

A Symphony in Blue



A “Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons” story
By Chris Bishop

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SYNOPSIS:

For a little while now, Captain Blue and Symphony Angel have talked about marriage. In vacations together in the Nevada, they have decided to make it happens, without Colonel White's knowledge of it. But as they stop in a town in the desert, before arrival in Las Vegas, Blue encounters a man from his past, who brings back painful memories to him. After an altercation with the man, Blue is arrested, and then disappears suddenly, and Symphony could only count on the help of Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel to help her find him. Meanwhile, Colonel White, suspecting something is afoot behind his back, goes to Vegas with the intention to stop the twosome from doing a mistake that would endanger their careers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Some references made to stories written by Mary J. Rudy and Sue Stanhope.

Following an idea already started in the "***Captain Scarlet***" TV series, and further developed in the Mary J. Rudy and Kimberly Smith-Murphy' stories.

As "***Spectrum is White***" served to explore some aspects of Colonel White's life, this one will do the same for Captain Blue's, who, like the Colonel is also one of my favourite characters (*It seems a lot of "Captain Scarlet" fans are fond of the guy*). Son of a wealthy American financier, Adam Svenson has been all but disowned by his own father when he choose to follow up a career as test pilot instead on following him in the family business. Things then became even more complicated when Adam joined Spectrum...

In this story, Blue and Symphony's project serves more or less as a pretext to learn more about Blue's life (at least, like I envision it) as well as a part of his past. Two new supporting characters are introduced: Amanda Wainwright, Symphony' sympathetic mother, and the not-so-

sympathetic John Svenson, Captain Blue's father. We also explore not only the stressed relationship existing between Blue and his father, and his love for Symphony, but also his friendship with his partner, Captain Scarlet, and his relationship with his commander, Colonel White.

This story will also show a more human side of the otherwise stern Colonel White, thus continuing what was already began in "**Spectrum is White**". It is not necessary to read "**Spectrum is White**" to appreciate "**A Symphony in Blue**", which is not its direct follow up.

Captain Blue and Symphony Angel thought they could keep their relationship a secret on Cloudbase, especially from Colonel White. But as revealed on "**Spectrum is White**", the Colonel already knows about it, and even suspects that there isn't many people onboard who doesn't know. Personally, I don't think ANYBODY can fool White. So why Blue and Symphony should be able to hide their true feelings for each other's from him?

If not for the hard time Captain Blue has in this, this story would be a fun one, as it contains scenes that are much more light-hearted than in the atmosphere of the most darker "**Spectrum is White**".

Further acknowledgement – if any – and following parts will be added to this page as they come along.

Chapter 1

"I think we made a wrong turn back there."

Karen Wainwright – who was known in the Spectrum organisation as Symphony Angel – looked with frowning dismay at the large unfolded road map she was holding in front of her, trying to figure out where the hell she had gone wrong earlier. Behind the wheel of the car, her companion cast her an annoyed look.

"Leave it to an ace pilot not to be able to read a simple map," Adam Svenson – Captain Blue – muttered curtly.

"Hey, at least there WAS a map in the glove compartment!" she retorted. "And while we're on the subject, leave it to a test pilot not to TEST the onboard computer before signing off on the rental car!"

Blue smiled sheepishly. "Touché."

She sighed. "I'll bet the last customer had trouble with the computer too, but didn't bother to report it."

"You realise that last crossroads is at least an hour and a half behind us?"

"Who had the bright idea of going from El Paso to Las Vegas by heading straight into the desert?" the girl replied coldly.

"I know, I know. It's all my fault... I take full responsibility."

"Well, don't fret too much over it, Big Blue... At least, it gives us some more time alone together." Symphony unsuccessfully tried to fold the map back into its original format and then, giving up, threw it down on the dashboard. "We will just have to continue on this road. We'll get there eventually."

"You're sure about that?" Blue asked, uncertain about it himself. "How far off course has this taken us?"

"We'll be three hours late," his girlfriend answered matter-of-factly.

"Great!" Blue mumbled. "The others will surely wonder what's happened to us..."

"You're angry with me?" Symphony asked him.

"No, absolutely not." He glanced at her, momentarily taking his eyes off the road. Then he extended his right arm and drew her to him. She cuddled against his shoulder. "You're right," he said, smiling warmly. "It will give us some more time alone together. It's just that a desert road doesn't seem like a very romantic place."

"Every place is romantic to me, so long as I'm with you," Symphony sighed longingly.

Blue's smile widened. "Flatterer. Continue that way and I might ask you to marry me."

"Isn't that what we're up to right now?" the girl grinned.

Both of them chuckled over the thought. Captain Blue and Symphony Angel had been seeing each other since they first met, over three years ago, during the Spectrum organisation's recruitment. Theirs had been an off again, on again relationship, but for a little more than a year now, they'd been together fairly regularly... And for some months, they'd realised they were in love, and had had thoughts of going further with their relationship. The word "marriage" had come up on more than one occasion. There were just a few little problems about it.

On Cloudbase, Spectrum's flying headquarters, where they were both stationed – Symphony as an Angel fighter pilot and Captain Blue as one of Spectrum's senior staff officers – not many people knew about their relationship. Well, some may have guessed about them going out together, since they were almost inseparable when off-duty, but nobody could know how serious they really were. Blue and Symphony had been very careful not to let that be generally known to Cloudbase's personnel. Only a few chosen ones had been in their confidence... Among them was Captain Scarlet, Blue's best friend and habitual field partner.

Scarlet's situation was somewhat similar to that of his friend: he too shared a close relationship with one of the Angels, namely Rhapsody, his compatriot from Britain. Like Blue and Symphony, Scarlet and Rhapsody were keeping their mutual love a secret from just about everybody on Cloudbase. The reason for both couples was the same: they didn't know for sure how Colonel White, commander-in-chief of Spectrum, would react upon learning of their relationships.

Colonel White was a very stern man, very strict on discipline... It was feared he would follow strict regulations regarding married couples being stationed together on military bases. One of the spouses could very well be reassigned somewhere else, despite the fact that White needed every member of his staff. Symphony and Rhapsody, as part of the Angel team, were almost irreplaceable, and the same could be said for Blue and Scarlet, who were Spectrum's best team of field agents. And while the colonel might be very upset upon accidentally discovering that two of his senior officers were romantically linked to two of his Angel pilots behind his back, there was also another reason that would lead the young couples to think he would be against it.

Captain Brown had been a fellow officer to Scarlet and Blue, and a friend to both of them. Shortly after joining Spectrum, three years before, he fell in love with a young telecommunications operator. Colonel White granted them permission to get married. But some months after the couple had wed, something terrible happened.

The Mysterons launched their war of nerves on the people of Earth.

The Mysterons were inhabitants of Mars. Two years earlier, an Earth exploration expedition, led by Spectrum's Captain Black, had discovered their city complex and destroyed it, mistakenly believing the Mysterons were about to attack their vehicle. The aliens had then vowed revenge upon the entire human race, and stopping their multiple acts of terror on Earth had become Spectrum's principal mandate. Unfortunately, during Spectrum's first strange encounter with the Mysterons, Captain Brown became one of their first victims... Captain Blue was the one to break the news to Becky Evershaw, his friend's wife, who was then expecting their child. He still remembered the look on her face when he had gone to see her, in London. She knew what had happened before he could say a word.

Colonel White had eventually gone to visit the young widow. Years ago, he had himself lost his wife, under tragic circumstances. The colonel knew the pain of losing a loved one... Upon seeing Becky Evershaw trying so hard to be so brave, the commander in chief of Spectrum had felt somewhat guilty about what had happened. Granted, he had sent agents to face death before – and after – that incident, but he blamed himself for the young woman's predicament. To lose a husband at so young an age and to raise a child who would never know his father... Captain Blue had heard Colonel White say that he should never have given Brown permission to marry in the first place. Knowing the daily danger faced by all Spectrum field agents, it wasn't a wise move to even consider it.

Hence the decision of Captains Blue and Scarlet not to inform their commanding officer – or anybody else, for that matter – of their feelings towards their respective girlfriends. In the beginning, it all seemed like an amusing game of hide and seek, but as the months passed by, and the war against the Mysterons continued to rage on, Blue and Symphony had begun to grow bored with it and had expressed the need to move on with their lives.

The next logical step would be marriage. Blue knew that Scarlet and Rhapsody had already talked about it between them, but that they had mutually agreed to wait until this whole business with the Mysterons was over with before actually going through with it. But for Blue himself, that was not something to even consider. Nobody knew how much longer this war would go on... One year, five, ten... Scarlet was fooling himself if he thought for even one minute he would be able to wait THAT long. Blue didn't want to take that course. He was now impatient to go on and felt himself ready for it. And Symphony felt exactly the same way.

Colonel White was the major obstacle to their plans. How to tell him about all this without having him objecting vehemently to it? That was a risk neither Blue nor Symphony wanted to take.

They simply decided they would not have to. As soon as they were able to go off-base together, they would get married, secretly, without Colonel White ever knowing about it.

Captain Scarlet, when they took him into their confidence, found the enterprise rather hazardous. Keeping such a secret from Colonel White? If he were ever to find out, there was little doubt both Captain Blue and Symphony Angel would face court-martial, even get sacked from Spectrum. Their commander would never forgive such disregard for Spectrum regulations... or the respect due to himself.

But Scarlet could see his friends were ready to risk everything, careers and way of life, to profess their love for each other. *"You know what you're risking, don't you?"* he had said to them, after pointing out what it would mean, if they were to be found out.

"Yes, we know," a determined Blue had responded.

"Eventually, HE'll find out, you know."

"We know that too."

"And there's no telling what he might do..."

"We've already talked about all this, Paul. Don't feel compelled to help us, but please, don't try to convince us to change our plans. Nothing you can say or do will stop us."

Scarlet had sighed deeply. "You've got more courage than I have," he had simply noted. "All right. I'll help you, however I can. Don't think for one instant I would miss your wedding. THIS I have got to see."

The occasion soon presented itself. Blue and Symphony each arranged for their personal furlough to be due on the same time. They had announced their intention to go to Texas, as they had to specify their location to Spectrum in case they should be recalled for emergency duty. The plan was relatively simple: from Texas, they would travel through the desert to Las Vegas, Nevada... While it may not be the most romantic spot on Earth for marriage, it was still the best place to get it done fast and simple.

Captain Scarlet would be there. At the Los Angeles Headquarters for a routine security job, he had arranged for a few days furlough in order to join his friends in Las Vegas, after his work was finished. The only drawback in this was that Rhapsody Angel, who was in on the secret, could not attend. She was not able to liberate herself from duty. Destiny Angel was to accompany Scarlet.

Despite the fact that Captain Blue and Symphony would have preferred Rhapsody's presence at their marriage, they were quite satisfied with Destiny. Captain Scarlet's oldest friend in the Spectrum organisation – and an ex-girlfriend of his – Destiny knew about Blue and Symphony's relationship, though she had never talked about it openly. Taken into the confidence of her fellow pilot and Blue's plan, she had shown herself pleasantly surprised... and not at all concerned by all the problems it could raise. "Oh! A conspiracy!" she was reported to have joyfully said to Scarlet. "That certainly sounds exciting! Count me in. I wouldn't miss it for the world!" That was not a surprising reaction coming from Destiny: sometimes, she had the tendency – which annoyed Scarlet intensely – to take life as a game. The professional military pilot then gave way to the child in her, and it was all she could do not to get carried away. Fortunately, she had the discernment to know when it was time to be serious – and she took her job VERY seriously when it counted – and when it was time to have some fun.

Destiny was to join Captain Scarlet in Las Vegas. Blue had arranged for rooms to be reserved for the four of them at a good, but not too sumptuous, hotel. No sense in drawing too much attention by staying at Caesar's Palace, he had said to his friends. The Svenson name carried some weight and influence, he had found out during his not-too-frequent leaves off-base. As the eldest son of one of America's wealthiest financiers, it seemed people thought he was entitled to some privileges. While he generally didn't care very much about that, he didn't mind THIS time around. It helped him to make quick reservations and ask for – and obtain – total discretion.

"I feel bad, though, doing this to the colonel," Symphony sighed, cuddling closer to Blue in the speeding car.

"Yeah, me too," Blue replied. "But it seems more cautious to act this way. You know Paul still says it's a crazy move."

"He should know about crazy moves," Symphony smiled fondly. "I think he would rather face ten Mysterons all at once than Colonel White's wrath, if he was in the same situation as us."

"Want to bet he will be before long?" Blue laughed out loud. "I don't think he and Dianne will be able to wait for this war to end... They'll be marching down the aisle too, before we know it!"

"Do you think he's arrived at the hotel already?"

Blue glanced at his watch. "Probably. When I called him this morning, he told me that he was waiting for Juliette to arrive in L.A., and that they would head off for Vegas soon after."

"Maybe we should call them, as soon as we can," Symphony suggested. "Just to make sure they don't worry about us..."

Blue glanced at her, wondering what was on her mind. He could see she was very serious about this. "I'll call them," he said. "If that's what you want."

"Just don't use your Spectrum communicator. You never know: what if the communication was to be intercepted?"

"By whom, may I ask?"

"I don't know... Some Spectrum official... Lieutenant Green... Colonel White."

"Don't fret over it. I won't use the communicator. Besides, if I did, I wouldn't say anything to 'incriminate' us, you know that."

"It's not somebody else learning about our plans that's got me worried. I don't want anybody taking the opportunity to call us back to duty before we're through."

"Stop worrying about that. It won't happen." Blue cast his fiancée an amused glance. "I'll use a phone when we reach the next town or gas station."

"Good idea."

"Mind if I ask you a question, now?"

"What question?"

"What makes you think Paul and Juliette would worry about us?"

Symphony sighed. "You know, with our kind of job, there's always some possibility that we may run into some kind of trouble..."

"Mysterons trouble?"

"Please! Don't even mention them! Paul once told me he and Steve were actually discussing them before their car crashed, two years ago..." Symphony shivered at the mere thought of her friends plunging into a ravine to their deaths, in a blazing car. That one of the two men should have been brought back to them afterwards was simply a miracle. "I hope they'll give us a rest, until we are actually married," Symphony added grimly.

"I just can hear them right in the middle of the ceremony..." Blue stopped suddenly, when Symphony angrily punched him on the shoulder with her closed fist. "Ow! What's that for?"

"You're really terrible, Adam Svenson! Hearing you talk like this makes me wonder if you really want to get married!"

Blue laughed and drew her closer still to his heart. "Honey, I've never been more sure of anything in all my life," he assured her. "And nothing, not even Colonel White, nor the Mysterons, would be able to prevent me from marrying you."

* * *

The *St-Maurice* wasn't a hotel with an international reputation, which was one of the main reasons people, famous or otherwise, stayed there. That certainly was why Captain Blue had chosen it, anyway. He was very conscious that his real name could be tracked right back to his father. The reputation of the family firm, Svenson and Sons, was renowned all over the financial world, not just on Wall Street, and his father and brothers had almost celebrity status. Blue could just see the news in the papers if he was careless enough to chose a hotel where reporters had the habit of camping in the lobby, just to get their hands on some good exclusive.

Nevertheless, the *St-Maurice* was a very good hotel. Excellent food, congenial employees, marvellous services, very clean rooms. Captain Scarlet, who had taken rooms there with Destiny Angel, under their real names of Paul Metcalfe and Juliette Pontoin, had no complaints. And he knew that Destiny had been well pleased upon discovering that the hotel was run by genuine French people. He was fairly certain that the hotel manager had developed an immediate attraction toward the very beautiful pilot.

"*We don't receive very much foreign visitors,*" he personally said to the British-born Scarlet, with an accent heavier than Destiny's. "*Our clients are mostly American people, desiring to live up a little 'exoticism', as they say. Why anybody would think that French are exotic people is beyond me!*"

The thought of the little man brought a smile to Scarlet's face as he stepped out of the shower and dried himself. He was almost certain the man would have asked Destiny on a tour of the city if he hadn't thought she was the imposing Scarlet's girl. That was funny, smiled the British Spectrum captain to himself. Some years ago, that would have been true. Today, Destiny was a very dear friend, but no more than that. Captain Scarlet's heart was taken by another Angel.

Scarlet consulted his watch, which he had put on the sink previous to his shower. He nodded thoughtfully. The day was still young. Adam and Karen were not due to arrive for another two or three hours. The other guest at their little get-together would arrive before them. Her plane was due at the airport in about an hour and a half. That gave him and Destiny some time off. Las Vegas had some shows going on twenty-four hours a day. Maybe he would invite the Angel pilot to go see one of them. *She must still be in the other room*, Scarlet mused. Like him, she had craved a good long shower upon their arrival at the hotel, something none of them were really able to do on Cloudbase. *Must have finished now, though*. He would dress and knock on her door, to ask her what she thought about going out.

His clothes being in the bedroom, Scarlet wrapped a towel around his hips, opened the door and stepped through...

...only to quickly retreat back into the bathroom.

"Juliette!" he cried out.

Destiny was in HIS room, obviously browsing around. She had turned around when he had stepped in and got only a glimpse of him. She laughed out loud when he disappeared so hastily.

"Really, Captain Scarlet! You don't have to be so shy!"

Scarlet only poked his still wet dark head into the room, casting an angry – and surprised – glance toward her.

"*What are you doing in my room?*" he snapped at her.

She smiled at his use of French, even though he was shouting it at her, recalling how she'd complimented him on his accent when they'd first met. Even now, years later, they spoke her native language whenever possible, because she was much more comfortable with it than English.

"*I was waiting for you*," Destiny answered in French. "*I thought maybe, before the others arrive, we'll have time to catch a show.*" She rolled her eyes at him and added, with a wicked smile: "*Although I think I had a very good one...*"

"*Oh! Very funny!*" Scarlet grumbled, amused despite himself.

"*Oh, come on, Paul!*" Destiny protested. Then, reverting back to English: "That would not be the first time I saw you naked!"

Scarlet could feel himself reddening. "I am not naked!" he objected. He took a look at himself, searching for a smart repartee. "I am just at some... disadvantage, here."

Destiny chuckled a little, trying very hard not to burst out laughing.

"That's the English reserve for you," she retorted. "Always so uptight, so prudish..."

Scarlet scoffed. "I'm not uptight!" he protested again. "Or prudish... Well, to a certain extent, perhaps. For God's sake, Juliette, you should understand how embarrassing this is! You were educated in a convent, for crying out loud! Please, I have to dress. Go back to your room."

"I could swear I've just heard *Papa!*" Destiny sighed.

"I'm not your father."

"No, you're an ex-boyfriend of mine who has a sudden case of shyness with me." Destiny sat down on the bed, demonstrating rather obviously to a distraught Scarlet that she had no intention of going away. "*What's the matter, anyway?*" she asked again in French. "*Are you afraid of me?*"

"Why should I be afraid of you?" a dismayed Scarlet replied.

"Well, that would be rather strange now, *n'est-ce pas*, that a man that has no fear even of death should be afraid of little old me..." Destiny looked mockingly at a silent and very annoyed Scarlet. She narrowed her eyes at him again. "*You think I would get you in trouble*," she added quietly.

"*What are you talking about?*"

"*You're not afraid of me. It's Rhapsody who frightens you so.*"

Since Scarlet did not even answer her remark, Destiny gave a victorious smile.

"*That's it, isn't it true?*"

"I really don't know what you're talking about."

"*Oh, you don't?* Paul, it's me, Juliette. I was the one who presented you to one another, remember? If you recall, I already noticed some sparks flying between the two of you at that time..."

"Juliette, that was three years ago..."

"Well, some people take longer than others..." Destiny smiled. "How long has it been going on, exactly? I've suspected something for quite some time, but..."

"Do you really expect me to confide in you, while I'm dressed like this?" Scarlet asked, frowning with perplexity.

"Well, since you're at a disadvantage... as you put it yourself."

This time, Scarlet laughed. He pointed toward his clothes spread on the bed.

"Give me something to put on. I'll admit anything to you afterward."

"Is that a promise?" Destiny asked him.

"Yes, it is." Scarlet sighed. "Please, Juliette, I'm about to freeze to death, here."

"Fat chance of that." Destiny got to her feet, taking up Scarlet's clothes, and walked toward the half opened door of the bathroom.

"Don't come any closer!" Scarlet suddenly urged her, stopping her right in her tracks. "Just throw me the clothes."

"Vraiment, Paul! You really have turned shy on me!"

She obeyed anyway and threw each piece of clothing one after the other. Scarlet expertly caught them on the wing, save for the shirt which he received squarely in the face. He smiled at Destiny.

"This shouldn't take very long," he announced before disappearing completely into the bathroom.

Destiny nodded and turned away toward the window, checking out if they had a pretty view of the city.

"So, how long have you had your suspicions?" came Scarlet's voice from the bathroom.

"About you and Dianne? For some months, now." The view wasn't so bad, Destiny thought. Well, the manager didn't lie about that. "They became certitude when I saw that rock on her dresser."

"Rock?"

"The ring you gave her. A big ruby, surrounded by smaller diamonds... I thought the colour of the principal stone was a dead giveaway to who gave it to her."

"Oh!" There was a short moment of silence, before Scarlet continued: "Maybe I should tell Dianne to be more careful with that ring."

"Don't bother," Destiny replied. "I have seen it only once, and only for a moment."

Scarlet came out of the bathroom, fully dressed with trousers, shirt and socks. He was still busy buttoning his cuffs when Destiny turned to him with a faint smile.

"So," she said, "I take it you're engaged now?"

Scarlet nodded. "Yes, we are. Since Valentine's Day."

"You always were the romantic one," Destiny remarked fondly. "Who knows about this?"

"Only Adam and Karen." Scarlet shrugged. "I haven't told my parents yet, and Dianne hasn't told her father, either. In fact, they don't even know we've been seeing each other."

"I hope your father won't be as difficult with her as he was with me," Destiny noted. She remembered vividly how Scarlet's father, General Charles Metcalfe, commander of Winchester Air Base, had reacted to his only son going out with her. He didn't seem to trust the young woman's real feelings toward Paul. She shook her head. "No, I don't think he would object to you marrying Dianne. She'll find a way to charm him. Why I didn't succeed in that is still puzzling me, though."

"I think you tried too hard," Scarlet retorted, smiling a little.

"What about Colonel White?" Destiny asked.

Scarlet scowled. "What about him?"

"Don't avoid the question. You know what I mean. He doesn't know, *évidemment?*"

Scarlet made a face and shrugged again. *"You know how it is, Juliette. I haven't worked up the courage to tell him about it yet."*

"So," Destiny smiled, "You may just decide yet to do like Blue and Symphony and go get married without telling him..."

"Are you kidding?" Scarlet started to protest. Then he shook his head. "I must admit, the thought had crossed my mind," he finished.

"Then it's a good thing it's ME who is here with you, today." Destiny continued. "What, if Dianne had come with you, this adventure may have ended up as a double wedding."

"Don't joke about that. I tried hard to talk Adam and Karen out of it. Can you imagine if the colonel happened to find out? There would be Hell to pay."

"Yes, for us as well as for them, since we would be regarded as 'accomplices'. But I think we were very cautious about this. Karen and Adam having gone in Texas before coming over here, and us coming on our own from Los Angeles... I don't think anyone could suspect this was planned all along."

"I don't know. The colonel isn't a fool, you know."

"Then why don't you tell him about YOUR situation with Rhapsody?"

"Would you believe I'm SCARED of the old man?"

"That, I would believe." Destiny smiled. "Well, whatever you decide to do, let me be the first to congratulate you... after Blue and Symphony, of course."

Scarlet grinned broadly when Destiny came to him, with her arms opened, and hugged him warmly, kissing him on both cheeks. There was a time, he thought, about two years ago, just after he snapped out of the Mysterons' control, when she would not even give him the time of day. She did not trust him, did not even consider him the real Paul Metcalfe, since his original body had been destroyed in the car crash, and then recreated by the incredible powers of the Mysterons, into a clone whose only purpose was to follow the orders of his masters. That Scarlet should have broken free of their influence was due merely to a twist of fate and thinking about it now only brought up one more concern to his mind.

"You don't know how happy I am for you!" Destiny was saying in French, still hugging him. *"You and Dianne, I think you were meant for each other."*

"Yeah, I'm happy too," Scarlet stated. *"But you do realize, of course that there is ONE major drawback to all this..."*

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. My... particular condition?"

Destiny broke the embrace and looked at her friend, realizing what he was implying.

Since his encounter with the Mysterons, Captain Scarlet had become virtually indestructible. He had acquired the ability to heal from any injury, even a fatal one, in a matter of hours... He could not be killed and had proven this amazing power repeatedly over the last two years, putting his life on the line and taking on missions that would have meant certain death to anyone else. Destiny herself had seen him 'die' before, and then come back to life again, his body completely unscathed, and himself seeming to be totally oblivious to what he had gone through.

Destiny knew for a fact that his condition had caused him a great deal of distress. For a long time, and even now, she realised, he had felt apart, different from other, normal human beings. He had confided in her, in the first year following his initial 'death', that he was afraid he could eventually lose his sense of identity, that he would not be able to relate to the rest of the world. In that respect, he felt desperately alone, and she was particularly grateful that, for Scarlet's sake, he was surrounded by some very good friends. The fact that he had fallen in love with Rhapsody Angel and eventually became engaged to her was a very good sign.

"Now, Paul," Destiny said in a soothing voice, *"I don't think that should be a problem for you and Dianne. I'm quite sure she thought hard about it before..."*

"I don't think you understand," Scarlet interrupted abruptly. He hesitated and sighed heavily. "Juliette, for the past two years, have you noticed anything different about me?"

"Anything different? Well, apart from the fact that you seem a little more at ease with your indestructibility..."

"I mean about my appearance, Juliette," Scarlet cut in again. She looked at him, puzzled, and he shook his head. "I don't seem to have changed much, do I?"

"No... At least... I don't see anything different." Destiny frowned. "What are you trying to say?"

"Don't you think I should, at least, AGE, Juliette?"

"Are you saying..."

"Yeah," Scarlet sighed. "I haven't told anyone about that, beside Doctor Fawn, Adam... and Dianne, of course. And without being sure about it, I think the colonel might know too. I may be stuck forever just the way I was looking when the Mysterons took me over."

"That would mean that in twenty years..."

"I would STILL look like this. And fifty years from now, it would be the same."

Destiny was amazed. She could not take her eyes off him. "*Diable!*" she murmured. "We're not talking only invulnerability, here, but... what? Immortality?" The word seemed so strange, yet accurate enough.

Scarlet nodded grimly. "What good is immortality if you've got nobody to share it with?" he grumbled.

Destiny shook her head in disbelief. "What does *Docteur* Fawn have to say about this?"

"Nothing much," Scarlet answered curtly. "He said there's nothing really conclusive yet." He stuck his fists into his trouser pockets, sighing. "But here I am, two years later, feeling absolutely the same physically, absolutely unchanged. Damn it, I don't even have grey hair yet! I think that with our kind of job, and the Mysterons to boot, I should at least have some!"

"How old are you, Paul?" Destiny asked him.

"Thirty-three... Well, technically. I was thirty-one when the Mysterons... well, you know."

"So, you're at an age where physical differences often are not so apparent," the French girl remarked. "And you don't have grey hair? That doesn't prove a thing. Lots of people don't have any before their late thirties. Others have it before their twenties. Look at Captain Magenta. He's about the same age as you. His hair is as black as yours... I don't think he has grey ones either."

"He's about two years and a half older than me," Scarlet replied, musing. A sudden thought came into his mind. He looked at Destiny, narrowing his eyes. "How do you know about him not having grey hair?" he asked.

He saw the young woman blushing violently. "A lucky guess, maybe?"

"Mmm... Perhaps Blue and I aren't the only ones around Cloudbase with a secret girlfriend..." Scarlet said jokingly. He instantly received a thump on the chest in protest and laughed out loud. "Hey! Striking a superior officer! I could have you court-martialled for that!"

"Try it, and I'll sing like a bird about you and Rhapsody, Captain!" Destiny hissed mockingly. "Seriously, Paul, about Magenta and me..."

"Your secret is safe with me, you know that."

"But there is nothing serious going on!" Destiny protested indignantly. She could see by the expression on his face that Scarlet didn't believe her in the least. She gave up. Anyway, her personal life wasn't the subject of the conversation, here. His was.

"Anyway," she said clearing her throat, "you shouldn't worry too much about all those thoughts that seem to be troubling you. We live very fast lives, Paul. All of us. Who knows what tomorrow might bring? You should reach to every available moment of happiness you can find... and hang on tight to them!"

"A bit of a poet now, aren't you, Destiny Angel?" Scarlet smiled raggedly.

"Well, I'm French, *Capitaine* Scarlet. And after all, the best poets are French. Won't you agree?"

"Whatever you say, *chérie*."

"And somebody should try to raise your spirits, since you're being so depressing."

"Me, depressing?" Scarlet scowled. "I was rather, wasn't I?"

"*Oui. Énormément.*"

Scarlet sighed. "All right. I'll take your advice to heart." He smiled broadly. "This is no time to feel down, anyway. After all, Adam and Karen are about to get married. That should be a happy moment!"

"Now you're talking!" Destiny said joyfully.

The phone began to buzz at that moment. Scarlet lifted the handset.

"Hello?" he called into the receiver. A wide smile came upon his face when he recognized the voice at the other end. "Oh, hi, Adam! How's it going?"

At the other end of the line, Adam Svenson was standing in a corner of a small smoky bar, using a public phone. He was trying to block out some bad country music, coming from an antique jukebox not very far from him, as he spoke into the receiver.

"I'm calling to tell you that Karen and I will arrive late at Vegas," he said, plugging his free ear to muffle out the music. "We took a wrong turn at a crossroads that sent us a few hundred miles off course..."

"Who had made a mistake like that?" a bemused Scarlet asked.

"Would you believe Karen did?"

"Sure it wasn't deliberate?"

"I admit I have my doubts about that myself!"

Scarlet noticed his friend was almost screaming into the phone. He also noticed the muffled music.

"What's that noise?" he asked.

"Country music," Blue replied. "At least, it sounds like it."

"It's positively awful!"

"Yeah, well... The place is awful as well. I'm in a small bar, at a gas station, in the middle of the desert. '*The Bull's Horn*', it's called. I won't describe it to you. Just think of the worst you can imagine of those kinds of places... And I can assure you, it's even worse."

Blue could almost see his best friend frowning at the other end of the phone line. "You've taken our Symphony into a dump like that?"

Blue laughed. "You sound exactly like a worried big brother or something like that!" he noted with amusement.

"Well, you know I regard Karen as the sister I always wanted..." Scarlet replied, rather primly.

"Then keep your shirt on, bro! She's not in here." Blue looked around, glancing over the few men strolling around the place. None of their faces were really pleasant ones. They all looked like rugged, tough characters. "She's out at the gas station, filling up the car," Blue continued, addressing Scarlet. "We'll find something to eat when I finish this call and then be on our way."

"Not too nervous?"

"No, she seems fine."

"I'm talking about you, Adam."

Blue smiled. "Are you kidding? I can't wait to be in Las Vegas so we can get on with this. By the way, did you check out any of the chapels on the list I gave you on Cloudbase?"

"Yes, I did. I've still got one or two left to check... But so far, there are two which seem very nice... and they're available for a ceremony tomorrow."

"Great! I'll tell Karen right away. She'll be glad to hear we will really make it."

"When do you expect to arrive, anyway?"

"At seven... or eight tonight, at the latest."

"That IS a long way off track! Well, at least it gives you and Karen some time alone together."

Blue smiled, nodding thoughtfully to himself. "You know, you really could be her brother. She told me the exact same thing, earlier."

"Great minds think alike, Adam, you know that."

"Yeah, that's what they say. We'll see you in a few hours. Did... our 'special guest' arrive?"

"Her plane should touch down at the airport in about a hour and a half. Juliette and I will pick her up, don't worry."

"Karen will be so pleased to see her. What will you and Destiny do in the meantime?"

"Probably go to a show."

"We really appreciate your help, buddy. Yours and Destiny's. Give her our regards."

"Give Karen our love. And try to be here as quick as you can."

"Will do, buddy. See you soon."

Captain Blue hung up the phone, sighing. Well, he thought, things were looking up. Paul and Juliette had already arrived at the *St-Maurice*, a couple of the chapels he had looked at in the brochures were available for the next day and he and Karen only were a few hours away from getting married. No Mysteron threat, no call from Spectrum, and no Colonel White to oppose their plans.

Now to get out of this godforsaken place and get back on the road...

Blue walked toward the exit, at a very determined pace. He was about to open the door and go outside when he suddenly bumped into the shoulder of a big man who staggered under the shock and turned around to face him.

"Watch where you're going, mister!"

Blue turned too, fully aware that he was the one at fault here. "Excuse me," he started politely, "I didn't see you..." He stopped in the middle of his sentence.

The rugged man, of about fifty, with greying beard and hair, particularly sharp blue eyes and a short scar that crossed his left cheek right through to the bridge of his nose, was staring at him blankly. Blue's face became pale, as he recognized the face. He knew those piercing eyes, that scar...

And the memories of them suddenly made him very uncomfortable.

"Excuse me," he croaked.

He tried to turn away from the staring man, who then put his hand on his shoulder, stopping him. His grip was like iron, like he didn't want to let go of Blue.

"Is that you, kid?" the man said, still staring at the younger man with a querying look.

Blue shivered, upon hearing that voice. He drew back from his touch, looking at him nervously. Then he turned away. Without even answering the question, he shouldered his way past the man and pushed the door to get out.

Fresh air, he thought. He desperately needed fresh air... and to get the Hell as far away as possible from this place.

As he walked toward the car, where Symphony was waiting, Blue cast a quick glance over his shoulder, toward the bar he had just left.

He could see the man with the scar, standing in the opening of the door, still looking at him.

Blue quickened his pace toward the car, feeling as if he had just seen a ghost.

A ghost he had thought had been dead and buried for twenty-five years...

Chapter 2

"I'm very sorry, Adam. It shouldn't have turned out this way."

The young boy on the passenger seat gave a gloomy look at the tall blond man driving the Jeep. He then glanced over his shoulder toward the fishing equipment on the back seat. There was a single fish in the basket, the only one, caught by his father.

"S'all right, Dad," the boy noted, trying to keep his voice as steady as he could. "It's not your fault, really. At least, we had a couple of hours together at the lake."

"I know you must be disappointed, son... After all, I promised you the whole day, just you and me."

"Told you, it's no big deal," the child replied, shrugging his shoulders as if he couldn't care less.

"That's good. You're being a big boy."

The man took the phone from the dashboard and punched in numbers before putting it to his ear; he didn't notice his son staring at the device with a look of dismay. If only Dad had left that home for the day, young Adam Svenson was thinking. No, he had to take it on that fishing trip... Had to keep in contact with his work...

"This is John Svenson," Adam's father said into the phone. "I'm almost home. I'll drop my son there and go to the office after that..." He took a good look at himself, before adding with a grin, "...Just give me some time to change clothes. Unless you want your boss to smell like fish... Yes, that's it. Get everything ready, then. See you later."

He hung up, his son following his gesture with a look in which it was easy to read disappointment. Svenson shook his head.

"Again, I'm sorry, son. But this can't be helped. This situation at the office requires my presence."

"It couldn't wait 'til after the weekend?" the boy asked tentatively.

"No, it couldn't. Immediate action has to be taken. Adam... I feel bad already as it is. Don't be difficult about this."

"I'm not, Dad. I was just curious." Adam lowered his gaze.

"What will you do with the rest of the day?" his father asked him. "Go see Andy or the young Coltrane boy? Now, what's his name..."

"Tommy. No, Dad. Andy's gone with his folks for the rest of the week. And Tommy isn't home either. He's at football camp."

"The rest of your friends?"

"It's Sunday, Dad. They've all got other things to do." Like I had too, Adam added to himself. With my father. He shrugged. "I guess I'll catch up on my reading."

Svenson smiled broadly. At nine, his son was able to read stuff that would deter even some adults he knew. He had caught him reading 'Moby Dick', the month before. Not an easy book to read, even for an adult.

"And what are you reading, these days?"

"James Bond."

"Oh really?" Svenson frowned. "Isn't that a little heavy for your age?"

"No, not really... I love it, you know. I'd give anything to live a life like that when I grow up. Excitement, adventures, secret missions..."

"...Chicks?"

Young Adam grumbled. "Maybe that I can do without..."

His father chuckled indulgently. "Over time, you'll change your mind about girls. And sooner than you realize, I bet."

"Whatever." Adam hesitated a few seconds, before looking up at his father, worry in his clear blue eyes. "Dad, I was just thinking... You will be home next Saturday, right?"

Svenson glanced at the boy. He gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, I didn't forget. I promised you I'd be there." He tousled the young boy's blond hair with his right hand, in a teasing gesture. "I wouldn't miss my son's big game, now would I?"

"Stop that, Dad! I really hate it!" Nevertheless, Adam's tone was a lot happier. At least, he was thinking, his father being there at the baseball game next week would more than make up for this disastrous fishing trip!

"You think your team will win, Adam?" John Svenson asked.

"I'm the best hitter they have, Dad!" Adam replied with a broad grin. "We'll destroy the other guys!"

"That's the spirit!" Svenson laughed. "Look in the glove compartment, son. There's something in there for you."

The curious little boy eagerly opened the compartment. Something made of black cloth fell into his lap; Adam immediately recognized what it was and picked it up, a satisfied smile widening on his tanned face. "A Red Sox cap! Thanks, Dad..." He noticed two small pieces of cardboard that were pinned inside and took them to get a closer look. "Tickets for the next game... against the Blue Jays!" Adam's eyes widened. "Wow, Dad! That's cool!"

"Just behind the Red Sox dugout, son. Happy?"

"Am I happy?" The ecstatic boy put the cap on. It was just a little too large for his head and the visor almost completely covered his eyes.

Svenson smiled. "Some adjustment is in order, it seems. Ask your mother to do it for you."

"I will, Dad."

"Isn't 'Blue Jays' the name of your team, by the way?"

"Yeah, that's it... That's funny! We'll go to the game together, right?"

"Sure we will."

The Jeep pulled off the road into the driveway leading to the Svenson house, an old ancestral mansion that had been built some four or five generations earlier. Adam looked up front as the vehicle rolled quietly between the trees bordering the drive.

"Will you be home late, Dad?" he asked his father.

"I'll be busy for the rest of the day, Adam. I have to prepare for an important trip to New York."

"You're leaving?"

"Just for a couple of days."

Adam's expression was one of total disappointment. His father looked curiously at him. "I've gone on business trips before. You should be accustomed to this by now. Why do you look so gloomy today?"

"I was just hoping... that you would throw a few balls with me. You know, I could use the practice before the big game next week-end."

"Well, I can't. And I'm about sure I won't have a single minute for myself until next week-end." Svenson cast a glance at his son. The boy was keeping silent, but it was obvious how he felt about this. His father had put work before his son too many times.

At the side of the driveway, Svenson saw a tall, bulky man, who was busy pruning a small tree. Seeing the Jeep passing by, the man waved at the driver and the young passenger, welcoming them back home. Adam didn't seem to notice him.

"Why not ask Grover to play ball with you?" Svenson asked his son.

Adam frowned. What a singular idea! Grover was the resident gardener, newly hired by his father at the beginning of summer. "Why would I ask him?"

"Well, I talked with him the other day... He was watching you practising baseball with your friends and seemed very interested by it... And I learned he actually was a professional player in the Minor Leagues, some years ago."

"Yeah, I know," the boy grumbled with bad humour. "He was with the Trenton Thunder, the Red Sox double-A team. He keeps telling me that. Always wants to give me tips..."

"He could give you some pointers," Svenson insisted.

"I don't want to play ball with some gardener!" Adam protested. "I want to play ball with YOU!"

"I told you, Adam, it's not possible..."

"Besides, I hate him."

Svenson stared at his son, wondering about this obviously despicable statement, so unnatural coming from him. "Now, that's new. Why do you hate Grover?"

Adam shrugged. "Don't know," he mumbled.

"There must be a reason, Adam," his father insisted. "He seems nice to you..."

"I don't know, Dad, it's just a feeling I have... I know he's trying to be nice, but..." Adam sighed heavily, unable to explain himself. He didn't trust that Grover guy. It was creepy, how he was always butting in when he was playing with his friends. He didn't like seeing him around his family, especially his mother and little brother Peter. He didn't believe his affected niceness and the forced smile he displayed whenever he addressed him or his father. It was just too much...

"He looks neglected, and he always wears dirty clothes and... I just don't like his face, that's all," the young boy finally told his father.

"That's enough," Svenson said sternly. "You can't go on in life hating people just because you 'don't like their faces'. That's not how decent people act, Adam. Life has been kind to us... We are privileged with riches some people like Grover can only dream of... but that doesn't mean we're better than them, or that we shouldn't regard them as our equals."

"Yes, Dad..." Adam lowered his gaze. That was the kind of speech he hated hearing from his father. He thought he must have heard it thousands of times. "You want me to be nice to him?"

"I suppose you weren't?"

"Well... I just ignored him... Dad, I can't pretend, you know that!"

"Make a little effort," Svenson said sharply. "I'm disappointed in you, Adam. Granted, Grover has a neglected look. His clothes are worn out and dirty... but he's a gardener. He works the soil for a living and he does it well. It's normal that he should look that way. You're lucky, son. YOU'll never have to do those kind of jobs for a living."

"No. I'm gonna be a test pilot."

"Don't change the subject," Svenson sighed. The week before, Adam wanted to be a scuba diver. Next week, and judging from his current reading, he'd probably set his sights on a secret agent's career. That was becoming quite annoying. "You should never judge a person by the way he looks or the work he does, Adam. You understand that?"

"Yes, Dad," the boy murmured, looking down in shame.

"And I do want you to be nice to Grover from now on, right?"

"Okay, Dad. Whatever you want..."

"You'll be a good kid. I know you will..."

** * **

"Would you mind telling me what's wrong with you?"

It had been more than a half hour since Blue and Symphony had left the gas station. The young woman had been completely taken aback by the rude way her boyfriend had suddenly decided to take off, without even having something to eat, as they'd previously planned. Blue hadn't said one single word ever since and was keeping his eyes on the road. Something was on his mind, that was for sure; something that was upsetting him greatly, and that he didn't want to share with Symphony.

"What is it, Big Blue?" she insisted. "Why the silent treatment?"

When he didn't answer, she sighed heavily.

"You did reach Paul in Las Vegas, didn't you?"

He simply nodded.

"Did he say something to upset you?"

She didn't think it would be that. Paul and Adam were the closest of friends, almost like brothers. Neither of them would ever do or say anything to hurt the other, at least not intentionally. There were the occasional wisecracks, of course, but never anything really mean.

"What could he have said to upset me?" Blue muttered.

Well, at least he's talking again, Symphony thought. *"What is it then?"* She sighed once more. *"Did something happen in that bar?"* She saw his right brow twitch. *"Okay,"* she said, nodding. *"Something happened in the bar..."*

"Nothing happened in there!" Blue snapped suddenly at her.

Symphony's eyes widened in surprise. Yelling in anger was so unlike him. And she knew he wasn't angry with her.

"Then what is it?" she asked again, more forcefully. "Adam, I think I know you fairly well. I've never seen you like this before! Not even with your father..."

Blue scowled. He and his father didn't get along very well. It had really started when Blue had decided not to follow in the paternal footsteps, working as a successful financier, and instead chose to become a test pilot at the World Aeronautic Society. He disappointed and worried his father even more when he later accepted the job of a security agent at the WAS, and things got again more complicated when Blue announced, about three years ago, that he would join Spectrum. NOW he even had to relinquish his family name of Svenson. He'd had to adopt the colour-code name of Captain Blue, and no one outside of his immediate family was permitted to know his real identity. To John Svenson, that had been the last straw. He had barely spoken to his son for the better part of these past three years. And Blue was despairing of ever making peace with his father. These days, when they met, it was always brief, with heated words between them each and every time. Blue had about given up trying to convince his father that he had chosen his own path, and that he was happy with it.

"Don't bring my father into this," Blue muttered coldly.

"Well, what then?" Symphony asked again. "Are you angry with me? Have I done something wrong?"

"No!" Blue looked at her, and she saw the anguish in his features. "Don't you ever say that, Karen... You know you could never do anything to make me angry with you." He turned back up front and blew a deep sigh. "It's not you... it's me."

"Adam, please, talk to me." Symphony put a hand on his arm. She felt him tense under his sleeve. "If we are to get married..." She stopped suddenly and a glimmer of concern passed through her eyes. "That is... if you still want to get married."

Blue violently pressed down the brake. The car came to an abrupt halt. He turned to the young woman, obviously shocked by what she had just said. He took her hand in his and looked longingly into her eyes.

"How can you ever doubt I'd changed my mind about that?" he asked her, his voice hoarse. "Karen, my feelings toward you haven't changed. I promise you, nothing will ever prevent me marrying you."

"Nothing?"

"I swear to you. I'm sorry if I caused you to doubt that."

He hugged her and kissed her. She let herself be washed by his love.

"I want to believe you," she answered, cuddling into his strong arms. "But I do so want to know what just happened to you back there."

"That was nothing to concern yourself about," Blue replied, his voice having returned to his normal, gentle self. "Anyway, it's finished, now."

He started up the car; Symphony could not help but notice that he was casting a nervous glance at the rear view mirror. She looked over her shoulder. There was the only car on the road.

"You're really sure it's finished?" she asked him.

Blue looked at her. Nothing escaped her, it seemed. He nodded. "Sorry. Old habits die hard." He paused a second, then sighed again. "Do you believe in ghosts, Karen?"

She scratched the back of her head, looking for a smart answer. "Let's see... I live in the sky, in an aircraft the majority of people would think is an impossibility. I fight alien invaders from Mars, who destroy people and things so they can recreate them for their own use... and I work daily with a man who has died and come back to life numerous times... Do I believe in ghosts? Why not?"

Blue frowned. "Well, until about an hour ago, I didn't believe in them. Then I just saw one in that bar."

"What are you talking about?"

"Did you see that man who was looking at me when I got out of that joint?"

"A big guy, of about fifty, with brown hair, greying on the temples, and a beard?"

"You still have a good sense of observation, I see."

"Years in training at the Secret Service can do that to a girl. Besides, he was hard to miss. Especially with that limp of his."

Blue looked at Symphony, intrigued by the remark. "I didn't even notice he was limping," he said, shaking his head.

"Well, he was," Symphony insisted. "You wouldn't have noticed, because you were just too busy jumping into the car to get away from there..." She looked at Blue. "You were running away from that guy, weren't you?"

"Yes, exactly. And if you ever encounter him again, you'd be wise to do like me and get the hell away from him."

"That's strange. I've never known you to be afraid of anything or anybody before. You didn't seem to know the meaning of fear."

Blue snorted. "That's a misconception! I don't know any of us in Spectrum who isn't frightened by the Mysterons and the extent of their powers. I know I was scared as hell when I found out exactly what they'd done to Paul, to take him under their control."

"But that man over there," Symphony said softly, "It seems he frightens you even more. That's the ghost you were talking about?"

"Yeah, sort of." Blue shuddered. "He's bad news, Karen. As bad as they come. To think I would run into him here, in the Nevada desert. God! What were the chances?"

"Who is he, Adam?"

"I told you: only a ghost. The ghost of a man I met twenty-five years ago."

"Twenty-five...? But you were just a kid, back then!"

"I tell you, he made an indelible impression," Blue mumbled. He shrugged the thought of that man away. At least, he tried. "Let's not talk about him now. It brings back too many bad memories. And today isn't a day for that." He smiled. "I almost forgot: Paul checked out some of the chapels on the list I gave him. He said there are two which seem very nice... and that are available tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Symphony repeated. "What about tonight?"

"Oh boy! You're in a hurry!"

"Adam, we don't know when we might be recalled for duty. It could be tomorrow!"

"You're right. Well, when we get to Vegas, we'll see if one of those chapels can marry us, as soon as possible." He looked at Symphony. "Are you satisfied with that?"

"I am if you are."

"You know the answer to that. Now is there anything else you want?"

"Well," Symphony grumbled, "I would like to eat something."

"Eat..." Blue scowled. "Oh God, we didn't get anything to eat back there, did we?"

"You should ask?" Symphony scoffed. "You were too busy pushing me back into the car to listen to my protests!"

"I'm sorry. I only thought of myself, I guess. You're hungry?"

"Hungry? I'm famished, Adam!"

"What's the next town?"

Symphony took the road map on the dashboard and unfolded it. She followed the road with her finger and found what Blue was asking for.

"Los Lobos," she announced. "About one hundred miles from the station we've just left."

"Nothing in between?"

"Nope. It seems I am condemned to die of starvation before we reach there."

"Come on, we'll be there in about a half-hour."

"Are you crazy? You're going to break the speed limit?"

"Hey! I drive faster than that when I'm in pursuit!"

"This car isn't reinforced like an SPV, Big Blue."

"But the road is smooth and straight. So why not have a little fun? And a rush of adrenalin?"

"You know, we could do that in a jet. We could go a lot faster and at least, at 40,000 feet there aren't many telephone poles to collide with."

"Coward," Blue smiled mockingly.

Symphony shot him a murderous glance. "Nobody calls me a coward," she replied curtly. "Burn some rubber, Svenson. Let's see how fast this car really is."

"Well, at least as long as it stays in one piece," Blue quietly replied.

He shifted into gear and pushed down the pedal to the floor before Symphony could utter one single protest over his last remark.

* * *

Meanwhile, one of the causes of Captain Blue's and Symphony Angel's concerns about their impending wedding was working on some reports in the Control Room of Cloudbase. Since Spectrum had succeeded in thwarting the last Mysterion threat, things were keeping pretty quiet around the world and Colonel White was taking advantage of the opportunity to complete delayed paperwork with Lieutenant Green.

Somehow, White could not focus on his work. He'd read the same paragraph of the report spread in front of him four times now. Something was bothering him, but he could not quite put his finger on what it could be.

Frustrated by his lack of concentration, Colonel White threw his pen down on his circular desk and sighed. Resting his chin in his hands, he cast a distracted eye toward Lieutenant Green, still working at his station.

What was bothering him, anyway? Did he find that things had been too quiet for the last couple of days? He had been in this kind of business far too long not to know that such periods often preceded a violent storm of some sort. And since this whole business with the Mysterions had started off, about two years earlier, nothing had ever proved itself truer.

White certainly was feeling uneasy that his two best agents, Captains Scarlet and Blue, had gone on a prolonged furlough at the same time... But White had thought it best to let it be that way, so his best team would be on hand and still working perfectly when the time came for it. They had already worked around the clock too often these last months. White couldn't very well ask them to continue that way much longer before seeing one of them breaking down at one point or another. In the case of Scarlet, Colonel White knew that the man, due to his particular condition, needed far less rest time than an ordinary man. But even he needed some time out, if not physically, then emotionally.

It was those thoughts of Scarlet and, by extension, of Blue, that were puzzling White. The colonel had been present that very morning when Scarlet had called Lieutenant Green to report that Destiny had just arrived in Los Angeles to join him and that they were going together to Las Vegas, where they intended taking their furlough. That call was standard procedure, of course... Even on vacations, Spectrum agents had to report their changes of location, and stay available in case of emergency calls. White generally tried his best not to disturb any vacationer, but, more often than not, it couldn't be helped.

White was still looking Lieutenant Green's way, still wondering what was bothering him so. "Tell me, Lieutenant," he suddenly asked his aide, "has Captain Scarlet called since this morning to confirm his arrival in Las Vegas?"

Lieutenant Green looked over his computer screen and tapped some keys. Having found the information, he nodded. "He called at ten A.M., local time, sir. He and Destiny have taken two rooms at the *St-Maurice* Hotel."

White nodded thoughtfully. "And Captain Blue must still be in Texas," he said, more to himself than as if to ask a question.

Lieutenant Green's answer had the effect of taking his superior aback. "No, sir. According to Captain Blue's last report this morning, he and Symphony have decided to leave El Paso, to travel by car to Las Vegas, through the desert."

"To Vegas?" a puzzled White repeated.

"Yes, Colonel. They left early this morning." Green smiled. "They must be on their way to join Captain Scarlet and Destiny."

"Must be, yes," Colonel White mused. "I should imagine those four will have quite a time together in Las Vegas..."

"I should think too, sir."

Green went back to his work and White picked up his pen. He tried to take up his reading where he had left it.

Without any success.

Lieutenant Green's report had stirred up more puzzling questions. Blue and Symphony were going to Las Vegas through the desert? Now that was an odd decision to make. The road must be a long one...

"Why not charter a plane?" White thought out loud.

"Sir?"

Lieutenant Green raised his head to his superior. Colonel White was distractedly playing with his pen. "Captain Blue and Symphony are both pilots... Why not charter a plane to go to Vegas instead of travelling by car through the desert?"

"I don't know, sir." Lieutenant Green gave a perplexed gaze at his commander. "Maybe they wanted to do some sight-seeing."

"Lieutenant, have you ever been to the American Southwest?"

"Er... No, sir."

"Well, don't bother. It's a desert climate, quite inhospitable. Murderously hot by day, bitterly cold by night, and there's nothing to see out there for hundreds of miles."

"Oh!" Lieutenant Green gave it some thought, then smiled broadly. "Then maybe they just want to spend some time alone together."

Green's remark was meant as a joke. Since he went back immediately after to his work, he didn't see the odd look his superior was giving him.

Some time alone together? Yes, that was quite possible, White thought. He wasn't a fool. For a long time now, he had known something was going on between Blue and Symphony, and he knew of the two's efforts in trying to keep it a secret. But unbeknown to them, they weren't very successful, and White suspected that it was more than probable than everybody onboard Cloudbase knew about it. They even had Scarlet as an accomplice, having him on the look-out just outside the Promenade Deck whenever they went to meet up there. White almost caught them red-handed once or twice, but Scarlet always managed to distract him in one way or another. Of course, White reflected, Blue was also helping Scarlet in kind, as he himself was involved in a quite similar relationship with Rhapsody Angel. The colonel had found that out a few weeks earlier, quite by chance. And THAT secret, until that moment, he had not suspected.

Since the game of cat and mouse seemed to amuse all of them so greatly, White had played along, letting everyone believe he was none the wiser about what was going on behind his back. So far, it hadn't interfered in any way with their work, so he had really nothing to say against it. He was just a little disappointed that they all should think so badly of him as to believe he would be against this kind of relationship.

Now another thought, specifically concerning Captain Blue and Symphony, was forming in Colonel White's mind as he mulled over what he had just learned from Green...

Scarlet and Destiny had been in Los Angeles, then went to Las Vegas... and Blue and Symphony were in El Paso, and then decided to take the road to join the other two.

White wondered if that hadn't all been prepared all in advance.

What was the name of that hotel where Captain Scarlet and Destiny were staying?

The *St-Maurice*.

Colonel White had a terminal built into his desk, connected to Lieutenant Green's computer. He turned away from his reading, tapped a few keys on the keyboard, and looked down at the screen. Even if he wasn't a computer genius like Lieutenant Green, or Captain Magenta, Colonel White certainly knew his way around computers too, and with one as sophisticated as the one on Cloudbase, it was fairly easy to find any information he wanted in the world.

He gained entry to the registers of the *Las Vegas St-Maurice Hotel* and searched the reservations records.

There. Reservations for two connecting rooms, made by Adam Svenson...

Three days ago.

So. This travel through the desert hadn't really been decided this morning, just as White suspected. Why would Blue lie about it to Lieutenant Green?

White cast a wondering look toward the young Black man seated at his console and going on with his work. A sudden amusing thought seemed to suddenly cross his mind and White saw him chuckle – although the young man was trying his best not to show it.

The Colonel looked at him inquisitively. "What is it you found so funny, Lieutenant?"

"Just... a crazy thought, sir. Quite trivial, to be honest..."

"Would you care to share it with me?"

The Colonel's tone was pleasant enough. Green hesitated just one second; he addressed his commanding officer with a broad smile. "I was just thinking, sir... You know Las Vegas has a lot of chapels and that people can get married very quickly there..."

"I fail to see what you're driving at, Lieutenant," White noted, his interest waning.

"Well, Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel were engaged once..."

"A LONG time ago, yes."

"Wouldn't it be funny if they tied the knot whilst they're there? They would have the opportunity."

Green's remark was innocent enough, but the odd way the Colonel looked at him and the apparent twitch over his left eye made Green wonder if he had done well telling him that. "No, Lieutenant, that would NOT be funny," White replied rather curtly. "I'm quite sure Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel have NOT rekindled their relationship. And it's not because Las Vegas is full of chapels that it automatically means people who go there get married."

Green cleared his throat, somehow uncomfortable. "Yes, sir," he said piteously. "I'm sorry to have bothered you with that..."

White shook his head, without answering. The lieutenant's reflection had somehow stirred some more thoughts to his mind.

What was so interesting in Las Vegas, anyway? White thought. Lots of casinos... Neither Blue nor Scarlet, nor the girls, were the gambling kind. Granted, there were also some pretty good shows... And dozens of Elvis Presley impersonators who were still going strong nearly a century after the so-called king of Rock n' Roll's demise.

There were also wedding chapels, as Green pointed out... Plenty of them. Las Vegas was renowned throughout the world for the quick, easy and varied ways people could marry there. It was the town's second most important industry.

White frowned deeply. He wasn't worried about Scarlet and Destiny getting married there, as Green had half-jokingly implied. He knew about Scarlet and Rhapsody being engaged. He had inadvertently seen the ring the captain had given the Angel pilot. He didn't know if they had made specific plans about it already, but if it had been Rhapsody instead of Destiny who had gone with him to Vegas...

Oh no! the colonel suddenly realised, as a sudden thought crossed his mind. *Blue and Symphony...* *THEY would not dare to do THAT*, he hoped. It was one thing, trying to deceive him about their fooling around, but another altogether to go and get married behind his back!

Colonel White shrugged the thought away and took his pen to return to his work. He had let his imagination get the better of him, he thought. After all, they were reasonable people...

He threw his pen down again.

Right. Reasonable. Symphony was certainly the most reckless of all the Angel pilots, and she had found herself in more than one desperate hot spot in the past. And Captain Blue was no better. His worst stunt to date, White recalled, was when he and Scarlet deliberately disobeyed orders, by staying in Base Concorde, trying to stop a rocket programmed to strike the very same spot they were standing on.

"No," the colonel muttered to himself, even as the doubt sank deeper into his mind. "They wouldn't..."

He didn't know how far Destiny Angel would let herself be involved in a foolhardy plan like this, but he knew far too well that he couldn't count on Captain Scarlet to try and prevent it.

He would certainly go along with it.

"They WOULD!"

Colonel White smacked his hand loudly on his desk. Lieutenant Green jumped at his station and turned to his commander, who was looking anything but serene.

"Something the matter, sir?" he asked, astounded by White's outburst.

The colonel had been pretty quiet and thoughtful since he had asked those questions about Captains Blue and Scarlet, ten minutes ago. What could be bothering him now? Green could see he was upset.

"Where's Captain Grey, Lieutenant?"

Colonel White's voice was hard and his blue stare was blazing with inner fury. Yes, thought Green, *something is definitely bothering him*. Something, or, more probably, someONE. Green certainly would not want to be in that person's shoes.

"Captain Grey? Er... he's in the officers' lounge, sir. He was about to fly down to New York Headquarters..."

"Cancel that flight," Colonel White interrupted abruptly. "Call him and tell him to come up here."

"Right away, sir?" a puzzled Green asked.

"No, Lieutenant, next Christmas!" White almost snapped at him.

Oh, boy! Green thought, *better be careful not to get on his bad side*. The lieutenant went to his mic and made a call to the officers' lounge, summoning Captain Grey to come to the Control Room – immediately. Then he took a chance by turning once again toward his commander, who had just closed the folder before him, in one decisive gesture.

"If I may ask you, sir..."

"Yes, Lieutenant?" White was standing up, his anger still fairly apparent, but cooling down a little. Green swallowed hard before continuing.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked. "I don't know, maybe because of what I said earlier... About Captain Scarlet and Destiny..."

White sighed. It was wrong of him to let Lieutenant Green take the brunt of his temper, he thought. The kid wasn't the one responsible.

"No, Lieutenant," he said. "There's nothing wrong... not much, anyway, and that's got NOTHING to do with your earlier reflection." He paused a second, then continued: "I just realized I needed a holiday of my own."

"Sir?" Green was perplexed. For Colonel White to actually admit he needed a vacation, something was definitely wrong.

"You don't agree with me, Lieutenant?" White asked, seeing his aide so unnaturally silent.

"No, sir. I mean... yes, sir." Green sighed. "Sir, it's a fact that you have worked harder than anyone else on Cloudbase, these past few months. And your last vacation turned out... well... rather badly."

"Tell me about it," Colonel White grumbled.

At that moment, Captain Grey entered the Control Room and Colonel White turned to greet him.

"That was fast, Captain. Did you run all the way from the officers' lounge?"

Captain Grey wasn't quite sure if question was meant as a joke, which, in itself, would feel really unnatural coming from his commander. But he could sense the bothered tone in Colonel White's voice. He decided to turn around the remark.

"Lieutenant Green's call seemed rather urgent, sir," he said, saluting his commander.

"Urgent? Oh, well..." White cleared his throat. "I want you to take command of Cloudbase, Captain. I've just decided to give myself a few days holiday."

"A vacation, sir?" Grey's tone was as perplexed as Green's had been.

White rolled his eyes. "WHY does everybody always seem so surprised when I decide to take leave?" he asked.

"Well, you're certainly entitled to it, sir," Grey responded, trying to smile.

"Glad you agree."

"But since your last... 'holiday' in London, you have to understand that we're rather concerned to see you go down there alone."

"Don't you think I can take care of myself?" White grumbled. "The last time, I was surprised. That isn't likely to happen again."

"Of course not, sir," Grey said, quietly nodding his understanding.

"And I don't intend to take this holiday alone," White added, almost to himself. He didn't elaborate, and neither of his officers asked what he meant by that. He cleared his throat. "Now, do you accept command of Cloudbase?"

"It would be an honour, sir."

"Good. So, you're in command, as of now. Have a plane ready for me. I'll leave immediately."

"May I ask where you're going, sir?"

"Las Vegas."

Lieutenant Green almost choked upon hearing that. He had the strength not to let his surprise be too apparent. But he couldn't help wondering why Colonel White would choose to take his vacation at the very same place as Captains Scarlet and Blue.

"I'll give you my exact location when I get there," Colonel White was telling Captain Grey. "Notify me if there's any emergency."

"Of course, sir," Grey replied.

"Very well. Then I'll be on my way."

White wasted no time heading toward the exit. A still perplexed Captain Grey called to him: "Colonel White?"

White stopped and turned on his heel, just as the door was opening before him. Grey gave him a smile. "Have a good time, sir."

White grinned back at him, a bit curtly. "I'm sure I will, Captain. Lieutenant..."

"Take care, Colonel," Green answered.

White nodded and disappeared through the sliding door. Still very confused at how fast the transfer of command had been done, Captain Grey turned to Lieutenant Green.

"Wow! Talk about being in a hurry! Do you know what motivated such a quick decision, Lieutenant?"

Green shrugged. As Colonel White's aide, he often found himself the unwilling witness of some events that even the captains of the senior staff were not aware of. Green had never betrayed Colonel White's confidence in him. Today would not be different. Especially since he didn't have a clue what it was all about. He could only suspect that it had something to do with Captain Scarlet, or Captain Blue. And he couldn't help himself wondering if HE wasn't the one who had set him off after either of them.

"I don't know, sir," Green said to Captain Grey. "That was as sudden for me as it was for you."

"Oh, well!" Grey sighed and went to sit at the commander's circular desk. He removed his cap and put it away. "Have the plane ready for the colonel, then. With the mood he's in, I certainly don't want to make him wait needlessly for it."

"Neither do I, Captain," Lieutenant Green replied, refraining from sighing heavily. "Neither do I."

* * *

Los Lobos was a quiet little town with no more than a couple of hundred houses and buildings, surrounded by drifting desert dirt. There was a gas station, of course, with its own bus stop, a general store, the sheriff's office, with its jail, a post office, a little hotel, a bar, no more commendable than the one Blue had phoned Scarlet from earlier that day, and most importantly, at least from Symphony's point of view, a cantina.

Captain Blue had stopped his rented car right in front of it and he and his girlfriend had entered to order the best meal the house had to offer. Blue wasn't really hungry himself, but he gave it a try, if just to accompany Symphony, who was literally famished. And she loved Mexican food, and proved it double time.

Blue was staring at her, obviously bewildered that so delicate a girl should be able to apparently inhale so much food. She was finishing her second portion of apple pie when she noticed that Blue wasn't eating his first one.

"You're not hungry?" she asked him.

Blue shook his head. He looked in amazed dismay as she took his plate and put it in front of her. His elbows on the table, he put his chin into his palms and observed her eating, in complete wonder.

"It always amazes me," he said with a dumbfounded tone, "that you should be able to eat so much. You eat... well, like a trucker."

"You left me to starve, might I remind you!" Symphony replied dryly. "So you shouldn't wonder that I'm eating like this now. And not only was I hungry, all this has been absolutely delicious!"

"And you'll eat that last piece of pie as well?"

"Fat chance of leaving it!"

"Speaking of fat... Where do you put it all?"

"I'm lucky, I guess. I've got a metabolism that allows me to eat whatever I want without putting on more than a pound."

"Lucky indeed. Remind me never to take you to one of those all-you-can-eat places... Especially if we're with Paul. Between him and you, any restaurant would be driven to bankruptcy."

"Are you somehow afraid I'll put on weight, Mr. Svenson? I can assure you, it won't happen."

Blue smiled. "No matter. I would love you, anyway."

"Yeah, that's what they ALL say."

"I'm just concerned that you'll get sick just before the wedding."

"The wedding... or the honeymoon, Big Blue?"

Blue let a smile come upon his face, but didn't respond. He had no need to. He cleared his throat and showed the still-eating Symphony the road map he had spread in front of them.

"Here we are," he said pointing to a spot. "Los Lobos." He followed the road line with his finger and stopped on another spot, before looking longingly into the eyes of his fiancée. "And here it is, Las Vegas."

"About three hundred miles more," nodded Symphony. She looked back at him. "We'll finally make it, Adam."

He smiled and covered her hand with his. "Yes, darling. We'll finally make it."

"Shouldn't we try to reach Paul and Juliette?" the young woman asked. "To let them know about our change of plan?"

"About having the wedding performed tonight, if possible?" Blue looked at his watch. "I don't know if we would be able to reach them. Last I called, they were on their way to catch a show." He gave Symphony a wry smile. "Of course, I'll be certainly able to reach Paul if I use my Spectrum communicator..."

"Absolutely out of the question," came Symphony's firm reply. "Try the phone. If you can't reach them, then we'll have to tell them when we get to Vegas."

Blue sighed and stood up. "It will be a bit short notice, then," he remarked. "Well, I'll give it a try, right now. Finish your meal. I'll be back in a jiffy."

"You know, I always have wondered how long a jiffy really is."

Blue waved at her and went to the owner of the place, a sympathetic round Hispanic woman who had personally greeted them, an hour earlier. When he asked her where he could make a phone call, she guided him to the back of the restaurant.

Now alone, Symphony was quietly finishing her last piece of apple pie. It wouldn't be long before Adam would be back, then they would take a few minutes more to relax a little, before getting back on the road, to Las Vegas.

And marriage.

Lost in her reverie, Symphony didn't notice two men entering the restaurant. One of them went to the counter, while the second came directly toward the young woman, with a limping step. Symphony didn't really see him until he stopped in front of her. She raised her eyes and looked up right at his grinning face.

"Well, hello there!"

It was the man from the bar; the one Adam was apparently running from. He was there, in front of her, and he was addressing her, with an expression that reminded the girl of an old grey, cunning wolf. She wasn't afraid, for she had looked death in the face more than once, and it was certainly a more frightening sight than this man. She was just surprised to see him there.

Surprised, and curious.

"Hello," she quietly responded, putting down her fork. "How surprising to see you here. Am I to think it's a simple stroke of luck?"

The man's smile widened. He didn't sit, but put his hands on the table and leaned toward her.

"Where is that boyfriend of yours?" he asked.

"Around," she answered, looking straight at him. "What is it with you two, anyway?"

"You mean, he didn't tell you?"

"He just said that you were bad news... and that if I ever encountered you, I should run like hell, as far away from you as possible."

"You don't seem to be following his advice."

"I don't know you. I don't see why I should be frightened of you."

"So you're not a coward. Unlike him."

"Adam is definitely not a coward," Symphony replied sharply. "If you think that, you don't know him at all." She narrowed her eyes at the man. "He also told me you were some kind of a ghost ... that he hadn't seen you in twenty-five years..."

"Yes," the man said thoughtfully. "It has been that long..." He shook his head. "The kid and I are old friends..."

"Somehow, I doubt it," Symphony replied with a cold tone. "Obviously, there is some unresolved business between you two..."

"You can say that again!"

"...Enough to motivate you to follow us through here."

"Who said I've followed you? There is only one road through here... There was a fifty per cent chance that I should go in the same direction as you."

"Right. And an even chance that you should stop in this town like we did."

"You understand quickly, pretty lady."

His tone was mocking and Symphony frowned deeply when she saw him pulling out the chair opposite her to sit down.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," she advised quietly.

"Do what?" the man asked, with perplexity in his voice.

"Sit here. Adam is due to come back any minute... any SECOND now. I don't think he would appreciate seeing you here."

"Really? But I'm looking forward to talking about the past with him. We'll be able to reminisce together."

"As far as he's concerned, I'm pretty sure he would much prefer to forget about you."

The man grinned again. "You're sure he hasn't told you about me?"

"I'm certain I would remember. You should go now, sir, before Adam comes back."

The man laughed softly. He put his hand on Symphony's.

"It seems young Adam knows how to choose his women," he said. "Not only are you stunningly beautiful, but you've got a brain in that pretty head of yours... and guts to boot."

Symphony slid her hand from under the man's. She was surprised to see him taking it again, insistently.

"I would advise you to stop doing that, sir," she warned dryly.

"Or what?" the man replied a bit curtly. "Your boyfriend will be angry with me?"

"No. I will be."

The man laughed again; there was something sinister in that laugh. Symphony tried again to get her hand out from under his. He grabbed it firmly, imprisoning it. The young woman frowned.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked him angrily.

"Please, don't talk so loud." The man's tone was more warning than request. "I just want to know you better."

"And I certainly DON'T want to know you," Symphony replied with an icy tone. "Now release my hand this instant!"

"Come on, pretty girl," the man insisted. "I'm sure you're dying to hear what that 'unresolved business' is between the kid and me..."

"Not from you, I don't!" Symphony said. "Now, let me go, before I do something drastic."

"Oh!" the man remarked mockingly. "You're really scaring me, little girl!"

There was something in his tone that displeased Symphony thoroughly... displeased and frightened her. And looking into his eyes brought nothing to reassure her. She tried again to disengage her hand, without any more success. Now she was really beginning to feel annoyed and maybe even a little worried.

"Sir," she said between clenched teeth, "I'm warning you for the last time: let go of my hand!"

The man didn't really have time to obey her. Suddenly, a firm hand grabbed him by the shoulder, forced him to stand, and pushed him away from the table where Symphony sat. Blue stood between the young woman and the older man, looking furiously toward the latter, with a threatening attitude.

"Stay away from her, Grover!" he shouted angrily.

The few clients of the restaurant turned to look at the obvious altercation between the two men. Symphony cast a glance at her boyfriend. He was generally a calm man, having no difficulty whatsoever in keeping his anger in check. But now, she could see he was really fuming.

"Say, kid," the man Blue had called Grover said, trying to smile congenially. "How are you doing, these days?"

"Cut the friendly pretence, Grover!" Blue replied sharply. "What are you doing here? Following us around?"

"As I said to your pretty lady," Grover answered quietly, "I am not following you."

"And you expect me to believe THAT?" Blue scoffed, shouting again.

"Adam, please, calm down," Symphony demanded. "There's no harm done..."

"No harm done?" Blue replied, turning to her. He pointed at Grover. "You don't know this man! You don't know what he's capable of! I do!" He turned again to the man, and took a threatening step toward him. "What do you want with me THIS time, Grover? Haven't you done enough already?"

"Easy now, kid," Grover said to Blue. "Listen to the girl. You're making a scene over nothing here."

"I don't care!"

To Symphony's surprise and dismay, Blue grabbed Grover by his collar and pulled him closer, looking straight into his face. The older man stumbled on his bad leg and Symphony saw him wince.

"Adam! Let him go!" she urged.

"Not before he tells me what he's doing here!" Blue retorted angrily.

"I keep telling you," Grover said, "It's got nothing to do with you, kid."

"Stop calling me that!" Blue shouted, shaking him furiously like a leaf. "I'm not a kid anymore!"

The man who had entered the restaurant with Grover then stepped forward, seeing his companion in such bad predicament. He put a firm hand on Blue's shoulder, intending to force him to let go of the older man.

"That's enough, pal! This guy's twice your age..."

Blue responded with a sudden elbow to the face, which took the man by surprise and drove him to his knees. Grover thought he saw a chance of freeing himself and tried to aim his fist at Blue's chin. The younger man easily evaded the blow and responded with a punch of his own, right into Grover's stomach.

Astounded by her boyfriend's sudden raging violence, Symphony stood up. Grover's bad leg had given way, but Blue kept him upright.

"I'm not done with you yet, mister!" he said to the man's face.

"Adam! Stop it now!" Symphony shouted.

Blue turned to her, distracted by the worried edge he heard in her voice. He saw the concern in her eyes. She was looking at him as if she didn't recognize him. It was true he wasn't feeling like himself right now...

"Look out!"

Symphony's warning came just in time for Blue to avoid the vicious attack of Grover's companion, who was coming toward him with a bottle. The improvised weapon missed Blue's head, and the Spectrum agent, letting go of Grover, grabbed the other man and threw him face first onto the table, knocking it over. The man fell to the floor, amidst broken dishes, and stayed there, apparently stunned.

Blue heard murmurs surrounding him; the other customers were quickly getting away from the fight. *Great! And I so wanted to keep a low profile...* Blue thought gloomily. *If it hadn't been for Grover...* Thoughts of that man made Blue turn to him. Just in time to receive a direct hit to the face.

Even if he was much older than Blue, Grover was a little heavier, and apparently as strong as he was. His blow staggered the younger man and Grover took the opportunity to hit him again in the groin. Blue's knees buckled. He heard Symphony's voice calling for all of them to stop. Obviously, Grover had no intention whatsoever of obeying her and continued laying into Blue.

A punch to his jaw drew blood in Blue's mouth and sent him to his knees.

"Trying to play in the big leagues now, kid?" he heard Grover whispering to him.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Symphony moving toward them. Knowing her as he did, he had no doubt she had every intention of coming to his assistance. He certainly would not let her face Grover.

The latter was actually bending down in front of him, preparing to hit his opponent again. Blue did not give him the opportunity to do so. He threw his fist upward, putting all his weight into it. He connected under Grover's chin, pushing him away from him. The Spectrum agent stood up quickly, stopped his opponent from falling over, and continued to pound into him.

Blue finally let Grover fall to the floor, at his feet. The young captain was breathing hard, exhausted by his effort and by the blows he had received. Glaring down with disgust at the man he was standing over, he wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth.

A half-stunned Grover was looking at Blue with bewildered eyes.

"Stay down!" Blue growled to him. "Stay down or I'll throw you down again!"

He felt a hand taking him roughly by the shoulder. *The other man*, he thought. *Must have come out of his beauty sleep.* Blue didn't want to give him the chance to try and hit him again with a bottle. He spun suddenly, throwing a punch...

...And caught a uniformed man, wearing a star, right on the chin.

"Oh, God!" Blue murmured, looking with dismay as the man fell on his back. He realized he had just hit one of the local constabulary.

"All right, that's quite enough!" Blue heard an angry voice behind him. He felt a violent blow at the back of his knees, forcing him down. Then somebody rammed him from behind and threw him across a table, face down. He was held tightly in this position, the weight of this new assailant pushing him down, a billy club across the back of his neck.

"Stay quiet, tough guy!" the man said angrily in his ear. "We don't appreciate your kind around here!"

"Hey! Let him go!"

Symphony had seen the events developing rather quickly before her eyes. Two uniformed men, obviously representing the law around there, had entered the restaurant. One had tried to grab Blue, who had mistakenly hit him. The other had succeeded in subduing the Spectrum officer, and was now twisting his right arm behind his back. That was when she decided to step in, protesting vehemently against the kind of treatment imposed on her fiancé.

"You have no right to treat him that way!" she said.

"No? I'm the sheriff around here, lady." The lawman, a bulky forty-something with a big moustache, turned angrily to her. "He just hit my deputy!"

"It was a mistake!" Blue tried to explain.

"The mistake was when you stopped here in the first place, mister!"

The deputy, still half-stunned by the blow he had received, was coming to his feet. Blue hadn't really been very gentle with him.

"You okay, Harvey?" the sheriff asked him.

"Yeah," the other man answered, shaking his head. "Yeah, I'm all right, sheriff. Boy, that guy has a mean hook!"

"All right, then!" the sheriff barked, looking around, still keeping Blue down. "Who started this mess?"

The witnesses were all pretty in accordance about that fact: they all saw Blue starting the fight. Symphony was the only one to come to his defence.

"Now look here, sheriff, there is an explanation for this..."

"Keep it to yourself!" the sheriff replied dryly. "I think your friend needs to cool off in a cell for a while..."

"You can't be serious! Listen to me: he was defending me!"

"Against what?"

Grover was starting to get slowly on his feet. He seemed to have some difficulty about it and he needed to support himself on a chair to finally stand up. Blue, who could see him from his position, was pretty sure he was exaggerating his predicament.

"I think the young man imagined I was bugging his girl," Grover said to the sheriff.

"Imagined?" Symphony repeated protesting. "He didn't imagine anything!" She turned furiously toward Grover. "You WERE bugging me!"

"Is that so, Will?" the sheriff asked Grover.

"Will?" Symphony repeated. She realized with horror that Grover was somehow acquainted with the sheriff. "Oh, give me a break!" she sighed heavily, rolling her eyes.

"I guess the situation could have seemed a little confusing," Grover said with a sly smile.

"There's nothing confusing about you, Grover!" Blue replied between clenched teeth. "You're a creep!"

"Keep quiet!" the sheriff barked at him. "Whatever Will Grover might have done, there's no reason to beat him up like you did!"

The deputy sheriff was helping the other man who had attacked Blue regain his footing. He was still a bit unsure of his balance. He pointed an accusing finger toward Blue.

"This guy's dangerous, sheriff!" he said dryly. "He was all over Will like a wild animal!"

"You should be ashamed of yourself, fella!" the sheriff noted to Blue. "Attacking a crippled man like that!"

Blue tried to get free. The sheriff tightened his grip and nodded to his deputy to come over to help him. The deputy obeyed and snapped his handcuffs on Blue's right wrist.

"I've got one more question for you, my friend," the sheriff asked Blue again, very quietly. "That grey convertible out there, in front of the restaurant... that's yours?"

"Yeah," Blue answered, gritting his teeth against the pain of the cuff biting into his flesh. "What about it?"

"We received a report about a smart guy going at nearly 200 MPH on the main road into town," the sheriff continued. "And he was driving a car just like yours."

"Oh, no!" Symphony murmured, looking upward again. She was able to do nothing more than watch as Blue's hands were tightly cuffed behind his back and he was forced to stand up.

"All right, now!" the sheriff told him. "Off to a cell you go, tough guy! Until the judge can see you."

"No!" The sheriff and his deputy were already starting to push and drag Blue in the direction of the door when Symphony came right at them, protesting again, most vehemently. "You can't do that, sheriff! What do you have against him exactly?"

"Karen..." Blue tried to call to her.

"What have I got against him?" the sheriff scoffed mockingly. "Assault and battery... against a cripple, no less! Resisting arrest, disorder in a public place, destruction of private property... and most probably drinking, speeding, and reckless driving!"

"I only had ONE beer!" Blue defended himself. "And it was in THIS restaurant!"

"Well, if that's true, it leaves reckless driving and speeding!" the sheriff mocked him. "Anyway, your place is in prison right now, mister!"

"You're making a terrible mistake, sheriff!" Symphony said, frowning deeply.

"Oh, yeah?" How so?"

"You don't know who you're dealing with, here..."

"Karen!"

Blue's loud warning took all of Symphony's attention and she turned to him. She saw the anguish in his eyes, but she also saw the firm message that she should keep quiet, that she shouldn't reveal their Spectrum identities to these men. Least of all, in front of Grover. He shook his head negatively. "No," he almost whispered.

"Adam, you can't..."

"No, Karen," he replied firmly. "YOU can't."

She sighed and gave in.

The sheriff grunted, and he and his deputy pushed Blue through the restaurant door. For a moment, Symphony stood there, feeling as helpless as she had ever been.

"Seems like your boyfriend is in a bit of trouble here, pretty lady!"

Symphony frowned and turned toward Grover and his friend, who were still there, looking at her. The gleam she could see in Grover's eyes was somehow unsettling and seemed to presage further trouble.

She didn't speak to either of the two men, and followed Blue, who was then taken to the local police station.

* * *

"What do you mean, I can't post his bail?"

It was more than two hours later. Symphony had waited all that time in the sheriff's personal office. She hadn't seen Adam since he was brought in and taken to the main office, and then to the cellblock, where he was to be held. The sheriff, Angus McNamara, seemed to have taken some pleasure in making her wait. When he finally came to see her, he had finalized the details of Blue's incarceration.

And now, he had told her that he wouldn't release Blue on bail.

"You have no right to do that!" she said angrily at the man who was sitting behind his desk in front of her. "Why would you refuse him bail?"

"Look, Miss...?"

"Wainwright."

"Miss Wainwright, your friend is a stranger around these parts." The sheriff sighed. "There is nothing to tell me he won't run away the minute I free him."

"...And then have a criminal record?" Symphony replied. "If you have checked, then you know he's never done anything wrong. He's the most honest man I know."

"Well, he APPEARS honest enough." The sheriff looked thoughtfully at her. "But that doesn't mean he really is. Besides, checking his records, I also learned he is a very wealthy man. It would be nothing to him to jump bail and get away with it."

"Adam is not wealthy. His father is."

"Well, it's all the same."

"No, it isn't."

"Miss Wainwright," McNamara sighed again, "imposing bail isn't my decision..."

"No, that's the judge's business. YOU have decided to keep Adam behind bars! And you have no right to do that!"

"It's my job to uphold the law. There is no denying your friend lost it in the restaurant. The owner is lodging a complaint against him... Will Grover will do the same, I imagine. And that's not counting the ones we can hold against him for hitting my deputy and speeding..."

"That last thing you can't prove," Symphony replied dryly.

"No, but I know it was him. Admit it."

"The hell I will!"

"Have it your way. But I'm keeping Mr. Svenson until tomorrow. Until he sees the judge. If anything, I don't want to risk seeing him running into Will Grover again. I have some concern that it could really turn bad if he were to meet him again anytime soon." The sheriff smiled lightly. "He could use the night to cool off."

"That's your last word on the matter?"

"Yes. I won't change my mind about it. Come back tomorrow morning, with the bail money... and I might consider letting him go."

"You mean you're not certain you will let him go even then?"

"That's right. We'll see if he's calmer then."

"Listen, if we're willing to pay for damages to the restaurant as well..."

"Don't insist, lady. Anyway, after he's seen the judge, he WILL certainly pay for damages to the restaurant... and then some, for the rest of what he did."

"I'm sure I can arrange things with the judge. If I can just talk to him and..."

"The judge won't be here to see your friend before tomorrow morning," the sheriff announced quietly.

"He's not in town?" Symphony asked with a frown.

"No. He's... otherwise occupied."

"You ARRANGED it that way, didn't you?" Symphony accused.

"Now, why would have I done such a thing?"

"You're really all heart, sheriff!" Symphony grumbled curtly. She sighed heavily. There was apparently no way she would be able to get Blue out of that cell tonight. "Can I, at least, see him?"

The sheriff got up on his feet. "By all means, Miss Wainwright... That I can arrange for you."

* * *

Blue was in the last cell of the block. When Symphony came into the place alone, she had to walk in front of all the other cells to go to his. The other prisoners whistled and called to her. She feigned not to hear them. She only had eyes for Blue, who was pacing around his cell, like a nervous tiger. When he saw her, he came close to the bars separating them.

"Am I glad to see you, Karen!"

She looked at his face. He seemed distraught, nervy, ready to blow up... Since being brought in, his lower lip had swollen and a violet bruise covered his left cheek. He looked like a prize-fighter who had gone a couple of rounds with the local champion.

"How are you?" she asked him.

"I'll be fine when I get out of here," he grumbled. "How much did they ask for bail?"

Symphony shook her head, hesitating. "I'm sorry, Adam. The sheriff just told me he won't let you out before tomorrow morning."

"What?" Blue looked at her in dismay. "He can't do that!"

"It seems he can and he's doing it. You won't be able to explain yourself in front of the judge before tomorrow." Symphony sighed. "I tried, Big Blue. He was adamant about it."

"Oh, wonderful!" Blue mumbled, looking to the sky and turning away to pace another round of his cell.

"He said he's afraid that if you were to run into that Grover fellow anytime soon, you would attack him again," Symphony continued. "And frankly, Adam, after seeing how you tore into him..."

"You agree with the sheriff?" Blue asked her in surprise, coming back to the bars.

"I didn't say that," Symphony replied. She hesitated, before continuing in a whisper: "What is it with you, Adam? You're not yourself today. What is that man to you? Every time you see him, you don't seem to be able to restrain your temper."

"I did lose it back there, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

Blue sighed heavily and put his forehead to the bars, closing his eyes. "I'm a stupid fool," he muttered. He looked at Symphony. "I blew it big time. We won't get married tonight."

"It's all right." Symphony tried to smile as if it weren't really important. "There's always tomorrow. And anyway, I'm not really looking forward to marrying you tonight, seeing you looking that way."

"Looking what way?"

"Like you just had a run-in with a bunch of hooligans."

Blue touched his swollen cheek and gave a wry grin. "How's the other guy?" he asked jokingly.

"It's no laughing matter, Adam." Symphony paused a second. She looked around, assuring herself nobody was listening to what they were saying. "Why did you stop me telling the sheriff who we were?"

"And compromise our Spectrum identities?" Blue retorted quickly. "Out of the question! And it's really a good thing that we had left our identity cards and communicators in the car. It simplifies the problem a great deal..."

"Adam, if I had told him, you would not be in this cell right now!"

"Yeah, thanks to a technicality! Think about it, Karen: if you had told them, they would have checked us out. Spectrum Intelligence would have found out about this incident. The COLONEL would have found out. Can you imagine the explanation I would have to give him regarding all this?"

"I think you're selling the colonel a bit short, here, Adam."

"Because you really think he would take kindly to learning one of his senior staff officers was arrested because of his involvement in a brawl? Especially since the said officer seemed to be responsible of the whole damned thing!"

"You were not responsible. That guy was bugging me. Besides, I'm sure if you'd explained to the Colonel what the problem is with that guy..."

"I'd rather not. It's very personal, Karen."

"And somewhat painful, I guess, because you still haven't told ME." Symphony sighed heavily. "Who IS that man?"

Blue kept silent for a moment. He looked around, and then glanced back at her.

"I can't tell you now," he said. "This isn't the place."

"What could be so..."

"I promise you. I will tell you. As soon as I'm out of here, I'll tell you." Blue looked toward the main door, seeming very nervous. "In the meanwhile, you'll have to leave this place."

"Leave this place?" Symphony repeated, frowning. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I won't be released before tomorrow morning. I want you out of this town until then, Karen."

Blue's voice had an urgent tone to it. Symphony couldn't believe what she had just heard. She shook her head.

"You're not serious!" she murmured.

"Deadly serious," Blue replied.

"I'm not leaving you here all alone, Big Blue," Symphony protested.

"You must, Karen."

"Listen, there is a hotel here, you know, and..."

"No."

"...I'll take a room here until tomorrow, and then I'll come back to this godforsaken jail to bail you out."

"No, Karen!"

What do you mean, 'no'?" Symphony snapped angrily. "Adam, I won't leave you all alone. I don't want to!"

"No, no, please, listen to me." Blue gently took the young woman's hand, which was gripping one of the bars separating them. He glanced toward the other prisoners, toward the door again, as if he was afraid that Symphony's outburst had attracted attention to them. Since nobody was really paying attention to them, he approached her as closely as the bars allowed.

"Listen carefully," he murmured, looking straight into her eyes. "Grover is a very, very dangerous man. What happened today tends to prove me that he hasn't changed his ways in twenty-five years. He followed us – ME – here... I don't have a clue what he wants, but I'm quite sure he won't hesitate to go after you to get to me..."

"You know I can take care of myself, Adam."

"I know that, honey, but I can't bear the thought of you facing him one on one. I know too well what he's capable of... And since I'm stuck here, behind those bars, I can't protect you..." His voice trailed off. Symphony had to call on all of her strength not to shiver. What could that man have done to her Adam that he would be so afraid of what he might do to her?

"I want you out of this town as soon as possible," Blue continued in a grim tone. "Take the car, go to Vegas, don't stop anywhere in between. Go to Paul. Tell him what's happened. With him to take care of you, I won't have to worry."

"And what about you?" Symphony asked him with concern.

"Me?" Blue gave her a faint smile. "I've got nothing to fear, behind these bars."

"Somehow, that's not very comforting."

"Karen, you don't have to worry about me. And first thing tomorrow morning, come back for me. With Paul."

"I know that if he was here, I'd certainly feel better," Symphony sighed. "Maybe I should call him to ask him to come over."

"You can't. I wasn't able to reach him, just before this whole mess. I suppose he's out with Destiny."

"With a Spectrum communicator, I would be able to reach him."

"No. No, don't use the communicator," Blue urged the young woman.

"Adam, what would happen if Spectrum recalls us to duty? They'd find out that you are in jail... They'll learn about the fight."

"Well, let's just hope that won't happen. Please, do as I ask, darling. I don't want you to stay in this town all alone, possibly at the mercy of Grover. I'll sleep better tonight knowing you're far away from here, safe and secure."

"And far away from you..."

Symphony gazed into the blue eyes of her lover. She saw the distress in them. *Dear God, he's really afraid for me, and it's killing him.* She was beginning to feel very frightened herself. *Better not let him know,* she mused. *He's obviously worried enough as it is.* She gently covered his bruised knuckles with her right hand and tried to smile at him in a reassuring way.

"You really want me to go?"

"Yeah," Blue nodded. "Right away. Without talking to anyone."

She sighed. "Well, at least, I've got to tell the sheriff I'll be back first thing tomorrow morning, with the bail money."

Blue gave a relieved smile, his eyes suddenly bright. "All right. Go then." He passed his free hand through the bars and caressed her cheek, looking longingly into her eyes. "I'm so sorry I blew things, honey. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"I certainly hope so," Symphony tried to respond with a debonair tone. "You know I was supposed to be a bride tonight."

Blue smiled again. Symphony kissed his hand before he took it back through the bars.

"Don't go away," she whispered.

"I won't." Blue gave a look around. "I'll still be here when you come back." He paused. "Be careful, Karen. Remember... I love you."

"I love you too, Big Blue," Symphony said, moving backward to the door. "Don't worry, I'll be back."

"I know."

They gazed at each other's eyes, as if they were unable to look away, as Symphony continued to back away toward the door. Then she made a supreme effort over herself to turn away, and walked out of the cellblock.

She promised herself that she would never, ever, again turn her back on Adam in such moments of need.

Chapter 3

The 'special guest' Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel had picked up at the airport didn't want to impose on them. Claiming the long flight had exhausted her, she took a nap in her hotel room while the two went out to see a show. Since they expected Blue and Symphony to arrive around eight o'clock, the two Spectrum agents came back to the hotel fairly early. They let their guest continue her nap, ordered a meal to be delivered to one of their rooms and, after dining, proceeded to pass the remainder of the time by playing some hands of poker, using one of the twin beds as a card table.

After a time, Scarlet became very annoyed at the game. Destiny proved herself to be a real card shark, winning almost all the hands herself. That was a side of her he had known about, when he was going out with her a few years ago; he had completely forgotten about it over time. He soon remembered, as the young Frenchwoman's gains of peanuts grew rapidly in front of her.

They were somewhere around their tenth hand when Destiny, with a very satisfied grin upon her face, placed her cards face-up on the mattress.

"Three kings," she announced.

Scarlet glanced at her cards murderously. He checked over the two aces in his hand and folded the cards, before throwing them down.

"I'm all out of peanuts," he sighed. "You wiped me out."

"Too bad we weren't playing for real," Destiny replied coyly. "I could have made a fortune. I wonder how much a captain of the Spectrum senior staff makes in a month..."

"Good for me gambling is against Spectrum's regulations," Scarlet stated gloomily.

"That's just an excuse for you!" Destiny noted in turn, proceeding to eat her winnings.

"I was so sure you bluffed with that last hand," Scarlet added, without deigning to respond to her mocking remark. "Where did you learn to play poker like that?"

"It's a natural gift," Destiny responded, nibbling a peanut. "*Et les leçons de Sœur Hélène...*"

"Excuse me?"

"At the convent where I was educated, *Soeur Hélène* was a repenting gambler. Never quite been able to shake off her 'bad habits', as *Mère Supérieure* used to say."

"Are you telling me a NUN taught you how to play poker?" an astounded Scarlet asked, frowning.

Destiny nodded. She took the deck in her hands and played distractedly with the cards, without really looking at them. Scarlet stared as the cards danced in her expert hands. "Poker, blackjack... you name it," the Angel pilot said. "She was a marvellous card player. And I was her star pupil." Grinning, she produced the Ace of Spades, put it back in the deck, cut the deck in two, and spread the cards on the bed, before taking one apparently at random. She handed it to Scarlet.

It was the Ace of Spades.

"And I suppose she taught you how to cheat," Scarlet noted, looking suspiciously at Destiny.

"Captain!" the French woman protested. "She was a nun! A saintly woman!"

"That didn't stop her leading you down the road of sin!" Scarlet smiled mockingly.

"*Vraiment!* I don't need to cheat to win, I can assure you!"

"A bit overconfident, aren't we now? The French are so full of themselves!"

"*Oh, and the English are not?*" Destiny replied sarcastically in French.

They heard knocking at the door; Scarlet looked at his watch. Almost eight thirty. He stood up.

"That's bound to be Adam and Karen," he said, moving toward the door. "It's about time they showed up, I tell you! I was beginning to take root..."

"Maybe we'll be able to catch that illusionist's show," Destiny said. "I know Karen loves magicians..."

"To be perfectly honest with you, Juliette," Scarlet replied with a broad smirk, "I'm quite positive that magicians will be the LAST thing on her mind tonight!"

He turned the door handle, preparing to greet his two friends. He opened the door wide and stopped dead.

It wasn't Captain Blue and Symphony who had just knocked at the door, but somebody else entirely, somebody completely unexpected.

Scarlet nearly jumped out of his skin on seeing who it was. Dumbfounded, he stood there like a statue, almost unable to think. From the bed where she was still sitting, Destiny glanced at him with an intrigued look. She didn't have a good view of the person standing on the other side of the open door.

She jumped to her feet when she heard the very distinctive voice that was now addressing Scarlet: "Hello! I suppose it is indeed a surprise to see me here."

Mon Dieu! Destiny thought, almost panicky over that fact. *Ce n'est pas possible!* She quickly went to Scarlet's side... then gasped in surprise upon seeing who was standing in front of them.

"Colonel White!" she exclaimed, absolutely astounded, not believing she was really seeing their superior here, in this Las Vegas hotel, wearing casual clothes and playing with a grey hat he was turning around in his fingers.

"Why, Destiny," he said mockingly. "I do believe I've surprised you too!"

He had something of an amused grin upon his face, which seemed rather unusual for him, and it added to the confusion of his two agents. Scarlet was still trying to find something to say.

"Well, sir, I must say... er..."

"It is indeed a surprise to see you here, Colonel," Destiny said, coming to the rescue of her stammering friend, and smiling as widely as she could. "May I ask... WHY you're here, actually?"

Scarlet managed to come out of his shock. "Have we been recalled to duty?"

"Eh? Oh, no, no." White was still turning his hat in his hands. *Something's on his mind*, Scarlet thought worriedly. The question was... what exactly?

"Things were still awfully quiet up on Cloudbase," White finally said. "So I thought I could take some time off myself."

Scarlet gave him a puzzled look. Now, that was strange... He remembered vividly that, before his departure for L.A., some days ago, his commander had made it pretty clear he wanted to use the quiet time to settle some overdue business. But now, he was here, and there was little Scarlet could do NOT to notice the small suitcase standing on the floor, right next to his feet.

"What about your unfinished reports, sir?" Scarlet asked bluntly. He wasn't a man to beat around the bush, Colonel White knew that and Destiny too, but that didn't stop the young French pilot looking at him with surprise, anger and worry in her eyes.

"Oh, the more important ones are done," White replied airily, as if he hadn't noticed the cold tone in Scarlet's voice. "Lieutenant Green is quite able to look after the rest by himself."

"Don't mind him, sir," Destiny said, nodding to a still visibly incredulous Scarlet. "He had a bad experience with cards, recently."

"Cards?" White repeated, frowning.

"Why yes! I was winning," Destiny explained, smiling. Obviously, White still couldn't understand her and was casting her an enquiring look. She shrugged and stepped slightly away from the door. "Please, do come in..."

White entered, suitcase in hand, and Scarlet closed the door, almost like a robot. He narrowed his eyes at his commanding officer, who was standing there, obviously relishing how his presence had struck the pair. He looked exactly like a cat that had swallowed a big fat mouse.

That was, in effect, a bit unnerving.

"So you have decided to give yourself a holiday," Scarlet noted thoughtfully.

"Yes. My presence wasn't really required on Cloudbase," White answered, putting the suitcase down next to one of the beds and turning to Scarlet. "And since my last furlough wasn't exactly filled with peace and quiet..."

Scarlet nodded his understanding. Indeed, Colonel White hadn't had any proper time off in a long time. His last London leave had been a terrible ordeal for him. Kidnapped and drugged by Captain Black, while visiting his late wife's grave, he was led to believe that Military despotism was still ruling over Britain, and that he had continued to fight it since his younger days. He would probably have struck a fatal blow in the name of the Mysterons, if Captains Scarlet and Blue

hadn't believed enough in him to risk their careers in trying to snap him out of his drug-induced paranoia and bring him back to his normal self.

"Are you feeling all right now, sir?" Scarlet asked his commander.

"It has been some weeks now, Captain. I've never felt better in my life."

Yes, obviously, seeing how he was looking, but Scarlet was still intrigued by White's presence. Why was he in Vegas, anyway? There was something afoot, here...

"You haven't come here just to tell us you've decided to take a holiday, have you, sir?" he asked White.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I haven't told you yet, have I?" the older man replied innocently.

"Told us what?" Destiny asked, really curious.

"When I found out that you were here in Las Vegas, with Blue and Symphony -"

"Blue and Symphony?" Scarlet interrupted nervously, without thinking.

"Why, yes. I know they're going to join you here." White smiled. "Captain Blue told Lieutenant Green this morning."

"Oh, he did, did he?" replied Scarlet dryly.

"Anyway, as I was saying, seeing that you would all be here... I thought I could... I don't know... join you?"

Oh no! Scarlet thought. *Of all the rotten things to happen just now...*

"Is something the matter, Captain?" Colonel White asked him.

"Er... nothing, sir," Scarlet answered, apologizing. "I was just wondering... what could have motivated you to join us?" He gave a weak smile. Destiny shot him an angry look. *Where on Earth did he learn diplomacy, anyway?*

"Well, I simply thought I would follow up on your invitation."

"MY invitation, sir?"

"Yes. You know, after that whole affair in London..."

Scarlet cast a dumbfounded look at his superior, trying to recall what the hell he could have said to him on that occasion. White glanced at his top agent.

"You remember, don't you, Paul?"

"Er... Yes, I seem to recall..." a confused Scarlet answered, lying as he did.

"Obviously, I would understand if you'd prefer that I didn't hang around with you during your leave. Young people like yourselves certainly don't want an old fogey like me spoiling your fun..."

Colonel White was smiling quite innocently. *There is a trap somewhere*, Scarlet thought quickly. It wouldn't be wise to let the old man believe he was unwanted... which was actually the case. Obviously, Destiny was thinking exactly the same thing.

"Who would ever say you're old!" she replied with her most gracious smile, taking her commander by the arm. "No, we'd love to spend some time with you... Isn't that true, *mon cher?*"

She was casting toward Scarlet a glance that was desperately spelling "*Please, help me a little here.*" Scarlet did all he could not to scowl.

"Yes. Love it. Definitely."

His tone was anything but convincing, and Destiny's glance became a murderous one. White was not fooled. Unbeknown to his agents, he was having tremendous fun witnessing them so uneasy. He pretended not to see anything odd, and addressed a big smile to Destiny.

"Thank you. I'm planning to have a good time in the next few days, you know."

"Oh, charming!" Scarlet mumbled behind his back.

White heard him quite well. A furtive and devilish grin passed upon his features as he turned away, pretending to look around the room. *Good. Let them stew a little.* He'd go in for the kill later. He suddenly turned back toward Scarlet and Destiny.

"By the way... where ARE Blue and Symphony?"

"They... haven't arrived yet," Destiny answered uneasily.

"Oh!" White thought about it a moment, then frowned. "Strange... I would have thought they would be here by now."

"They took a wrong turn on the road," Scarlet explained.

"The road?" White repeated.

Scarlet just had time to hold back a curse. *Oh, really good, Paul. Put your head in the noose, while you're at it.* How could he have been so stupid, giving THAT information to the old man? White was now sitting on the foot of one of the beds, musing over the notion.

"What a peculiar idea," White noted innocently. "Now, why would they take the road when they could charter a plane? Do you know what could have motivated a decision like that?"

Scarlet drove his fists into his pockets and sighed. "Beats me, sir."

"Mmm... I'll have to ask them that question," White continued. "When do you expect them?"

"Any time soon," was Destiny's response. Scarlet cast her a murderous look. She just made a face at him, behind White's back. Now why should she hold her tongue if HE talked, anyway?

"Where are you staying, Colonel?" Scarlet asked his commander, turning away from the Angel pilot.

"Ah... I haven't got a room yet... But I thought I could stay at the *St-Maurice* too. Lieutenant Green told me you were all staying here."

Scarlet scowled. He had to remember to wring the kid's neck when he got back to Cloudbase.

Provided he got the chance to do so. Between White, who could be very close to finding out what was really going on, and Blue, who would surely want to kill him for supposedly having invited their commander to join them at some point, there was little doubt in Scarlet's mind he wouldn't survive this holiday...

Thank Heavens he was indestructible.

"What's this?" White had just discovered the cards lying on the bed, next to a pile of peanuts. He took the deck. Destiny cleared her throat.

"Like I said, sir, we were playing cards, when you just arrived..."

"With peanuts?" a perplexed White asked. "That doesn't seem very exciting..."

Scarlet shrugged, walking toward the window. "Regulations prevent us from playing for money... sir," he reminded his superior. He looked out at the city lights through the window, before turning to White, grinning. "Anyway, you know I'm not a gambling man."

"Yes, I know, but..." The Spectrum commander was still looking at Scarlet with an intrigued expression. "I don't get it. You two are in the most entertaining city in America, with plenty of good shows and entertainments to choose from, and you stay in a hotel room, playing cards... with peanuts for winnings?"

Scarlet looked squarely at him. "What did you expect us to do, stay in a hotel room all by ourselves?"

White smiled wryly. "I'm not implying anything, captain. I know the two of you are not involved... Well, not anymore. Unless... there's something I don't know about?"

"No, there isn't," Scarlet answered quickly.

White's grin broadened. Of course, he knew that. Because he also knew, and Scarlet wasn't aware of this, that the captain was involved with Rhapsody Angel now, and that it was a very serious relationship. He wasn't the kind of man to fool around. Not only because he would run the risk of ruining everything with Rhapsody, but simply because it wasn't his style.

Scarlet gave a very brief glance toward the door, not far behind his commander, that led into the next room. *Don't open it*, he thought, almost willing the person on the other side to hear him think. *Please, don't open that door, or we're all going to be in BIG trouble...* He smiled at his commander, very eager to distract him.

"Now, what do you want us to do, sir?" he asked him. "Unless you're suggesting we take Destiny somewhere where they play illegal poker games..."

Destiny scowled. "*Vraiment!* Who do you think I am? *Soeur Hélène* would turn in her grave if she could hear you!"

"Who's *Soeur Hélène*?" White asked, puzzled.

"The nun who taught Destiny to play cards," Scarlet answered.

White frowned deeply, and turned a very perplexed look toward a reddening Destiny. *Now that was an interesting concept...* "A NUN taught you to play cards?" he asked her.

"And to cheat, no doubt," Scarlet added quickly.

"She wasn't a cheat," Destiny replied dryly.

"Well, she was a card shark... and so are you, *chérie*."

Destiny answered with a shy smile. Scarlet would have smiled too, with a certain amusement, if he weren't so concerned about wondering about the real reason behind Colonel White's presence. He wasn't really buying that stuff about his superior 'wanting to pass some time with them'. Scarlet couldn't shake the feeling White knew something was about to happen behind his back and that he had come especially from Cloudbase, pretending a few days' leave, in order to prevent it.

But what could he know EXACTLY, and how the hell would he have found out?

The awful thought that his commander could actually know everything about Blue and Symphony's wedding plans came to Scarlet's mind. What would they all do if it were the case?

And HOW in Heaven's name could he have learned about it?

No, that couldn't be possible!

Surely there was a way to trick the old man, so Adam and Karen could go and get married without him ever being aware of it...

"You're not very talkative, Paul," White remarked, looking at the younger man.

Scarlet almost snorted. Right now, being called "*Paul*" by his commander was making him feel really uncomfortable. The friendly tone in White's voice didn't sound RIGHT, somehow...

"Sorry, sir." Scarlet took a look at his watch. "It's way past eight. I was just thinking that Adam and Karen are late, that's all."

"Not worried, are you?"

"Me? Why should I worry?"

There is plenty of reason, Colonel White thought wickedly. And he was pretty sure Blue and Symphony's lateness wasn't really what was preoccupying Scarlet. If White knew him – and he knew him well – he was almost certain his young compatriot was looking for a smart way to get rid of him, so his best friend and partner could move on with his project. The colonel was really curious to see what Scarlet would come up with. *Go and plan along all you want, my young fellow*, thought White. *You'll see who has the last laugh over this one.*

When he had arrived in Las Vegas some few hours earlier, the Spectrum commander had gone directly to the *St-Maurice Hotel*. Upon discovering that his agents weren't there, he first thought he had arrived too late. But then, the receptionist had informed him that "*Mister Svenson and Miss Wainwright had not arrived yet, and that the hotel administration had been notified by Mister Metcalfe that they would arrive by eight, at the latest*".

Good, a relieved Colonel White had thought. There was still time after all. He could still stop this nonsense.

And a good lesson was in order. A lesson he fully intended to give all the members of this little gang of conspirators. He had every intention of making sure not one of them would forget it anytime soon. Discipline must prevail, after all, and they had all taken their commander for a fool. In addition, there was the fact that White was feeling rather disappointed about all of this. He had the distasteful impression he had been betrayed, or something very much like it.

He hadn't noticed yet how Scarlet was casting quick and worried glances toward the adjoining door, still praying it would not open to reveal the special guest he and Destiny had met at the airport, some hours earlier.

Calm down, Paul. What could be the odds against that door opening while Colonel White's in this room, anyway?

To Scarlet's and Destiny's dismay, it DID open.

A woman in her late forties, strikingly beautiful, with fair hair and eyes the colour of honey entered with a quick pace right to the centre of the room; she was all dressed for the night, draped in a gorgeous white satin robe.

Scarlet almost groaned, and Destiny looked up to the sky, taking the Saints as witnesses of their misfortunes.

White looked at the woman in total surprise and confusion.

"Excuse me, children," the woman said without even noticing the effect her presence had caused in the room, "I hate to come barging in like this, but I was wondering when you were expecting -"

She suddenly stopped short, upon seeing the white-haired man seated at the foot of the bed, staring squarely at her. White's expression of surprise turned into a broad smile as he stood

up quickly and went to her. "Mrs. Wainwright!" he said in a joyful voice. "What a MARVELLOUS surprise!"

Scarlet looked down and hid his face in his hands. *Well if he didn't know about Karen and Adam's plans before, he thought gloomily, he certainly has a good indication now!*

The presence of Amanda Wainwright at the ceremony was meant as a surprise for Symphony. The woman knew of the relationship between her only daughter and the "good-looking and so polite Captain Blue" she had been introduced to, a couple of years ago. Adam had thought that Karen would be so pleased to see her mother, and that Amanda, in all fairness, couldn't be kept away from that wonderful moment. So he had arranged for her to take a plane from her ranch in Iowa to come to Las Vegas just for the occasion, without telling Karen about it.

Now the mere fact that SHE was there was enough to bring everything down.

"Colonel White..." Amanda said in a poised yet dumbfounded tone to the tall man who stopped in front of her. "I wasn't expecting to see you here..."

She knew about Karen's intention to keep her marriage to Adam a secret from the Spectrum commander. Although Amanda Wainwright thought the idea was very risky – not to mention childish – she had agreed to respect her daughter's decision in that matter and even to support it if needed be.

That was the reason why she was so surprised to see Colonel White there.

"I can assure you, madam," White answered, taking the woman's hand, "that the surprise is also mine."

Scarlet looked on, hoping that, for once, those damned Mysterons would now pronounce one of their ominous threats... However, there was no loudspeaker in this room so they could be heard, to begin with. The British captain noticed the presence of Destiny, suddenly by his side; she had cautiously approached him, and was staring at the older couple talking to each other at the centre of the room, with the same distraught look.

"How do you say '*We're done for*?' in French?" Scarlet whispered to the young woman.

"*On est cuit*," she replied in the same tone, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Yeah, that's right," mumbled Scarlet. "We're cooked. Toasted. Whatever. Please, take a gun and shoot me."

"That wouldn't be fair. For me."

They watched in concern, wondering when the hammer would fall on their heads. But curiously, the discussion they were witnessing, between Colonel White and Amanda Wainwright was taking a strange, unexpected course.

"You look as ravishing as I remember," White was saying to the woman. "You haven't changed a bit, since last we met." He took her hand gallantly to kiss the back of it. Amanda laughed.

"Why, Colonel, still charming as ever, I see!" she said. "Now I know why my daughter is so fond of you..."

"Oh, is she really?" White smiled. "I didn't know she felt that way about me... Now may I ask to what I owe the pleasure of making your acquaintance again?"

"Well, I..." Amanda saw Scarlet briefly shaking his head at her, and mouthing the words '*He doesn't know*' behind Colonel White's back. Obviously, the Spectrum commander's presence was not expected – nor wanted – for the ceremony. She smiled broadly. "...I was invited to spend a few days with my daughter. It has been a long time since we've seen each other, you know."

"Oh? Why not go home, then?" White asked innocently. "I seem to recall her saying that you are the owner of a big, beautiful ranch in Utah -"

"Iowa. Yes, it's a beautiful spot, even if I say so myself. And this time of year, it's pretty lovely..."

"I have to remember to go and see it for myself, one day."

"Please, do visit! It will always be a pleasure to receive you... Business is pretty quiet and dull, now and then -"

"Business?"

"The ranch is mostly used for tourists, for some years now. I receive vacationers from all over the States. They want to do some horse riding, cattle-driving, camping and whatever else you can think may be happening on a ranch..." Amanda laughed softly. "Ten years ago, Harry

even bought a mechanical bull for some clients who wanted to do some rodeo riding! I still have it."

Still from a distance, Scarlet and Destiny were watching the scene. Destiny seemed pretty annoyed; Scarlet, on the other hand, was beginning to find this interesting, and a curious thought was forming itself in his mind.

"*Will they go on like that endlessly?*" Destiny murmured in French, trying not to let her temper get the better of her. "*The waiting is excruciating!*"

"*No, watch closely,*" Scarlet whispered back. "*They seem to be hitting it off pretty well...*"

"*Paul, it's only a matter of time!*" Destiny replied dryly. "*He KNOWS something is going on... Seeing Symphony's mother here, he CANNOT NOT KNOW!*"

"*Well, Amanda seems to be able to distract him,*" Scarlet noted, still looking at them. "*There must be a way to use that to our advantage...*"

"*What do you mean, 'use that to our advantage'?*" a very annoyed Destiny repeated.

"*I don't know yet.*"

"*Paul Metcalfe, you're worrying me. Me, I say we're courting disaster! What will happen when Karen and Adam arrive, and when Karen reacts to her mother's presence, WHEN SHE DOESN'T EVEN KNOW SHE'S SUPPOSED TO BE HERE?*"

The telephone buzzed at that instant. All the people assembled in the room looked toward the instrument. Nearest to it, Colonel White had just to extend his hand to answer it. That was just what he did, much to Scarlet's frustration.

"Hello, Room 53..." He listened for a moment, then frowned deeply. "Hello?" he repeated. A pause, then a frustrated "What?" White sighed and said in French, "*Could you repeat that, please?*" He held his hand over the mouthpiece and waved the phone at Scarlet and Destiny. "It's one of the hotel staff. The lady's speaking with a very thick French accent and I can't make out half of what she's saying. Can one of you take this call?"

Scarlet took the receiver as White turned his attention back to Amanda Wainwright.

"Paul Metcalfe here -"

"What's HE doing here?"

The sound of Symphony's furious voice nearly took Scarlet aback. He didn't have time to answer before she continued: "Never mind that, now... I need you right now. Come to see me, in the lobby. We have to talk."

"Is there... something the matter?" Scarlet couldn't help but notice the urgency in Symphony's tone. He heard her sigh.

"Aside from the Colonel being here? Yeah, you can say there is something the matter... Come quick, Paul."

She hung up; a thoughtful Scarlet put the receiver down, wondering what was happening now. Something was bothering him. Why had Symphony said "Come to see me" and not "Come to see US"?

He turned to White. How the hell would he be able to go down without having White asking what was going on?

* * *

"You don't know how glad I am to see you!"

Finding a suitable excuse to get out of the room wasn't easy, but Scarlet had pretended that he had been called down to see the manager because of some problem concerning his luggage. He considered himself lucky that White was too involved into a conversation with Amanda Wainwright to notice he was actually lying. Destiny was not so easily fooled. The way she looked at him was explicit enough of her feelings toward him at that moment.

She was feeling like she actually could kill him for leaving her alone with the colonel.

The problem would have to be dealt with later, anyway. Symphony's situation seemed more urgent. She greeted him in the lobby and then took him aside for a little privacy. Scarlet took the time to give her a welcoming kiss, before looking straight at her with a broad smile.

"Well, it's about time you arrived!" he remarked. "You're quite late, you know that?"

"I know," Symphony answered, hesitating. "I'm sorry, Paul, we..."

"I'm the one who should be sorry," Scarlet retorted. "About the colonel..."

"How come he's here, Paul?" a worried Symphony asked. "Does he know anything about Adam and me or..."

"I frankly don't know," Scarlet sighed. "He arrived a few minutes ago... He said he had decided to take some time off and that he wanted to join us..."

"You believe that?"

"As I said, I don't know... But I'm keeping my eyes open for whatever he may have in store for us. Anyway, for the moment, he seems quite occupied with your mother..."

Symphony opened her eyes wide in bewilderment. "What's my mother doing here?" she exclaimed.

Scarlet sighed again. *So much for the surprise.* Anyway, it was better that way, considering the situation. "It was Adam's idea. He thought her presence at the ceremony would please you. So he arranged for her to come here and wanted to surprise you with it."

"Adam did that?" Symphony said in a timid voice. "What a thoughtful thing to do..."

"Karen, I don't know what to say... I'll sort something out concerning the colonel, but -"

"Paul, excuse me, but right now, the colonel is not the biggest thing I'm worried about."

At that moment, Scarlet saw that she was not kidding; the concern on her features was too obvious. He understood that there was something really big troubling her.

"What's wrong, Karen?" he asked softly. "Did you run into some kind of trouble with Adam?"

"You can say that again!"

"What is it?" Scarlet asked her, frowning. "Isn't Adam with you?"

"No, he..." Symphony hesitated. "I had to leave him behind, in some little town."

"What?" an astounded Scarlet exclaimed.

"I had no choice," Symphony explained quickly. "He insisted that I leave. I didn't want to, but -"

"What are you talking about?" Scarlet interrupted her. "I had him on the phone a few hours ago. He seemed perfectly happy and couldn't wait to be here! What happened? Did you... have a fight or something?"

"Oh no!" Symphony protested loudly. "That's not it at all!" She looked at Scarlet's face. He looked confused, and certainly as worried as she did. For her as well as for his best friend. He could feel the young woman's anguish.

"What's the matter, little sister?" he asked her softly.

She smiled faintly. She always had felt close to Paul; it was nothing like the feelings she shared with Adam, of course, but a different relationship altogether. He had always shown some kind of brotherly feeling toward her, almost since the beginning of Spectrum, but he had really begun calling her "little sister" about two years ago, some months after his Mysterionisation and not long after her father's untimely death. It was as if each of them, after losing something important in their life, needed that special link to be stronger between them. They were so much alike. Like him, she was an only child, who had so wanted to grow up with some brothers or sisters. They also had in common that same recklessness that worried their friends and colleagues so much.

"It's Adam, Paul," Symphony finally said. "I'm afraid he's the one in trouble."

Scarlet sighed. "Yes, I guessed as much. But what is it exactly?"

"You won't believe it," a gloomy Symphony continued. "He's in jail."

"Say that again?" Scarlet exclaimed, not sure he did believe his ears.

"He's in jail... and I had to leave him behind. And I am so ashamed that I did!"

Scarlet shook his head in disbelief. *How did Adam end up in prison?* he mused with concern. *And why did Karen leave him there alone?*

"We'd better go to the bar," he muttered. "Then you can tell me what happened out there... And then we'll see what we can do about it... I think I'd better get you a drink."

"I certainly feel like I could use one," Symphony mumbled.

"There you are!"

The very recognizable English voice boomed behind them before they could actually make a move toward the bar. Scarlet scowled. *What is he doing, anyway, following me around?* He turned around; Colonel White was approaching them, with a big grin upon his face. A perplexed Symphony was looking at him, not really sure what to do.

"So the problem with your luggage is resolved?" the colonel asked Scarlet with his most innocent tone.

"Yes... There wasn't any problem, after all," an uneasy Scarlet answered. "It was a mistake."

"Good." White looked down at Symphony. The girl didn't dare say a word. *That's a guilty look if ever I saw one*, the colonel mused, most amused by the situation. "I see you have found one of your missing friends... Hello, Symphony."

"Co—uh, *Mister Gray*..." the young woman answered, awkwardly.

"She just arrived," Scarlet said. "We met in the lobby."

"Of course you did." White's eyes didn't leave Symphony's obviously concerned and worried features. "I'm glad to see you, Symphony."

"Paul had just told me you were here, sir," Symphony said hesitantly.

"Yes, I suppose he would tell you now, wouldn't he?" White replied softly, musing. Symphony didn't answer, just cast a look of appeal at Scarlet.

The colonel took her silence as a sign of embarrassed annoyance. "So you know I'm not here on official business. I'm on holiday."

"Holiday, sir?"

White scowled. Symphony had that same look of perplexity as all the others about that sole simple fact. He was beginning to find it very annoying. *Of course, they're all concerned about what happened to me in London, a few weeks ago*, he reflected. He looked around. "Where's Adam?" he asked, matter-of-factly, as if wanting to change the subject. "Wasn't he supposed to be with you?"

Symphony stared at him blankly, unable to answer. It was bad enough that White was here, but his referring to Captain Blue by his real name only made her feel worse.

It was Captain Scarlet who provided the response. "Symphony just told me, he... ah... ran into a friend from his days with the WAS. They decided to take a tour of the town together."

"Really?" Colonel White was apparently perplexed by the concept. He frowned, looking at Symphony with an inquiring glitter in his eyes. "And he left you on your own? I thought the man was more of a gentleman..."

She gave him something of a sad smile. "Well, I suppose that one never can know enough about a friend now, can you, Colonel?"

White had the distinct impression he had just been lied to. It seemed obvious. TOO obvious. Although he couldn't guess WHY Captain Blue would not be there, and certainly for what reason he would have left his fiancée alone, so close to their impending wedding. *Maybe there's trouble in Paradise*, he mused. Anyway, the way Scarlet and Symphony were keeping this to themselves was a confirmation in itself that something was going on.

He didn't let on about his suspicion. "So when do you expect him?" he asked.

"Don't quite know, sir," Symphony said, shrugging, trying to sound indifferent. She did a bad job of it.

"Why, all the worse for him," White replied, still smiling. "At least you'll have ME and Paul to take care of you while he's away..."

"I... don't know what to say, sir. I'm flattered that you should concern yourself with me."

"It's only natural, young lady." White stared at her. "Maybe you're hungry, after such a long trip through the desert... Why don't I invite you to dinner?"

"I don't feel like going out right now."

"Then we'll have something brought up to our rooms, what do you think? Come on up... I know someone's waiting there for you, anyway."

"Lead the way, sir," Scarlet invited their commander.

White directed his pace toward the elevator, and Scarlet took Symphony by the arm to follow. She turned a concerned look to him. "Paul..."

"I know, I know," he muttered. "I'll find a way to get rid of him, so you can explain to me what happened with Adam..."

"We have to get him out of his jam!" she insisted.

"We'll do that, too, don't worry..." Scarlet looked at his commander's back. "Maybe we could use Juliette's help... and your mother as well."

Symphony stared at him curiously. "What's my Ma have to do with the colonel, anyway?" she whispered.

"Never mind that, now. Just let me plan along... I'll find something."

"I sure hope so!" a doubtful Symphony sighed.

Chapter 4

"But, Dad... You promised!"

Dressed in his baseball uniform, young Adam Svenson was looking in dismay at his father, standing in the middle of his office at home. The child was ready to go to the single most important game for his team, with his father, when the latter had called him into his office to have a talk with him. Adam was almost certain of what he was about to hear BEFORE actually entering the room. His suspicions had confirmed themselves a few seconds ago, when his dad announced that he couldn't go to the game with him.

"Two weeks ago, you said you'd come!" the youngster continued in a hurt tone. "Last week, you said it again! Why change plans now?"

"It can't be helped, Adam." John Svenson was feeling rather uneasy. He didn't like the accusing look he was seeing in his son's eyes. "Something came up at the office."

"We've been planning this for a long time. Couldn't you just tell them you were busy?"

"Now, Adam... You know it doesn't work that way."

"No, I don't. You're supposed to be the boss!"

"Yes, and that's why I've got to take care of my business." There was an annoyed edge in Svenson's voice. Standing a few feet away, not far from the door, Sarah Svenson was silently witnessing the altercation between her husband and her son. This wasn't the first time they had collided, on exactly the same volatile subject; but this time, she realised, it was somehow different. Looking at the hurt expression in Adam's eyes, she could see it could take proportions it never did before. She was growing increasingly uneasy at the way things were going.

"It's not fair, Dad," Adam said to his father, with a croak in his voice.

"Life isn't always fair," John Svenson replied sharply enough. It didn't occur to him he was talking to a nine year old kid who couldn't care less about that kind of remark. He shook his head. "Adam, I think you can understand..."

"No, I can't understand!"

Adam had never dared to interrupt his father in the past. But months of built-up frustration were now too much for him to handle. He felt he couldn't take any more of this kind of treason. This was the last straw. He was deeply disappointed and he had every intention of telling his father.

"It's always like this, Dad. We plan things together, and at the last possible minute, you cancel everything. You cancel what we're going to do and go to meet someone for your business, and leave for the office in town -"

"You stop this!" Svenson urged him. "You know my work is important. Adam, I've got a family to think about!"

"You DON'T think about us!" The outburst surprised Adam almost as much as his father and mother.

"Adam," the woman called to him from behind, with a soothing voice. "Now, you're not being fair to your father..."

"It's HIM who isn't fair!" Adam replied, much more sharply than he really meant to. "Why does he have to do this? Why can't he come to the game? I was counting on him... I wanted so much to see you there, Dad!"

"It's enough, young man!" Even John Svenson's stern voice was not nearly enough to calm down the fuming boy who was still staring defiantly at him. "You've talked enough nonsense for one day! You've got to cool off and be a reasonable boy about this!"

"I don't wanna be a 'reasonable boy!'" Adam replied. "You always ask that of me... I'm tired of it! I..."

"Stop being so selfish!" Svenson suddenly cut him off. He threw his arms into the air. "I can't BELIEVE you would react this way about such a thing! It's only a game, for Heaven's sake! A stupid, foolish game!"

"That game is important to ME, Dad! And I wanted to share it with YOU!"

"Damn it... Right now, I've got far more important things to concern myself with than the trivialities of a nine year old boy... I can't let myself get distracted from my job because a selfish kid thinks HIS business is more important than mine..."

Adam stepped back, his eyes widening; his father suddenly realized that he had just hurt the young boy's feelings. He gave a quick glance towards his wife and saw the disapproving look upon her face. That was directed at him.

"Adam, I'm sorry. I should explain..."

"Your job is more important than me, Dad?" the child asked with a catch in his voice.

"I didn't MEAN it to sound that way, son -"

"But you SAID it! That's just what you said!"

The look of accusation and hurt in his son's eyes was almost too much for John Svenson to bear. To his credit, he tried to make amends.

It only made things worse, as he couldn't envision that he could be unable to simply buy his way into the child's heart.

"Come on, Adam. Forget about today. I'm sorry I can't go with you. But we still have that Sox-Blue Jays match we're planning to see together -"

"It'll be the same," Adam replied dryly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It'll be the same, Dad. It's ALWAYS the same. It's not the game. It's got nothing to do with it. You're NEVER there when I need you to be there."

"NOW what's the matter with you?" Svenson asked, frowning.

"You always tell me I should keep my promises, Dad. And I do. Always. But YOU never keep YOURS..."

"Of all the ungrateful -" Svenson became livid with anger. He walked to his son, a glimmer of anger in his eyes. The boy never lowered his. "All right! We'll do it your way, then! If you're going to take that distasteful attitude toward me, young man, you'll be dealt with accordingly. You're grounded!"

"You can't do that!" Adam replied forcefully.

"I can, and I will!" his father snapped furiously. "And don't you shout at me! You're grounded. You won't go to that baseball game of yours!"

"The others are counting on me! I'm part of the team!"

"I don't care! They'll have to do without you!"

"How can you do this to me, on top of everything else?"

"I'm your father, that's how!"

"That's unfair!"

"Keep your voice down! Adam, I hate doing this... We'll have to see about that Sox game. If you don't change your attitude -"

"Sure, keep beating on a guy when he's down." Adam's voice was full of sarcasm and resentment. His father's features became absolutely white with fury.

"Stop being so insolent!" he snapped loudly. "What's gotten into you, Adam? I swear, I -" He stopped, looking absolutely distraught. "I'm deeply disappointed in you, son."

"You always say that!" Adam shouted back with anger. "No matter what I do, or what I say! I'm always a disappointment to you! But you know what, Dad? That makes two of us!"

"Adam..." the boy heard his mother call behind him.

"I'm disappointed in you too!" Adam continued, looking furiously at his father, without listening to his mother's voice. "Why can't you be the father I want so much? Why can't you be like EVERYBODY ELSE's father?"

He didn't give his father time to answer. He spun round and ran out of the office, flinging the door wide. He heard his father angrily calling him back. He did not even turn back to look at him.

"I hate you, Dad!" he shouted over his shoulder.

The words were harsh, he knew, but he couldn't keep himself from uttering them. And he would not go back to his father right now; that would have only served to show him the tears of rage and disappointment that were filling his eyes.

He went directly to the front door and threw it wide open; not even bothering to close it behind him, he ran out of the house and almost bumped into a tall, bulky man, dressed in working clothes, who caught hold of him, before he ran straight into him. Adam stared into the glimmering eyes of Wilson Grover, the gardener he had told his father he hated... The man's expression was

one of curiosity, and the boy wondered if, by any chance, he could have heard something of what had happened in the office.

He brushed the man aside and ran all the way to the other side of the garden...

* * *

Captain Blue suddenly opened his eyes; he was lying in the cell bunk, staring blindly at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep at all. It wasn't the constant snoring of his neighbours in the other cells that kept him awake; recurring thoughts about the events of the past day had brought up ancient, painful memories that he hadn't thought about for some time... They were now haunting him. That, and the fact that he couldn't forget the anguished face of his beautiful Symphony Angel whom he had forced to leave, for her own safety.

The night was still young, Blue mused gloomily. He had no idea what time it could be. Ten, eleven... maybe later. He had had to leave his watch at the police counter, with all the rest of his things. He had the feeling this would be a very long night, until the morning came and he would be allowed to leave this jail to see the judge.

He heard a door open, but did not move; the sheriff or one of his deputies – assuming he had more than one – was probably coming to check on the prisoners, he thought. No need to concern himself with that.

He heard the steps coming down the corridor in front of the cells, until they stopped in front of his.

"I'm guessing you're not sleeping, Svenson," Blue heard the sheriff's voice say to him.

"Leave me alone," Blue mumbled. "Aren't your prisoners entitled to any peace and quiet around here?"

"On your feet, mister," the sheriff replied. "You're out of here."

Blue frowned. "Out? As in 'out of jail'?"

"Yeah, exactly. You're one lucky fellow, I can tell you."

Blue heard a key being turned in the lock and jumped to his feet. He watched in puzzlement as Sheriff McNamara pulled open the cell door.

"I don't understand. I thought you had decided to keep me here until tomorrow."

"Well, let's just say circumstances force me to act otherwise. Follow me."

Blue didn't need to be told twice; the sheriff took him to his office where he found his things spread on the desk. The deputy was there too, his arms folded on his chest; he was staring at Blue with blazing eyes. *Must still be angry with me about accidentally hitting him*, thought the Spectrum officer.

"If you care to take a look at your possessions," Sheriff McNamara told him, clearing his throat and taking his seat behind the desk. "See if it's all there."

Blue glanced down quickly, took his watch and put it back on his left wrist. Then he glared at McNamara.

"What's going on, sheriff?" he asked him blankly. "Why let me go now? I'm quite sure it's not out of the goodness of your heart."

The sheriff sighed. "Charges have been dropped."

"Dropped?"

"That's what I said. Somebody paid the damages to the restaurant, so the owner won't press charges."

Blue looked at the sheriff suspiciously. "Who paid?" he asked him.

"Don't know. But he – or she – also provided for your bail."

"But you didn't want to hear about bail before."

"Paid double the amount normally asked for your kind of offence. The ticket for reckless driving and speeding's been paid too."

"What about Grover?"

McNamara tilted his head to the side. "What about him?"

"Wasn't he considering pressing charges against me?" Blue clarified with a frown.

"He won't do it," the sheriff answered. "Said you obviously were angry because you thought he was after your girl... So he decided to let go of the charges. He's really a nice guy."

"My heart is bleeding, sheriff," Blue retorted dryly.

"Will you let the guy alone?" McNamara grumbled. "I hope you won't go after him after all the trouble you already had?"

"I'm not looking for trouble, sheriff. And you know what? The further I am from Will Grover, the happier I'll be."

"I hope you mean it." The sheriff tapped a piece of paper on the desk in front of Blue. "Now, if all your things are there, will you be kind enough to sign this receipt?"

Blue checked the contents of his wallet, then put it into his pocket, along with his keys and cash. Then, he turned a cool stare back at the sheriff and deputy.

"Something the matter?" McNamara asked him.

"Yes, plenty," Blue said coldly. "For example, you were so keen to keep me behind bars until tomorrow... I can't figure out WHY you'd let me go, now."

"I must admit, I was really tempted to let you rot in your cell, Svenson. I don't really care for bullies who'd attack a crippled man. But seeing as how things were all settled for the better..."

"About the bail and the rest? That's the other thing that puzzles me. Why not tell me who paid for this?"

"What makes you think I know who it is?"

"You say you don't? I have a hard time believing that!"

"Look, why are you looking a gift horse in the mouth? You're free. So you'd better get the hell out of here before I change my mind and throw you back in the joint."

"Was it my fiancée?" Blue insisted.

He suspected that Symphony might not have left as he had asked her, but could have stayed instead, and that she might have found some way to persuade this stubborn constable to let him go. Maybe she had even called Paul, like she had said earlier. But McNamara shook his head.

"She left town just after visiting you," he replied. "I don't think she's come back yet..." A cynical smile crossed his face. "...if she ever comes back."

"Why do you say that?" asked a frowning Blue.

"Well, didn't you have a quarrel, back there, just before she went away? I was told you and her had a very tumultuous... discussion."

Blue did not deign to respond. He could see that the deputy sheriff had the same grin on his face as his superior. What they thought wasn't true, and it wasn't any of their business whether or not he and Symphony had had a fight. Blue was just satisfied that, apparently, his fiancée had followed his advice and gone away.

But that didn't answer the question about WHO had paid his bail...

"May I make a call?" Blue asked, pointing to the phone.

The sheriff nodded and Blue picked up the receiver. On putting it to his ear, he frowned. There was no dialtone.

"It's out of order," he said to the sheriff.

McNamara tilted his head to one side and took the receiver Blue was holding out to him. He listened for a second and shook his head, before putting it back on its hook.

"Must be a local breakdown," he told Blue. "We had a couple of these the last few months. Were you trying to call your girl?"

"She's supposed to be in Vegas," Blue said, more to himself than in response to the sheriff's inquiry. "I have to call her to tell her I'm free..."

"Well, that can't be helped," McNamara muttered. "These breakdowns affect all the phones in the town. Why don't you go tell her in person?"

"How? She took the car."

"You could take the bus," the deputy suggested curtly. It was the first time he had spoken since Blue had walked in the office. The Spectrum agent glared daggers at him.

"I can't go off on my own to Las Vegas without telling her!" he replied. "She's supposed to come back tomorrow morning."

"It would be a real shame if you should pass one another on the road," McNamara laughed slightly.

"Oh, you're a big help, sheriff!" Blue said dryly.

"I'm not here to help you," the sheriff replied. "And frankly, I don't much care about your problems. We have a hotel here. Rent a room there 'til morning if you must, but I want you OUT of this town at that time... Girlfriend or no girlfriend."

"In the meantime," the deputy sheriff added, "maybe the phones will be back on line and you will be able to call her, so she can come to pick you up... If she still wants you, of course."

Blue cast the man another icy look, then glanced at the sheriff. The unsympathetic way the two men were looking at him made him feel rather uneasy. He sighed and took the pen on the desk to sign the receipt as asked by McNamara. He put down the pen loudly.

"Thanks for your hospitality, sheriff," he said, stepping toward the exit.

He had just opened the door when McNamara called on him. "One last thing, Svenson."

Blue looked back at the sheriff. "Stay out of trouble," the lawman warned him. "If you get in another fight, I guarantee you, you won't get out so easy next time around. I'll send you back to jail and throw away the key."

Blue didn't answer; but he didn't turn a hair at the sheriff's threat. He turned his back on him and left, closing the door behind him.

He walked down the main office and went out into the night. Then he stopped on the steps of the station and sighed, contemplating what he must do.

As he had told the sheriff, he couldn't leave without calling his friends in Las Vegas. If only to tell Karen he was all right... *Poor girl*, he thought, *she must be worried sick about me...* He regretted not having his Spectrum communicator with him. This was one occasion he would not have hesitated to use it. But since Symphony had taken the car, Blue was left without communicator, weapon or Spectrum identification. He had left it all in the glove compartment.

Well, maybe the phones would be back on line soon... In the meantime, he would take the sheriff's advice and take a room in the town's hotel. He really had no choice in the matter.

The hotel was down the main street, just in front of the restaurant where Blue had stopped with Symphony. He started walking that way. The night was quiet. Everything was closed, except for the bar, from which loud sounds of music and laughter were coming. Blue took a look at his watch. It was far later than he had first anticipated... No wonder almost everything was closed.

As he walked down the street, Blue had the distinct impression he was being watched. He looked around but saw nobody. Yet, he was quite sure he wasn't mistaken. Years of training and living on the edge had attuned his senses... He could sense impending danger lurking about him.

He felt rather than saw the group behind him, and broke into a run. He heard rapid footsteps and glanced over his shoulder. Three men were in pursuit. *No sense in calling*, he thought. Since his misadventure of the day, he was pretty sure he wasn't popular with anyone in this place. The sheriff would not be much help either. He would probably find a way to pin this thing on him and throw him in a cell again.

Blue tried to make it to the bar. A public place would be the perfect hideout in the circumstances. But then he saw two other men coming from the shadows right next to the door and walking quickly toward him. Blue changed direction and went down a small street.

More like a dark alley, he realized, the instant he entered it. It was obvious he had purposely been pushed that way. And with five men now hot on his heels, he didn't have much choice but to continue running in the same direction.

He stopped suddenly. Just ahead of him was a wall. A dead-end. *Naturally*. It was so obvious, he should have seen it sooner.

Blue turned on his heel to face the five men who had stopped running and were now approaching slowly, taking their time, knowing full well he was trapped and couldn't hide anywhere from them. He didn't care who they were or what they wanted, although that last question was very obvious to him. In fact, for the present, he didn't have the time to think it over... The only thing on his mind was that he didn't intend go down without a fight.

"Nice to see you again, kid."

Blue froze on the spot upon hearing those words. He turned to his left to see the shadow of a big man lurking in the dark. He didn't need to see his face to know who it was.

So, that answered the question about the identity of the person who had prepared this ambush... Not that it was any surprise to Blue

He didn't have the time to act upon that discovery. He didn't see another shadow that came bolting from the other side of the street and violently rammed into his back, sending him face down on the ground. The five men who had pursued Blue to that spot then rushed up to him. Brutal hands seized him and dragged him back to his feet. He struggled and succeeded in getting free of two of them; but they were too many, and he already had been shaken by the first attack. His arms were seized and pulled tightly back, and the Spectrum officer soon found himself defenceless against a series of blows that began raining on him, catching him on all sides, dazing him.

He saw Grover coming slowly out of the shadows, limping on his bad right leg, and coming toward him. The man stopped at a safe distance and looked upon the scene. He quietly lit a cigarette and blew out some smoke with obvious satisfaction. Blue saw the evil smile crossing the older man's face.

The scum is enjoying this tremendously...

It was about the last thing Blue was really conscious of before some kind of a rag was clamped over his mouth and nose. A distasteful odour hit him and a mist came down over his eyes. He desperately fought to stay awake, but the combined effect of the pain from the beating, and the chloroform, began to take their toll on him. He mercifully passed out just as his aggressors let him fall to the ground.

Chapter 5

"He's gone? What do you mean, 'he's gone'?"

It was about six-thirty in the morning when Symphony presented herself at the office of Los Lobos' sheriff. She wasn't alone.

The evening before, somehow finding an opportunity when Colonel White was otherwise occupied – with her mother and Destiny Angel – she had explained to Captain Scarlet what had happened during her journey through the desert with Captain Blue. She told him all about their two encounters with the man called Will Grover, how the second one had degenerated, the ensuing jailing of Blue and his insistence on seeing her leave town without delay.

Scarlet had carefully listened to the whole story, before making another one of his quick decisions. The single most important thing, he had stated, was to get Blue out of jail. Without the colonel knowing anything about it. To Symphony, that appeared quite difficult, but it turned out Paul already had an idea of how to proceed.

He was to go to Los Lobos with Symphony, at the crack of dawn. Destiny and Amanda would stay behind to distract the colonel and keep him occupied. If Symphony's mother was very happy to comply, it was definitely not the case with Destiny. Already, she had a bad feeling that they were going to fail miserably.

"What do you think I am, suicidal?" she had replied vehemently. "Maybe he doesn't know anything about the wedding plans, but there's no doubt in my mind he'll wonder WHY you have sneaked out on him... Maybe that'll make him think. That may make him very angry, Paul."

"Why would he get angry, Juliette?" Scarlet had answered negligently. "As you said, he doesn't seem to suspect about the wedding. He seemed to be in a good mood all evening, I daresay maybe even enjoying himself."

"THAT was tonight. HOW am I going to keep him occupied all day tomorrow? That's an impossible task!"

"I thought 'impossible' wasn't a French word. Or so the French say."

"Oh, very funny, Paul Metcalfe!"

"Relax, girl... I don't think you'll have much trouble. You'll have Amanda to help you."

"Yes, well... At least SHE doesn't have anything to fear from Colonel White..."

"Yes, he appears to like her a lot."

"That's NOT what I meant! He can't discipline HER! He won't put HER in front of a court-martial! He won't risk wringing HER neck!"

"Oh, really, Juliette... He won't do any of those things to you. He likes you too, you know."

"Paul... Can't you be serious about this?"

"I AM serious, chérie. Listen, there's no reason for the old man to get angry. At you or at any of us. We're going to Los Lobos early. We'll be back as soon as we get Adam out of jail. We'll be here before the colonel has a chance to miss us."

"You WON'T use the opportunity to go to a chapel with Adam and Karen and get them married, I hope?"

"No, I promise you. Time is of the essence, here. We won't waste any of it. Not right now, anyway."

"It's still pretty risky, if you want my opinion."

"Maybe so, but we're in Spectrum, girl. Risks are part of our job."

Destiny had finally given in, AFTER Scarlet had promised he would call her the minute Blue was released from jail.

That settled, there was only one complication left. With Blue absent, the colonel, who was unable to get a room before the next day, was sharing Scarlet's room. Scarlet would have to sneak out of there without awakening his commander.

That had Symphony worried, but she needn't have bothered. Scarlet was as good at stealth as she was at observing details. He was waiting for her at the car. *"Piece of cake,"* he told her with a reassuring smile.

All the way back to Los Lobos, Symphony was trying to figure out what Blue's reaction would be to finding out about their commander's presence in Las Vegas. It wasn't really hard to

work out he would be upset. Not only were his wedding plans with Symphony delayed due to his arrest, but now, they were in grave danger of being put on ice. Scarlet had tried to reassure the young woman by telling her they would surely find a way for her and Blue to get married despite the trouble posed by their commander. But Symphony was not really convinced. For the moment, however, her only concern was to see Blue out of his cell and safely back in her arms.

That was why she was so astounded when Sheriff McNamara told her Blue was already out.

Captain Scarlet had accompanied her to see the sheriff. He waited discreetly behind her while she talked to him. If he was surprised by the sheriff's announcement, he managed not to show it. Symphony didn't even try to hide her feelings.

"Let me get this straight," she continued, addressing the sheriff in an upset tone. "Yesterday, you weren't going to let him out before this morning... and even then, you weren't sure you would let him go. Now you're telling me he's been out since late last night?"

"That's exactly what I said, Miss Wainwright," McNamara answered patiently. He was looking very tired. *Can't have been up for more than half an hour or so*, thought a silent Scarlet, still a few steps behind a fuming Symphony.

The sheriff pointed to the phone, clearing his throat. "He did try to make a phone call, before leaving, but the lines were down." He looked up at Symphony. "Hasn't he reached you since then?"

"Would I be here with you if he had?" the young female pilot scoffed. "Do you have any idea where he could be?"

McNamara shrugged. "He could have taken the bus. We suggested it to him, last night. Or he could be at the hotel."

"You mean you're not sure?"

"Look, it's not my job to follow miscreants around when they get out of jail. I just have to make sure they don't cause any more trouble, that's all. In the case of your boyfriend, I specifically told him to be out of town by this morning. Now, where he's gone and what he's done since then, I don't know."

"In any case, Sheriff, he would have called to inform us," Symphony replied. "When did the phones come back online?"

"I honestly can't tell. Mine hasn't rung at all, since yesterday. Only once this morning, just before you arrived."

"Isn't it a little strange that your phone should stay so quiet, since you're apparently the only law enforcement around here?"

The sheriff looked up at Scarlet, who had just spoken. So far, the tall man accompanying the young woman had kept quiet, letting her do all the talking. He looked like the strong, silent type, and McNamara was pretty sure he was listening carefully to all that was said. The sheriff had recognized an English accent in his voice when he had finally spoken.

"This is a pretty quiet county, sir," McNamara explained to Scarlet, keeping a barely polite tone. "About the only problems we encounter around here are speed freaks and barroom brawlers... and troublemakers like your Mr Svenson."

Scarlet did not respond to the remark. He looked thoughtful. "If you didn't want him out before this morning, why did you let him go last night?"

"Miss Wainwright asked the same question," the sheriff noted.

"You didn't answer it," Scarlet replied quietly. "So I'm asking it again."

The sheriff narrowed his eyes at him. "Yes, well, the answer should be obvious: Svenson got out because his bail was paid off."

"Adam paid the bail?" Symphony asked.

"I didn't say that," the sheriff sighed.

Symphony frowned. "Then who?"

"I don't know, and even if I did, I don't see why I'd tell you."

"So we are to assume that person wants to keep his or her identity a secret," Scarlet nodded.

"You understand fast. That person paid not only the bail, but also the damages to the restaurant, the speeding ticket and so on..."

"And the charges against Adam?" Symphony asked quickly.

"They were dropped".

"All the charges?" Scarlet asked in his turn.

"All the charges," the sheriff answered.

"Even the one for assault and battery on that Grover guy?" Symphony insisted. "You wanted so much to pin that rap on Adam."

The sheriff sighed again. "The victim chose not to press charges. He didn't want to sue. And as for me wanting to 'pin that rap' on your friend, you must admit, Miss Wainwright, that he was definitely guilty. Somebody who beats up a cripple is a creep in my book."

That was the last straw. That was more than Symphony could bear at the moment. She suddenly snapped in anger. "Look here, Sheriff, I have no intention of standing here listening to you insulting my friend without..."

"That's quite enough now," Scarlet interrupted her quickly. He had a feeling that she was about to lose her temper, and it seemed to him that it wasn't such a good idea under the circumstances. She looked at him with surprise in her eyes, not understanding why he was interfering with her righteous anger, as he firmly took her by the shoulders to direct her toward the door.

"We'll follow your advice," Scarlet said to McNamara, opening the door and pushing Symphony outside of the office before she had the chance to utter a word of protest. "We'll check the hotel, and the bus station. Thank you for your time, Sheriff."

McNamara stood up from behind his desk. "If I may give you another piece of advice, Mr..."

Scarlet stopped to turn to the sheriff. "My name is Metcalfe," he presented himself, as the lawman was obviously waiting for that information.

"You and the lady don't intend to get into any trouble now, I hope?" McNamara asked suspiciously.

"Do we look like we're looking for trouble?" Scarlet innocently replied.

McNamara refrained from scowling. He had his doubts about that. There was something strange about that guy. Something unclear about him... The sheriff could not put his finger what it was exactly, but he was sure of one thing.

It spelled trouble.

"Be sure to remember that, sir," McNamara advised Scarlet, pointing a warning finger in his direction. "Keep a close eye on that girl."

"Don't worry, Sheriff. We'll leave your charming town the minute we find our friend." Scarlet reached for the door handle. "Good day, sir."

McNamara watched doubtfully as the Englishman left, closing the door behind him. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and sat down. He then saw the door open again and his deputy enter. The man nodded toward the other room from where he came.

"Who was that guy with Svenson's girl?" he asked.

McNamara looked grim. "Trouble, I'm afraid. Is Grover anywhere around in town?"

"Haven't seen him yet."

"Good. Better he doesn't run into the girl, especially if her friend is with her." The sheriff looked up at his deputy. "They're searching for Svenson. I suggested the hotel and the bus station."

The deputy frowned. "What do you want me to do?"

McNamara thought about it for a moment. "Keep an eye on them," he finally said. "Discreetly, of course. Make sure they don't cause any trouble."

"And if they do?"

The sheriff grunted, and smiled slightly. "We'll act accordingly... After all, we're the law around here, aren't we?"

* * *

Alone in her room at the *St-Maurice*, Destiny Angel was a nervous wreck. The last hour – since Colonel White had woken up – had been nothing short of a nightmare, from her point of view. Not that anything exactly wrong had happened... But she had the very deep feeling that an impending catastrophe was going to fall upon her head any minute.

She didn't know how she had managed to keep up a strong and carefree façade so far, in front of Colonel White; of course, as she had assumed, he had wondered about Scarlet and Symphony's absence. And it was not surprising that he would seem upset by it. Upset and very annoyed, if Destiny knew him well. Somehow, he had managed to keep his temper down, but the Angel pilot wasn't fooled and could see it was screaming to get out. It was only a matter of time before the storm broke, she was sure of it.

She had told him, rather matter-of-factly, that Scarlet and Symphony had gone into town, together. White asked about Blue, whether he had come back last night or not. The Angel pilot couldn't help but notice that the question seemed to concern him. She couldn't figure out exactly why. And she couldn't provide him with an answer that would be satisfactory enough for his taste. She could see that.

Breakfast was taken in a heavy enough atmosphere. How Destiny had managed to distract White with a suggestion to go out and visit the town was beyond her. She certainly had noticed how her commander seemed reluctant to agree, until Amanda stepped in to save the day, and insisted upon him coming with them... *Vegas was a beautiful city to visit, but certainly, it wasn't safe for two women to walk its streets alone...* The argument was rather feeble, and certainly, Colonel White would not have reason to worry, for Destiny Angel surely knew how to take care of herself. But Amanda Wainwright used her most charming smile and batting eyelashes... He was hopelessly hooked.

They each had left her to go back to their respective rooms, in order to shower and get ready. Destiny was still in her robe, and was on her way to take a good, well-earned shower when the telephone rang. She nearly jumped on it to answer. It was the man at the *St-Maurice* reception desk who announced to her that "*Mr Metcalfe was on the line*". She was relieved when she heard her friend's welcome voice:

"Hello, Juliette."

"Paul, am I glad you called!" she said, sighing deeply.

"Is it safe for you to talk?" Scarlet asked carefully.

"Yes, it's safe," Destiny answered. "The colonel is in your room, taking a shower... We just had breakfast in here, with Amanda."

"Taking a shower?" Scarlet teased her. "You didn't get a peek at HIM, I hope?"

Destiny gave a dubious frown. "I swear, Paul, sometimes your sense of humour is WAY off base!"

"How are things going?"

"Fairly well, *Grâce au Ciel*," Destiny sighed again. "The colonel awakened about an hour ago... Naturally, he was searching for you... and Karen, of course. He seemed... I don't know, annoyed that you weren't there."

"What did you tell him?" Scarlet asked.

"That you'd gone for a run. The two of you. He seemed to believe me. At least, he didn't ask too many questions about that. But he DID ask for Adam. He was wondering if he had come at all last night, while we were sleeping. I told him that, since I was sleeping so soundly, I didn't know... and asked him if HE noticed him coming in."

"Nice touch, Destiny!"

"A nice touch that could see me in front of a court-martial... Paul, I lied to our commander!"

"Not really... And it wasn't on duty."

"Oh, I'm sure that will make ALL the difference!" Destiny scoffed loudly. "So... when are you and Karen coming back with Adam?"

"I... think there's a problem, *chérie*," Scarlet started cautiously.

"How BIG a problem?" Destiny asked, worried and annoyed.

"Blue wasn't in jail anymore when we got here..."

"What do you mean, 'he wasn't in jail'?" Destiny snapped suddenly. "Where is he?"

"I was rather hoping you'd say he was with you," Scarlet answered.

"No, he's not here..."

"He didn't call either?"

"No... Paul, what's going on?" There was a worried edge in Destiny's voice.

Scarlet sighed, hesitant. "Well... We don't know that yet."

"Oh, great!" Destiny mumbled dryly. "You don't know... Would you care to elaborate a little?"

"It seems he was released from jail last night."

"What? Yesterday? Why didn't he call us, then?"

"Well, for starters, the phones weren't working here yesterday. As for where he could be... Karen and I are still searching for him. We've already checked the only hotel, and he wasn't there. He doesn't seem to be anywhere in town, but we'll have to check that out more thoroughly. We'll check if he took the bus, by any chance, as soon as the bus station opens... That's as much as I know, right now. So it could take us a bit longer before we come back to Las Vegas. Do you think you can hold your own with the colonel for a bit?"

Destiny was pacing in the middle of her room, the phone in hand. *Of all the times for Adam to disappear...* "I'll do my best, Paul, but I'm not really sure I will be able to keep him busy for much longer," she sighed, rubbing her eyes. "But it seems I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"It's really out of our hands, you know," Scarlet noted.

"I know, it's not your fault... How's Karen?"

"Well... you know her, when it comes to Adam..." There was a short pause. "She says she's having one of her feelings," Scarlet answered, concern apparent in his voice.

"It certainly not like Adam to disappear this way," Destiny noted in turn. "But do you really think there is reason for concern?"

"No, I don't think there is... There's nothing to suggest anything is wrong, really. I told Karen not to worry too much."

"That didn't do too much good, did it?" Destiny sighed again. "Find him. I'll take care of the rest, here."

"You really are an Angel, Juliette."

"Keep that in mind. I hope you find him quickly, though. I don't want to press you, people, but I'm in a hot spot."

"We really appreciate your help. Thanks again."

"And... if you ever need help out there..."

"We'll think of you, don't worry. Bye."

Destiny heard the phone being hung up at the other end of the line and put down the receiver too, very thoughtful, and wondering how she would have to proceed now with Colonel White.

That was when a distinguished English voice suddenly boomed behind her: "Is anything wrong?"

Destiny literally jumped, her heart missing a beat, quickly muffling a cry of dreaded surprise. She spun around; Colonel White was standing just a few inches behind her and was staring at her curiously.

"Good God, Destiny!" he said, frowning in surprise seeing her reaction to his presence. "I'd swear, I nearly gave you a heart attack!"

Nearly, thought the Angel pilot. *But not quite. How long has he been there, anyway?*

"Colonel White," she replied with a faint smile. "You did surprise me!"

"I can see that." White pointed to the phone. "Was that Captain Scarlet?"

"Yes," Destiny answered, uneasily. "Yes, it was..."

"Are Symphony and Captain Blue with him?" White asked, curious.

"I... didn't ask him the question, sir."

White nodded quietly, eyeing the girl. Truth to tell, he was upset. REALLY upset, and on the verge of losing his temper. He had woken up early to discover that Scarlet was already up... and gone. Gone also was Symphony Angel, who was supposed to be sleeping in the other room with Destiny. And then, he couldn't find out if Captain Blue had showed up at all since the previous evening. He was beginning to become concerned. He was worried that the three had found a way to sneak off – literally ditch him – to go to one of those awful chapels Las Vegas was so full of. As far as White could tell, Blue and Symphony might already be married right now and he would have been unable to prevent it.

Destiny was left behind... undoubtedly, to provide the necessary distraction, Colonel White realised. He didn't know for sure how far Amanda Wainwright was involved in this all-too-obvious little conspiracy, but he was fairly sure she had helped. After all, she was the mother of one of

the culprits... and she would have thought it was worth it, to sacrifice her presence at the ceremony, if it meant that her daughter could get married. *They've taken me for the fool that I am*, a frustrated White mused. *I was too good a sport. I waited too long. I never ever imagined they would go to such foolhardy lengths to carry out their plans. I wasn't conscientious enough, and I have been had. Maybe I deserve it.*

"All right, Destiny," he told the French girl. "Where are they?" His tone was still very courteous. He was still trying to keep his temper in check. Now was not the time to get angry, not just yet.

"Sir?" Destiny said, opening her eyes wide.

"Where are Scarlet, Blue and Symphony?" White repeated patiently, stressing every word. "Surely, you must know..."

Destiny carefully weighed her answer. "Well, Captain Blue, I can't really be sure about," she said truthfully. She tried to sound very cool, almost indifferent. "You did say to me you didn't hear him come into the room in the middle of the night, sir?"

"No, I..." White shook himself. That girl was playing innocent, but he was way too smart for her. She was trying to gain some time, obviously. "I slept like a log," he answered. "I didn't even hear Scarlet going out this morning..." *Must have tiptoed his way out*, he grimly added to himself. "Why did HE sneak out on me, anyway?"

"It's probable Paul didn't want to wake you up, sir," Destiny replied.

"I bet," White mumbled, that realisation being the only thing he was really sure of so far. "I'm normally not such a sound sleeper, you know..."

"It must be jet lag."

"Excuse me?"

The door behind White opened; Amanda Wainwright, having finished preparing herself, walked in, a cup of coffee in her hand. She closed the door behind her and approached the two people standing next to the bed. Neither of them seemed to notice her presence.

"Or maybe accumulated fatigue," Destiny continued, addressing White. "You know what I mean? All that work on Cloudbase, you never take time to relax... and I bet you don't even know HOW..."

"Destiny..."

"So when you take vacation time, well..."

"Destiny, please..."

"...I guess you fell like a rock."

"That's enough!"

Losing what little what was left of his eroding patience, White slammed his open hand on the table next to the bed, with such violence that the phone upon it jumped up and the receiver fell off its hook. Amanda, who was taking a sip from her cup, almost choked on it, surprised by the sudden outburst. A startled Destiny froze instantly.

"I tried, I REALLY tried to make it nice and easy!" White growled, pointing an accusing finger in the Angel's direction. "But I just CAN'T play along in this little game of yours!"

"What game are you talking about, Colonel?" Destiny asked timidly.

"In God's name, what's going on here?" Amanda said in turn, widening bewildered eyes at White.

The latter feigned not to hear her.

"Where are they?" he asked Destiny with contained anger in his voice. "You're keeping something from me, that's obvious... What is it?"

"Sir," a hesitant and uneasy Destiny replied, "I assure you, I can't see why you seem so angry about..."

"STOP taking me for an old fool, girl!" White hissed between his teeth. "I'm not enjoying this in the least!"

"But, sir," Destiny protested, blushing violently. "I'm not taking you for a fool..."

"Well, if you're not, you're doing a bloody good impression of it!" White snapped furiously.

"Really, Colonel..." Amanda tried again.

"Please, keep OUT of this, Mrs Wainwright." Flashing with righteous anger, White's blue eyes gazed into Destiny's. "Let's get a few facts straight, shall we? First of all, Symphony arrived

here yesterday evening. ALONE, when she was supposed to be with Captain Blue. I am not mistaken when I say you and Scarlet were waiting for them to join you, am I?"

"No, sir... I mean, you're absolutely right, sir."

"Right. Last night, Symphony seemed preoccupied, depressed, even on edge. Did you notice how she kept AVOIDING any discussion with me? I thought she was UPSET, even ANNOYED by my presence here... as if I was disturbing some plans she may have made?"

"Er... Colonel, I..."

"Don't answer that. Yet. You know, that excuse she gave about Captain Blue having met a friend of his here in Vegas? I didn't believe it. Not even for one minute. Too far-fetched, if you ask me... I don't know where he was, but I'm pretty sure of one thing: he NEVER came to the hotel last night. Am I still right?"

"Y-yes, sir, you are."

"Good. I THOUGHT I couldn't be such a sound sleeper... It's a relief to have confirmation of that. Now, one last thing I'm sure of: Scarlet and Symphony have quietly, but surely, SNEAKED OUT on me. And it's probably to go and join Blue. Isn't that true?"

Destiny hesitated. *Damn you, Paul*, she thought. *I'm really going to get you for this!* She hated being grilled this way...

"You stayed behind to keep me busy, am I right?" Colonel White insisted, in an accusing tone.

Well, that was true, but for Destiny to admit it to her commander was like putting her head into a lion's mouth...

"What's the matter with you now?" White grumbled. "You couldn't keep yourself from babbling earlier. You suddenly don't know what to say?"

"No, sir... I mean, yes... I mean..." Destiny was frankly at a loss for words. That was irritating for Colonel White. And frustrating.

"You're wasting my time, Destiny," he warned her. "And I'm on the verge of thinking that you're doing this on purpose."

"Sir, I don't -"

"Why?" White snapped impatiently. "Why did they sneak out on me like that? You KNOW why! And you will TELL ME!"

"Oh, for Heaven's sakes! Will you stop YELLING LIKE THAT?"

It was Amanda protesting vehemently. Astounded by her outburst, White turned to stare at her; he saw the anger flashing in her eyes.

"Don't you see you're SCARING the girl?" the American woman told him sternly.

"I'm scaring her?" White snorted at the remark. "I should hardly think so! That 'girl' is a lot tougher than she looks... If she wasn't, she wouldn't be in Spectrum!"

"Well, it's obvious that in front of you, she's still like a little girl!"

Destiny felt herself reddening violently. This was embarrassing enough, without having Symphony's mother adding to the situation by trying to help her out.

"Amanda, please, I don't need -"

"Shut up, Juliette!" Destiny closed her mouth and watched in dismay as Amanda Wainwright stood her ground and openly confronted a still furious Colonel White. "Now, Colonel, I don't care if you presently are one of the most powerful men on Earth, I won't stand idle and sit on my hands and watch you tear into that girl like a shark with a piece of meat!"

"*Seigneur, aidez-moi!*" Destiny whispered, rolling her eyes. She could hardly believe anybody would stand up that way to her commander, and even less have the courage to speak to him in such a manner. "*Please, tell me it's not true...*"

"I haven't finished with you yet, Destiny," the colonel told her, before turning his attention back to Amanda, with an annoyed glance. "Mrs Wainwright, I don't really appreciate being admonished that way in front of one of my people! I would appreciate it if you would keep out of this."

"And why, pray tell, should I keep quiet about this?"

White scowled. "My dear lady, I know why you feel compelled to interfere here..."

"Oh, you think you do?" Amanda waved toward an uneasy-looking Destiny. "You can't honestly expect that young woman to betray her friends' confidence in her? She's loyal to them!"

"What about her – THEIR loyalty to ME?" White almost barked. "I'm their commander!"

"Is THAT what this is all about?"

"PLEASE, Mrs Wainwright!" White sighed with annoyance. "Stay OUT of Spectrum business!"

"I would gladly do so!" Amanda retorted. "But I don't see any Spectrum business here! I just see a man who feels his ego has been hurt so badly that he's lashing out in anger and is about to make a complete fool of himself!"

"WHAT?"

"*This is a nightmare,*" Destiny moaned. She dropped onto the bed, taking her head between her hands. She was feeling a headache coming on. This argument between the colonel and Symphony's mother reminded her just a little too much of the way her own parents often behaved toward each other. Thank God, she had to leave for the convent at an early age, to receive what her father called 'a proper education'... So she didn't have to witness too many of those scenes.

You're really lucky you're indestructible, Paul Metcalfe! Because now it's certain I'm going to kill you for putting me in this spot!

"How dare you speak to me like that?" White growled angrily, addressing Amanda.

"I'll talk to you any way I want!" the woman snapped back. "I've always spoken my mind, and I'm not changing that now! Now, if you can't handle the truth, well, too bad! For you!"

"Well, I've never..."

"If you two want to be alone," Destiny then tried, standing up, "I can go, and leave you to continue this conversation..."

"Stay!" White ordered. Destiny sat back, piteously. The colonel stared back at Amanda, who was still defying him. She was not about to let go easily, he realised.

And maybe, with reasons good enough for her.

"Now I know where your daughter gets her fire," White muttered sombrely.

"That's because you've never met her father," Amanda replied.

"I believe I did meet him," the colonel retorted. "Three years ago, when your daughter received her commission." He sighed heavily. His anger had dropped some degrees, but he was still upset. "I didn't mean to snap at you, Amanda. I just HATE it, when people keep secrets behind my back... especially when I'm fully aware something is going on!"

Amanda nodded slowly. "So I was right when I said you had been hurt..."

"If I have, dear lady, it wasn't in my ego," White answered. "I'm... well... disappointed."

"That nobody confided in you."

"That's about right, yes."

Amanda nodded again. "You want to know where the three of them are?" she asked abruptly, sitting next to Destiny. The French girl gave her a distraught look that White noticed instantly. He grumbled and shook his head of silver hair.

"I don't want you to feel obligated to tell me, Amanda," he answered the American woman. "If it stirs up trouble between you and your own daughter -"

"Los Lobos," Amanda said quietly.

"Los Lobos?" White repeated. He stared at the two women with a puzzled look. *What an odd name for a chapel,* he thought, a bit confused. *Even for Las Vegas.*

Destiny sighed and then seemed to finally give in.

"It's a little town, about two hundred miles into the desert," she explained. "All I know of it is... that's it's not a really interesting place."

White was dumbfounded. Into the desert, away from the glamour and excitement of Las Vegas? Why would Blue and Symphony go to all the trouble of coming here in the first place, if they were going to get married in an unknown little town in the middle of nowhere?

Because of me, probably, he thought. But since he wasn't totally convinced of that...

"What are they doing there?" he asked carefully.

"That's where Karen left Adam yesterday," Amanda answered briefly.

More and more puzzling, White mused.

"WHY would she have left him there?"

Destiny looked at him uneasily. "You did notice how distraught Symphony was, last night?"

"Yes..."

"It wasn't because of you," Amanda said. "In fact, she was far too worried about Adam to be really upset by your presence."

"I'm not sure how to take that," the colonel grumbled. He stopped, wondering about the first part of Amanda's sentence. "What do you mean, 'too worried about Adam'? What's the matter with him?"

He was wondering if, by any chance, the two lovebirds had had a quarrel or something like that. Well, that would be a shame, he thought, because deep down, he didn't bear them any ill will... But he couldn't help but think that it would make his job easier... If the wedding were called off, he wouldn't have to stop it.

He saw the still hesitant Destiny looking down a brief second, before staring at him uncertainly. *Here it goes*, the French pilot was thinking, with an impending sense of catastrophe hanging over her head. *At this point, there can be no turning back.*

"I... don't know how you would like hearing this, sir," she cautiously warned her commander.

"I don't think it can get any worse, Destiny," White replied dryly. "You'd better continue."

"All right then." Destiny gave a deep sigh, just like a skydiver preparing for the big jump. "Captain Scarlet and Symphony have gone to Los Lobos, to retrieve Captain Blue from the local jail."

The surprise – and doubt – in Colonel White's features were fairly apparent. That wasn't at all what he had expected to hear.

He frowned deeply. "What? Jail? Captain Blue? How... what happened?"

"From what Karen told us – when she was able to get away from you yesterday – Adam got into a fight with a guy..."

"A fight?" White repeated in disbelief.

"He was out of luck," Amanda added quickly. "It seems that guy was an acquaintance of the local sheriff... who threw Adam in jail for the night."

"A fight." White shook his head. "I don't understand... Blue's not a brawler. He's not the type..." *If it had been Scarlet, on the other hand... he's the impetuous type.* White shrugged. "That's it? You're telling me the truth?"

"Sir!" Destiny protested vehemently.

"Why would we lie to you about something this important?" Amanda asked.

White dismissed the suspicions forming in his mind with a wave of his hand. "Forget I said anything. I was just... surprised by the revelation, that's all. Why didn't you tell me straight away?"

Destiny blushed. "We were all afraid you would get angry, sir," she admitted.

"Because Captain Blue got into a fight like a common brawler?" White grumbled. "Because he ended up in prison? Well, yes, I would have been angry! But it's nothing compared to what I have felt – and still feel – about the lot of you keeping this a secret!"

"I told you you should have told him," Amanda said, elbowing Destiny. "Your commander is not such an ogre, you know."

"I may not be an ogre," White muttered, "but I'm still your commander, Destiny. Don't you have any RESPECT for me?"

"Sir, you shouldn't have to ask that question!" Destiny answered, hurt.

"Well, I'm asking it. And I intend to ask it of all your co-conspirators... If you DO have respect for me, show it. I don't like being toyed with."

"I understand, sir," Destiny whispered, looking down in shame.

"I'm deeply disappointed, in all of you."

"I'm... sorry, sir."

"You should be."

"I'm... If you think you should take action, sir..."

"We're not at that point, yet."

Destiny looked up, gazing inquisitively at her commander. He looked straight into her eyes and sighed deeply. "No, I really don't think you understand," he noted. "I said I was disappointed. I'm disappointed that you did not trust me enough to confide in me. That hurts me, Destiny. Didn't you think I could be understanding enough to actually listen to you and maybe help you out with your problems?"

"Sir?" There was a puzzled tone to Destiny's voice.

"You should know by now, Destiny, I may shout sometimes..."

"...And then some," Amanda added in a murmur behind his back.

"...But I'm not unreasonable," White finished. "Now, you should have told me, without being afraid of the consequences." He smiled ruefully. "And for the moment, I'm on holiday, remember? I don't think there's any reason right now to take disciplinary action against you or the others."

"Really, Colonel?"

"Just don't push your luck. For now." White sighed. "All right," he added, rather tiredly. "The others will be coming back shortly, then? I trust Captain Blue's release this morning was a simple formality?"

"Well, sir..." Destiny hesitated for a moment. Both the colonel and Amanda Wainwright looked at her with curiosity and concern.

"What is it, Juliette?" Amanda asked.

"There may still be a problem," the Angel pilot said timidly.

"Wonderful!" White mumbled, rolling his eyes. "WHY didn't Captain Blue use his Spectrum identity, or call Cloudbase to get out of this, to begin with?" Destiny was about to say something, but he stopped her right away. "Don't answer that, I know why not. And anyway, that's a question I'll ask him personally." He shook his head. "I knew it. That was what the phone call earlier was about, right?"

"Yes, sir... It was Scarlet. It seems Captain Blue has somehow... disappeared."

There was a heavy silence; Amanda, who was not used to this kind of situation, gave a distraught look to the Spectrum commander, who was staring sternly at the Angel pilot.

"Disappeared?" he repeated, with an even tone.

"For lack of a better word, sir... yes." Destiny shook her head. "I don't know much about it, and it may be nothing but... when Symphony and Captain Scarlet arrived to get him out of prison this morning, he was already gone. Since yesterday evening, it seems. They're presently searching for him."

"In Los Lobos?"

Destiny nodded. "There's probably nothing wrong, sir, but..."

"Great," White grumbled again, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I've got the feeling it's going to be another one of those days... Why is it never easy?" He paused a second, looking thoughtful. Then he turned his attention back to the Angel pilot. "All right, then, you'd better get dressed, Destiny. After that, I want you to give me a complete briefing of what you know about this. And I want you to remember every detail Symphony may have told you of what happened yesterday, and what Scarlet told you over the phone this morning."

"Yes, sir", a startled Destiny answered, getting to her feet. "Er... May I ask what you plan to do?"

"I don't know yet," White murmured. "It depends on what you're going to tell me..."

Chapter 6

"Thank you for taking me to the ball game, Mr Grover."

Adam was in the passenger seat of the speeding van. Behind the wheel, the big, bulky gardener gave him a quick glance and a rueful smile. "Ah, don't mention it, kid! I had to go into town, anyway, to get those new plants for your mom."

Adam nodded sombrely. His feelings were in turmoil at the moment. He was on his way to his big game, and he should have been happy about that. But it wasn't the case at all. He was feeling guilty, for having disobeyed his father and sneaked out of the house to go, when he had been forbidden to do so. He was sad, and certainly still angry with his dad for having acted the way he did. Disobedience was a way for the boy to get back at his father, and he knew it perfectly well. It didn't matter that he would have to take the bus, walk, or hitchhike his way to town. He just had to go.

That Wilson Grover was to pass in his van about a mile away from the Svenson mansion could have been viewed as a kind of a blessing. So determined was Adam to go to his game that he didn't hesitate one second to put his suspicion and aversion for the man aside and gladly accepted his offer to take him to his destination.

"Aren't you afraid my Dad's gonna be sore at you for giving me a ride there?" Adam asked the gardener.

Grover shrugged negligently. The boy's father had shouted loud enough for him to hear all about the conflict that had arisen between the two. He was outside the open window tending to some bushes. He would have had to be deaf not to hear anything.

"He doesn't know about it," Grover replied. "Anyway, if I had been afraid of that, do you think I would have suggested it?"

"Well, I sure appreciate it, Mr Grover."

"Your team's counting on you, right? I can relate to that. You don't want to disappoint them."

"Yeah, you can say it's that..." Adam lowered his gaze, looking down at his ball and glove he had put on his lap. He really just wanted to stand up to his father. That his friends were relying on him for the match was second on his mind.

"Aren't YOU afraid your father will be angry at you?" Grover asked in turn.

"I don't care," the boy murmured. "He's already angry enough as it is. It can't be any worse."

"If you want my opinion, he shouldn't have grounded you. It was bad enough he was unable to live up to his promise, he didn't need to stoop so low as to forbid you to go to the game."

Adam didn't reply. He was just thinking that none of this was Grover's business. He didn't voice that.

"A man's gotta keep his promise," Grover continued. "No matter what. You're keeping yours, to your teammates. Too bad your father doesn't know how to do the same to you."

Adam looked up at the big man. "Did you ever have problems with your dad when you were a kid, Mr Grover?"

The gardener gave him another quick glance. He pointed a finger to his face, drawing the contour of a scar.

"See that? It's a gift from him."

Adam stared at him quizzically. "Your father did that to you?" he murmured.

Grover nodded. "He was a tough man. Drank a lot... Beat the hell out of me whenever he got the chance."

"Why?"

Grover shrugged. "Didn't matter. No matter what I did, it was a good enough reason to hit me."

Adam stayed quiet. He couldn't conceive that any man would ever beat up on his kid. Even at his angriest, his father never raised his hand to him or Peter. He did yell a lot on some

occasions – like he just did during that dispute about an hour ago – but it never lasted long. And in this particular case, Adam was aware that he had provoked his father.

“Does that shock you?” Grover asked the boy.

“No... Well, yeah, a little.” Adam looked down again. “I guess my situation with my dad isn’t that bad, after all.”

“Your dad is a rich, lucky sucker. You live in a house I could never even dream of having, and you get every toy a kid your age could desire. NO, I would say your situation is not bad at all.”

Adam could have sworn he had heard an edge of contempt in Grover’s voice. He stared at the man, but didn’t see anything wrong in his face, as he watched the road ahead. The boy thought it was probably only his imagination.

“Did you ever get to settle things with your dad?” Adam asked, clearing his throat.

“Oh, yeah... I settled things with him all right.”

“Well, I’m glad for you.”

“You really mean that, kid?”

“Sure. Why do you ask?”

“Because I know for a fact that you don’t like me much.”

Adam blushed violently. Seeing him so uncomfortable, Grover laughed loudly. That made the boy even more unsettled.

“Don’t feel bad about it, kid. I suppose that if I were your age, I wouldn’t like a guy like me either!”

“I... I suppose I judged you too quickly,” Adam said with a shamed tone. “I’m sorry, Mr Grover.”

“S’all right, kid.”

The boy cleared his throat. He wanted nothing more than to change the subject. “You talked to your dad, lately?”

“My, aren’t you a curious little boy!”

“Just trying to make conversation...”

Grover shook his head. “My father’s been dead for a long time.”

“Oh! Sorry...”

“Don’t be. I’m not,” Grover replied very quietly. “He’s better off where he is.”

The bitterness in the gardener’s tone didn’t escape Adam.

“At least you made up with him before he passed away.”

“I didn’t make up with him.”

“But you said...”

“I said I settled things with him. That’s not the same,” Grover almost snapped. “That old bastard, always on my case... Said I would make nothing of my life. Said I never would make it big. I wonder what he’d say right now.”

Adam was feeling more and more uncomfortable. He tried to shrug it off. “Wasn’t he proud of you when you played with the Minor Leagues?” he asked tentatively.

“You actually remember me saying that to you?”

“Well... Yeah, I do.”

“Funny. I didn’t think you were listening.” Grover shook his head. “My old man died before that, kid. He never saw me in the Minors. Never saw me throw one single ball either, when I was a boy. Didn’t care enough about me, ‘cept to beat the living daylights out of me.” He stared at the boy who was watching him intensely. “One day, he tried once too often. I was fifteen. He thought he could still handle me. Too drunk to notice I had grown big and strong. When he tried to hit me, I hit him first. Never laid a hand on me ever since.”

“You... hit your father?” a disbelieving Adam asked the gardener.

“Yep. Didn’t hesitate at that,” Grover answered coldly. “HE never did when he beat me up. Why should I?”

“I... could never do a thing like that,” Adam said, shaking his head.

Grover chuckled mockingly. “Too much of a good kid for that, eh? Maybe you think that makes you better than me. Along with all that money your family has. Am I right?”

Adam thought he heard it again: the contempt, the resentment. And this time, it was so vivid, he could almost smell it. The boy felt even more uneasy, to the point that he wished the

van would arrive at its destination. The more he listened to the man, the more he had that creepy feeling about him.

He shouldn't have accepted his offer to take him to the game.

Adam looked ahead through the window, to see how far away they still were from the playing field. He frowned, noticing the van was not following a route he was familiar with.

"That's not the way to the field," he noted.

"I told you your mom asked me to pick up some new plants," Grover answered.

"But the playground is on the other side of the city," Adam insisted. "We're going in the exact opposite direction."

"You think so, kid?" Grover asked innocently.

Adam glanced suspiciously at him; why did he have the feeling that the guy was up to something? He wasn't feeling safe, but he couldn't say why.

He dismissed the thought and unbuckled his safety belt.

"Please pull over, Mr Grover," he asked politely. "I'll just take a bus to the field."

"I can't let you do that," Grover replied, shaking his head.

"Look, I'll be all right," Adam retorted. "It's not like I never took a bus before..."

Grover scoffed mockingly. "You surprise me. I would have thought you had your own personal chauffeur to drive you whenever you wish!"

The insolent tone surprised the boy. Seeing that Grover didn't seem about to obey his request, he turned toward the door and put his hand on the handle. Maybe if he showed the gardener he meant business when he asked him to pull over, the man would stop the vehicle. He felt a strong hand grabbing him by his T-shirt, pulling him away from the door he was trying to open and back to his seat. Adam turned around to stare at Grover's angry face.

"Stay quiet, you little brat!" the gardener growled at him. "What do you think you're doing? Get yourself killed? You're much too precious to me to allow that!"

Adam was stunned by the way the man spoke to him. It made him worried, and at the same time angered him. He wasn't used to people addressing him that way.

"Let me out of this van!" he demanded, in an annoyed voice.

"You're used to seeing everybody obey your every whim," Grover replied between his teeth, with a mean enough grin. "How's it feel to face someone who ain't at your command, kid?"

Adam turned pale; that heinous, contemptuous glance Grover was casting on him, the way he was hanging on so tightly to him, the boy was suddenly very afraid for his own safety. The mistrust he had entertained toward the gardener came back to him with a vengeance. Could it be he was right to doubt this man like he did?

He grabbed Grover's hand, which was holding his T-shirt, and made a commendable effort to break loose.

"Let go of me!" he ordered furiously.

"If that's what you want..."

Before young Adam could understand what was happening, Grover violently pressed down the brake. The van stopped suddenly; Adam was thrown forward, and hit his head very hard on the dashboard; Grover had made no attempt to stop him. The boy slumped on the seat, almost completely stunned. Through a haze, he heard a cackling sound coming from the driver.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you to keep your seat belt fastened?"

Stunned as he was, Adam was nevertheless astounded to hear the mocking tone in the gardener's voice. Grover's hand brutally took the boy by the arm, and without any apparent effort, lifted him up, and tossed him behind, from between the two seats. Adam fell on the van's floor with a loud thud. He felt something warm and damp running down his forehead, as pain reverberated throughout his skull. Grunting, he tried to raise his aching head. He saw a dark red substance staining the floor, where his head had been. He was horrified when he realised it was his own blood.

Adam heard creaking coming from the front of the van and looked in that direction; he saw that Grover had left the driver's seat to come in the back. He slowly moved toward the boy who, his eyes wide-open with terror, started to back away from him. Adam didn't get very far, as he quickly reached the side of the van. His head was spinning, and he had trouble keeping his eyes in focus. He looked with dread and disbelief as Grover crouched in front of him; the man quietly lit a cigar, before looking down at the terrified boy, and smiling coldly at him.

"I sure hope your Dad ain't as angry at you as you think, kid," Adam heard Grover tell him, through a deepening haze. "Because I intend to cost him plenty, before I consider returning his precious little brat to him..."

The gardener blew some smoke directly in the weakening boy's face. Adam didn't even cough, his strength drained from him by the pain and the sheer horror of what was happening to him.

"My old man would be so surprised," Grover added, staring icily at the boy. "I'm about to hit it pretty big, thanks to you."

Those were the last words young Adam heard before consciousness left him, and fell mercifully into a pool of blackness.

* * *

Captain Blue's head was spinning. He had an awful taste in his mouth and every nerve and muscle of his body ached.

Slowly awakening, he found himself lying on his back, on a thin, uncomfortable mattress, still fully dressed. He tried to lift his head, but let it fall back heavily, unable to even do that. That move only sent a wave of nausea through his stomach. He frowned, puzzled. *What is wrong with me?* he asked himself, trying to recall how he could have ended up in such a state. It felt like a bad hangover, but he didn't remember drinking anything the day before. That bad taste in his mouth didn't remind him of any alcohol he had ever drunk. It had a strange taste; like a mixture of blood and something medicinal. Like ether...

Or chloroform.

It suddenly came back to him. The jail. The ambush. The beating he took. And that piece of chloroformed rag somebody put over his nose.

The face of Grover.

That memory triggered a reaction within Blue and he tried to sit up straight; he could barely lift up an inch, and fell back on the mattress, grunting. He couldn't move his arms. His hands were tied up over his head, to one of the metal bars of a headboard he could feel under his fingers. He couldn't open his eyes either. Something was covering them, like an adhesive tape or something similar, completely blinding him.

"Wonderful," Blue muttered, sighing heavily. He moved his hands, pulling on the ropes binding him. He succeeded only in hurting himself, and making the headboard rattle loudly. Which immediately brought another sound to his ears.

A key had been turned in a lock, and then a door creaked, as it was opened. Blue stopped his efforts and pricked up his ears. He heard somebody cackling. "Don't try so hard, kid. You'll break your hands."

Blue felt his heart miss a beat, and shuddered. He heard steps approaching, limping steps... Then another creaking, like somebody sitting on a rickety wooden chair. He could feel the man next to the bed, looking at him. He could almost SEE him.

"Still up to your old tricks, eh, Grover?" Blue asked, trying to sound casual. "Why the blindfold? It's perfectly useless. I know it's you... And I know what you look like..."

"Don't you find me changed, after all those years?" Grover asked mockingly.

"Yes. You're older. Greyer. But I still recognized you..."

"Well, YOU've changed too, kid. You're a lot tougher than you used to be."

"I was a kid back then, Grover."

The man chuckled. "I thought the blindfold would be a nice touch. A reminder of the good old days..."

"Yes," Blue mumbled bitterly, almost to himself. "Still the same scum you were twenty-five years ago." He paused a second, trying to get himself a little more comfortable, without much success. "So, when did you get out? I thought you were sent up for life."

"I got paroled about five years ago."

"So you did twenty years, huh? And you've been hiding in the Nevada desert since you got out? I suppose that's the perfect place for you. You can make yourself forgotten. Plus there's plenty of snakes like you."

"Cute, Svenson, really cute! Don't push your luck. I'm being real patient with you as it is." Blue could feel Grover looking over him, with that very cold look he knew far too well. He waited for him to speak. "I've been around here for a couple of years. Doing odd jobs, making some friends... Not really a very exciting life. But it's still a living."

"Strange... I have a hard time picturing you spending a quiet life." Blue moved his hands a little. He felt the bonds biting deeper into his wrists and grunted, gritting his teeth. "Of course, I kinda lost touch with you, didn't I?"

"I searched for you when I got out of jail, kid."

Blue sighed upon hearing those words. "I wonder why, really..."

"You shouldn't wonder. You know we've got scores to settle between us." Grover paused a moment. "You're a hard man to find, you know?" he added. "I began by looking you up at your father's numerous companies. Well, surprise, surprise! You didn't join him on the finance market. Despite the fact that you studied economics. Hey, I learned you were a real whiz kid? Finished Harvard at sixteen? I'm really impressed."

"I see you studied my life."

"Just tried to keep myself informed." There was another pause. Blue couldn't see Grover taking a cigarette from his pack and lighting it, but the Spectrum officer distinctly smelt the scent of the tobacco smoke.

"Some bad habits are hard to break, I see," he muttered. "But I guess smoking isn't the only one in your case."

Blowing out some smoke, Grover looked thoughtfully at the burning red end of his cigarette. "You know these things are like money in the joint?" he said quietly to Blue. "I learned to live on it and by it for twenty years, kid... Because of you and your dad."

"That's right. Make us responsible for what happened to you, Grover."

Blue had hardly spoken those last sarcastic words when he felt a sudden burning sensation in the lower part of his neck, just above his collarbone. He let out a yelp of both surprise and pain. He could smell the distasteful odour of his own flesh sizzling under the burning cigarette.

"Will you cut that out, you maniac?" he shouted through clenched teeth.

"I told you not to push your luck!" Grover answered coldly. He pressed the cigarette down and crushed it against Blue's bare skin, watching with satisfaction as his captive tried hard not to grunt in pain.

"I'm going to get you for this, Grover!" Blue lashed out in anger.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, kid," Grover replied, tossing the crushed cigarette to the floor.

"Stop calling me that! I'm not a kid and you don't frighten me anymore!"

"Oh, you think you're so tough, now? You didn't seem that tough last night!"

"YOU weren't either when I knocked you down in that cantina!"

That seemed to do the trick. Growling with anger, Grover got to his feet, and reached for Blue's restrained hands. He proceeded to untie them from the headboard. "We'll see about that now, mister!" he grumbled all the while. "You should know that nobody can defy me like that and think he can get away with it!"

Blue's hands were now free from the headboard, but still securely bound together. Grover took him by his collar and forced him to his feet. "Get up now! Up, smart guy! I'm gonna give you a lesson you won't forget soon!"

No sooner was he on his feet than Blue brutally hit Grover under the chin with his bound hands. The older man stumbled backwards, and Blue pushed him over. Grover fell on his back, and Blue had to struggle not to follow him. He staggered, his footing precarious, since he couldn't see where he stood, with his eyes still covered as they were. He heard too late the rapid footsteps behind him and was unable to evade the brutal blow on the back of his neck. He fell on his hands and knees; a kick in the stomach sent him sprawling on the floor with a loud moan. Before he could make a move, somebody put his foot on his throat, pinning him down, almost choking him.

"What were you thinking of, Will?" the newcomer called out angrily at Grover, who was struggling to get to his feet. "Why did you free him?"

Grover was up, breathing hard, looking down with fury and contempt at Blue. He threw him a vicious kick in the side, that made the younger man groan in pain.

"He needed a lesson!" Grover said to his companion. "Hasn't changed much... Still the same pig-headed kid he was twenty-five years ago. Will you ever learn, Adam, my boy? You can't defy me without paying the price for it!"

"I'm not your boy, you dirty..." Blue's voice trailed off in a strangled grunt, when the foot that was keeping him down pressed a little more on his throat. Grover looked at him intensely, before nodding to his accomplice.

"Help me get him up. I'll show that bastard who's boss here."

A dazed Blue was picked up from the floor by two strong pairs of arms. He was literally dragged away from the bed where he had awakened, still not able to see anything around him. The two men didn't take him far and didn't leave the room. While his accomplice held the half-stunned Spectrum officer, Grover picked up a long rope from the floor and tied one end of it to Blue's hands. He threw the other end over a steel beam that was about ten feet above their heads and caught hold of the rope when it came dangling down in front of him. He went to a supporting stud not far from there, and pulled with all his strength on the line, hoisting his prisoner up. He didn't stop until Blue was only able to touch the ground with the tips of his shoes; then he tightly secured his end of the rope to the stud.

"That should keep him quiet," Grover said with a satisfied grin, addressing his accomplice. "Now you can go. I'm sure I can take care of the rest."

The ominous edge in his voice didn't presage anything good in Blue's ears. Even the other man seemed a bit worried.

"Now be careful, Will. We don't want him dead. He's much more valuable to us alive."

"Don't you think I know that?" Grover grumbled dryly. "It's me who's the brain, here!"

"But you're not alone in this. I don't know if the others would agree with..."

"I won't kill him, don't worry. I know what I'm doing. Now leave us. Me and Mr Svenson have a lot to talk about."

The other man sighed, giving up; he left the dark room in which they had locked up their captive, and closed the door as he went out. Grover turned an evil eye at the young man in front of him, hanging by his hands. Blue was trying to get his footing. Only his toes were supporting him; his weight pulled painfully on his arms and wrists. Before long, he realised, he wouldn't even be able to feel them.

"Not comfortable, is it?" Grover remarked quietly. "Don't worry. I'll lower you down later on. But right now, I've got a lesson to give you."

Blue stopped struggling; it was useless. He wished he could see to know exactly what Grover had in mind. At least, he had heard some interesting bits of information from the other man.

"What did your friend mean, 'I'm much more valuable to you alive'?" he asked, overcoming the growing pain in his wrists.

"What do you think he meant, kid?" Grover answered back. "You MUST have a good idea..."

Blue nodded; yes, indeed, he had an idea...

"I don't have any money, Grover."

"Doesn't matter. I'd already imagined a former test pilot and security agent wouldn't have much to spare."

"You know about that too?"

"Told you I kept myself informed about your whereabouts. Though I lost track of what you've been doing for the past three years or so. You seem to have completely disappeared from the face of the Earth. What are you up to these days, anyway?"

Blue did not respond. He had no intention of telling Grover about Spectrum. The other man pondered his captive's silence and thought he was concentrating on keeping his mind clear. He sighed.

"No matter. That's not really important. I'm not after your money, kid. I realised that any you could have would come from your father. So I'll go right to the source."

Blue laughed softly, notwithstanding the pain he was feeling from his numbing arms. "I should have known... So we're right back to that, are we?"

"Your dad owes me, kid. And with interest."

"He won't pay you, Grover. Remember? He didn't pay last time. What makes you think he will this time?"

"Me, I'm pretty sure he will. Last time, he didn't pay because he chose not to play fair. Now, we just have to show him how serious we really are. I'll need your... cooperation for this."

"Don't hold your breath! You don't really expect I'd help you out? I will do nothing!"

"But you DON'T have to do anything."

Grover unbuckled his belt and dragged it out of his belt-loops. He folded it in two in his hands and made it snap loudly. Blue pricked up his ears at the sound. Grover smiled evilly.

"You just have to hang there, looking absolutely miserable," he explained, walking slowly around his intended victim to get behind him. "That should convince your old man we mean business. Don't worry about a thing. I'll make sure you really look the part. I'll provide the necessary... inspiration."

Blue heard the whistling sound of the belt as it was suddenly released. He braced himself just in time before the heavy buckle hit him brutally in the lower back. He clenched his teeth against the violent pain, and muffled a cry. The second blow caught him squarely between the shoulder-blades; he stiffened, letting out a grunt.

"I swear, Grover," he hissed between his teeth, "I'll make you pay for this."

"That's where you're wrong, kid," Grover cackled wickedly. "You're the one who's going to pay... You and your dad, that is."

The belt struck Blue's back again, even more violently than before, sending a wave of pain throughout the young man's body. He had now the distinct feeling that Grover had every intention of beating him up to his heart's content. And he had plenty of grudge and hate in him to go on endlessly.

The Spectrum officer steeled himself. The punishment, he knew it, would be a long and very painful one. He was praying fervently that he would be able to find a way to get himself out of this mess before long.

He was also very grateful that his beloved Symphony Angel had not fallen into Grover's evil clutches... and that she was now safely away, under the watchful care of Captain Scarlet.

Chapter 7

"Now what do we do?"

After having called Destiny at the *St-Maurice* Hotel to inform her of the latest developments, Captain Scarlet and Symphony had immediately begun the search for Captain Blue. They first went to the small store which doubled as the town's bus station, to find out if he had bought a ticket for Las Vegas. The employee there told them that the store was closed between ten last night and six in the morning, and that there wasn't a bus during the night anyway... Since the sheriff had said to Symphony that Blue was released around midnight, there was no possible way for him to have taken the bus.

Then, the two Spectrum agents visited the town's hotel again, to see if there weren't, by any chance, any other places where Blue could have spent the night. As far as the owner knew, his was the only place that rented rooms to visitors.

He told them that he hadn't gone to bed before three the night before, that he got caught up in some late night show on the television... If Blue had shown up, he would have seen him. Of course, according to the hotel owner, there also was the possibility that Blue could have found a good Samaritan to take him into his home... Unless he had fallen asleep in some murky alley, or one of the dark corners of the local bar... Which Scarlet and Symphony couldn't see him doing.

Since neither of these steps proved fruitful, Symphony and Scarlet went to the cantina. Upon seeing the girl enter, the owner, the round Hispanic woman Symphony had seen the day before, gave her and her companion a mean look. Symphony feigned not to notice the flash of worry in her eyes, while Scarlet was ordering two rounds of breakfast.

"Where could he be?" Symphony sighed, sitting at the table. "And why didn't he contact us?"

"That's one of the main reasons I called Juliette," Scarlet said in turn, taking the other seat. "To see if she'd had a call from Adam... I thought that he could have tried to reach us while we were on the road. It seems not."

"So he didn't even TRY to reach us," Symphony said.

"I wonder why the sheriff suggested that Adam take the bus last night?" Scarlet noted thoughtfully. "Surely he knows about the bus schedule..."

"That's a good question," Symphony remarked, eyeing her companion. "My guess is, that sheriff is an idiot... or he knows something he's not telling us."

"Could Adam have hitchhiked his way out of here?" Scarlet mused again. "Frankly, I don't see him doing that, all the way to Vegas, but..."

"Paul, he would still have called us."

"Unless the phones lines were still down until this morning."

"In which case he would have STAYED HERE," Symphony insisted with conviction. "Knowing we would come for him, he would have waited for us."

"Then WHERE is he?" Scarlet asked, frowning. "It's not like him to disappear like that!"

"Certainly not!" Symphony agreed. "I don't like it, Paul. I don't like it at all."

The owner of the place came to put two plates of eggs and bacon in front of her and Scarlet. The young woman looked down at her meal, and sighed, pushing it away. "I'm not hungry," she declared, as the owner went her way.

"YOU? Not hungry?" Scarlet replied, rolling surprised eyes. "Now I've heard everything!"

"Please, Paul, don't tease me. I'm not in the mood."

"I can see that. Would you please calm down? There's no reason for you to worry!"

"How can I believe that?" Symphony replied impatiently. "There's no trace of Adam, he doesn't seem to be anywhere! How can I not think he's having problems with Captain Black, or that Network that kidnapped the colonel?"

"Karen, you mustn't think that. We have no indication that it could have happened!" Scarlet reached for the young woman's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "Please, calm down," he murmured. "You don't want to draw attention to us, do you?"

Symphony hesitated a second. Then she sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, Paul," she murmured. "I guess I'm really worried about Adam."

"Yes, so am I. But we still have to stay rational about this. We'll find him, Karen."

She nodded thoughtfully, seemingly agreeing with her companion. Scarlet patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry... I'm sure he can't be that far. He'll reappear."

She responded with the faintest of smiles. "What would we do without you?" she murmured.

He grinned back at her. "Well, I suppose you'd all have very boring lives!" he teased her.

"I can do with boring right now," Symphony mumbled dully. "With Adam not being where he's supposed to be... and the colonel being where HE shouldn't..."

Scarlet cleared his throat. "Oh, yes, the colonel... Now THAT'S another problem, isn't it?"

"I sure wish I knew exactly why he came to Las Vegas yesterday. What did he tell you when he showed up on your doorstep?"

"The same as he told you. He'd decided to take a few days off. And he expressed the desire to spend some time with us."

"Excuse me, but I find that strange."

"The fact that he wants to get some rest? You know he needs it more than any of us, Karen."

"Well, at least as much as YOURSELF, Paul."

"He HAS been working very hard these past few months," Scarlet continued thoughtfully. "And his last holiday having been something of a nightmare..."

"Yes, on that we agree. But what I find strange is his idea of spending his vacation with us. I mean... has he ever done that before?"

"Yes. Sort of. We spent an evening together once, him, Adam, Seymour and me." He grinned slightly. "As a matter of fact, it was in a casino..."

"I don't think THAT'S what brought the colonel to Vegas," Symphony replied, smiling. "He's not a gambling man. I remember that occasion you're talking about. It was after that mission where you pretended to lose a bundle at roulette, so the colonel could pretend he had kicked you out of Spectrum... How Adam could EVER have thought you were REALLY gambling that time is beyond me!"

"YOU didn't buy it?"

"Well... I had my doubts. It was so unlike you." Symphony gave a faint smile. "So... the colonel didn't come here to keep his eye on you, in case you were gambling."

"I think we can safely rule that out, yes," Scarlet grinned mischievously.

"So why is he here, then?" A worrying thought then crossed the young woman's mind and she became suddenly gloomy. "Do you think he could... know about Adam and me?"

"About your plans to get married?" Scarlet shook his head. "I doubt it very much. How could he have found out about that?"

"I don't know, Paul... I mean, we were careful, but you know him. There's not much that gets by him."

The owner of the restaurant came back again, this time bringing two glasses of orange juice. Scarlet noticed the sideways look she was giving them – him in particular. He watched intently as the woman returned to her counter.

"Why is that woman looking at us like that?" he mused, frowning with curiosity.

Symphony shrugged. "Must be a little worried, I guess. Since you're with me, maybe she wonders if you're going to get into a fight and destroy this place."

"You mean, the fight with Adam and that other guy – what's his name..."

"Grover."

"It happened here?"

Symphony nodded quietly. "That's right, just here. You should have seen Adam. He was out of control. He was literally tearing into that man. It was pretty clear he hated him."

"And he never told you WHY?"

"He promised he'd tell me when he got out of prison."

Scarlet rubbed his chin thoughtfully, turning his attention toward the cantina's owner. "I wonder why the charges against Adam were dropped," he murmured.

"Because the bail was paid?" Symphony suggested.

"There's more to it than just that, Karen. But, since we're at it... WHO paid that bail, the speeding ticket, and the damages to this restaurant?"

Symphony was following Scarlet's line of thought; she looked toward the woman too. "Maybe we should ask her that..."

Scarlet nodded, looking thoughtfully at the woman. Yes, maybe she would be able to provide them with some useful information. HOW that could lead them to Blue, however, was another matter entirely.

Scarlet saw a little Hispanic boy running by the woman, flying a model plane with an extended arm, and making sounds with his mouth that sounded roughly like an interceptor jet. *Her son, perhaps*, Scarlet thought with an amused smile, as he heard her shouting to him to go play outside. The boy shrugged his shoulders and ran toward the exit; absent-mindedly, the captain looked on as the boy passed by the table where he sat with Symphony.

The boy was pushing the door when Scarlet suddenly jumped to his feet, startling the young pilot.

"Hey, kid! Come here a minute!"

The boy ran out, without even acknowledging him. Scarlet pushed back his chair and quickly walked toward the door. His call had drawn the attention of the boy's mother, who had raised her head. Symphony was staring at him with a puzzled expression.

"Paul, what's going on?"

"Go and talk to the woman, Karen," Scarlet answered urgently. "I need to have a word with that boy."

"What do you want with him?"

"I'll explain when I come back."

While Symphony was leaving her place to go see the cantina's owner – who seemed rather distraught that Scarlet would go after her son – the Spectrum captain left the restaurant. He looked around for the boy and saw him on his right, running in the empty street, still flying his plane. Scarlet called again to him: "Hey, boy! I want to talk to you!"

The kid looked over his shoulder at him, and then ran into an alley. Grumbling, Scarlet broke into a run and followed. *I don't think his mother would be reassured*, he thought. *It looks like I'm after her kid.*

Once into the alley, Scarlet looked around. The boy seemed nowhere to be found. He sighed heavily. "Come on, now!" he shouted. "I just want to ask you something. I don't have time to play hide and seek!"

He didn't receive any kind of response. *The kid must be very good at it*, he thought, walking slowly into the alley, looking to his right and to his left. *Fortunately, so am I*. He lowered his eyes to the ground, searching for clues. It was very dry, but still he could see some footprints in the dirt. Very few of them, and one set was very small. He smiled. They led toward a trash can, near the far end of the alley. He went to it and leaned against the nearest wall.

"You can come out now," he said quietly. "I'm sure your mother will be annoyed with you if you come back all covered with garbage."

The boy reared his head out of the can; Scarlet cast him an amused glance.

"How did you find me out?" the boy asked.

"Tracked you down," Scarlet answered. "Pretty easy when you know how. Now you'd better get out of there." When he saw that the boy still hesitated, he smiled again. "Don't be afraid, now. I won't hurt you. As I said, I just want to ask you a question."

The boy jumped out of the can, sighing. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he tried to make a run for it. But Scarlet was ready for him and grabbed him by the arm. "Oh, no, you don't! What are you so afraid of, anyway? Am I that intimidating?"

"You ran after me," the boy defended himself, a glitter of defiance in his eyes.

Scarlet nodded, thoughtfully. "Yes, I admit that could be distressing. I'm sorry if I frightened you. Really." The boy looked up at him; his eyes weren't reflecting any fear and he wasn't struggling to get free. "Now, if I let go of you, will you run out on me again?"

The boy shook his head in negation. Scarlet let go of his arm. The boy kept to his word and did not run away.

"What's your name, son?" Scarlet asked him, trying to sound reassuring and friendly, so he would not frighten him again.

"Pablo," the child answered, his black eyes gazing into Scarlet's, obviously wondering what he wanted out of him.

"Now that's a peculiar coincidence," the Spectrum captain noted. "It means 'Paul' in Spanish." He pointed to himself. "That's *my* name."

"You pulling my leg, mister?" the boy asked suspiciously.

"I never lie, Pablo. And certainly not to a namesake."

The boy considered this for a second, then nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer given to him. "What do you want?"

Scarlet crouched in front of him and pointed to an object dangling from Pablo's belt, attached to a simple string. "I want to know where you got that watch."

Pablo looked down at the watch. "Somebody gave it to me."

He had answered too quickly, and he didn't look Scarlet in the eyes. *He's lying*, thought the Spectrum officer. Nevertheless, he continued to question him. "Who gave it to you?"

"Some *gringo*."

Scarlet rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "Can you describe this... '*gringo*' to me?"

The boy hesitated, obviously incapable of doing what was asked of him. Scarlet smiled slightly. "I bet your mother already told you never to accept a gift from a stranger," he noted matter-of-factly.

Pablo was still hesitant to answer. The captain showed him his left wrist. "Look, I've got the same watch as yours. Only mine's got red hands and numbers on it. I'll take a wild guess: yours has got blue ones, hasn't it?"

Pablo frowned. "How'd you know that?"

"That watch happens to belong to a friend of mine. And I'm pretty sure HE didn't give it to you. I'm right, aren't I?" The boy kept silent. Scarlet's voice softened even more. He didn't want to sound accusing, that would scare the kid away. "How did you get that watch, Pablo?"

The boy grumbled loudly. "I found it," he finally admitted. "You friend must have lost it. See? The wristband's broken... That's why I attached it with a string."

Pablo took the watch off his belt and showed it to Scarlet, as if he wanted to prove what he was saying. Scarlet took the watch in his hand and looked closely at it. It was definitely a Spectrum-issue watch, personalised for its owner; it had blue hands and numbers. As Pablo had said, the wristband was broken, as well as the glass face.

It was Captain Blue's watch.

And there were some dark smears under the glass that made Scarlet shiver.

"Where did you find it?" he asked Pablo.

"Will you give it back to me?" the boy answered instead.

"It's broken, Pablo," Scarlet replied, smiling again. "Wouldn't you rather have something else for it?"

"YOUR watch?" Pablo asked, glancing at the object with a covetous look.

"I'm sorry, I need it myself. Wouldn't you prefer to have some money instead? Say, twenty dollars?"

"I sure would!" Pablo said excitedly.

"And you will tell me where you found that watch?"

Pablo nodded quickly. Scarlet produced a couple of ten-dollar bills from his wallet to give to the boy, who put them in his pants pocket. "I found it in an alley," he then said. "It has a brick wall at the end, and I go there often to play ball."

"Where is this alley?" Scarlet asked frowning.

"It's near the bar," the boy answered. "On the other side of the street... I can take you there if you want."

Scarlet nodded his approval and slowly got back to his feet. He glanced one more time at the watch he had retrieved from the young boy... thoughtfully looking at the dark reddish stains he could see on it.

It was blood, there was no doubt about it.

* * *

The little boy guided Captain Scarlet to the alley where he had said he had found the watch. It was, as he said, by the bar, and it was a dead end, with a solid wall of bricks. As the pair walked down it, Scarlet noted that there weren't many doors opening onto it, and even fewer

windows. Plenty of trash cans and dark corners. *Anything could have happened here*, the Spectrum captain thought grimly, *and there's a good chance NOBODY would have even noticed it... Really nice place for an ambush.* He was pretty sure Adam would not have come into such a place of his own accord.

He would have been forced to.

Pablo showed him the exact spot where he had found the watch; near the foot of the brick wall. Scarlet looked down at the ground, searching for further indication of Blue's previous presence in this alley, or for anything out of the ordinary.

"What are you looking for, mister?" Pablo asked with curiosity.

Scarlet shook his head quietly. "A clue to where my friend might be," he answered vaguely.

He was rather grim, for he had found something that wasn't really comforting. There were dark stains on the dirt, of a reddish shade, surrounded by a number of confused footprints. The dirt had been heavily scuffed at that spot, as if a good number of people had been there.

There was definitely a struggle here, Scarlet reflected. But there were too many footprints to know exactly how many people were involved. Scarlet examined the dark stains more closely. Somebody had fallen at that spot and apparently, he had been hurt. He took the broken watch from his pocket and looked at it closely, comparing the stains under the glass of those on the ground.

Blood in both cases.

I've got a bad feeling about this, Scarlet thought, getting back to his feet, musing. Blue had fallen into an ambush, he was sure of it. But where he could be NOW...

He heard movement behind him and quickly turned around.

Three big, bulky men had entered the alley, marching slowly toward him, each wearing a suspiciously hostile expression on their faces, each staring straight at him. Two of them had baseball bats in their hands. Scarlet stayed where he was, watching them. He didn't know who these guys were, but he had the feeling they were up to no good.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said, very politely. "May I be of service to you?"

"You can begin by telling us what you're doing here," one of the guys answered in a nasal voice that nearly made Scarlet wince.

"Is that any of your business?" Scarlet cautiously asked.

"We don't like people snooping around," a second man replied ominously.

"We know you've been all over town, asking questions," the first remarked.

"So? Maybe you can help me, then. I'm looking for a friend of mine..."

"We KNOW that already. He's not in town. So you'd better buzz off and go your way too."

Scarlet raised his eyebrows. "How can you be so SURE he's not in town?" he asked. "There's nothing that leads me to believe he left."

The three men stepped closer. Scarlet felt an insistent tug on his sleeve and looked down at Pablo, who was standing just behind him. "Mister," the boy whispered worriedly. "That's the Dawson brothers... They're bad... You don't want to get into a fight with them!"

Scarlet gave a thoughtful glance at the boy, then, gently pushing him against the closest wall, moved away from him, toward the middle of the alley. He had a feeling things would soon get ugly, and he certainly didn't want the boy to get hurt by being too close to him.

"Last warning," the man with the nasal voice said. "Get out of town and don't come back."

"Sorry, I can't do that," Scarlet replied calmly. "Not before I find my friend. I won't leave without him."

"Well, not only do you talk funny, but you have a thick head," grumbled the third man who had kept silent until now. "We're telling you your friend is not here. If you know what's good for you, you'll leave without discussion or..."

"Or WHAT?"

"We'll MAKE you leave." That was Nasal Voice again. He raised his bat and played with it, an evil smile on his face. "The HARD way."

Scarlet stared at him for a second, apparently pondering the threat. He narrowed his eyes at the three menacing men. He nodded slowly, as a realisation took form in his mind. "The hard way..." he said, coldly. "That's what you did with Adam, eh?"

"You better listen, pal," Nasal Voice said again. "Or you're gonna regret it..."

Scarlet turned his attention back to the third man who had spoken earlier. "And you said / talk funny..."

That worked as a signal. The guy with the nasal voice lurched forward with a roar of fury and tried to club Scarlet with his bat. The Spectrum agent avoided it by stepping quickly aside and only felt the wind of the weapon passing by his head. He caught hold of the arm holding the club. The two other men came in to attack too. Scarlet stopped the first with a well-placed kick in the groin, sending him to the ground instantly, and welcomed the other by pushing the one whose arm he still held into his path. That caught the two men off-guard and threw them off-balance. Scarlet finished the job with the second man with a punch in the jaw. That made it two down. Nasal Voice was still in his grip. He sent him kissing the brick wall behind. The man gave a low grunt and sprawled on the ground.

"Wow!" That was Pablo, not far from there. He was watching with a wide-eyed expression of total amazement at the three goons slumped all over the place. "You clobbered them good, mister! And without breaking a sweat!"

"I would have thought you would run and hide, Pablo," Scarlet replied sternly. "What are you still doing here?"

"And miss the show? No way!"

"Well, you'd better go now. This doesn't concern you anymore."

"But..."

"No 'but's, Pablo. Thank you for your help, but now it's strictly between these chaps and me. I don't want you to get hurt."

The kid was obviously wondering in what way he could possibly get hurt, since the three men were already incapacitated. Only one of them was trying to get back to his feet, and it was obvious he had trouble doing so. Pablo didn't reply, however, and broke into a run toward the path leading out of the alley. Scarlet leaned over the recovering man and helped him up. He pushed him face first against the brick wall, and wrenched his right arm behind him, forcing a grunt from him.

"Hey! You're hurting me!" the man protested between his teeth.

"And what were you planning to do to me with your mates?" Scarlet replied rather harshly. "The same as you did to my friend?"

"I don't know ANYTHING about your friend!"

"That's not what you said earlier."

Scarlet drove the arm higher behind the man's back. The latter grunted in pain. "That's the big blond guy who picked on Grover yesterday," he finally admitted.

"Yes, that would be him. But the story I heard about that incident was rather different. Now... what happened to my friend? Where is he?"

"I don't know!"

"On the contrary, I've got a feeling you DO know," Scarlet replied between his teeth, in a very ominous tone. "Let's try again, shall we?"

The goon didn't answer, which compelled Scarlet to twist his arm, forcing a loud cry from his lips. The Spectrum officer wasn't normally the kind to resort to brute strength and physical violence to get answers to his questions, but considering that this man was about to bash his head in, he had no compunction about it at this moment. Besides, he was also very worried for Adam. He was certain that this guy – and his brothers – had something to do with what happened to his best friend in this alley. For Scarlet it was motivation enough for some ruthlessness.

"You're breaking my arm!"

"Not yet, but I will do if you don't answer me!" Scarlet barked. "I'm not a very patient man, and you'd better answer quickly before I do something you'll regret. Again: where's my friend?"

"I swear to you, I don't know."

"You're lying!"

"I'm not! We... we were just hired last night. We were supposed to teach him a lesson."

"You led him here into an ambush, right?" The man didn't answer, but his silence was eloquent enough. "What did you do to him?" Scarlet asked again, more insistently.

"Told you... We just taught him a lesson."

"Which means you beat him up."

The man nodded nervously. "Yeah... yeah, that's what we did. But I swear, we did nothing more. He was alive when we left him. We weren't hired to kill him, we're no killers, we..."

"WHO?" Scarlet demanded savagely, the disgust and anger mounting inside him.

"Me, and Billy and Sam..." The man nodded in a way that clearly demonstrated he was talking about his two brothers, still lying on the ground. "And three other guys I don't know..."

"Six of you against one? Very courageous of you. But that's not what I asked: WHO hired you to do that?"

The man still didn't answer that question. Scarlet was really losing patience, as his fury grew. "I HOPE for your sake that my friend IS alive..."

"He is! But I don't know WHERE he is! I don't know that!"

"But you know who hired you, that's obvious. Tell me that!" The man shook his head in negation. *Obviously*, reflected Scarlet, *he's more afraid of that man who hired him than of what I may do to him*. That wasn't a very comforting thought for Blue's safety. "Was it that Grover character?" the Spectrum officer insisted.

The man was still hesitant to answer; Scarlet was about to ask the question again when his ears picked a sound behind him. From the corner of his eye, he saw one of the other men up and coming quickly at him with his club high, ready to strike. He reacted quickly, and spun around, in the same movement violently throwing the man he was questioning against his companion. The blow meant for Scarlet was instead roughly received by the goon, who sprawled on the ground unconscious. The man with the club felt the Brit's fist in his stomach and fell on his knees, out of breath, panting loudly, his weapon falling from his grasp. Scarlet looked down at him with cold anger in his eyes.

"Maybe you'll be more co-operative than your brother," he noted dully. "I have questions I want answers to, right now. I want to know where my friend Adam Svenson is... and I want to know if that man Grover is involved with what happened to him."

Scarlet never got the chance to try to force a response out of the kneeling man. In all the confusion, and since he was keeping his eyes on the three men already present in the alley, he failed to notice a fourth figure that had come in from behind. Too late did he sense the presence right behind him as he felt something touching him between the shoulder blades and sending a powerful jolt throughout his nervous system. He gave a muffled grunt as his body went stiff under the sudden pain, and then totally numb; his balance completely gone, he fell heavily to the ground. His eyes barely caught a man wearing a police uniform, standing over him, holding some kind of a black leather stick.

A *stun baton*, he realised, trying to hang on to what little was left of his consciousness. He reached to grab the man's leg, in an attempt to get up, but was repelled roughly. The curtain fell on the Spectrum officer's mind and darkness surrounded him.

The man with the stun baton, deputy sheriff Harvey Ringward, glared with contempt at the man lying unconscious at his feet, and then looked at the three other men, trying, with difficulty, to get back to their feet.

"What happened here?" he barked.

"HE started it!" the last man Scarlet had manhandled responded. He pointed accusingly toward the Brit. "He INSULTED Billy!"

"And YOU did nothing to provoke him, right?"

"We're lucky you arrived just then, Harvey. He's a real madman! Don't know what he would have done to us!"

"That's right, three against one and HE got the upper hand?" Ringward scoffed loudly. "You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

Billy – the man with the nasal voice – his nose now bleeding profusely since his encounter with the wall, made a threatening step toward the unconscious man, with the obvious intention of avenging himself. The deputy sheriff stopped him in his tracks and pushed him away.

"That's enough!" he barked again.

"You're going to let him get away with this?" Billy protested. His voice had an even more nasal sound than before.

"No, I'm taking him in. The sheriff asked me to keep my eye on him, in case he caused trouble. Guess he was right at that," he mused, with a wicked smile, looking down at Scarlet. "Assault and battery, public disorder... I guess he's in for a stay in a nice, warm cell!" He stared

up at the three men, now standing uneasily before him, with a grim look. "You're coming with me."

"Come on, Harvey!" one of them replied. "You're arresting us too?"

"I need a hand to get him to the jail. And I want you to tell the sheriff what happened. You're witnesses, right?"

"More like victims," Billy grumbled with a low tone.

"Don't make me laugh! Likes of you are no victims. Come on, help me get him up!"

At the entrance to the alley, a dark head was peering inside, not missing anything of what was going on in there. The young Pablo had seen Scarlet getting rid of his adversaries without any apparent effort and trying to get answers to his questions, albeit in a rather unorthodox way. He had witnessed as Ringward had stepped in for that cowardly attack from behind with the stun baton, and now was watching with great interest as the stranger, apparently unconscious, was roughly dragged off the ground by two of the guys that had attacked him, after the deputy had told them of his intention of taking him to jail.

That wasn't very fair, thought Pablo, upset that the stranger who had been provoked, and only defended himself against Billy and his brothers, was to be the one to be dragged off to prison. After all, he was only searching for his friend and these guys came bugging him...

Pablo liked the stranger. He found him sympathetic. And he had given him twenty bucks for a broken watch. A watch Pablo had in his hand. He had picked it up from the ground, after the stranger had let go of it, right after these men had came in to attack.

Pablo turned around quickly and ran toward the cantina. He had to tell the stranger's lady friend what had happened.

Chapter 8

Young Adam Svenson was working frenetically.

He couldn't remember ever having been so afraid in all his young life. Nor so desperate. He didn't know what would happen to him. Neither did he know how much time he had to work on those ropes tying his hands. If he was to have any chance of escape, he had to get rid of them.

Adam was in the hands of a ruthless man, he was perfectly aware of that. Since the moment he had struck him so violently in that van, Wilson Grover had demonstrated it very clearly. Adam's head had still been reeling from that first wallop when he had woken up in this God-forsaken place. That's when he had noticed that his hands had been bound together in front of him; but he wasn't able to reach his face, his arms being secured against his body, leaving little freedom of movement. He couldn't see a thing; there was a blindfold covering his eyes. Another piece of cloth, pushed into his mouth, prevented him from speaking. He felt bad, sick in the stomach. The place and the thin mattress he was lying upon had a strong reek of damp and stale sweat upon it. That was almost too much to bear.

Then Adam had heard the echo of a bolt being pulled back and the creak of a door opening. That was Grover coming, and Adam's heart, already filled with worry and fear, knew complete terror. The man had approached him to tell him what it was he wanted from him. From his father, to be more precise. "Your dad's gonna make me rich, kid," Grover had said with a cackle. "It was easier than I thought it would be. I was gonna use your little brother, but I couldn't've hoped for a better chance than the one you gave me. Thanks a lot. I really appreciate this."

He had removed the gag from the boy's mouth, so he could breathe properly. Adam tried to plead with him, begging him to let him go, swearing that he wouldn't tell anybody anything. The boy's voice shook with fear and terror; he would have promised anything just to get out of that place and back to the safety of his home. But Grover was adamant.

"D'you really think I went to ALL that trouble just to let you go now?" he had snapped in a hissing tone.

"Please, let me go... Nobody will know. I promise, I won't say a thing!"

"Of course you won't."

With that mocking answer, Adam knew that Grover would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. And it was pretty clear now what would happen to him... Adam's heart missed a beat. He was a bright boy. He realized that Grover wouldn't let him go after this, since he knew perfectly well who his kidnapper was. The man couldn't take that chance. It was too risky. The boy would have to disappear.

At this realization, Adam became so desperate that he found himself shouting for help, right in front of a startled Grover. He knew that Grover would eventually make him stop shouting, but he was hoping somebody would hear him before that, and call the police.

"Stop that, kid!" Grover's growling order hadn't reached the panicky young boy and he continued to call for help. Blindfolded as he was, he couldn't see Grover coming to him and striking him a violent backhand that sent him flat on the mattress, half-stunned. "I said stop that!" Grover added furiously. "What do you hope to accomplish? There's nobody around to hear you! You're alone, kid. There's nobody to help you!"

That hadn't stopped Adam having one last try. Grover's hand was swift to silence him. "I hate shouting!" the man shouted in turn. "My old man was always shouting at me! He couldn't stop. But I stopped him! I stopped him all right! Now, you're gonna keep quiet! Or I swear to you, you'll regret it!"

A couple more brutal slaps almost completely stunned the young boy and left him moaning in pain and distress on the mattress. Grumbling with bad humour, Grover had gone away, slamming the door behind him and fastening the bolt again. Through a daze, Adam had heard his steps fading away, until he couldn't hear them anymore.

He wasn't sure if he had lost consciousness at that moment, from the combination of despair, fear and pain. The only thing he was sure about was that he woke up again, and that

there seemed to be a blank in his mind. There was an unpleasant salty taste in his mouth, as if he had cried, but he didn't remember having done that. It could be blood too, he reminded himself, and the thought had the effect of making him redouble his efforts to free himself.

He had found a nail, protruding from a wall against which his mattress had been placed. Adam had been trying to use it to undo his bonds for what now seemed to him an eternity. He could feel the ropes biting deeply into his wrists and tightening around his body; the rough surface of the wall was painfully scraping the skin from his hands, as he rubbed them feverishly against the nail. It hurt him a lot. He bit his lip so as not to cry out, but there was little he could do not to let an occasional grunt escape him.

The wall he was leaning against didn't seem to be very thick; he could hear a television on the other side. And from time to time, footsteps, which seemed to be approaching him. He was wondering if it was Grover coming back to visit him again, and the mere notion sent a shiver down his spine. But no, he had realised suddenly. Those footsteps weren't Grover's. Grover had a heavy step; the other one was quieter. From a different, much lighter person. And when Adam heard a sigh – a definitely feminine sigh – he understood that he was right. There was a woman out there; probably Grover's accomplice.

That person never came into the room where the prisoner was; always, she had turned away and left. Adam only heard her; Grover, wherever he was, didn't seem to be around. The boy, even while wondering where he could be, wasn't complaining in the least about that fact. Grover frightened him.

Time passed, with Adam still trying to work on his bonds. He didn't feel as if he was making the slightest progress, but he wasn't giving up. He couldn't afford to.

That's when he heard, through the wall, a door being opened and slammed violently. He almost jumped in dreadful surprise; the footsteps he was now hearing were those of a man. His heart missed a beat, when the voice of Grover reached him:

"Has the kid been behaving himself?"

"Why have you been so long?" a woman's voice answered with a nervous catch to it. "I was beginning to get very worried, Will. I was wondering..."

"If I'd been caught? Naaa... There's no danger of that, believe me! Nobody would suspect me."

All of a sudden, Adam felt the ropes around his wrists coming loose; feverishly, he shook them off and finally succeeded in untying his hands completely. He could hardly move them, they hurt him so much. But now wasn't the time to stop. He proceeded to try to get rid of the loop of rope that held his arms against his body. With his hands now free, it was a lot easier.

He could still hear Grover, on the other side of the wall, as he gave a low chuckle. "Would you believe it? Svenson thinks his kid has run away! He figures the boy was so angry at him that he chose that way to get back at him!"

"So nobody suspects...?"

"Not at the moment, anyway. The kid's folks think they'll hear from him, sooner or later. Svenson is furious."

"Why did you have to go back there, Will? You know it could be dangerous!"

"No. It would have been dangerous if I hadn't gone. If I'd disappeared at the same time as the kid, someone might have suspected me... And anyway, I had to keep up with what was going on. For the moment, I can say it's pretty safe."

"That won't last, Will. When the boy doesn't come back in the morning, his parents will suspect something is wrong. They'll alert the police..."

"Don't you think I know that, Marsha? Don't worry, I tell you. I'll make my move before there's any danger for us."

"What... what are you going to do?"

Adam had finally succeeded in getting free of the ropes. Marsha's voice, he had noticed, was still very nervous. She had a beautiful voice, strangely soft, compared with that of Will Grover. Not at all a voice the boy would have associated with a kidnapper.

"You must be VERY careful, Will. If you get caught..."

"I don't intend getting caught. Now, please calm down. There's nothing to worry about."

Adam had now removed his blindfold. Not that it helped him in any way, he realised immediately; the room he was in was almost pitch black; almost no light at all entered it, except

for a very faint ray coming from a small hole on the very wall he was so close to. Adam carefully approached that hole and put his eye to it, trying to get a glimpse of the other side. He couldn't see much; only a modest kitchen table, a counter with a sink, and a couple of chairs.

Then she came into view; a young woman with dark hair. She walked toward the counter, to pick up a cup. All the while her eyes, filled with worry and sadness, were looking in the same direction.

"I still think all this is a very bad idea," she then said, nervously turning the cup in her hands. "Will, we'll live to regret this, I feel it."

"Don't you worry about a thing, honey," the voice of Grover answered smoothly. "Nothing can go wrong! We'll have the money. More money than you ever dreamed of! And then, my darling, we'll live the GOOD life! Thanks to that spoiled little brat!" He paused, before continuing. "How is he? Seems quiet enough..."

Adam shivered and nearly jumped on hearing that remark; he caught himself just in time to hold back a gasp of complete outrage.

"I haven't heard anything from him for hours," Marsha sighed tiredly. "Since you went out, actually."

"Bet he learned to keep his head down, since I had my talk with him," Grover cackled wickedly.

"It's not funny, Will," Marsha protested with an annoyed frown. "You shouldn't have hit him like that."

"Well, it did the trick, didn't it?"

The troubled look Adam saw in the woman's features made it clear enough to him that she didn't agree with Grover. The latter cleared his throat, and walked toward the woman. Adam saw him appearing in his field of view.

"It's time now to let those people know what's happened," Grover declared, taking Marsha's cup. "Time to show them what's happened to their kid and what they have to do to get him back."

"And what will you do, exactly?"

"I have it all figured out. I'm going to leave a message for Svenson, in a way they would never relate to me."

"How?"

"You'll see." Adam saw the thoughtful look of Grover as he took a sip from his cup. The cruel twinkle he could see in those eyes, even at this distance, sent shivers down the boy's spine. "I'll need something from the boy, something that belongs to him, to send to his folks. Say, that cap he was wearing when I brought him in..."

Nervously, Adam looked around. His eyes had quickly adapted to the darkness in this room. He found, on the mattress where he had been lying, the object in question. The Red Sox cap his father had given to him some days ago; strangely, that was the one he had chosen to wear to the game his father had forbidden him to go to. He couldn't explain to himself exactly why.

Adam reached for the cap, picked it up and pressed it against himself, as if it had been the most precious treasure in the world to him, at the moment. He then noticed, with horror, the sorry state of his hands, all scratched, and covered with blood, following his recent efforts to get himself free of his bonds. They were sore and numb, and he had trouble flexing his fingers. Nevertheless, seeing them like that gave him a crazy idea.

"I think it's with the boy," he heard the voice of Marsha say, making him jump nervously. "I'll go fetch it for you."

"No need. I'll go myself."

Adam heard the heavy steps of Grover approach. Apprehensively, he searched the darkness with his eyes, and found the door; at that exact moment, he heard the bolt being pulled back and saw the door open, with a creaking sound. A little more light entered the room, surrounding the powerfully built silhouette of Will Grover.

The big man saw the boy, crouching there next to the mattress, leaning against the wall, staring at him with his blue eyes screwed up against the sudden increase in light, and pressing something against his chest with both hands. He gave a faint chuckle, and nodded quietly.

"I see you got rid of your ropes, kid. You're resourceful, I'll give you that."

He entered the room. It had a very low ceiling, about five feet high, Adam then noted; it probably was some kind of big closet. It was too low for Grover to stand upright; he had to stoop in order to get in. Adam backed away, as Grover stepped toward him; he kept his eyes fixed on him.

"You don't have to worry, kid. I just want..." Grover stopped right away, as he just had spotted what it was that Adam was clutching in his hands. He gave a devilish grin, and indicated the object with a demanding finger. "That's exactly what I want, in fact. Gimme that cap, kid."

Adam kept his distance; he didn't make a move toward Grover, nor did he give any intention whatsoever of wanting to obey. There was a glitter of defiance in his blue eyes, now. The man's brow furrowed deeply.

"I advise you not to make it difficult for me, kid," he told the boy with a warning tone. "I'm not patient. Now you give me that cap right away or..."

Instead of obeying, Adam suddenly went deeper into the darkness of the room, as far away from Grover as possible; the man was totally taken aback.

"Kid! Come back here!"

He went further into the room, growling with anger, searching the shadows for his quarry, but keeping himself between Adam and the door. It took him some seconds, but he found the boy, rather easily, curled up in the farthest corner, keeping his cap close against him, trying his best to protect it from the man who wanted to take it away from him.

"Give me that, kid," Grover demanded again, approaching the boy.

"NO!"

The cry of complete anger and outrage from Adam took Grover completely by surprise, especially when he saw the youngster suddenly lurching at him. Because he was standing in a rather precarious position, Grover lost his balance and fell on his knees, away from the door. Adam couldn't believe his luck. For a fleeting second, he thought he had the chance to run from this dreadful place, away from that horrible man, and his evil plans.

Grover's hand roughly caught his ankle and held it tight; Adam lost his footing and fell heavily, face first on the floor. He wrapped his arms round his head to protect it, the best he could. His forearms, and his already sore hands took the full brunt of the fall, and he grunted in pain. Still, he wasn't giving in. He started kicking the face of the man holding him down, hoping to make him let go.

"Enough, kid! Stop that right now!"

Adam wasn't about to obey. He could see the danger he was in, so he had nothing to lose by trying to get away. He was just too desperate.

"I said, that's enough!"

This time, Adam saw Grover's big hand coming right at his face. He tried to avoid it, but was too slow. It caught him over the left ear; the impact was such that it made his ears ring. He sprawled on the floor, half knocked out.

Panting, Grover got to his feet; he ran a hand across his face and then down his jaw, and grunted in disgust; the kid had landed at least one blow hard enough to draw blood. He spat some blood on the floor.

"You little twerp!" he growled with fury. "I'm gonna teach you..."

"Will!"

That was the woman – Marsha – standing in the door way, who was looking down at the scene with a dreadful expression on her face. Adam weakly raised his head and his eyes met hers, with a desperate, pleading message.

"P-please, help me," he begged in a murmur.

He could see the eyes of the woman trembling, but it was all he was able to see. Grover was over him, and dealt him another strong wallop across the face, that sent his head reeling. "Shut up, you little creep! I don't wanna hear another word from you!"

"Will, stop this!" Marsha suddenly shouted in protest. "You're hurting him!"

"Damn right, I'm hurting him!" Grover tore the cap from Adam's now weak grasp and tossed it toward Marsha. There was uncontrolled fury in his eyes, now, as he stared at the young woman. "Take that away, and keep it a moment. I won't be long."

The intense way he was looking down at the half-stunned boy at his feet made his intentions all too clear. Marsha felt the fear creeping inside her and blanched instantly.

"No!" she protested. "Will, he's just a boy! You can't..."

"Mind your own business!" Grover barked at the young woman, his face red with anger. "This is between him and me! Get in the other room and keep yourself busy!"

Distraught, Adam saw Marsha close her mouth, without any more protest and she disappeared from his view. He was in deep trouble now, he knew it. He was so very afraid, and he could feel his heartbeat increasing within his chest.

"That was a very stupid thing to do, kid!"

The growling sound of Grover's voice made Adam look up; the big man was standing over him. Even in the dim light of the room, the young boy could see the flash of anger in his eyes, the way his lower jaw was tightening and the evil smirk curling his thin lips.

"Do you really think you could take me for a fool like that?" Grover continued ominously, sending a shiver down the boy's spine. "You need a lesson, kid. You need to learn respect. If your dad was unable to teach you, I'm gonna do it." He cracked his knuckles, nodding with a satisfactory expression of anticipation over his face. "Just like my old man used to do!"

Adam's features became white; the fear within him mounted again and he could feel his heartbeat still increasing.

The next thing he saw was the big hands of Will Grover coming to grab him...

* * *

Captain Blue woke up with a start; that flashback, so vivid in his mind... That was exactly as he was reliving it now. The beating he had taken as a kid at the hands of Will Grover, so many years ago, had been a very painful one. It didn't matter to Grover that he was striking a nine-year-old boy. The memory of it was absolutely horrible, and had haunted Adam long after it had actually happened. With time, he had managed to somehow dismiss it from his memory, but still it had never completely left him. He just had no idea how painfully present it still was.

Blue ached all over. Grover had not held back, and had relished every single blow he had laid on the defenceless man. He had beaten his prisoner, until he couldn't keep himself upright. Then Blue had lost consciousness, waking only now. He could hardly move, and still hung limply from that rope. Yet, he could feel the floor underneath his dragging feet. Unsteadily, he made an effort to get his footing, grunting under the efforts demanded of his aching body. That's when he noticed that something was covering his mouth, similar to what he had over his eyes.

He heard movement nearby, and voices murmuring; instantly, Blue pricked up his ears, trying to catch on what was going on. Grover was there, all right, with somebody else; they were busy discussing setting something up, apparently, as Blue heard the clicking sounds of buttons being pushed.

"Right, that's how you use that thing," he heard the voice of Grover say. "Be sure to wait for my signal before switching it on. I want the surprise to be complete."

Blue was wondering what it could be all about; he moved on his feet, and checked the strength of his bonds. He grunted under the gag, as he felt the rope biting into his already abraded wrists.

"Awake now, kid?"

Blue had barely heard the limping step of Grover approaching him. The man stopped in front of him; the captain could feel his presence as well as he could smell the cigarette he was smoking. Despise his rather precarious position, Blue made a threatening step forward, only to be stopped by the rope. He heard Grover's derisive gloat in answer to his vain attempt.

"Got to hand it to you, you've grown up tough, Svenson." There was a short pause, that Grover used to pull on his cigarette; then he blew a mouthful of smoke right into his prisoner's face. Blue grunted with annoyance, trying to escape it. "Right," Grover continued, "now that you're back with us, kid, we can proceed. I hope you won't mind, but I'll do the talking. At least at the beginning. Don't worry, you'll get your chance too, in a short while."

The only answer Captain Blue was able to make was an angry and very frustrated grunt, as he tried once again to reach for his tormentor, quite uselessly. He couldn't do anything to stop him from doing what he was planning...

* * *

John Svenson was a genuine workaholic.

He had come into his office at "Svenson and Sons" in Boston at exactly 5:30AM and didn't plan to leave until nine in the evening. There was important business to attend to, and accounts to check, and he intended to have it all done before leaving for the comfort of his home. His son Peter – who had certainly inherited some of his father's flair for finance – worked in another office, not far from John's, on a similar task, but John trusted only himself to handle some of the more important files of the company. There were clients and business partners that only John Svenson himself would handle. Neither he nor they would have it any other way.

He loved every minute of his work. He only really felt alive when he was under pressure like at this precise moment. He had instructed Tracy, his secretary, not to disturb him under any circumstances, unless she deemed it to be very important. He always trusted Tracy to make a good judgement about that, and never once did she disappoint him.

The morning had passed quickly, and Svenson, after an hour's lunch break that he took with a business partner, discussing a new account, came back to continue his work at his office. He was about half way through an important report when the intercom on his desk buzzed; without doing more than looking at it and without stopping work on his report, Svenson frowned, and pressed a button. "What is it, Tracy?"

"The important call you were waiting for from the West Coast, sir."

"Thank you. I'll take it right away."

He cut the intercom and, putting his pen down, pushed the button for the hands-free phone speaker. At about the same moment, he realised that he actually wasn't waiting for any important call from the West Coast. He picked up his pen again, sighing with irritation.

"Mister Svenson, how nice to talk to you," came a cheerful-sounding voice over the speaker.

"You have about three minutes to explain to me why you have called me under false pretences, sir," Svenson stated roughly, continuing to write. "After that, I'm hanging up. I'm a very busy man, and I don't like to be disturbed for nothing."

"So you haven't changed much over the years."

Svenson signed his name before closing the folder in front of him. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"We met, a long time ago."

"Who are you?"

"Don't you recognise my voice?"

Svenson furrowed his brow. "I don't have time to play games, mister. If I had recognised your voice, do you think I would have asked your name? Now state your business. You have less than two minutes."

"My business... Well, I have something to offer you. In exchange for a... small remuneration."

"You have gone to all this trouble to sell me something?" Svenson sighed, annoyed. "I'm about to hang up, sir."

"Please don't. You'll regret passing up an opportunity like this."

"Sir, whoever you are, I can assure you, there's nothing you can offer me that I haven't been offered before. I'm pretty sure you don't have anything that could be of interest to me."

"What about your son?"

"I'm sure he won't be interested either. We are financiers, sir, not commodity traders. I'm sorry, but as I said, I'm a busy man. Your three minutes are up. Have a good day, sir."

Svenson was about to press the button to end the communication, when he heard the man suddenly shouting into the speaker: "Put down that phone, and your son is dead!"

Svenson froze in mid-movement. He blanched, upon hearing the harsh words, not sure what to do next. "Peter?" he murmured, almost without really thinking. He shrugged and shook his head, dismissing the thought. Now he was starting to get very angry. "I saw my son not half an hour ago! He was in his office and seemed quite fine! What kind of sick game are you playing, mister?"

"You asked me the same question, twenty-five years ago."

The remark was followed by a cackle that sent a shiver down Svenson's spine. That was a sound he had heard before... A sound that had pursued him for a long time in his most nightmarish dreams.

He couldn't forget it.

"Grover," he whispered. "Wilson Grover. That's you, isn't it?"

"Ah! So you recognize my voice."

"I'll never forget your voice, you despicable bastard," Svenson snapped with obvious disgust in his tone. "I thought you died in prison."

"You would think that. Heck, you even did your best to make sure it would happen!"

"What do you want?" Svenson suddenly interrupted.

"Don't you have a LITTLE idea about that?"

Svenson's brow furrowed. "If it's about that hollow threat against my son Peter..."

"I'm not interested in Peter," Grover cut in. "If I recall correctly, you have more than one son, Mister Svenson."

Svenson's frown deepened. His youngest, David, was away somewhere in France, for what he called a 'cultural trip' with a bunch of his friends. He was pretty sure that, wherever David might be, Grover could not reach him.

No. It wasn't about David either. Svenson was pretty sure that only one of his sons would be of interest to Will Grover.

"Adam?" He snorted slightly. "I don't even know where he is, but I'm pretty sure he's out of your reach. You can't hurt him this time."

"You're so sure about that, are you?" Grover paused, before continuing: "Are you in front of your computer?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I've got something to show you. Plug your phone into it."

"Grover, I'm warning you –"

"It's me who's warning you, Svenson! Hook up that damn phone! And don't worry about a thing: we're already online, waiting for you to join in!"

A bad feeling began to make its way inside Svenson's mind; he could tell Grover was up to something, but he was almost afraid of what it could actually be. He turned to his desktop computer and obeyed Grover's demand. Svenson was about to enter a command so the computer would take charge of the current phone communication, when he saw an image beginning to form before his eyes. He was wondering how Grover had managed to actually hook himself to the computer, when the screen gave him the image of the man, standing in a dark room, a cordless phone to his ear, looking directly at him.

"You look a lot older," Svenson noted, narrowing his eyes.

"Why, thanks!" Grover responded, grinning. "I wish I could tell you the same, but as this is a one-way image transmission, I can't. Which is too bad, I'd love to see your face now. By the way, don't bother to record this. It won't be of any use to you."

"I won't." That didn't stop Svenson from entering a new command on his computer keyboard, thus instructing his computer to begin recording, unbeknown to Grover.

"You better sit tight, Johnny," Grover continued, "I'm sure you'll be quite surprised at what you're gonna see!"

He nodded toward the camera operator and the angle of the picture changed... And John Svenson discovered with shock that his dreadful feeling about all this was even worse than he had first imagined.

He saw a tall, battered blond man hanging heavily from his bound hands. His mouth and eyes were covered with duct tape, soiled with blood from multiple cuts, and his face was heavily bruised. By the look of his clothes, all loose and torn up, and dirty from sweat and blood, the man had recently been at the receiving end of a particularly harsh beating.

The blond hair, height and general features of the man were more than enough for Svenson to recognize him. He blanched instantly. He jumped to his feet, his eyes wide open with untold horror, glued to the screen. "My God! Adam!"

How could that be possible? thought Svenson. The last time he had heard from Adam, he was still stationed at Cloudbase, whatever and wherever that was. One thing he thought for certain was that that place was probably the safest spot on Earth.

And now, Adam was there – in the hands of Will Grover.

Again, like so many years ago.

“What have you done to him?”

For an awfully, horrible instant, the thought that Adam could be dead before his eyes came creeping inside Svenson’s mind. But then he saw him raise his head and move, struggling against his restraints, and heard him grunting through his gag. John Svenson let out a sigh of relief. He then saw Grover appear next to his captive; he didn’t have the phone in hand. *Must have connected it up to the main machine*, Svenson mused, when he heard the man address him again.

“So, do I have your attention now?” An evil grin curved Grover’s lips, as he looked thoughtfully at his prisoner. That did nothing to reassure Svenson. “I suppose NOW you know what I was planning to offer you.”

“Don’t you hurt him, Grover,” Svenson croaked.

“Ah... But I don’t plan to. Not just yet, anyway. Maybe later, it’ll depend on the agreement we make, you and me.” Grover turned again his attention toward Blue, musing. “Now what do you have to say about this, Adam, my boy? I’m really curious to know.”

He violently yanked off the length of tape covering Blue’s mouth. The latter let out a cry of pain and pure outrage. John Svenson winced. He saw his son taking only one second to regain his breath.

“Father! Don’t agree to ANYTHING!”

“Now, now, Adam... That’s unkind,” Grover admonished his prisoner with a false note of kindness in his tone. He pulled Blue by the hair and forced him to turn toward the camera. The younger man made a commendable effort to resist, in vain. Svenson could see his eldest son’s face covered with bruises, blood running down from his nose. It was a wonder he hadn’t choked earlier, with that gag on.

“He’s still the cocky, arrogant little kid he was, twenty-five years ago, huh, Johnny-Boy?” Grover said, chuckling. “And he’s grown big and strong... You must really be proud of him!”

“You madman,” Svenson whispered. “Let him go!”

“Not so fast, my friend.” Grover gave a quiet look at Blue, before releasing him brutally, pushing his head back. “As you can see, your boy still has plenty of fire in him...”

Svenson swallowed hard. “Where did you find him? How did you...”

“Oh, quite by chance, actually. It’s really, really weird, you know. I passed the better part of the past year looking for him, and never finding him. And then, yesterday, he literally fell into my lap. Driving around the Nevada desert with his girlfriend.”

“The Nevada desert?”

Svenson frowned, wondering what the hell Adam was doing in Nevada. *Must be for his damned Spectrum job*, he thought grimly.

“What do you want from him? Didn’t you do him enough harm when he was a boy?”

“Would you rather I went after one of your other two boys?” Grover asked wickedly. Behind him, upon hearing his words, Blue lifted his heavy head. “Or after your daughter, for that matter? Now what’s her name... Kathy?”

Svenson paled. How could that maniac could even imply that HE should choose which of his children would end up in his hands? He could see that Adam was having his own reaction to Grover’s hateful statement. He made a sound that resembled a growl as he struggled, trying to reach Grover.

“Keep away from my family, you bastard!”

Almost instantly, Grover turned around and brutally punched his prisoner in the side; with a yelp of pain, Blue slumped back, knocked off his feet by the vicious and unexpected blow; he would have fallen to the floor, if the rope keeping him standing had not stopped him. Svenson blanched at the sight.

“No, stop!” he yelled.

Grover didn’t seem to hear him. “Thanks for volunteering, kid!” he cackled wickedly, addressing the stunned Blue. “Doing your job as a protective big brother, I see. Well, your brothers and sister should be grateful to you...” He hit his captive in the face, knocking him sideways. Blue wasn’t in any position to avoid the blow. It was all he could do not to lose

consciousness. Witnessing it all, John Svenson, in complete disarray, was biting his whitened knuckles.

"Stop that!" he repeated, anguish in his voice. "You're hurting him!"

"That's the general idea." Grover turned back to the camera. A dazed Blue dangled at the end of his rope, moaning faintly. "Now, concerning this business of ours, Johnny..."

"What is it you want?" Svenson murmured.

"You, of all people, should know what I want from you and your boy. It's the reason why I went after HIM, instead of one of your other kids. That would have been easy, really. But it was Adam I wanted. He owes me. Like you do."

"He owes you? Why?" a revolted Svenson replied. "Because you kidnapped him when he was a nine year old child and then tried to ransom him? Because your plan failed miserably, you got caught and went to jail?"

"It was a perfect plan!" Grover snapped. "It failed because your kid messed things up! And because you didn't follow instructions and went to the police!"

"And what would you have had me do?" Svenson scoffed. "My boy was in the hands of a maniac who had threatened to kill him! And seeing the state he was in when the police found him, I was right to call them in. You would have killed him anyway!"

"That mistake, alerting the police, I'd advise you NOT to make this time, Svenson!" Grover retorted ominously. "Because what I did to your boy back then will be NOTHING compared to what I'm ready to do NOW!"

Svenson shivered and found the need to sit down; his hands were sweating and shaking. He swallowed hard, his eyes riveted on the disturbing image of his battered son, now apparently too weak to even stand on his feet. "I see you've already made a start," he said weakly.

"Just to show you how serious I am, this time," Grover said rather quietly.

"WHAT do you want, exactly?"

"You're ready to negotiate, then?"

"Just tell me, you son of a bitch!" Svenson shouted furiously. "What's the price for my son's life? You didn't call just to show me how you had already tortured him! Tell me your price, I'll pay it!"

"You shouldn't call me names, Johnny-Boy... I really, REALLY, hate that."

To Svenson's dismay, Grover turned back to Adam and started hitting him again. The look of pain on his son's face was almost too much for Svenson to bear. He desperately fought himself not to look away.

"Grover, stop it!" he pleaded. "He can't defend himself. You'll kill him!"

"Isn't that what those guys you sent after me in jail tried to do to me, Svenson?"

Grover had spun around to face the camera again, leaving his prisoner, groaning in pain, barely able to keep his head up. There was an expression of anger in the man's eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play games with me! I know they came from you! You paid them to come after me! I came out crippled from it, Svenson! But I survived!"

John Svenson didn't reply. Yes, he knew perfectly well what Grover was talking about... And it was true, he had paid some tough guys in the federal prison, to get to the maniac who had almost killed his young son, way back when. Svenson had not been satisfied with his jailing, not after what he had done to Adam. Not after leaving him for dead, and in a coma the boy had fought so very hard to wake up from. Svenson had not thought Grover had been dealt with appropriately. In his mind, the punishment wasn't severe enough. Grover had to pay.

"So, you don't deny it anymore, huh?" Grover said with an evil grin. "You bastard, you tried to have me killed..."

"Tell me what you want," Svenson interrupted in a bleak voice. "You'll have it. I'll do whatever you want."

"I'm sure you will." Grover paused a second, thoughtful. Then, he cleared his throat. "I want you to book a plane ticket for today. Not your private plane. Take a regular, commercial flight. Go to Las Vegas, and rent a room there, at any hotel you want. Keep a low profile. The ONLY thing I want you to take with you is a portable computer, which will enable you to transfer the funds I want."

"How much?"

"You'll know that in due course. Don't be too eager to find out yet."

"What should I do, in Las Vegas?"

"You still have a cellular phone, haven't you? Don't worry, I know the number. I'll call you back, tomorrow, with further instructions. You BETTER be in Vegas by then. Remember: don't say a word about this to anybody. Not your secretary, your associates, your wife, or any other member of your family. Just say you have urgent business to attend to, if anyone asks you. No further information. Just go. Nobody has to know where you're going. And don't call the police... You try to trick me, your son dies. Very painfully. And if I get the chance, I'll make you watch it. It's all the same to me, Svenson: I'll take much pleasure in doing that as in getting your money!"

Svenson's throat tightened, hearing those terrible words. There was so much anger, so much hate in them... He had no doubt that Grover would do as he said.

"I believe you," Svenson croaked. He took one look at Adam, who was trying to get on his feet. He was desperately hoping it wouldn't be the last time he would see his son alive. "Adam, if you can hear me, I swear, I'll get you out of this, son..."

He didn't get the chance to see if Adam had actually heard him. The communication was suddenly shut down and he found himself staring at a blank screen.

For long seconds, John Svenson could do nothing more than stand there, his mind as blank as the screen itself. He then sat down very slowly, mechanically, his legs weakening, leaning against his desk. He buried his face in his hands and gave a long, desperate sigh.

God! The nightmare he had lived twenty-five years ago was beginning again! With a Wilson Grover even more bloodthirsty and violent than he had been when he had a nine year old kid in his clutches. And Adam, with all his strength, all his vaunted skills honed from years of training in his present job as well as his preceding one as a security agent at the WAS seemed as helpless as he did when he was only a child. In those days, Grover had not hesitated to brutalize him; now that he was a man, John Svenson didn't have any doubt that he would hesitate even less to hurt him.

For all the differences and arguments that had grown between them, John Svenson always had admired, even envied his son his force, both physical and of character, and his courage. Of his four children, Adam was the only one who had ever dared stand up openly to him – and was still doing it today. Of course, David was the unconventional one – living some kind of bohemian life, but always he had come back to the family fold when he had felt the need for it. Katherine had a strong will, one that resembled Adam's, but still not quite the same; she was ready to argue with her father, but more often than not, she would side with him, and accept his decisions. As for Peter, he was more like his father. John saw himself in Peter. That was probably the reason why Adam and Peter couldn't get along for more than five minutes in the same room together.

Peter and Katherine were working with their father at the family business; David was still too young, still a student, and was only concerned with the pursuit of personal pleasures. He would come around eventually, Svenson was convinced of that. But Adam... Adam was a whole different thing. He had already made choices in his life that his father couldn't understand. What was that idea of becoming a test pilot, after years of studying economics, anyway? Why take the risk of getting killed just to make sure some dumb aircraft would fly properly? That wasn't the kind of proper job a Svenson would do.

And then came that job with Spectrum, even more dangerous, that Adam accepted, three years earlier – giving up his identity in the process, to adopt a colour-coded name. Adam had tried to explain to his father it was to protect the rest of the family. John Svenson wouldn't listen. The only thing he was very aware of was that the son he had been so proud of in his younger days – proud of his character, of his achievements as a human being, a student and an eventual heir to his company – had grown up to become a total disappointment. A stranger. An embarrassment, even. Especially when people asked about him. How could Svenson tell them about him, without revealing that so damned important secrecy that surrounded Spectrum? So he had to lie, and pretend not to know anything about what his son was 'up to, these days'.

But now, Adam was in trouble. DEEP trouble. And apparently, that Spectrum organisation he was so proud to be a part of could not even get him out of it.

In that case, what can I do? Svenson mused in despair, looking back at the empty screen. He felt that he had no choice other than to follow Grover's orders. There was no doubt in his mind that this maniac would continue to mistreat his son until he obtained what he wanted. And

Svenson only prayed that Adam's great strength would be enough to permit him to survive this ordeal, until HE could get him out of it.

Svenson quickly picked up the phone and called the airport to find out the time of the next flight to Las Vegas. Upon hearing that there would be one in less than an hour, he booked a seat in his name, and quickly hung up. He got to his still unsteady feet, and feverishly gathered his papers to throw them in the first drawer he opened. He shut down the portable computer and snapped the lid closed. No time to call home. Anyway, Grover had specifically told him to give no explanations, to anybody. If he were to call Sarah to tell him he was going away for a couple of days, it was a sure bet she would wonder where he was going and would ask questions. He would have a lot of trouble lying to her about what was going on. And he certainly wouldn't tell her.

Damn you, Grover. I'll play your sick game. For now. You don't leave me much choice, do you?

He was about to go, when the door of his office opened and a young blond man entered, to quickly walk toward him, while consulting the contents of an open folder he had in his hands.

"Dad, I'm sorry to barge in like this, but I need some information concerning Webster in..." He noticed at that moment that his father was clearing his desk, and gave him an inquiring look. "You're leaving?"

"I'm leaving town, Peter," Svenson answered rather abruptly. "Something came up. I must go."

"Oh." It wasn't so rare that John Svenson would go off like that, after receiving an important call from an investor, or an associate from out of town. He seemed to always be on the run to some business or other. So Peter wasn't so surprised to see him go. He knew he was planning to work late today, but... it was just that his father appeared somehow nervous this time around.

"When do you expect to be back?"

"I don't know yet."

Svenson took his attaché-case and closed the lid. Peter watched him busying himself, puzzled. "Can't you be more specific? Will you be gone for the rest of the day, or..."

"I told you, I don't know. A couple of days, maybe. I'm going to the West Coast." Svenson bit his lip, but it was too late. The information was already out. He didn't have to raise his eyes towards his son to know he was staring at him curiously.

"The West Coast? What for?"

Svenson hesitated for just a moment. "I can't talk about it right now," he said. "I'll inform you the minute I'm sure if... all's going well."

He was aware that his answer was stirring even more questions within Peter's mind, but at the moment, he really didn't care. He was just hoping he wouldn't press.

"Tell your mother about this, will you?" he quickly said, leaving his desk.

"You didn't call to let her know you're leaving town?" Peter's voice sounded more and more puzzled.

"I don't have time. I must catch my plane..." Svenson glanced at his watch "...which will be leaving in about forty-five minutes."

"What do you mean? You're not taking the company jet?"

"It's otherwise occupied..."

"Come on, Dad, you're the company president! If anybody's entitled to take the jet, it's you. I don't understand why you..."

"I don't have time to answer all your questions, Adam," Svenson suddenly interrupted, walking with a quick pace toward the door. "I really must be going now. This is a date I can't afford to miss. I promise, I'll tell you all about it, when I return."

He failed to notice the puzzled look on his son's face as he passed by him; Peter followed him with his eyes and suddenly called to him as he was putting his hand on the door handle.

"It's about Adam, isn't it?"

Svenson frowned and stopped; he looked toward Peter, surprise on his face. "And what makes you think it has something to do with your brother?"

"You called me 'Adam', just then," Peter noted. He furrowed his brow, apparently irritated, as if he had thought he had figured out something. "What has he done this time? Hasn't he caused you enough worry as it is?"

John Svenson sighed tiredly; Peter was always quick to put all the blame on his older brother, in any circumstances, whatever the reason. It had been like that for years, and even more since Adam had decided not to work in the family company, and follow the family tradition. Sometimes, John wondered if Peter's motivation in acting that way was really related to his true feelings on the matter, or if it wasn't simply to please his father, by trying somehow fill the void left by Adam. No matter how hard he tried, Peter had to be aware he would never be able to fill Adam's shoes, to somehow replace him. Not in his father's heart, and certainly not as a human being. He was simply out of Adam's league. Hence the reason why he was always picking on his brother. Sometimes, Peter's attitude bothered John greatly, even though he understood why he did it.

"Your brother has done nothing," he replied coldly. "When are you going to stop picking on him like this, anyway?"

"When he understands where his real place is, maybe?" Peter shook his head.

"I really don't need for you to start that argument right now," Svenson sighed.

"Come on, Dad... I'm only stating what you yourself say all the time! And what argument could there be, Adam's not here to argue with!"

"Well, this time, you've got it wrong. I told you, Adam has nothing to do with this."

"Are you so sure about that?" Peter asked, with obvious doubt in his voice. "It seems that you're thinking about him right now."

"Because I called you by his name?" Svenson sighed. "It was just a slip, Peter. Nothing more."

Peter shook his head, musing. "Okay, Dad... If you say so."

"I REALLY have to go now, son. I'm counting on you and Kate to take over for me while I'm gone."

"You know you can, Dad. And I'll tell Mom, don't worry." Peter nodded slowly, watching as his father opened the door. "You sure you won't need any help there? I can go with you, if you like..."

John Svenson nearly shivered. He already had one son in trouble; he certainly didn't want another joining him.

"That won't be necessary. Thank you anyway." He cleared his throat and turned away. "I'll see you in a couple of days."

Peter watched as his father walked out and closed the door behind him. Musing, he moved toward the desk and went behind it, to open the top drawer. He looked into it with a puzzled expression upon his face, as he could see the documents his father had been working on, just thrown inside, in a disorderly heap. That was perplexing; it certainly wasn't the way his father usually behaved. Even considering that he was probably in a hurry, he would usually put his working papers carefully in order. And in a safe place.

Peter closed the drawer, wondering what could be going on that he wasn't aware of. It had to be something very important and out of the ordinary for John Svenson to act so out of character.

And even though his father had denied it, Peter couldn't shake this feeling that it had definitely something to do with Adam.

* * *

The minute he was certain the communication had been cut off, Grover had addressed a very satisfied grin toward the man handling the camera.

"All right. Now, we're in business."

"You're sure Svenson won't alert the police?" the other man asked, lowering the camera, a note of doubt in his voice.

"He won't. He knows I'm serious. I'm pretty sure he won't risk his son's life this time. Now we just have to wait until tomorrow, and then I'll give our friend another call." Grover shook his

head quietly. "Go tell the others, Wesley. I'll let them know soon what we're going to do next. For the moment, I need a talk with our guest, here."

"I'm not sure if I can leave you alone with him," the other guy mumbled. "I can't believe you just said my name in front of him!"

"He already knows ME. Do you think it could make any difference, now? Go, I tell you. And stop worrying."

The man grumbled again; he took off, taking his equipment with him and closed the door behind him. As soon as he was alone with his captive, Grover turned again to face him. Blue was struggling to get back on his feet.

"You were very good, kid," he said with a mocking tone. "I'm sure your father was very impressed with your performance." He laughed faintly, pausing to allow Blue to regain his footing, and took advantage of the moment to light a cigarette. He blew out some smoke, with obvious satisfaction. "How nice of your old man to come running to your aid like that, don't you think?"

"What... do you want from him, anyway?" Blue asked, trying very hard to overcome the stress imposed on his arms and wrists, not to mention the pain in the rest of his body. "It's about more than money, isn't it? There's vengeance as well."

"What makes you say that?" Grover asked innocently.

"What exactly happened to you in prison?"

Blue's footing was rather precarious; he slipped and felt the rope tightening around his burning wrists; he repressed a groan. Grover was looking blankly at him.

"You mean to say you don't know?"

Blue shook his head. "No... No, I don't. What happened?"

Grover scoffed loudly. "It was about two weeks after I landed in federal prison after my trial for your kidnapping. A couple of tough guys were waiting for me there. Think I gave you a bad beating just then, kid? That's nothing compared to what they gave me. I spent the next few weeks in the prison infirmary, breathing through a tube in my throat! You've seen how I walk today? Well, I have your dad to thank for that! I found out he was the one who paid those guys to beat me up, probably even kill me. Because I had the audacity to touch his precious brat!"

Blue was obviously astounded to hear that revelation. For a moment, he didn't have any reaction. Then, to Grover's surprise, he found the strength to laugh out loud, although very weakly. "Dear old Dad... Leave it to him to take justice into his own hands if it doesn't go the way he expects it. I must admit, though, I would never have thought he'd go that far."

"I just told you your father is responsible for me being a cripple, and that's all you've got to say about it?" Grover asked dryly, his eyes flashing in anger.

"And what would you have me say?" Blue suddenly snapped with renewed fury. "I was nine years old when you kidnapped me, Grover! Remember how you beat me to within an inch of my life? Remember that fall I took because of you? You think you got it bad? I spent days in a coma, with a major concussion, weeks to overcome the pain of broken bones and months to learn to let go of all that pain and fear. Do you know how long I was scared to go to sleep, because of the nightmares?"

Blue could feel the anger and hate still mounting by degrees within him. He was rather out of breath, after this prolonged speech, but he hadn't finished yet. "I was NINE YEARS OLD, Grover!" he repeated dryly. "I certainly wasn't much of a threat to you. You didn't have to beat me up like you did, or try to kill me. What could have motivated you?"

"You were an insufferable, spoiled, little brat," Grover replied. "A rich kid who never had to work or suffer to get what he wanted. You had it all. You were never hungry, or cold, or needy, and always had top medical attention when you got sick."

"If I'm not mistaken, you could have it good too, Grover. You were in the Minor Leagues..."

"I never made the cut to go higher, and have the success I deserved."

"Did you work HARD enough for it?" Blue replied accusingly.

"Don't push it, Svenson."

"So, was that all there was to it? Jealousy, pure and simple? I didn't have to suffer, so you decided to make me suffer?"

"You needed a lesson, kid. You don't seem to remember all the trouble you gave me, back then, by resisting me, and trying to escape."

Blue scoffed in complete disgust. "Right! Like, you kidnapped me and I had to play dead!" He shook his head. "And now, you kidnap me again, beat me up again, and complain that it's all my father's and my fault, if you have a crippled leg today? Do you EXPECT me to feel sorry for you? You've got some nerve! You have NOBODY BUT YOURSELF to blame, Grover. You've made your own bed, now lie in it!"

"Shut up, you bastard..." Grover growled, taking a threatening step toward his captive.

"Or what, you'll beat me again?" Blue replied, still in the same tone. "I told you once, I'm not a kid anymore. And I'm not afraid of you! Do your worst, if you want. You won't see me grovel."

"I'll kill you, kid," Grover spat between his teeth. "I'll kill you, you and your father."

"Yes, I thought as much," Blue replied, his voice amazingly calm. "Your revenge won't be complete unless we're dead, is that it, Grover? Did you happen to tell this detail to your accomplices? Do they know you intend to make murderers of them?"

Grover cackled wickedly. "They don't really care what happens to you. So long as they receive their cut. And they know there is plenty of money involved. Millions, to be exact."

"Bet you care NOTHING about the money, do you, Grover?"

"Oh, I care about it. A lot. But you're right about one thing: I care much more about revenge. Much more."

"You're a petty man, Grover. You were, twenty-five years ago. You still are, today."

"So I am, according to you." Grover looked thoughtfully at his captive. He narrowed his eyes. "You're really not afraid of what'll happen to you, are you, kid?" Blue didn't answer, and contented himself with standing as tall as he could, considering his situation. Grover shook his head, and gave a low sigh. "Ah, by the way... Before I talked to your father, one of my buddies brought me some interesting news from Los Lobos. It appears your girlfriend went back there."

That had the impact he expected on Blue; the Spectrum officer shivered, and lifted his head. He now seemed very concerned.

"Karen?" he murmured in a worried voice.

"She wasn't on her own, though," Grover continued, ever so quietly. "She brought a friend with her. A tall, dark-haired fellow, who speaks with an English accent. It seems they ran around town, asking questions about where you were. Since you're not in Los Lobos anymore, I'm guessing they won't have a chance in hell of finding you there."

Blue let out a sigh. At least, he thought, Karen was not alone. She had Paul with her. He knew she was perfectly able to take care of herself, but that extra help would be needed against the likes of Grover and his friends.

Knowing them as he did, Blue didn't doubt for a second that, if they were looking for him, they would stop at nothing until they found a clue to where he was. It didn't matter that he wasn't in Los Lobos anymore. They would find him. The question now was: in what condition would he be by then? Would he even still be alive?

Grover cast a suspicious look at his captive, obviously wondering what was going on in his mind. He thought he could guess, and he came close to him.

"You think they can actually find you, anyway?" Seeing that Blue was keeping quiet, Grover nodded. "Yes, you're sure they could, now, are you? Well, I wouldn't bet on that, kid. And anyway... They have their own problems to solve, before worrying about you."

Blue pricked up his ears. Grover smiled with satisfaction. "Yes, that guy with your girlfriend... He already ran into trouble with the sheriff. He's in the joint, for public disorder." He chuckled evilly, when he saw the apparent discomfort in his captive. "Which means now that your precious Karen is on her own, alone on the streets of Los Lobos..."

Blue understood the implications of this new development. He could hear the threat in Grover's voice. It was too much to take. Furiously, he launched himself in the direction of that hated voice; Grover stepped back, just out of reach and gazed contentedly at his struggling captive.

"You keep away from her!" Blue yelled with complete fury. "If you ever touch even one hair on her head, I swear, there will not be one safe haven for you on Earth! You hear me? I swear, I'll kill you!"

"Oh! Now that's really threatening! You would actually have the guts to do it?"

"You'd better believe it!" Blue tried again to reach for Grover, naturally without any success. "I would not hesitate one second to snuff out your miserable life!"

There was something in Blue's tone that made Grover wonder about that. The fury and determination were certainly there.

"Yes, I believe you would. But that won't happen, kid. Because it's ME who'll have the last word. I hold all the cards, and I can do whatever I want. And nobody can do anything about that. Not your girl, not your English friend, not your father... and certainly not you."

"Grover, you dirty..."

"I think it's better if I leave you now to meditate on all this," Grover cut in with a wicked chuckle. "You have plenty to think about, now, kid." He moved toward the door, leaving his captive to struggle anew, trying desperately to free himself to get to him. The older man knew that there was no chance that he would succeed. "I think seeing your girl would do you a lot of good."

Grover looked over his shoulder to witness what effect that declaration had on his prisoner; he saw him shivering again.

"Leave her alone, Grover!" Blue shouted, his anger and worry mounting.

"I'll give her your best, kid. I'll make sure of that."

With that quiet promise, Grover went out; Blue heard the door being opened, then closed; he heard a lock being turned. He frantically pulled on his bonds again, but only succeeded in hurting himself. He let out a furious shout:

"Grover! Come back in here, you scum!"

He heard Grover's limping steps fading away, followed by the echo of his cackling laugh. A distressed Blue then knew that he was alone with his despair. For the moment, his situation was certainly desperate, and it seemed that it was going from bad to worse. Hungry for revenge, Grover was using him as bait for his father, who was about to fall into a deadly trap. And Karen... Karen was now set up as a target. There was no telling what that sick man would do to her, just to torment her lover. Just the thought of knowing she would be in danger was driving Blue mad with worry, and pushed him to pursue his efforts to get free.

But without avail. The only thing he obtained was getting his wrists deeply damaged. He bit his lip over the pain and let out a frustrated cry. Then he stopped, trying to regain his breath, and to calm down his rapidly beating heart.

He felt so useless.

"Karen," he murmured, almost hoping she would hear him. "Please, be careful... Don't let that maniac get his hands on you!"

Chapter 9

Captain Scarlet awoke with a start.

Strange, he noted, moaning slightly; his back was hurting him. Just as if he had slept badly. That hadn't happened to him for a long time. Not since his Mysterionisation, in fact. His retrometabolism had mostly kept him from any discomfort due to strained muscles, after a bad night's sleep – or any other injury. This time, however, it was exactly as if he had slept directly on a concrete floor.

He realised, upon opening his eyes, that this was exactly the case.

He was sprawled on the floor of a twelve by twelve cell, with three walls made of thick concrete blocks, and the fourth of apparently very sturdy iron bars. To his left, he could see a bunk bed, near which a tall and imposing man, dressed in jeans and a leather vest, with tattoos all over his arms, was standing, looking down at him.

Scarlet sat up, grumbling at the pain in his back. He considered his situation for a good minute, at first wondering what had happened. The memory of the policeman standing over him with a stun baton quickly came back to him.

Right, so this must be the local jail, he reasoned, disgruntled. Obviously he had been arrested. For what exactly, he could only guess. He had a feeling the guys he had manhandled – after defending himself against them – had probably pressed assault charges against him.

He got to his feet, but stumbled. *Oh boy, I haven't felt like this for a while*, he noted, steadying himself against the bed-frame. Could it be that the electric jolt he had received from that stun baton was playing tricks with his unusual metabolism?

"Too much booze for you, pal?"

Scarlet didn't like the condescending, mocking tone – nor the accusation of his cell-mate. He only glared at him, very briefly, before walking squarely toward the bars and grabbing them. He looked into the corridor beyond them, trying to spot any official to whom he would be able to talk in this joint.

"Hey!" he called loudly, "I want to see the sheriff! I need to speak to him!"

He was received by a concert of protestations and insults. Obviously, those occupying the other cells weren't very pleased with his shouting. Even his companion objected, snorting noisily.

"Will you pipe down? Ain't nobody gonna be answering you, bud!"

Scarlet turned toward him, annoyed. "There's been a terrible mistake, I shouldn't be here! I need to get out!"

The man snorted again. "Oh, yeah! A mistake... Like I never heard that one before! You gonna tell me you're innocent?"

"My friend needs help. I have to talk to the sheriff."

"I told you, he won't listen to you. You're here until he feels like letting you out. So you better get used to it."

"I can't stay here while my friend's in trouble!" Scarlet protested loudly.

"It's not like you got any choice, pal," the man chuckled.

Scarlet was doing his best not to let his temper get the better of him. Blue was in trouble, he was sure of it. As he was sure that that Grover character had something to do about his disappearance. And now, Karen was alone out there, and as far as he knew, she had no knowledge of anything that had happened to Adam – or to himself, for that matter. She could be in danger too, now. Adam had wanted so desperately for her not be anywhere around Grover, all alone, to the point that he had begged her to leave this town, when he had been jailed the day before. Scarlet was convinced that his best friend had a good reason for that. Certainly, considering the recent events, Blue knew what kind of danger she could be risking.

Knowing Karen and her recklessness, it wasn't a good idea to leave her alone. At least, Scarlet told himself, he had to talk to her.

"How can I get in touch with a friend who's in town with me at the moment?" he asked his companion. "I need to talk to her. It's really important."

"If she knows you're in jail, she'll come," the man grunted. "And then, McNamara will let her see you... if he feels like it."

Scarlet was absolutely frustrated; but at the same time, he was beginning to wonder how the sheriff – and perhaps even his deputy – were involved with Blue's disappearance. He had no way to be certain of this, but suspicions were beginning to crawl into his mind. If the sheriff was involved with what had happened to Blue, then it might potentially be dangerous for Scarlet to tell him what he had discovered.

I can't think straight, Scarlet thought, shaking his head. *I need some rest*. He felt tired. Much more tired than he should be. Normally, after a short regenerating sleep, he felt fine. Not this time, though. It was as if he hadn't had time to recuperate fully.

There was nothing he could do about his situation now, he finally reasoned. He might as well use the time to get some rest, if only for a little while, and gather his strength. Until Symphony arrived, anyway. He would certainly feel much better when he woke up, and would be more able to evaluate the situation. Maybe he could even do something about it.

IF he could get any sleep at all, he thought gloomily, with the thought of Blue being in trouble, and Symphony possibly left to fend off any kind of danger by herself, while he was in here, unable to help either of them.

He walked back toward the bunks, and was about to climb onto the upper one, when the man put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. Scarlet turned, to see the grin on his face.

"That's mine," the man noted, quietly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Scarlet answered. "I didn't realise."

He leaned down to take the other one, when his companion stopped him again, forcing him to straighten up.

"That's mine too," the man grinned.

Scarlet frowned. Obviously, this guy didn't want to make it easy for him. "So where am I supposed to sleep?" he asked, rather roughly.

"You were on the floor, earlier. You're welcome to go back there."

Now Scarlet was genuinely annoyed. "That's rather uncomfortable," he noted dryly. "Look, mister..."

"Jake."

"Mister Jake..."

"JUST Jake."

"I won't get any rest if I sleep on the floor."

"Your problem, not mine." Jake's grin widened, taking a wicked curve. "You gonna do something about it?"

"I'm not in the mood to get into any kind of fight."

Scarlet saw Jake narrowing his eyes, ominously. "I heard tell that you're here because you got into a fight with the Dawson brothers. That doesn't impress me at all. Those three are pathetic, useless wimps..."

"It seems we agree on one thing, at least," Scarlet sighed tiredly. "Now, please, mister, will you leave me alone and let me get some sleep? I desperately need it."

"I told you my name was Jake," the man snapped, jabbing an insistent finger into Scarlet's chest, obviously trying very hard to provoke him.

It was working.

"Don't do that," Scarlet said politely, but a warning was obvious in his tone.

"Oooh... Now you're scaring me, pal!" Jake continued, derisively, poking Scarlet yet again. "And what're you gonna do about it if I don't stop?"

"This."

With one swift movement, Scarlet's right hand had grabbed Jake's index finger, and the rest of the hand with it, pushing it upward. Jake heard his finger crack, and let out a yelp of both surprise and pain; his knees bent, so that he almost lost his footing. Scarlet's left fist caught the man right on the cheek and he fell backward to the floor, like a felled tree. He lay there, on his back, moaning groggily, while the Spectrum officer looked quietly down at him.

"You can have the floor yourself, 'pal'," Scarlet murmured.

Jake attempted to raise his head, but let it fall heavily, grunting. Scarlet turned around and climbed into the upper bunk. He already felt tired, but this last effort seemed to have exhausted him, more than he cared to admit. And he certainly couldn't let his cellmate know.

He lay on the thin mattress, and made himself as comfortable as possible.

"Thanks for the bed, Jake," he said to the man lying motionless on the floor at the foot of the bunks. "I really appreciate the sacrifice you're making."

He gave a faint sigh and closed his eyes, quickly dropping into slumber.

* * *

A completely outraged Symphony Angel left the police station, brusquely slamming the door behind her. She was frustrated and as angry as she could get. Sheriff McNamara had refused to hear her out, so she could plead Scarlet's cause. Worst still, he had refused to let her see him. Not even for a single minute. He had alleged that his prisoner couldn't receive any visitors, since it was deemed necessary to put him into solitary right away after his arrest. Because, supposedly, he had violently resisted arrest. Knowing in what circumstances Scarlet had been arrested, Symphony knew she had been lied to, and she had openly said so to the thick-headed constable. To say he had reacted harshly would be putting it mildly. McNamara had become absolutely livid with anger at the accusation. He had slammed his big fist onto his desk, apparently expecting to impress the young woman standing in front of him. She didn't even bat an eyelid.

"I don't know who you think you are, young lady, or where you think you are, but HERE we respect the law. Which doesn't seem to be a thing you or your friends are used to! And the law in this county, Miss Wainwright, is ME! So you gotta keep quiet and speak respectfully to me! Or, by Heaven, I'll throw YOU in a cell TOO!"

He went on to say that Scarlet would have to stay the rest of the day – and the following night – in jail. Symphony had an uncomfortable feeling of *déjà vu*. She made another attempt to reason with the sheriff, trying to explain to him about Blue's disappearance without trace – and without even trying to contact any of his friends. That didn't make any impact on McNamara. He had shrugged off any notion that Blue's vanishing was suspect in any way.

"I won't mount a full-scale search for a trouble-maker, on the mere assumption that his girlfriend THINKS he may be having some trouble," he had snorted with loud contempt. *"My guess is that your Svenson has pulled a fast one. Rich guys like him are like that. He's probably already in Vegas right now, blowing big bucks at the roulette table with another babe on his arm..."*

Symphony was so angry she didn't even hear the last part. Seeing that there was no way for her to make the sheriff change his mind, she had left abruptly. Scarlet would have to stay in jail for the moment, and there was nothing she could do. The last she heard from McNamara was his mocking remark stating that maybe she would be better off changing the kind of crowd she was hanging around with. Symphony had come to the conclusion that McNamara was either a complete idiot and an incompetent fool – or that he had something to hide. Whether it was his heavy-handed way of handling both Blue's and Scarlet's arrests, or something shadier, she couldn't tell. That last possibility stopped her from telling him who she and the two men he had arrested in two days really were. If the sheriff had something to do with Blue's disappearance, she didn't want to tell this guy anything that could bring any kind of trouble. Maybe she was getting paranoid, but she was beginning to be very afraid for Adam. And, at the same time, so very irritated at the lack of progress in her search for him. And now, all alone, with Paul in jail, she didn't know quite what to do.

She was still fuming, seconds after leaving the sheriff's office, when Pablo came to her, a look of perplexity on his face.

"Did you get to see your friend, lady?"

She shook her head. About an hour before, the young boy had come back to the cantina, running like a scared rabbit, to inform her of Scarlet's arrest. That he was still there, waiting for her in front of the door of the police station, surprised her a little. But then, Pablo was a curious little boy, like all kids his age.

"No, Pablo, I wasn't able to," she answered softly. "The sheriff didn't allow me to."

"Oh! That's so unfair. Your friend, he didn't do nothing."

"Yes, I know, Pablo. You told me all that, already. I can't thank you enough for warning me." Symphony sighed heavily. Pablo had told her about all that had happened preceding Scarlet's arrest. The boy had proved helpful, much like his mother, to whom Symphony had

talked while her companion was following his own lead. At first reluctant, Pablo's mom, Rosa, had finally admitted that somebody had indeed paid for the damage to the cantina, caused by Blue's fight with Grover and his friend. But the name she had given wasn't at all the one the young pilot had anticipated. She fully expected to hear that it was Wilson Grover that had paid the damages – whatever the exact reason for that may be. Instead, Rosa gave her the name of one Pietro Gardenia.

That was odd, certainly, because it was a name that Symphony was sure she had heard before. But she wasn't able to remember in what circumstances.

She was about to ask Rosa who that man was exactly, and what his interest was in the affair, when Pablo had arrived with his disturbing news concerning Scarlet. Symphony had momentarily forgotten her investigation, to go directly to the sheriff's office.

Without any satisfying results.

"Now what will you do, lady?"

Symphony wished she knew the answer to that one. She was considering the very likely option that it was probably time to finally come clean and give Spectrum a call, when she noticed that the young boy in front of her was holding something in his hand. She crouched in front of him. "What do you have there, Pablo?"

He gave it to her, not without giving her a large smile of satisfaction.

"Your friend," he said nodding toward the prison. "I gave it to him, but he lost it during the fight with the Dawson brothers. I picked it up, thinking he might want to have it back later. He said it belonged to your other friend... the one you're looking for."

It was a Spectrum-issue watch, that Symphony recognised right away, with its blue hands and numbers. Pablo explained to her how it had come in his hands in the first place, and how he had taken Scarlet to that alley where he had been attacked by the Dawson brothers. While listening to him, Symphony was scrutinizing the watch, noticing its broken wristband, the broken glass face, and the dark smears underneath it. She quickly looked into Pablo's eyes, worry in hers.

"Where is this alley you're telling me about, Pablo?"

* * *

Something happened here...

That was Symphony's main thought as she looked pensively about, standing all alone in the alley, where Pablo had brought her. She had sent the boy back to his mother, wanting to have a look around without any interference. Pablo had provided much useful help, and she had rewarded him accordingly. No doubt the kid would soon be enjoying himself with the latest toy he had so wanted to have recently.

There wasn't much to investigate, Symphony had discovered, much to her frustration. The dirt on the ground had been heavily scuffed, at the exact place where Pablo had told her he had previously found the watch. There had been a fight here. Most probably, that was the last trace of Scarlet's encounter with the Dawsons. But, considering what Pablo had found, what if there had been something else? Another fight, which Adam had been involved in? There were some faint, dark stains, but Symphony wasn't really sure that they were exactly what she was dreading they were. And there was no way she could be certain of which fight it was from.

My God, Adam, WHERE are you? What exactly happened to you in here?

Her fear that something terribly wrong was beginning to take form. Adam was in danger. She now felt it deep in her heart. She had to find him, as soon as possible. She couldn't count on that sheriff, since she was beginning to suspect he could be mixed up in this. Maybe he had arrested Paul to keep him from learning too much. Probably, those Dawson brothers were involved too, or they wouldn't have a good enough reason to attack Paul in this same alley, where Blue's watch had been found.

That settles it. I'm contacting Spectrum. Time to call for some back up. This situation has to be resolved, before it's too late.

Symphony quickly walked toward the end of the alley, now convinced that there wasn't any other solution at this moment. She exited it and was about to direct her steps toward her car, parked in front of the cantina, when she noticed two men standing on the other side of the desert

street, seeming to wait right outside the bar; they were now looking straight at her. She stopped in her tracks and stared at them, wondering. Their eyes still fixed on her, they suddenly left their position...

...And moved directly toward her, at a quickening pace.

Symphony didn't wait any longer, to find out what they wanted with her, and broke into a run. A quick glance toward the two guys informed her that they were giving chase. Her instinct had been right about them.

She was a quick runner, more highly trained than these two men could be, so she easily out-distanced them. She didn't call for help, knowing it would be useless. There were only a couple of guys sitting on their doorsteps, but they didn't even glance at the scene. *Right. People around here prefer to mind their own business. They don't want any trouble.*

She just had to reach the car before they caught up with her and then she'd be able to make her call – and take her Spectrum Personal Tracker and activate it. She was nearly there, when she noticed there was a third man standing right next to it. She made a sharp turn to avoid meeting him, and continued to run, without slowing down. The third man joined the two others in their pursuit.

Symphony was running down the main street now; she didn't dare to go into an alley, not knowing if she would find a dead end which would stop her. Of course, she knew that when she reached the end of the street, there would be nowhere to go, but onto the desert road. *Not many hiding places there*, she brooded grimly.

There still was a safe distance between her and her pursuers. She made another sharp turn at the corner of a house, nearly at the end of the street, and found herself right in front of the gas station. There was a van there in front of the pump, being filled by a big black guy with dreadlocks and dark glasses. He had his back half-turned to her and was leaning casually on his van, near the open door. A little farther away, there was the small store where the employee, waiting for his customer to finish filling up, was apparently checking his cash. She didn't think she would have the time to reach the store before the three guys after her would arrive and see her.

There wasn't much time to think it over, and she ran toward the van.

* * *

When the Dawson brothers arrived where Symphony had disappeared from their view, they stopped, out of breath, searching with their eyes the area that opened out before them. They were in front of the gas station, and they could see a man filling the tank of his van, and the employee of the store going about his business. The black guy, seeing them appear so suddenly, raised his eyes to look at them. It was simple curiosity, and, putting a big lump of chewing gum into his mouth, he turned back to his van, without apparently taking any more notice of them.

"Where'd she go?" Billy was red in the face, and panting loudly. Obviously, he wasn't used to running so hard.

"I don't know!" one of his brothers answered, breathing as hard. "I can't see her anywhere!"

"She can't have disappeared!" the other one added. "She must be somewhere near!"

"Yeah, she can't have run straight into the desert. We would see her!"

"Hell, we gotta find her. Grover will have our guts if we don't!"

The three men spread around, looking about for their quarry. Billy approached the black man. "You seen a girl running this way just now, pal?"

The man raised his head to look at him, his expression hidden behind his dark glasses. He seemed to be contemplating a possible answer. Billy quickly lost patience. "Well?"

The man nodded quietly. "Bout this high?" he asked raising his free hand to about his shoulder height. "Beautiful, with long blonde hair?"

"Yeah, you've seen her?"

"You're after her, right?"

"She owes us money. And it's none of your business, anyway. You've seen her?"

The black man shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I saw her." He nodded toward the small store where the two other Dawsons were heading. "She went around the grocery store. Man, you'd think the devil was after her, the way she was running..."

Billy didn't even thank him. He broke into a run and went to join his two brothers, to tell them about this new information. The three of them quickly left together and followed the tip. The black man followed them with his eyes, with great interest, still chewing his gum, very quietly.

"Jerks," he grumbled under his breath. Then he glanced toward the back of his van and raised his voice: "You can come out now. They're gone."

Symphony carefully reared her head out from under a large blanket she had found in the van. Seeing that the Dawson brothers had indeed left, she shrugged the blanket away and jumped out. Cautiously walking around the other side of the vehicle, so she would remain hidden should her pursuers come back, she moved toward the good Samaritan who had just finished filling his tank and was now paying the automatic pump with his card.

"Thanks for the help, fella. I really appreciate it."

The black man nodded quietly. It didn't seem like there were much that could faze him, seeing how casual he had remained all along.

"Don't mention it," he answered. "Those guys looked like bad news. Why were they chasing you?"

"You didn't believe him when he told you I owed them money?"

"It could be true, but I don't care. You were in trouble. I had my fair share of problems too, so I thought I could give you a hand." The man had finished his transaction. He turned around to address Symphony. "Name's Butch," he introduced himself.

The young woman hesitated for a moment. "Karen," she answered. "I can't thank you enough for your help, Butch."

"Don't mention it." He calmly shook his head. "It doesn't seem to me that you can stay around this place," he noted. "Those guys will find you real soon. This isn't a big town."

"I know. I just need to get to my car."

"Why not inform the sheriff?"

Symphony hesitated a second, not knowing how to answer that. Butch thought he understood. "Okay... No sheriff, then."

"He and I have a... disagreement," Symphony replied shyly.

"Yeah, I bet... So you want to get to your car and then you'll get away from here?"

"For the time being, yes."

Seeing that it was clear Symphony wouldn't say anything further, he gave her a large grin and shrugged. "All right, then. Just hop in the back. I'll get you to your car, safe and sound, and you'll be able to leave. But if you ever return, I would advise you to stay low, and keep hidden from those three bums."

Symphony smiled back, sighing with relief. She nodded her thanks and walked toward the back of the van, followed by the man. "You're a real lifesaver, Butch."

"We'll see about that," he answered quietly, as both of them stopped in front of the open doors. "Come on. Get in."

Symphony jumped into the van, and then hesitated, at the last possible second, feeling Butch right behind her. She had a sudden feeling that something was wrong. She had confirmation of this when the big man roughly shoved her inside, before she could change her mind. She dropped on the floor, and quickly turned around, protesting: "Hey!"

Butch had closed both the doors before she could reach them. She grabbed one of the handles but was unable to move it, as she heard the key turn in the lock.

"Let me out!" she yelled, thumping loudly on the doors.

Outside, whistling quietly, Butch was walking around the van, to hop behind the steering wheel. He started the engine. At the same time, he heard Symphony's hurried footsteps inside the van and saw her face appearing in the small opened window separating the cab from the back.

"What do you think you're doing?" the young woman furiously called to him. "You locked me in! I want to get out right away!"

"I don't think it would be a good idea," Butch deadpanned. "Remember those three guys who've been chasing you?"

"I'll take my chance with them... I demand that you let me out!"

"Sorry, Blondie... Believe me, I'm doing this for your own good. And you'd better stop that ruckus, you'll draw people's attention."

"You've got some nerve, you dirty..."

The van pulled out from the gas station and onto the highway. Symphony had to brace herself against the side of the van so as not to lose her balance. "Hey!" she protested again. "You're leaving town!"

"You've got a real good sense of observation."

"I don't want to leave town! I've got two friends in trouble here! I've got to help them! Let me out!"

"You'd better make yourself comfortable, girlfriend. We're going for a LONG ride."

The stream of well-chosen insults that followed had nothing lady-like about them, and Butch frowned deeply, hearing them, surprised that a girl like this one should know such vocabulary. Seeing that Symphony didn't seem to want to follow his earlier advice, he sighed in deep annoyance and pressed down a button on his dashboard. A panel came up from under the window and closed it, cutting out the sound of Symphony's protests. He could still hear her banging on the side of the van.

"The things I wouldn't do..." Butch mumbled to himself. He popped a music disk into his player and country music came out of the speakers, drowning out Symphony's antics. Then he took his onboard radio helmet and tapped out a number. He didn't have to wait long before his communication went through.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm calling to report like you asked me to. I found the girl... No, I had no trouble at all, she practically fell in my lap. I have her in the van now. I'm coming over with her..." He grinned broadly, hearing his contact's next comment. "I knew you'd be happy to hear that..."

* * *

Scarlet was pacing nervously around his cell; he had received no news from Symphony, and was beginning to worry.

"Where can she be?" he murmured, giving a last glance toward the door leading out of the cell block. "She should be here by now. There's no way she couldn't have heard of my arrest!"

"Hey, Paul, would you calm down?"

Sitting on the lower bunk, Jake was nursing a really big black eye. Since Scarlet had woken up again, a little less than an hour ago, now feeling much better, Jake's attitude toward him had changed drastically. It appeared that he had developed some kind of respect for the man who had stood up to him and knocked him out so easily earlier. Scarlet didn't understand much of the guy's line of thought, but he was pleased that he didn't try to get back at him. The way he was figuring it, Jake had reasoned that he had had it coming, and that Scarlet had proved he was more than able to fend him off.

"This isn't right," the Spectrum captain said to his cell companion. "Why isn't she here yet?"

"Maybe McNamara didn't let her see you," Jake offered, shaking his head.

"Didn't let her?" Scarlet repeated, with a frown. "He has no right to do that!"

"He's the sheriff of this county, buddy. He has been for the last eight years, and he's used to having his way. If he decides that your girl can't come in to see you, then he ain't gonna let her!"

"Great!" Scarlet sighed, letting himself fall on the bed next to Jake and taking his head between his hands. "If she's not allowed to come, then I won't be able to tell her about what I found. I won't be able to warn her about the Dawsons and Grover."

"Wilson Grover?" Jake asked, frowning.

"You know him?"

"Everybody knows everybody in this dump. Yeah, I know Grover. Not much, but... enough to know that you gotta stay out of his way if you don't wanna get any trouble."

"My friend got trouble from him all right," Scarlet grumbled more to himself than to answer Jake's remark.

The latter nodded, suddenly understanding. "Your friend... He's the big blond guy who got in a fight with Grover yesterday and got himself arrested by the sheriff?"

"That's him, yes. Adam Svenson. It seems that this Grover is a friend of the sheriff, right?"

"Friend is not really the word, no... Let's say Grover knows somebody with influence... who, in turn, knows McNamara. You catch my drift?"

"Yes..." Scarlet said thoughtful, eyeing Jake carefully. "I think I see. What can you tell me about this Grover character?"

Jake hesitated, unsure if he should tell Scarlet anything. He glanced toward the bars, as if fearing that somebody would overhear him. Then he cleared his throat, and decided to give the Spectrum captain the information he wanted.

"Grover arrived around these parts about five years ago. He went from Vegas, to Reno, and other towns here and there, at first doing odd jobs. He was just out of prison and, there wasn't anybody who would have given him much chance, if not for..."

"...Those certain friends he has?"

"Right."

"So he was in prison? Do you know why?"

"No, I don't know that. It must have been something pretty heavy, though. He spent about twenty years there, if the rumours about it are true."

"Who is this person protecting him?"

Jake hesitated again. Apparently, he was reluctant to answer that. "I'm not sure I should tell you about it..."

"You've gone this far. You'd better finish."

"Right, me and my big mouth. Okay, then... I hope I won't regret it." Jake sighed heavily, then lowered his tone, nearly to a whisper. Scarlet had to prick up his ears to hear him. "His name is Pietro Gardenia. Maybe you've heard of him..."

"No, I can't say I have."

"He's an ex-Major League baseball player from about twelve or fifteen years ago, with the Red Sox. Seems he was acquainted with Grover when the two of them were in the Trenton Thunder – that was in the Minors..."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about baseball, Jake. Get to the point, please."

"Gardenia had a successful career in the Majors, and became extremely wealthy. When he retired from baseball, he went to Las Vegas and opened a couple of clubs there, and casinos, and restaurants... The rumour has it that Gardenia owes Grover a lot. Nobody knows what exactly. But Gardenia is quite willing to help Grover when he can."

"For old times' sake, maybe?"

Jake scoffed loudly. "Maybe so. But Gardenia isn't known for the goodness of his heart. The only sure things that motivate him are money and profit. He would sell his mother for that – if he still has one."

"Would you say he's mixed up in shady business?"

"That's more than likely. As shady as can be. He's associated with the Vegas mob, that's for certain. Only nobody is able to prove it."

Scarlet nodded thoughtfully. So this feeling he had about Adam being in deep trouble was confirming itself. Maybe even deeper than he first thought, by the looks of it. He just hoped Adam was still alive...

From the far end of the corridor, he heard a door being opened, and then closed again almost immediately, then steady footsteps approaching his cell. Scarlet sighed and rose to his feet. If it was the sheriff or his deputy, he would try to convince him to let him out of here – or at least to let him see Karen or make a call. This whole affair was beginning to be too big for just him and Symphony. Spectrum had to be informed and brought into it.

He was moving toward the bars when he saw a man finally appear and stop right in front of them. The sight of this tall, white-haired man made Scarlet stop in his tracks. Piercing blue eyes were staring straight at him, with an iciness that almost drilled a hole in him. The colour left Scarlet's face in a matter of seconds. This was the LAST person on earth he would have wanted to meet in this dreadful and mortifying situation.

Colonel White flicked a glance at the other man in the cell, then turned his attention back to Scarlet, staring at him without uttering a single word. He seemed to be waiting for Scarlet to speak first. The captain wasn't sure that was a good idea at all. Getting a grip on himself, he approached the bars, to stop in front of his commander.

"Sir..."

"I advise you," White cut in, with a very cold and warning tone, "to choose your words VERY carefully. I'm in no mood to hear foolish explanations right at this moment."

"But..."

"I have half a mind to leave you to rot in here," White continued without hearing Scarlet out. "Maybe filling holes in this country's roads would knock some sense into that scatterbrained head of yours!"

"Sir, I don't think the United States uses chain gangs anymore. Well, maybe not in this State, that is, but..."

"I don't see anything funny in this at all!"

"Neither do I, sir... Please, you have to get me out of here."

"And why should I? You DITCHED me in Las Vegas to come here to get Adam, without telling ME anything, and you now EXPECT me to HELP YOU?"

"How do you know about Adam?" Scarlet asked in a murmur, frowning with perplexity.

"How do you THINK I know? Now it's YOU I find in prison, instead."

"You know about that too?"

"I know A LOT more than you think, Paul," White growled. "Now you tell me what I should do about it."

"We can discuss that later, sir... But please, you HAVE to get me out of here. I'm awfully worried about Adam."

"I know he's disappeared. You haven't found him yet?"

"No, I haven't. But I'm afraid he may be in deep trouble." Scarlet sighed heavily, and moved closer still to the bars. "Do what you want with me, but please, we have to do something to find Adam. His life may be in danger as we speak."

White didn't answer right away. He was pondering what to do, right now. He had every intention of giving Scarlet the lesson he needed, but the concerned look he could see on the young man's face convinced him that something very serious was going on. His hesitation only lasted a moment, and he nodded his consent.

"I'll see what I can do to get you out of here," he said, the edge in his voice still sharp.

Scarlet blew a deep sigh of relief. "Whatever you do, sir," he added in a whisper, "be careful with that sheriff. Maybe you shouldn't tell him about – uh – work. I suspect he may have something to do with Adam's disappearance."

White nodded again, his piercing eyes still set on Scarlet, with that same righteous anger. Without another word, he turned around and walked toward the exit. Scarlet watched until he couldn't see him anymore and then returned to sit on the bed. He heard the door at the end of the corridor close noisily and sighed again, bowing his head and taking it between his hands. Jake was staring at him with curiosity. Discreetly, he had kept away from the two men during their brief conversation, and all he was able to hear were small bits of it. Nothing to give away what was being discussed, actually, but it was pretty obvious the older Englishman was very angry.

"Harsh fella," Jake noted, looking in the direction White had disappeared.

"Tell me about it," Scarlet answered, in a muffled and tired voice, not raising his head.

"Who is he? Your father?"

Scarlet's head literally sprang from between his hands, and he glared at Jake with some alarm.

"What a dreadful thought!" he mumbled under his breath.

Chapter 10

"That child's going to be the death of me!"

John Svenson was pacing furiously in the living room of the family mansion, raging on. It was morning, and Adam was still missing. The boy had not come back at all, and had spent the night out. He hadn't even called home to reassure his now worried parents. Svenson was absolutely infuriated. Adam had often demonstrated a rebellious, almost wild streak, but he had never gone this far before.

"I can't believe it! How dare he put us through all this worry? How could he put YOU through it?" Svenson looked at his wife, sitting on the sofa. She had not slept at all, the preceding night, sick with concern for her missing eldest child. She had been crying a lot, John could see that on her face. Her hand was resting on her overgrown belly, as if she wanted to make sure that the baby she was presently carrying was still there, safe and sound. This third pregnancy wasn't an easy one for Sarah Svenson, as she wasn't able to get all the rest the doctor had advised. And now, with Adam being his perfectly annoying and selfish self, running away like that... It wasn't good for her at all.

Peter was sitting on the floor, at her feet, as if he sensed that his mother needed to feel his presence. He was flying a model plane, making sputtering sounds with his mouth. John frowned, looking down at him. "Not too loud, Peter," he admonished the five-year-old boy. Peter's voice instantly dropped, but he continued to fly his plane. John raised his glance toward Sarah. "How are you doing, my darling?" he asked her. "You must be tired..."

"I'm all right," she answered in a murmur, keeping her eyes down.

"I worry about you. The baby..."

"...isn't due for another eight weeks, so you don't have to worry about it. You'd better worry more about Adam, and getting him back soon."

"With a little luck," Svenson grumbled again, "this one won't cause us so much trouble when she's born."

"John, please..."

Taking no notice of his wife's plea, Svenson turned toward the other man in the room with them, who was watching the couple patiently from an armchair, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"You think you can find that ungrateful brat, Mike?"

Michael Ellis, Sarah Svenson's brother, and a detective lieutenant in the Boston police, looked into his brother-in-law's angry face, himself remaining very calm. "You're sure you don't want me to make this an official police search, John?"

"Absolutely not!" Svenson replied swiftly, before his wife, obviously very keen on that idea, could give an answer of her own. "That's not necessary. I want YOU to search for him, unofficially. Adam's run away from home because he's angry with me! He wants to get back at me, to punish me because I forbade him to go to that game! And what did he do? He sneaked out of the house and went anyway!"

"His coach told us he WASN'T at the game, yesterday," Sarah remarked bitterly.

"I don't want reporters to come nosing around and blow this whole thing out of proportion!" Svenson replied. "I don't need bad press at the moment!"

"So that's it, is it?" Sarah came back, this time annoyed by the remark. "Our son is missing, and all you can think about is all the bad press you might get from it!"

"Sarah, that's not what I meant. Adam is being stubborn again, and absolutely selfish. He doesn't think about the harm he's doing us..."

"He spent the night outside," Sarah noted dryly. "He's never done that before..."

"I'm sure he WASN'T outside." John Svenson turned again toward his brother-in-law. "He must have spent the night at one of his friends' homes..."

"WHICH one?" Sarah insisted. "John, we called everybody we know! None of them has seen him!"

"Well, ONE of them is lying!"

"I'm not sure. Michael, I want the police in on this. I want them to find my son."

"Wait a minute, Sarah, you're NOT giving that boy the satisfaction of seeing us call the police on him!"

"What satisfaction is there in that, John? I don't think he's doing this on purpose! He would never do this to us. You should know that. Adam is not like that!"

"You know how angry he was with me..." The sounds coming from Peter had increased again, and to John's ear, they had mounted into a crescendo he was finding more and more annoying. He had been trying to dismiss it, but he found he couldn't. It was exasperating. As exasperating as this dispute he was having with his wife.

"Peter!" he called angrily to the young boy. "I thought I told you to stop that!"

The sounds died instantly on Peter's lips. The blond little boy looked up at his father. He failed to see how angry he really was, and showed him his plane. "Look, Daddy... That's Adam's plane. He gave it to me."

"REALLY kind of him," Svenson grumbled, turning away.

"I wanna be a pilot like him, when I grow up," the boy continued cheerfully. "Then we'll go flying around the world together."

"No!"

Svenson turned on his heel and came back to his youngest, his eyes blazing. "You stop that this instant. I don't want to hear any of this! I have enough trouble as it is right now with ONE son having crazy ideas like that, without him putting the same foolish dreams into the other's head!"

"JOHN!"

Sarah Svenson had protested vehemently. She looked down and saw the dismayed expression on Peter's face; the little boy was very near to tears. With great difficulty, she got to her feet, and took the boy's hand. "Come, Peter, I think it would be better for you to go play in the nursery with Carrie."

"Daddy?" Peter stood up, and looked expectantly at his father; the latter averted his eyes. His outburst was uncalled for, he knew. He couldn't bear to see the hurt in the eyes of his younger son. Seeing that his father wasn't about to answer him, Peter addressed his mother. "Should I give the plane back to Adam, Mommy?"

"No, Peter. It's yours. Adam gave it to you. He would be sad if you gave it back to him."

"All right, then..." Bowing his head, Peter let his mother lead him toward the door. Sarah called Carrie, the children's nanny, who was near the door, and instructed her to take the boy back to the nursery, where he would be able to play quietly. Before leaving, Peter gave a tentative look behind him, toward his father. John Svenson had his back turned to him. "I'm sorry if I got you mad, Daddy..."

Svenson didn't answer; he felt that he should say something, but he was unable to. He just had too much anger in him – toward his older son – to just open up and address a couple of gentle words to the younger. He was afraid he would snap at him again.

"Daddy's not mad at you, sweetie," Sarah reassured the child. "He's just very concerned at the moment. He didn't mean to shout at you."

"Sure wish Adam would come back soon," Peter murmured, as he left the room to follow Carrie. Sarah closed the door behind him and then, giving a frustrated sigh, turned around to address her husband.

"The least you could do was say you were sorry!" she snapped angrily.

John turned around, furrowing his brow. He dismissed the problem with a wave of his hand. "I'll go talk to him later. I'm sure he'll understand..."

"Oh, like Adam understood?" Sarah scoffed loudly.

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm not responsible for his running away!"

"Oh, you're not, are you? According to you, he ran away to get back at you! So if that's really the case, then maybe you should wonder what it was you did wrong!"

"I DIDN'T do anything!"

"Think back, John Svenson: you broke a promise you had made to your son. You've put your job before him too often."

"My job IS for him! It's for you, and Peter, and this baby you're carrying..."

"I know that! And I can accept that. If I had not been able to, do you think I would have married you, ten years ago? But Adam can't understand. He's just a boy who wants his father to be near him."

Michael Ellis cleared his throat and stood up from his seat; this argument between his sister and her husband was becoming very unsettling for him. "I think I'd better leave you two to settle things between yourselves..."

"No," Sarah replied swiftly. "You stay, Michael. We'll still need you to find Adam for us. And I'm not so sure we won't need the official help of the police for that."

"Sarah..." John sighed heavily. His wife had presented him with strong arguments. He KNEW that Adam running away was partly his fault. He KNEW he wasn't always there for his son, and that more often than not, he had changed the plans he had made with him, to accommodate his work. But that was not an excuse for the boy to run away like that and put his parents – especially his pregnant mother – through such a terrible ordeal. "I'm worried too, you know? That's why I snapped at Peter like that. I know I have much to blame myself for but..."

"Can't we JUST find Adam?" Sarah cut in, her voice cracking. "John, that's all I want. To see him back here, in this house. Safe. Then I want you to make your peace with him. It's as simple as that."

John Svenson had a moment's hesitation. He didn't even have the time to answer, as suddenly something came through the window right next to where his wife was standing. John had seen the thing coming and had quickly grabbed his wife's arm to pull her away from harm and protect her as best he could with his own body. She let out a cry of surprise when she heard the crashing of the window, and bits of glass flew all around them.

John only received a small cut to his arm, but nothing more serious than that. His wife had escaped unscathed, and in his mind, that was the important thing. He saw the object fall at his feet and separate in two. A piece of cloth stayed where it had fallen, while something heavier – looking like a ball – rolled away behind the armchair.

Mike Ellis had rushed to the window and was looking outside, trying to catch a glimpse of whoever had done this. He couldn't see anybody around.

"Whoever that joker was," he grumbled, "he's gone by now."

John was looking in disbelief at the object at his feet. The Red Sox logo was staring him right in the face.

"I can't believe it," he murmured. He bent down and irritably snatched up the baseball cap he knew was the one he had given to his son. He was beside himself with anger. He gave the cap to his wife, who had gone white from all the emotion. "That's the cap I gave Adam last week, when I told him about the Sox game we were to see together."

"Yes, it looks like it," she confirmed, nodding faintly.

"He could have hurt somebody, throwing it through the window like that!"

"Oh, John, you can't think it's Adam who just..."

"What am I to think? That boy was so ANGRY at me last time we spoke! Remember what he said to me?"

Mike had left the window and was now in search of the other, heavier object that had been used to weight the cap. He had seen it roll away, behind the armchair. He found it underneath the chair, and pulled it out. He frowned as he looked closely at it.

"What is it?" John asked.

"A baseball." The ball was almost entirely wrapped in crumpled brown paper. Mike took the paper off the ball and unfolded it to look inside. What he found disturbed him.

"He's gone too far this time! I swear, when he finally comes back, I..."

"John, Adam didn't throw the ball through the window," Mike suddenly interrupted his brother-in-law, trying to keep his voice even. He beckoned Svenson closer. John left his wife and walked toward Mike, his brow furrowed, wondering what it was about. He couldn't see that, behind him, Sarah was examining the cap more closely.

Mike showed the large piece of paper to his brother-in-law who went to take it, but the detective stopped him right away. "I'd rather you didn't touch it, John," he whispered. "Please, keep calm..."

Raising curious eyes to Mike, wondering what that strange remark was all about, John could see he was glancing in Sarah's direction, a concerned look on his face. A sudden worry crept inside his mind. There was something not right, about all this. This paper...

He looked down at it. He felt his heartrate suddenly increasing, when he saw the newspaper letters pasted on it, forming threatening words that sent a shiver of fear and pure horror down his spine.

"We have your son. You can have him back for \$5,000,000.00. Don't say anything to anyone and don't call the police or your son is dead..."

There was more, probably instructions on how to deliver the money, but Svenson found he was unable to read any more. He was staring down in disbelief at the note, suddenly white-faced, gasping, as if desperate for air.

"Oh, no!" he murmured. "No, this can't be happening..."

He glanced at Mike, as if he wanted to ask him if this was simply some kind of sick joke, but he could see, by the gloomy look upon his brother-in-law's features, that unfortunately, it wouldn't be the case. Unable to keep his legs from shaking, and feeling like he would lose his balance, Svenson reached for the armchair, to keep himself standing straight.

"Oh, no, no, no..." he murmured again. "Mike, this is..."

"Stay calm, John," Mike urged him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "For Sarah's sake..."

"What have you found there?" That was Sarah's voice calling to them. Svenson straightened up suddenly and turned to go to her, followed by Mike. Both men were unsure what to do, how to tell her about the note. For the moment, she had turned back her attention to the cap she was turning around in her hands. She seemed quite agitated.

"Sarah, I... You'd better sit down, honey. There's..."

She was hardly listening. Something had suddenly caught her attention. She shoved the cap nearly under her husband's nose. Her face was deathly pale, and her lips were trembling.

"Look at that!" she said, her voice shaky. "Look, John! Those marks on the cap... They... they look like..."

She was unable to say more. John gently took the cap from his wife's quivering hands, and examined it, Mike coming closer to do the same. Both of them could see dark, reddish stains on the cap. John stared at Mike with an enquiring look, hoping he was mistaken – that his wife was mistaken. The grunt he heard from his brother-in-law was eloquent enough, but the nod and the word that followed were enough to send all sort of torturous thoughts tumbling through his mind.

"Blood," Mike murmured, rubbing his thumb and index finger on the stains and then looking down at what they had left on his fingers. "I'm sorry, but..."

What little colour was left in Sarah's face totally drained then. "Blood? That's what I thought. I... What's happened to Adam? Was he hurt, or..." She saw by the looks of his husband and brother that they knew something she didn't. "What is it?" she asked suddenly. "You're hiding something from me..."

"No, we're not," John replied, still unsure how to say it. "My God, Sarah... We... We just found out..."

"Found out what?" She saw the devastated look on his husband's face, the way her brother was trying to avoid her eyes. Then, she saw the brown paper in Mike's hand. She caught a glimpse of the cut-out letters pasted on it. She pointed to it with a shaky finger. "What... what is that?"

"Sarah... somebody has our son, and... and they want..."

"My God, no!" Sarah simply didn't listen to the rest of her husband's uneasy explanation. The rest was drowned as she suddenly broke down in tears; she didn't need to hear more, as she had understood all too clearly what was going on. She shook violently, and John had to take her in his arms and help her to sit down on the nearest chair. She was crying on his shoulder without being able to stop herself. They were tears of despair, and fear, and rage, also, as she pounded her husband's shoulder in helpless rage. "And you thought he had run away!" she cried out. "My God! John! Our boy... Somebody has our boy!"

"Shh! I know, I know..." John's voice was trembling; he was so near to tears himself, and it was all he could do not to break down like his wife. He was trying so desperately not to, he wanted to be strong for her... to reassure her. But it was so difficult. He tried, but was painfully aware of the inadequacy of the attempt. "I'll find him. I'll bring him back home, you'll see..."

"How?" she cried out again. "They've already hurt him!"

"No. No, you must NOT think that."

"What do they want? Why did they take our baby?"

"They want... They want money... They..."

"Give it to them! Give them everything they want! I just want my boy back!"

"Sarah, please, calm down..."

"Sarah, listen to your husband." Mike's voice suddenly made itself heard over Sarah's loud sobbing. It was smooth, and gentle, but at the same time firm and reassuring. The despairing parents looked over to him as he approached and stood in front of them. He still had that awful piece of paper in his hand, and the sight of it was making John sick.

"They're going to have it," John grumbled, anger now taking the place of his despair. "I'm going to give them everything they want. So long as they give me back Adam, I..."

"You can't do that," Mike protested. "That what I wanted to tell you, John, you can't pay these guys..."

"Like hell I can't!" John barked with fury. "I'm going to do what they want. I want my son back!"

"And what makes you think they'll return him, even if you pay up?"

"Would you please SHUT UP?" John yelled. He didn't want to hear these words, and he was concerned about the effect they would have on Sarah. He took a deep breath, trying to calm down, before continuing. "Stay OUT of this, Mike!"

"I can't, John. I can't leave you two alone in an ordeal like this. I can't leave Adam in the hands of these people. I'm going to call for some backup. We'll help you."

"NO! They said no police!"

"Unfortunately for them, I AM the police, John. A fact that they certainly don't know about. Please, listen to reason... The police can work it so these people won't know we're involved. We'll be careful..."

"Mike, no. Please!" By then, John Svenson was choking down the tears threatening to overwhelm him. He had so much trouble keeping himself in check. He knew he was about to break down. "They said... They said if the police were to be involved, Adam..."

"John..." Mike replied in a softer voice, one behind which John could hear regret and sorrow. "They have ALREADY hurt him."

Despair filled Svenson's heart at the same time as the tears began to flow from his eyes. Mike was showing him the cap. Adam's cap, stained with his son's blood. His son who had already suffered at the hands of these people. That was enough for him to understand that even if he was to follow the kidnappers' demands, his son would never come back to him alive. Svenson bowed his head, drawing his wife to him and suddenly sobbing with her. He closed his eyes and finally nodded his consent to his brother-in-law.

"Bring him back to us alive, please," he murmured, his voice full of pain.

Mike grimly nodded in turn. He put a reassuring hand on the grieving father's shoulder. "We'll find him, you'll see. I promise you that."

It was then that, looking down once again at the cap, Detective Michael Ellis suddenly saw that some of the bloodstains drew strange patterns in the lining fabric... Patterns that made him frown in complete disbelief...

** * **

The sounds of people talking all around him made their way to John Svenson's mind and snapped him out of his reverie. He turned his eyes away from the window through which he was staring at the clear blue sky, without really seeing it, and looked around. One of the first-class stewardesses was approaching him. She leaned toward him to ask, with the brightest of smiles, if he needed anything. He refused politely and she went on her way, to ask another passenger. Svenson returned his attention to the view outside the plane. In fact, he thought, he needed a drink. Desperately. But he didn't dare to take even one. He was so depressed, feeling so totally useless, that he was afraid he would not be able to stop. And becoming completely drunk, at a time like this, would certainly not help Adam.

Now confronted with this dreadful situation of today, John Svenson's mind kept coming back to those terrifying moments he had lived through with his wife, twenty-five years ago. Never in all his life, before or after those events, had he ever had to face something so horrifying as the kidnapping of his eldest son.

Wilson Grover had made more than one mistake, which had brought about his downfall. For a long time, John had been wondering whether the gardener would have thrown that ransom note through the window if he had known that Michael Ellis was at the house that day. John never knew that for sure, he was just guessing that the kidnapper would probably have waited for the parents of his victim to be alone, before making his move. One thing that was for sure was the fact that, if Grover knew that Mike was Sarah Svenson's brother, he had never been aware that he was a police detective. That was rather difficult to believe, though, seeing how his sister was married to one of the most influential financiers in North America. The Ellises themselves came from a respectable, if certainly less wealthy family, operating a small but rather profitable marketing business. But Mike was not part of the family business, as everybody would assume, and it always came as a surprise when they found out about his successful career in the police force.

Grover didn't know that, and it was to cost him dearly, as Mike had made a vow not to rest until he found his nephew, got him back safe and sound to his parents, and brought his kidnappers to justice.

Right from the moment he had read the ransom note, Mike Ellis had realised that it had come from someone close to the family. That person had gone through the home security system without a glitch. Mike knew that security system well, he was the one who had recommended it to the Svensons. So, that lead Mike to believe that it could be a member of the domestic or estate staff, probably someone who had come in to work that very morning, as if nothing had happened, so nobody would suspect him or her. Or, somebody who knew his way around the property well enough to avoid security.

It didn't take long for Mike to realise how right he was, just a few minutes after he had read the note; confirmation was in the bloodstained baseball cap he held in his hands...

The other important mistake Grover made was to underestimate young Adam's resourcefulness. And in retrospect, John thought, it was easy to understand the man's reason for the obvious hatred he had for Adam. For it was the then nine-year-old boy who had beaten him at his own game, when Grover provided him with the tool he needed to find a way to get himself out of the dreadful situation he was in. Grover never imagined, for one second, that his victim himself would be the one to indicate to the police who his kidnapper was. Mike Ellis just had to follow the trail back to Grover, back to that house where he had kept Adam...

Back to where the young boy was finally located.

In spite of himself, John Svenson shivered violently, thinking back to that. He wasn't actually there, when Grover had been arrested, and Adam had been found. Mike had told him all about it, how Adam was barely alive, how Grover had tried to get rid of the boy, even though his parents had confirmed that they would pay the ransom. It was probably a good thing that John had not been there. The way he reacted at the hospital afterwards, when he finally got the chance to see his battered son, was a good enough indication that he would probably have strangled Grover with his own hands if he had come face to face with him.

Adam had been right about Grover. All along. Strangely, he had felt that the man wasn't to be trusted, and was wary of him. In his childish way, he had tried to warn his father, but, and Svenson was deeply aware of this, he had refused to listen, and had even forced his son to approach Grover, to "be nice" with him. He had himself given to that despicable man all the chances he needed to make his move and further his dark plans. John felt an overwhelming guilt about the responsibility he bore. He knew he should have taken heed of the boy's warning. His failure to do so had brought upon Adam the most terrifying experience a child of his age could possibly endure. That had almost cost him his life.

The stress of the whole affair, the agony of not knowing what would happen to her eldest son being too much to bear for her, Sarah had been rushed to the hospital, where she gave birth early to a beautiful little girl, whom the proud parents named Katherine. Mother and child were fine, but the anguish and concern for Adam, first missing, and then fighting for his life, tarnished that beautiful moment. The tiny, premature baby had to stay at the hospital for long weeks, before she was strong enough to be allowed to leave with her family. And Sarah came out of the ordeal so very tired, that it took her a long time to recuperate. When, a couple of years later, she became pregnant with David, John was understandably worried that this child might be too much

for his wife. He needn't have worried though, as it was far easier than might have been expected. But it was to be the last child for the couple.

After Adam's kidnapping, John and Sarah became concerned that it would happen again. Having gone through it once, that was their biggest fear. They weren't sure how they would handle it a second time, and although they took the fullest precautions they could, they knew they had no guarantee that their children would be safe.

Fortunately, they didn't have to face that dreadful eventuality again.

Until today, John thought grimly, biting down on his clenched fist in anguish and frustration. And this time, he didn't have Michael Ellis' help to get his son out of this mess. He couldn't even tell his wife, or anybody else. He was alone, forced to accept Grover's demands, in fear of seeing his son killed in front of his very eyes.

He wasn't even sure that anything he could do would be enough to save Adam and himself but he realised there was little he could do at the moment, but to follow the instructions he had received...

... And pray for some kind of miracle.

* * *

Hot...

It was so hot in here, so hot that Captain Blue was drenched from head to toes. His wounds were burning from the salty contact of his own sweat, which made his position even more uncomfortable. The heat was so stifling in this closed room, he was gasping for air, each breath hurting like crazy. He was sure he had at least one broken rib, following Grover's harsh beating. He had tried again and again to get free, but his efforts had only served to drive the ropes deeper into his wrists. His hands were now so numb, he could hardly feel them.

He had the impression he would not be able to hold on, but he was still fighting to keep conscious, not willing to give up. He would not give that satisfaction to Grover. Not so easily. Even though he was so close to despair.

He had found himself in tight situations before, in the WAS, when he was head of security. He had foiled murder attempts on his life, and found the culprits. He survived even worse situations after joining Spectrum. The Mysterons had kept him on his toes. He always came out nearly unscathed.

This time, it was hitting too close to home. The threat was coming directly from the darkest period of his past, something he had had to face when he was still only a young boy, and that had left its mark on him. Something no child in the world should ever have to be confronted with.

He had survived that early trial, and was determined to do the same this time. Too much was at stake. His life. His father's. Maybe other members of his family were also threatened, for all he knew. None of them was safe, until Grover was stopped.

There also was Karen's life, and the future he was planning with her. If only for that, he had to keep fighting.

"Still holding on, kid?"

That was Grover's voice mocking him again, from a distance. Blue had not heard him coming into the room. But now he could feel his presence, taunting him, trying to hurt him again. He had come to relish the spectacle of his prisoner's sufferings. Surmounting the pain he was in, Blue stood as tall as he could and took a deep breath, before answering back to his tormentor, between clenched teeth.

"You will not break me, Grover."

Standing in the doorway of the dark room, Grover shook his head thoughtfully. He hadn't expected his victim to be this resilient, nor this brave. It was obvious to him that he didn't have in front of him the kid he once had kidnapped, so many years ago. The man he had become was a tough, hard-boiled son-of-a-gun... Not so easily intimidated as when he was a boy.

"Don't fool yourself, kid," he told him in a quiet voice. "You're helpless. I have you, and you can't escape. Your old man is coming for you, and when he gets here, we'll be able to settle things between us."

"My father won't pay you one penny," Blue growled.

"That should be the least of your concerns." Grover gave a sly smile, as a thought occurred to him. "Oh, we almost forgot somebody in our little get-together... Your lady friend."

Blue's heart skipped a beat. "I told you to leave her alone," he said in a threatening tone.

"I'm sure she won't say 'no' to my invitation to join us, kid."

"You don't have her," Blue realised upon hearing those words.

"Not yet. But it's almost done. It's just a matter of time. It's a sure deal. She can't escape me any more than you can."

"You're lying. You're just saying that because you want to see me suffer."

Grover cackled maliciously. "Now, you can't really know that for sure, can you, Svenson?"

Blue swallowed hard. Indeed, if only he could be sure... "You don't need her, Grover. Let her go."

"Sorry, kid," Grover replied with a sigh that was unconvincing. "But you could say she brought it on herself the minute she hooked up with you."

"No..."

Now the anguish was apparent in the prisoner's face. Grover was enjoying this tremendously, and his smile had broadened.

He was unpleasantly surprised, when he saw his prisoner suddenly lashing out, pulling on his bonds.

"Don't think you've won! This is not finished yet, Grover!"

Blue's despair had only lasted a very short moment. He had remembered that it wasn't just any woman Grover was threatening, but Symphony. And she certainly wasn't somebody who would roll over and play dead, if Grover were to get to her. There would be hell to pay, before he could get his hands on that girl, and that certainly wasn't something Grover would expect.

"I'll see you dead before I let you hurt my girl!" Blue went on, with a tone full of dire promise.

There was a short pause, during which Grover pondered the younger man's words. He entered the room, and limped toward his prisoner; stopping in front of him, he looked at him, with a cold flash in his eyes. Then his voice made itself heard again, in the small, dark cell, with a very ominous and cold edge to it.

"It's me who'll see you dead, kid. You can be sure of that. But before that, I WILL break you. Oh yes, I'll break you... And I'm gonna take real pleasure doing it!"

Chapter 11

Sheriff McNamara had been convinced to let Paul Metcalfe go free. Scarlet didn't know how Colonel White managed to do that, without telling the constable about Spectrum, but the results were there. Deputy Harvey Ringward soon came to get him out of his cell and bring him to the sheriff's office, where his release would only be a formality. Scarlet recognised the deputy; it was the man he remembered seeing holding a stun baton just before he lost his senses in that alley. Apparently, the deputy recognised him too, judging by the arrogant way he was looking at Scarlet.

The sheriff was in his office, along with Colonel White; the latter, standing behind the seated sheriff, was looking through a window, his back turned toward the door, when Scarlet walked in; he didn't even turn around or say a single word to acknowledge his officer's presence. Scarlet could see he was still very angry, and certainly very annoyed by this whole situation; the atmosphere was heavy enough.

Ringward having left them, Scarlet signed the receipt the sheriff presented to him, to get his belongings back, while his commander obstinately kept silent and ignored him. McNamara had certainly noticed the uneasiness between the two men, and he glanced curiously at them both. At first, it seemed that he wouldn't say anything.

Until the moment Scarlet was putting his wallet back in his pocket.

"So, Mister Metcalfe... I think you owe a great deal to Mister Gray at the moment."

The sheriff's tone was nothing less than mocking and insolent; so was his look. Scarlet addressed an icy stare at him. One glance toward White told him that his commander didn't even react to that remark. The captain furrowed his brow.

"What are you going to do about Adam Svenson, Sheriff?" he asked rather abruptly.

McNamara raised his eyebrows. "What would you have me do?"

"He's disappeared. You should search for him."

"That's your opinion!" the sheriff scoffed loudly and with obvious contempt. "I don't see any reason why I should search for him."

"Sheriff, I am absolutely certain that my friend was attacked in that alley, in front of the bar, last night, soon after he'd been released from this jail," Scarlet replied in a harsh tone.

That caught the colonel's attention, Scarlet noticed, as he saw the older man pricking his ears at it. But still, White didn't turn to face him.

McNamara, on the other hand, was adamant.

"Oh, you're certain, are you? And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"I found traces of a fight, on the ground. And those guys, the Dawson brothers... They..."

"Right, the Dawsons." McNamara waved his hand. "The men who pressed charges of assault against you, right?"

"THEY were the ones who attacked ME! I didn't provoke them."

"That's not their version."

"Right. I heard they're the local bad boys. Doesn't that make you a little SUSPICIOUS about their version of events?" Scarlet frowned deeply. "They were involved in that fight with Adam last night. It WASN'T even a fight. They beat him up. One of them told me so himself."

"The one you were tormenting when my deputy intervened?" Scarlet didn't answer. The sheriff rose from his seat and stared him in the eyes. By this point, White had finally turned around to watch the scene. But the captain was too preoccupied even to notice this.

"Did Dawson tell you why they would have beat up your friend?" McNamara asked.

"He said they wanted to teach him a lesson."

"Because of what happened with Will Grover, right? And after that... your friend disappeared?"

"Sheriff, I know Grover is behind Adam Svenson's disappearance. You've got to question him, to find Adam. He MUST know where he is."

"Oh, right..." McNamara mocked him. "And how did you come to THAT conclusion? You tortured it out of that Dawson boy?"

"You've got a strange way of upholding the law in this county!" Scarlet snapped suddenly. "Protecting the guilty and not helping honest people..."

"Honest people?!" McNamara laughed it off, scoffing again. "As far I'm concerned, your friend is a creep. And don't you come telling me how to do my duty! You're a stranger here. I decide what to do. And searching for your friend is the least of my priorities!"

Scarlet bristled, hearing these words. "Adam is not a creep!" he protested between his teeth. "Will you listen to me, and DO something? Or are you such an incompetent f..."

"Enough."

The voice of Colonel White rang loud enough to stop Scarlet right in the middle of his imprecation. The captain raised his head, to see his commander looking straight at him. The tone of his voice had been even, but the cold stare of his eyes betrayed the anger still boiling inside him. Scarlet was angry too, not at the colonel, of course, but his eyes were also reflecting this.

"Mister Metcalfe," White said calmly, with a formality in his tone that was disturbingly unsettling for Scarlet, "would you mind leaving the sheriff and me alone for a few minutes? Wait for me outside."

"But..."

"NOW, if you please."

White would not accept a refusal. Scarlet straightened up, still furious; he gave a annoyed look toward his commander, then a murderous one to the sheriff. He gave a frustrated sigh and turned around, to go out the door...

...Slamming it behind him.

Sheriff McNamara cleared his throat and sat back on his chair, making himself comfortable. Slowly, White left his position at the window to walk toward him.

"Quite an agitated young fellow," grumbled the sheriff. "But it seems you have your way with him, Mister Gray. You said you're his boss?"

"And Mister Svenson too. And the young woman you saw with them."

"Oh yes... That hysterical broad."

White's brow furrowed, hearing the sheriff's last remark. Yet, he kept silent, as he stopped near him.

"Mister Metcalfe and Miss Wainwright are only concerned for their friend's welfare at the moment," White replied quietly. "Which I can understand."

"Yes, well... Their worries are a waste of time. Svenson is nothing but a spoiled rich troublemaker, who thinks he can get away with ANYTHING he wants. Why, I'm sure he has simply left town, without even bothering to give his friends a call."

White gave a deep sigh. "Miss Wainwright is his fiancée," he noted gloomily. "They were on their way to Las Vegas to get married. Don't you think he would at least call HER?"

"So, maybe that's the answer then: at the last minute, he could have got cold feet, changed his mind and ran away from her..."

White shook his head. How could this man be so thick-headed? "I know Adam Svenson. He would never behave like that. And I'm not so sure his friends are worrying about nothing."

"You're not starting with that, too?" McNamara grumbled in annoyance.

"I'm concerned too, you know," White replied. "When one of my people disappears, and there's no clue to his whereabouts, and two others claim there's something wrong, I find it very suspicious. What do you make of this story Metcalfe just told you, about the Dawson brothers having attacked Svenson?"

"Svenson is nothing but a trouble-maker," the sheriff answered back. "He broke the law, yesterday, several times over, and beat up on a cripple. If the Dawson brothers ganged up on him to teach him a lesson, I'd say he had it coming."

"So the Dawsons are friends of Mister Grover?"

"Friends, no... I would say they're... acquaintances."

"Enough 'acquaintances' to motivate them to attack Svenson?"

"Now, Mister Gray, this is becoming quite annoying..."

"Did you take the trouble to check what kind of history there was between Adam Svenson and Wilson Grover, Sheriff?" White cut in, eyeing McNamara conspicuously.

The latter bristled. "I told your friend, and I'll tell you too: don't try to tell me how to do my duty!"

"It seems somebody has to, Sheriff. Because you're doing a very bad job of it."

McNamara's face became totally red with anger, upon hearing those quiet but acerbic words. "I thought you were some kind of a gentleman, sir! Now you're showing yourself as insolent as those people working for you! How dare you insult me like that?"

"Did you know that Wilson Grover kidnapped Adam Svenson as a child, twenty-five years ago?" White replied, not deigning to answer the sheriff's question. "That he had tried to ransom him back to his family, and to kill him?"

"And how do YOU know that?" McNamara replied, frowning deeply.

"I have my sources in certain areas... So, you know that, do you?"

"Yes, I know that. Contrary to what you presumed, I DID check on them, to see what could have set Svenson up against Grover. But it was twenty-five years ago, Mister Gray."

"Did you interrogate Mister Grover concerning Svenson's disappearance, Sheriff?"

McNamara's brow furrowed. "I don't see any reason for me to do so."

"Why?"

"First of all, Wilson Grover is a hard man to pin down. I don't know where to find him, most of the time. I don't think anybody has seen him since a couple of hours after that incident with Svenson, yesterday. Second, I don't want to bother him with it. Grover paid his debt to society, and spent twenty years of his life in prison. That should count for something, don't you think? Svenson had no reason to come beating on him like that..."

"I would tend to disagree with you, as I see PLENTY of reasons for him to have lost his temper as he did. But that's not the question, right now... The question is: if you know about this history between them, why then aren't you taking any notice of the report of Adam Svenson's disappearance, and why aren't you investigating it?" White leaned on the desk to look McNamara squarely in the eyes. "Don't you find it highly suspicious?"

"If you'll pardon me for being blunt, Mister Gray," the sheriff replied very coldly. "I find Mister Svenson to be a very unpleasant fellow..."

"And you find the man who kidnapped him as a child, sympathetic," White said between his teeth. "Somehow, that's what I would have expected from you."

"Now I'm finding YOU unpleasant, as well," McNamara continued. "You won't get me wasting my time on that Svenson creep, under the pretence that you, along with that hothead compatriot of yours and that hysterical blonde bimbo..."

"DON'T EVER call her a bimbo," White suddenly interrupted the sheriff, with a very ominous tone, pointing a warning finger at him. "Neither is she hysterical. NONE of my girls are to be referred to in such an insulting manner. I would advise you NEVER to speak of her that way."

McNamara paled, seeing the nasty glow in the Englishman's blue eyes. The tone of his voice was very unsettling. He suddenly appeared to be a man it wouldn't be wise to cross. McNamara swallowed hard, but tried to keep a strong façade.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked, softly.

"Damned right I am. You will refrain from using such offensive language, Sheriff. Adam Svenson IS NOT the creep you describe him to be. He's a good man, better than you could ever aspire to be. Miss Wainwright is a very special, compassionate young lady. She is worried because her fiancé, the man she was going to marry, has vanished. In this town, where YOU are supposed to uphold the law. And you sit there, doing nothing but uttering nonsense. I have heard enough of this. I am strongly considering the very likely explanation that you know more about this disappearance than you let on."

"I'm WARNING you..."

"It's ME who's warning YOU, Sheriff!" White leaned toward McNamara, forcing him to lean back in his seat, the anger in the Spectrum commander's features growing by the second. "I don't know what your involvement in this affair is, but I can promise you this: if anything happens to Svenson, whether you're involved in it or not, I will hold you responsible. And you'll hear about me."

McNamara stared at White in total confusion. He couldn't understand how that man could even DARE talk to him that way, even threatening him in such a fashion. He didn't seem

impressed at all by the authority conferred on him by this badge upon his chest and the uniform he was wearing. It was as if he couldn't care less about his authority, and wasn't afraid of it. McNamara wasn't used to that, and that was very unnerving.

"DON'T cross swords with me, sheriff," White went on. "You will not come out of it unscathed!"

The sheriff's face was deathly pale, as he could see the Englishman meant it. White stood up, gave the sheriff a last look full of contempt and then turned toward the door. He had opened it when McNamara, coming out of his surprise, and regaining some of his self-esteem, was sitting up straight, now looking White with a renewed anger.

"Who do you think you are, to speak to me that way?" he lashed out, his face very red, looking as if he was about to pop a nerve.

White stopped in his tracks; he turned around to stare at him with an Olympian calm that contrasted with the sheriff's edginess. "Probably your worst nightmare, Sheriff", he answered evenly. He gave just a ghost of a smile, before exiting the office, closing the door behind him.

McNamara looked at the closed door, his jaw dropped, gasping in complete outrage. The red of his face had become crimson. For a moment, he did nothing but stare, in complete silence. Then he stood up; his hand fumbled for the phone, and he snatched it from the hook in a furious gesture, nervously pressing down a button.

"Harvey!" he barked into the receiver. "Get your butt in here right now! And call Hill and Calhoun; tell them to report to the station! Yes, I need the three of you! Right away!"

He slammed down the phone and looked toward the door, where Colonel White had disappeared. The murderous glow in the sheriff's eyes didn't presage anything good as he made a promise of his own, matching that of the Englishman:

"We'll see who gets the last laugh, friend. I don't take kindly to folks threatening me. I'll show you... ONE false move from you... and you'll be in deep trouble!"

* * *

"What happened in there?"

The second Colonel White had stepped out of the sheriff's station, he started walking down the stairs to the street, with a very quick and assured pace. Captain Scarlet, leaning against the wall while waiting for him, left his position and followed. His commander's face was still very hard, completely set. He was unable to read anything on it.

"I just had a talk with the sheriff," White muttered.

"What did you talk about?" This was unnerving. White was walking very quickly, toward the cantina, and Scarlet had to run to keep up with him. The colonel didn't even bother to answer his last question. No doubt, he was still fuming. Scarlet gave a sigh. "You didn't tell him about Spectrum, did y..."

"DON'T." White turned suddenly on his heel; Scarlet nearly bumped into him, and received a warning finger poking hard at his chest, at the same time he was staring straight into the blazing eyes of his commander. "Don't TRY to tell me what I should, or should not do!" White warned him. "You're in NO position to do that at this moment." He shook his head, in an almost disgusted way. "I don't know what's stopping me sending you STRAIGHT back to Cloudbase, where I could deal with you appropriately!"

"You're not going to?" a surprised Captain Scarlet responded. He saw the scowl on White's features.

"Don't get smart with me, Metcalfe, I'm in no mood for that!" The colonel sighed with irritation. "I didn't tell the sheriff about Spectrum," he finally said, in a harsh tone. "You may be right about him. He may be involved with your friend's disappearance."

Your friend. The deliberate stressing of those words sounded unpleasant enough at that precise moment. Somehow, White was discounting himself as some kind of a friend for Blue. That was a good indication that he was feeling hurt. Scarlet chose to keep as cool as possible, and to try not to further arouse his commander's anger. It would not be good, as he was furious enough as it was.

"Thank you for arranging my release, sir," he simply said, nodding.

"Don't mention it!" White grumbled between his teeth. He turned around and continued walking in the street, toward the cantina. "Now I suggest we find Captain Blue as soon as possible, and put all this nonsense behind us!"

"WE?"

"What, do you want to get rid of me AGAIN?"

"Er... No, sir."

"Good. Because I wouldn't take kindly to you sneaking out on me a second time. Now, we'd better regroup. Where can we find Symphony?"

"Symphony, sir?"

Hearing Scarlet's perplexed tone, White stopped and turned around again... And again, Scarlet nearly bumped into him. "Yes, Symphony," he said, very impatiently. "Why do you sound so surprised? She's somewhere in this God-awful town, isn't she?"

"Sorry, sir, it's just that... I thought you'd already met up with her." There was concern in Scarlet's voice now, even as he spoke. He eyed his commander squarely. "You mean... you didn't? As you knew I was in jail..."

"I found out you were in jail because, can you imagine, it's currently the talk of the town!" White suddenly lashed out. "You think it's pleasant for me to find out from a barman that one of my most valued agents had been thrown into prison because he was involved in a brawl with a gang of local ruffians?"

"Actually, that's not exactly how things went, sir..."

"Spare me! I'm not sure I want to hear your explanation, right now! Just tell me where we can find Symphony."

Scarlet was rather hesitant to answer. His commander was still very upset with him. He CERTAINLY didn't want to anger him further. But he couldn't see how that would be possible. "Well, sir... Actually, she could be anywhere... She didn't come to see me in jail, and..."

"She didn't come?"

"Most likely, if she did come, the sheriff would have refused to let her see me."

"Marvellous," grumbled White again. "The man is even more of an incompetent fool than I thought!"

Scarlet didn't say a thing. So, he thought, it seemed that the Colonel's 'talk' with the sheriff wasn't such a nice one. He saw White eyeing him conspicuously, even suspiciously.

"Are you SURE you're not keeping anything from me, at the moment?"

That was a curious question, and Scarlet shot White a perplexed glance. *No*, mused the Spectrum commander, *he isn't. He wouldn't go this far to keep me busy, so Blue and Symphony can quietly pursue their wedding plans.* He shook his head, grumbling once more. "Never mind that, we'd better go in search of her now."

Scarlet carefully weighed what he was about to say next.

"I'm worried, sir," he confided, in little more than a murmur. "And not just about Adam. Those Dawson boys ATTACKED me, earlier, while I was searching for him. What if Karen continued the investigation by herself? I hate to think that she might stumble on those guys and have trouble with them!"

White nodded, his anger calming down a little, but he was still fairly upset by the whole situation. But for the moment, he had other considerations. "I think you may be right to be worried," he said, turning around, and starting to walk again.

Again, Scarlet followed suit, puzzled by his commander's last comment.

"Is there something you know that I don't, sir?"

White nodded again, this time very slowly. "Plenty, I'm afraid."

* * *

Symphony couldn't believe she had been so stupid.

She could have kicked herself, to have fallen, like an idiot amateur, into a trap like that. Obviously, that Butch character was working with those guys who had chased her. They acted as beaters, and had driven her to him, so he could capture her. And that happened so easily! She never suspected a thing!

She was still stuck in the back of Butch's truck, and didn't know where he could be taking her, now. It seemed like hours since the truck had started moving toward its mysterious destination. She was feeling so hot, in this close, narrow space, that her clothes soon became completely soaked. It had taken her some minutes to finally get adjusted to the darkness. The motion of the vehicle had made it very difficult for her to keep on her feet, and she had found that she had no other option than to sit directly on the floor, her back to the partition separating this compartment from the driver's cabin. She still could hear Butch's howling, and that made her cringe. His voice was simply awful. He had started singing along with his country music, and Symphony found she couldn't escape it anymore than she could get out. Not a single note was right and it was starting to get on her nerves.

There was only one consolation in her situation: more than likely, Butch was taking her to where Captain Blue had to be. She would soon find him, and discover what all this was about. Only that made it all worthwhile.

I may be trapped, but I'm far from defenceless! Symphony thought grimly, her eyes glaring ominously toward the closed doors at the back. She was distractedly playing with a crowbar she had found lying near some of the boxes that Butch was transporting in his truck. That certainly was a lucky find, and Symphony was certainly ready to use it, the second the doors opened.

She just had to be patient... Her moment would come soon...

* * *

Captain Scarlet and Colonel White sat at a table, in a quiet corner of the town's cantina, having coffee. Scarlet had reported to White all his recent discoveries, during the course of his investigation of Blue's disappearance. The colonel's temper had cooled down considerably, although it was still apparent he was holding a certain grudge against his younger compatriot, for the way he had stood him up in Las Vegas. Scarlet was pretty aware that it would probably come back later to haunt him. Now, however, the colonel's mind was otherwise occupied. He now had little doubt that Scarlet had been right in his assumption that something very wrong had happened to Captain Blue. And to make matters worse, Symphony Angel was nowhere to be found either. The two men had searched the town thoroughly for her, without any success. The car was still where Scarlet and the young woman had left it, and nothing was missing from it. Even their personal communicators were still there. White did nothing to hide his disapproval of any of his agents leaving those behind. Here was living proof that his officers should carry their personal communicators in all circumstances, even on furloughs. He made a mental note for it to be discussed during the next staff meeting, and if necessary he'd make it an order.

This new disappearance had both Scarlet and White really worried, as they assumed it couldn't mean anything but bad news. They had hoped that they were wrong to be concerned about Symphony, that she was probably continuing her investigation, and that she would probably join them before long at the cantina, while the two men were comparing notes. As time went by, that hope was slowly eroding.

His report finished, Scarlet had showed himself ever more curious about what Colonel White knew. His earlier statements had been intriguing enough. White handed him a computerised information pad, slightly larger than a notebook, in which was everything he knew about this whole affair, the history between Wilson Grover and Adam Svenson. Captain Scarlet checked the information, while White waited patiently, until the young man had gone through the major part of the file. He had witnessed the expression on his face changing gradually as the facts unravelled themselves to him. From the first line, Scarlet had seemed perplexed, then plainly incredulous. But after a few minutes, realising the full length of the information, and all the horror it held, that had changed. He had become extremely pale, feelings of shocked disgust reflecting in his eyes; of fear too, for his missing friend; and of complete anger.

"I can't believe this!" he murmured. He looked up at his apparently calm commander, who had not uttered a single word while drinking his coffee. "That Grover character kidnapped Adam as a kid?!"

"So, apparently you didn't know about this part of Adam Svenson's life?" White noted thoughtfully.

"No, I didn't know... Adam never told me about it. Mind you, a kidnapping must not be an experience anybody would like to reminisce about!" He scoffed loudly. "No wonder he hates that lowlife so much! How did you...?"

"I only did what you should have done yourself," White explained dryly. "I did a background check on this Wilson Grover." He gestured toward the pad. "It seems that, in his youth, he showed a definite talent for baseball, and was recruited by the..." White searched the name out of his memory. Scarlet nodded.

"The Trenton Thunder?" he offered.

"How do you know that?" White asked, raising an eyebrow.

"My... cellmate told me about it," Scarlet explained carefully.

White gave him an old-fashioned look, but decided not to say anything. "Yes, well... It seems that Mister Grover could have had an outstanding career with the Red Sox, on the face of it, but there were problems that kept him from making the leap to the big leagues. His criminal record, to be specific. That's how I found out about him, and his previous relationship with Adam."

Scarlet was thoughtfully looking at the pad's screen, opening the criminal records file, and first reading the description of the guy. He nodded thoughtfully. "Age 58, six foot four, powerfully built, blue eyes... greyish brown hair, distinguishing feature: a scar on his nose... and a heavy limp in the right leg, from a bad injury after a fight in jail, more than twenty years ago... Yes, that's our man. Symphony told me about the scar and the limp."

Pictures had appeared on the screen, apparently taken from police records too. The first set was of a young Wilson Grover, probably taken when he was in his mid-twenties. The second set was of the same man, much older, sporting a beard. Scarlet grumbled. "Doesn't look like someone you'd want to meet in a dark alley..."

"I second that," Colonel White agreed sombrely. "That chap has an impressive collection of misdeeds, believe me."

Scarlet was just checking that exact information that had appeared on the pad, just below the last set of photos. He whistled, seeing the long list that presented itself to his eyes. "Looks like he started to go to the bad quite young," he murmured. "Common theft, car thefts, armed robbery, protection rackets, death threats, blackmail, assault and battery, aggravated assault..." He shook his head in disgust. He stopped at the two last entries and looked up again at White. "Kidnapping and attempted murder..."

White nodded. "That refers to the Svenson case," he confirmed. "That happened some years after he was kicked out of the Trenton Thunder, because of his violent behaviour..."

"No wonder Adam thought this man was bad news," Scarlet murmured. "Look at the size of the guy... how could any child stand up to him?"

"Even the Spectrum computer had trouble accessing the FBI file concerning that affair," White noted grimly. "It was classified under a high protection code, used to conceal identities of young child victims of brutal crimes." White rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Although the crime was twenty-five years ago, it had been kept away from prying eyes. Looking further into it, I discovered that the man responsible for Grover's arrest at the time was a certain Michael Ellis, of the Boston police. After being transferred to the WGPC, about four years after that, he pulled some strings so the case would be kept under indefinite embargo. My bet is, his brother-in-law also pulled some very important strings to that effect."

"Sorry, I don't follow. His brother-in-law...?"

"Boston financier John Svenson."

Scarlet raised a curious pair of eyes toward his commander who nodded. "Adam's father," Scarlet said, thoughtful.

"At the time of the kidnapping, the case became front page news in all the national newspapers in the United States. The son of a wealthy financier from Boston, who had been abducted by the family's gardener, and then ransomed... It seems both the kidnapping and the trial stirred up the interest of the public on the East Coast. Sort of the 'Lindbergh case' of the twenty-first century... Now, being from Britain, I suppose I didn't hear much about it at the time, or at least didn't take much interest in it. Still, there is something familiar about this story... Svenson probably thought it'd had enough exposure, for his son's sake. He probably didn't want the file on

his son's kidnapping to end up on anybody's desk, to become the object of some young policeman's studies." White scratched his ear. "Mind you, I don't blame him."

"Hence the cover-up operation," Scarlet nodded in turn, understanding that himself.

He was reading anew the full report of the 'Svenson case', as it appeared in the file. In there was the full description on how the kidnappers had proceeded with their dark plans. There was also a description of the mistreatment inflicted on the kidnapped boy. Along with police pictures that must have been produced as evidence during the subsequent trial. Reading the report and viewing those photos was making Scarlet's skin crawl uncomfortably. He shook his head in complete disgust. "That man is a maniac," he murmured. "What he did to a nine year old boy..."

"I read that, yes," White noted gloomily. "The experience must have been very traumatic."

"Must've been. That's probably why he didn't want to tell Karen about it, even after all these years, after he'd seen the man," Scarlet murmured. "It's no wonder he was afraid for her, too. He knew exactly what that man was capable of." He raised his eyes again to his commander. "Imagine... there's no limit to what he could do NOW that Adam's an adult."

"Are you still convinced that Grover has him now?" White asked him.

"He was attacked last night in that alley by a gang composed of the Dawson brothers and some others. I have no proof of this, but it looks as if Grover hired those guys to beat him up... And after seeing THAT..." Scarlet tapped the computerized pad, "I'm now quite POSITIVE he's behind it, and that he has Adam."

"There could be a couple of other possibilities, you know," White suggested carefully. "For example... what if Adam went after Grover, after that beating he took?"

Scarlet gave his commander an odd look, and the latter shook his head. "Try to put yourself in his place: Grover is probably the man he hates most in the world. He had kidnapped him as a boy, and nearly killed him. He encounters him here in the Nevada Desert, quite by chance, and old painful memories come back to haunt him. It's possible that he wanted to settle things with him once and for all."

Scarlet brow's furrowed. "What?" he murmured. "You're suggesting he could have... gone after Grover to kill him?"

"That would be an explanation for his disappearance, don't you think?"

"No," Scarlet protested, shaking his head in negation. "Adam would NEVER do a thing like that. I'm surprised you're even considering that, sir. You know the kind of man he is."

Yes, I know, White thought grimly. Adam Svenson was probably one of the best men he had ever encountered, one of the finest officers to work under his command. It was not easy envisioning him going after a man like Grover, driven by a sense of vengeance, to settle scores with him. That wouldn't be something the man he knew as Captain Blue would do, but considering what he had read in this report, all the things that despicable Grover character had done to him, Adam Svenson had a considerable grudge against the man. Plus, there was Symphony to consider. Blue knew full well that Grover was as dangerous as could be, and he didn't want to see her anywhere near that man. So afraid was he for her that he had sent her away from Los Lobos, dreading that Grover would do her some harm.

To protect the woman he loved, could Blue consider taking drastic measures? Especially considering the beating he had apparently taken, because of that man?

"I'm just evaluating the situation," White explained to Scarlet, shaking his head. "I'm as much in the dark about this as you are. No, I must say, I don't think he would act that way. Let's just pray that Sheriff McNamara has the same thought."

Scarlet scoffed derisively. "That would be a lonely thought, then!"

"Don't judge the man too quickly. And don't take this too lightly, either: he told me earlier that Grover hasn't been seen since yesterday. Since the fight, most probably." White eyed Scarlet conspicuously. "And if HE thinks that way, there's only one conclusion to draw."

"Grover is missing too?" Scarlet said, frowning.

"Nobody's seen him since a couple of hours after the fight," White confirmed.

"Well, I can guarantee that there is somebody who saw him after that!"

"You're thinking of the Dawson brothers?"

"They didn't decide to come after me on their own, I'm sure. They're much too thick to have that much initiative!" Scarlet leaned toward White. "Grover's gone missing. I find that very suspicious. I'm convinced he has Adam."

"To what purpose?" White asked. "And... I don't want to sound pessimistic or anything, but... how can you be so sure that Adam is still alive, to begin with?"

Scarlet didn't want to consider this eventuality, although he was aware that it could be possible. White looked around, making sure nobody was listening to their conversation, then continued grimly: "We're in the middle of the desert. There's plenty of places around here to get rid of... a body."

"According to that Dawson boy I... er... interrogated, Adam was still alive when they finished with him."

"Yes, maybe, but after that? I know you don't like the idea, neither do I, but you have to consider that it's also a possibility."

"I can't see why Grover would have paid Adam's bail, just to kill him like that," Scarlet said morosely. "There has to be something else."

White nodded his agreement. That certainly was something to be considered. "Yes, who else but Grover could benefit from Adam's release? Although what that benefit might be, is another question."

"There's also the damages paid to this restaurant to consider," Scarlet continued. "The last I saw of Symphony, she was on her way to find out about that last detail."

White was about to voice his concern about her being absent as well, when a little boy, with black hair, bright eyes and a tanned complexion, suddenly appeared beside the table, flashing a broad grin at Scarlet.

"Hi, *señor* Paul!" he said happily.

"Oh, hi, Pablo," Scarlet replied, returning the boy's smile.

"I'm sure glad to see you out of jail!" the boy continued. "The lady got you out, then?"

He had a big plastic toy tucked under his left arm, and was steadying it carefully with his other hand. Almost despite himself, White was staring at the half-seen toy. It looked like a vehicle, painted in cheap metallic blue, with three pairs of tyres, and a black and white shark-line muzzle of a definitely unique and familiar design... He wasn't so distracted by the toy, though, that he failed to notice Scarlet's sudden embarrassment at the child's question.

"Er... No, Pablo. Actually, I didn't get to see her at all."

Pablo conspicuously eyed the older man sitting at the same table, across from Scarlet. "So I guess your father got you out?"

The remark caused both Scarlet and White to scowl. "I'm not his father," White replied. "I'm... a friend." He stared at Pablo. "Sort of," he added, rather sourly. He pointed toward the object tucked under the boy's arm. "That's a very fine toy you have there, lad."

"Oh! I just bought it!" Pablo beamed. He put it down on the table between the two men. It was a replica in plastic of an SPV. The two men stared at it in perplexity. "It's a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle. It's exactly like the real thing!" Pablo continued, obviously bursting with pride over his new toy. "Down to the last detail!"

White took it, and carefully examined it more closely. "I didn't know these were on the market," he mused.

"YOU didn't know?" Scarlet said, eyeing the toy with suspicion. "How detailed is it, actually?"

White was curious to know exactly that. Of course, he knew that there were some toys distributed around the world, bearing the Spectrum insignia; Spectrum had given its approval for that. But due to the top-secret nature of some real-life vehicles and craft, there was little chance that the toys would be very accurate. For example, from what he had seen of the 'Angel interceptor', the toy had little to do with the real thing. The toy makers had probably worked from photos and television footage, with indifferent success. He opened the door to look inside, and shook his head. For starters, the seat wasn't fixed to the door, and the interior was nothing but an empty shell, with two seats, a steering column, and a drawing of a computer. "Not THAT detailed," he answered in a murmur. "There's something inside..." He dug out a small figurine, sporting a black and red uniform. Scarlet groaned.

"Don't tell me..."

"It came with the vehicle," Pablo explained, making a face. "Too bad, I wanted the blue one... But all that was left was that one... Captain Red."

Scarlet gave the boy an odd look, then, apparently offended, stared back at the figurine that Colonel White was holding. He could see that his commander was having tremendous fun seeing him so embarrassed, and was trying very hard not to openly laugh at him. White put the figurine back into the vehicle and gave it back to its owner, with a large grin of satisfaction upon his face. "It's very nice, Pablo. I'm sure you'll have a lot of fun with that SPV and... Captain Red." Scarlet scowled at that. Through it all, White was keeping a straight face. "Did you say you'd just bought it?"

Pablo nodded vigorously. "Thanks to *señor* Paul," he explained. "And to his lady friend."

"Karen?" Scarlet asked, frowning.

"Yeah, you gave me money for that old broken watch... The lady gave me some too, when I showed her the alley, where I found the watch."

"You took Karen there?" Scarlet asked. "When?"

"Just after she tried to go see you in prison, Mister. She told me the sheriff didn't want to let her see you... He's bad, that sheriff."

"Pablo!" Coming from behind the young boy, the owner of the cantina had suddenly appeared, obviously annoyed at him. Pablo almost jumped, hearing her voice, and swiftly turned around to face her. "How many times do I have to tell you not to bother the customers?!"

"Oh, he's not bothering us, madam," Scarlet replied in defence of the boy.

"Nevertheless, he shouldn't be here," the woman answered dryly. She shot a mean look toward Scarlet. She was obviously thinking 'jailbird'. *Naturally. The colonel DID tell me I was the talk of the town, following my arrest... Probably that woman didn't want her boy to be near such a man...*

"Come on, shoo!" she said, waving Pablo to go on his way. "Go play outside with your toys and stop pestering people!"

She didn't have to repeat herself, and Pablo ran away, without another glance at Scarlet or White. Muttering, the woman was about to leave too, in order to continue her work, when Scarlet stopped her.

"Pardon me, madam, but we're currently looking for our friend, Karen Wainwright... You must remember, that young blonde woman who was with me this morning?"

"...And who was with that big blond man yesterday when he and Mister Grover started that fight in my cantina," the woman answered grumpily. "Yes, I remember her, *señor*."

"Do you have any idea where we can find her?" Scarlet insisted, hearing the full resentment behind the woman's tone.

"How should I know that?" she answered, shrugging indifferently. "The last I saw of her, she was asking me all kind of questions concerning Mister Grover, before Pablo came running in here, telling her YOU got yourself arrested."

"I'm afraid my friend has been the victim of a misunderstanding," White then suddenly said, before Scarlet could answer. "We're a little concerned for the young lady, you see, and we don't seem to be able to find her anywhere. We were hoping YOU could provide us with some information, *señora*..." He hesitated, obviously waiting for the woman to introduce herself. He was directing his most boyish smile at her. That was some kind of an odd picture for Scarlet to witness his commander make a show of his charm that way. Even odder, it seemed to be working, as he saw the woman suddenly relaxing and answering with a smile of her own.

"Rosa," she finally introduced herself. "Just call me Rosa."

"Such a beautiful name," White noted smoothly.

Scarlet had to make an effort not to roll his eyes. *He's pushing it a little too far...* It was probable that Rosa felt the same, seeing how she waved a finger at him, but still, there was that smile upon her face, as if she wasn't entirely hating this.

"You naughty man... You're trying to get sweet on me, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't dare, dear lady," White replied gently.

"All right, then. What is it you want to know?"

"Rosa, you said Miss Wainwright was asking you questions about Mister Grover the last time you saw her?"

"I don't want any trouble, Mister," Rosa replied, apparently still hesitant.

"We don't want to cause you any," White answered reassuringly. "We're just looking for some information."

"Like who paid for the damage to your cantina yesterday?" Scarlet asked, suddenly feeling he was being left out and that he had to say something. "Was it Wilson Grover?"

Rosa gave him a mean look. She checked around, as if making sure nobody was listening to them.

"Don't speak so loud, *señor*," she whispered. "Walls have ears in this town." She gave another look around, before addressing the two men again. "I already gave that information to the lady earlier."

"As we told you," White noted, still very patiently, "we haven't seen her since... my friend's incident..."

"With the sheriff, I know," Rosa murmured. She hesitated again. "You must be very careful, *señores*... There are people – very influential people – out to protect Mister Grover. And he has the sheriff in his pocket."

"Pietro Gardenia, right?" Scarlet asked, narrowing his eyes.

She nodded; apparently, she didn't ask herself how Scarlet had come up with the information. But White was very curious to learn that and he made a mental note to ask him a little later. "*Señor* Gardenia was the one who paid for the damage to my cantina," she said in an even lower tone.

"I was beginning to work that out," Scarlet mused.

"Yes. Mister Grover didn't have the kind of money for that. But the *señor* Gardenia, he has plenty."

"That's what you said to Miss Wainwright, Rosa?" White asked politely.

She nodded again. "That was the last time I saw her, yes."

And then Pablo took her to that alley where he found Adam's watch, Scarlet was thinking. *Could she have run into trouble there as I did?*

"The Dawson brothers... are they related to Mister Gardenia?" he asked, frowning.

"The Dawsons are but petty thugs around this place," Rosa said scoffing. "You give them enough money, and they'll do whatever you want. The sheriff has put them in jail often, because they get drunk in public, or start some ruckus... They always find themselves in trouble."

"The sheriff didn't arrest them this time, though," White noted.

"No, he arrested me instead," Scarlet declared bitterly, "and kept me behind bars after those louts pressed charges against me for assault and battery."

What the sheriff's angle might have been for doing that, Scarlet could only guess. And he could see by the look on his commander's face that the same thought had crossed his mind. McNamara had obviously worked in the interests of somebody else...

"My son was right, *señores*. Sheriff McNamara is bad... But not as bad as *señor* Gardenia... He's in league with the Vegas mob... Nobody wants to mess with him."

"Where can we find the Dawson brothers, Rosa?" White asked.

"The best place to look would be at the town bar," she scoffed again. "Or at the *Bull's Horn*. That's another bar, with a gas station, one hundred miles from here, in the desert, by the highway. That's where all kinds of thugs, tough guys and bikers hang out... A real dump. Not a nice place for honest people, I tell you."

White nodded. His face was now very serious. "Thank you very much, Rosa. You've been very helpful."

"*De nada*. Take heed of my advice, *señores*: be very careful. Find your friends, and get away from this town. As soon as you can."

"We'll do just that, my good lady," White reassured her. "As soon as we find our friends."

Rosa gave him a very faint smile, then, excusing herself, she went back to her chores. Both Spectrum officers watched her go, and waited until she was at a safe distance.

"Are you still angry with me for being arrested, sir?" Scarlet asked matter-of-factly.

White let out a deep sigh. "It's obvious that if you were arrested, it was to stop you from discovering too much," he said dryly. "But," he added quickly, "I've plenty of other reasons to stay angry with you. So don't push your luck." He narrowed his eyes. "Do you think this Gardenia paid Captain Blue's bail last night, just like he paid for the damage done to this cantina?"

"I think it's a sure bet, yes."

"And that would have permitted Grover to go after him."

"Using the Dawson brothers to do the dirty work, yes."

"And if we are to follow your line of thought, Blue is still alive and Grover has him." White frowned. "Again: why?"

"That could be a question we'll have to ask Mister Grover."

"...Who has gone missing too. As has Symphony Angel, obviously."

"I'm really worried, sir. If she stumbled on those Dawson bullies..."

Scarlet didn't have to say more; Colonel White had understood very clearly what he meant. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

"I think it's about time we found those Dawsons," he said quietly, "to see if they know anything about Symphony's absence... and if they can give us more information on Mister Grover, and his friend, Gardenia." He eyed Scarlet. "Incidentally, you'll have to tell me how you know about that man. How did you...?"

"Let's just say," Scarlet answered with a reticent smile, while standing up, "that I... made some 'contacts' in jail."

Colonel White lifted an eyebrow. He was curious to know, that was obvious. "I'm sure that makes a VERY interesting story," he said, trying to lose the edge in his voice. He looked at his watch. "I'll call Lieutenant Green. See what more information he can dig out of the computers on all these shady characters."

"Are you making this official Spectrum business, sir?"

"Not just yet." White's features became very hard. "We'll make discreet use of Spectrum resources. We're dealing with a large part of Capt... of Adam's personal life here. It seems he wanted to keep this episode of his life to himself. He didn't tell even you." *Or his fiancée, either,* he added inwardly. "I can understand that, and I think the least we can do is keep it that way. That is, until we have to do otherwise."

Scarlet produced a smile of gratitude. "Thank you, sir. That's really... nice of you."

"Nice?" White snorted. "I didn't mean to be 'nice' about it, Scarlet. It just seems to me that information like that, as well as a possible situation like the present one could turn out to be, shouldn't be spread needlessly around the Spectrum organisation. And furthermore..." he gazed at Scarlet, "...I'm repaying a debt, here."

Scarlet nodded, understanding very well that his commander was referring to the dreadful events of some weeks earlier, when White himself had been captured by collaborators of the Mysterons – and when Scarlet and Blue had put their lives and careers on the line to help him, especially by keeping secret from all but Cloudbase senior staff the brainwashing that their commander had been subjected to.

"Nevertheless," Scarlet replied, "I'm sure Adam will appreciate it."

"Let's make it clear, however," White added quickly, "I won't hesitate to call for back-up, if we should ever need it."

"That's quite all right, sir. I wouldn't have it any other way, as a matter of fact."

White snorted. He got some money from his pocket, and put it onto the table, to pay for the coffees he and his companion had been drinking the last hour or so. "Come on, let's find those Dawson boys," he said, moving toward the door. "Let's hope they'll be able to tell us something."

* * *

Butch had driven his truck inside the warehouse in Las Vegas, where he knew his contact would be waiting for him. The door had automatically closed behind him, and the lights had been turned on, powered up by an electronic eye that had picked up the vehicle's arrival. Butch stopped the engine, at the same time killing off the music from his player. He gave a deep sigh of satisfaction, before extracting himself from his seat and stepping out of his truck. He stretched his cramped muscles. That had been a long drive, he mused. But all in all, a very satisfactory one. He glanced toward the van; the girl was certainly keeping quiet. A broad smile came across Butch's lips. It must be pretty hot in there, he thought. Enough to have quietened her down considerably. Not a bad thing, certainly. He wouldn't want to see her in all her fury to face his contact.

Time to get her outta there, he mused, chuckling. *Don't want her to melt down entirely!* He moved toward the doors at the back of his truck, humming the last song from his country music disc. Reaching the doors, he turned the key in the lock, pulled back the bolt and opened wide.

"Okay, Blondie, we've reached our destination. Time to get out, now. Somebody wants to meet with you."

He fully expected to find a very quiet Symphony, possibly huddled up against one of the walls, in the darkness of the van; he couldn't have been more wrong. He didn't even see her at first; it was really TOO dark in there. His eyes didn't have the time to adapt, as a metallic flash suddenly appeared. A steel bar came right at his head and barely missed it, striking him violently on the right shoulder. He gave a yelp of pain and then found himself driven back from the truck by a violent blow to his stomach. He then saw that his attacker was the blonde girl. Completely dishevelled and drenched by her long wait in the overheated compartment, her eyes blazing with righteous anger and her face sporting an implacable determination as he never had seen it before. The poised and articulate young woman he had met some hours earlier had transformed herself into a genuine fury.

Taken by surprise, Butch was unable to avoid a third blow, to his leg. His cry of pain was nearly drowned by the cry of victory coming from Symphony, as she sent him falling to the concrete floor. Now Butch was on his back, moaning, looking up, dazzled, and in complete disarray as the furious young woman, panting for breath, came toward him menacingly for another go.

"THAT, my dear Butch," Symphony said between clenched teeth, "that was for literally putting me through hell in that overheated and uncomfortable van of yours, listening to your blasted country music for what seemed like hours! AND, of top of that, to be forced to listen to YOUR dreadful howling!"

"E-easy now, lady!" Butch called to her, crawling away as she drew closer, his fearful eyes set on the crowbar she was still holding tight. "You don't want to do this..."

"Oh, I DO want to do this!" she almost yelled. "And I'll do it, if you don't tell me exactly where I can find Adam Svenson!"

"I don't know what..."

"You've got ONE chance, Mister! I'm not very patient! Your Mister Grover spoiled my wedding plans, do you realise that?"

"S-sorry?" Butch was confused as he didn't seem to understand what Symphony was telling him. The Angel pilot, on the other hand was growing more and more impatient.

"Where is that lowlife, anyway? That's the coward he is, sending you to get me, and then not showing himself?"

"There's been a mistake... Grover didn't send me to get you. I'm a friend, I..."

"You're a damned liar!" Symphony yelled, raising her improvised weapon. Her intention wasn't really to strike Butch, but to frighten him enough for him to confess. She didn't have to go further with her attempt, however.

"He's telling the truth."

The very quiet, soft voice came from deeper into the warehouse, behind Symphony. Its female timbre stopped the Angel pilot in her tracks. Keeping an eye on Butch, she checked in the direction of the voice, ready for any trick that might be waiting for her. First, she heard the sound of a very faint motor, that made her prick up her ears. Then she saw, coming from the other side of Butch's truck, a modern, electric wheelchair. A woman of about fifty, her once-dark hair heavily streaked with grey. She stopped her chair and stared at a perplexed-looking Symphony. Her features were soft, but at the same time, very sad and, somehow, quite determined. She gave just one look at the crowbar Symphony was holding and shook her head.

"Believe me," she said quietly, "Butch isn't your enemy. Neither am I. It's me who sent him to find you."

"You...?" Symphony said, frowning, more puzzled than ever.

"I want to help you. I know that Adam is in trouble."

"And who are you, lady, to know that?"

The woman gave a very faint, very sad smile, in which pain was fairly evident. She moved her chair closer to Symphony.

“My name is Marsha Billings,” she answered, locking eyes with the younger woman. “I used to be Wilson Grover’s girlfriend.” Her eyes suddenly blazed with disgust and contained anger. “He’s the one who put me in this chair.”

Chapter 12

The search for the Dawson brothers proved inconclusive when Captain Scarlet and Colonel White investigated Los Lobos' only bar. So, following Rosa's information, they took the car and drove all the way to the *Bull's Horn Bar*, some hundred miles away. Scarlet had recalled that it was from there that Adam had called him, the preceding day, to let him know that he and Symphony would be arriving late at Las Vegas.

Even before entering the bar, both men realized that it was exactly as Rosa had described it. There were at least thirty bikes parked in front of the door, beautiful, well maintained machines, gleaming in the sun, contrasting with the neglected façade of the bar. Paint was coming off the wall, roughly scoured away by the windborne desert sand. The sign over the door was damaged, riddled with holes, with the name of the place half-erased. From the interior, sounds of country music, loud laughter and animated conversation could be heard.

It was a dump, in every sense of the word. Yet the two men didn't hesitate to enter. The inside was just a little better than the outside. Very dark atmosphere, with tobacco smoke floating in the air, its smell pervading the place along with the smell of cheap alcohol, sweat and dust. There were men all dressed in black leather and jeans everywhere, most of them wearing on their back a big badge sporting the name "Road Rovers", and the logo of a very nasty-looking dog, a dagger clenched in its sharp teeth. Others looked like misplaced cowboys from another time, and there were only a handful of women, whose morality, judging by the way they were dressed and how they were acting around the men, was questionable. All of them seemed like tough people, some of the men clearly to be avoided. There were a few of them who gave just one glance toward Scarlet and White as they walked in the direction of the bar, but no-one paid any real attention to them.

"You said Adam made a stop here yesterday?" White grumbled as they stopped at the counter, waiting for the bartender to come to them.

Scarlet nodded. "Yes, to tell me he was going to be late." He looked around, wrinkling his nose at the smell. "According to Karen, this is where he first ran into Grover."

"I HOPE he didn't let the young lady come in here," White muttered. Scarlet gave the faintest of smiles, remembering that he had had the same reaction himself the day before. He wasn't really surprised by the colonel's comment. He knew he was rather fond of his Angel pilots.

They found an empty space at the counter, just large enough for the two of them to stand. They waited until the bartender, a tall, bulky, overweight man with a big black moustache, came over, and glared at them with impatient and intolerant eyes.

"Excuse me, my good man," Colonel White started, "but we're looking for the Dawson brothers and..."

"You gonna order something?" the bartender suddenly cut in. Seeing the puzzled gaze White gave him, he grumbled and shook his head. "You can't stay at the bar if you ain't ordering..."

"Oh!" White checked the man standing at his right, and saw the big glass of beer he had in front of him. "Same as this gentleman, then," he finally answered. "For my friend too."

The bartender nodded. It took mere seconds for the two beer glasses to appear on the counter. Meanwhile, White had searched his wallet; he put three bills next to the glass, keeping them half-covered, as the bartender reached to take them. Scarlet had seen the sum of money the colonel was offering the man – and the latter saw it too; a flicker passed through his eyes as he raised them to meet the white-haired man's.

"You can keep the change," White declared matter-of-factly.

He removed his hand and the bartender took the money, quietly, and put it into his shirt pocket. He nodded to White. "You said you were looking for the Dawson brothers?" he said. White answered with a nod of his head. The bartender pointed to a table, in a far corner of his establishment. Both Scarlet and White turned around to see a young man sitting there, playing solitaire with a deck of cards, a cigarette dangling from his lips, a small glass of some alcoholic beverage in front of him. "Billy's over there. Don't know where his brothers are."

"Billy will do perfectly," White declared. "Thank you for your co-operation, sir." That said, he left the counter, with Scarlet, leaving the two beer glasses where they were, without even

touching them. Scarlet glanced around. It didn't take two seconds before somebody took them as their own.

"That was three hundred dollars you passed to the barman," the perplexed Spectrum captain noted to his commander.

"Yes. So?"

"That's a lot of money for so little information."

"Do you want to find your friend, or not?" White remarked, as they walked toward the table occupied by Billy Dawson. "Don't tell me you wouldn't have given as much for the same information!"

"Yes, of course, but..."

"Oh, sorry. I forgot. Beating up informers is more your style."

Scarlet scowled. He realized he had lost his temper earlier, when he had interrogated the Dawsons. White was aware of that, as he also knew of his junior officer's hot temper. Scarlet had a feeling his commander would not allow him to forget that soon.

They had reached the table where young Billy Dawson sat smoking and playing cards. They stopped in front of him; it took Billy a little while to notice them and finally lift his eyes to look at them. As soon as he saw Scarlet's stern face staring straight at him, he went suddenly pale; the cards in his hand fell on the table.

"Remember me, Billy?" Scarlet noted, keeping a straight, accusing tone.

Billy nervously tried to stand up. White put a hand on his shoulder, drawing the man's attention to him. "We would like a word with you, Mister Dawson," he said, in a level, almost excessively polite tone.

Billy shook his head, staring at the older man's impassive features. "Ain't got nothing to tell you," he answered nervously.

"Oh, but I'm sure you have." White took the man by the arm, squeezing the muscles and forcing him to stand, without any apparent effort, or having to insist. By the look on his face, it was obvious that Billy was too afraid to resist. Somehow, he had the feeling he was in deep trouble. The older man didn't look like a broadminded fellow. "Now, if you would follow us, please?"

"This way." Scarlet had discovered the men's bathroom, just next to where they were standing. Checking inside, it appeared that it was empty. White nodded his consent and pushed Billy that way. The young man nearly stumbled inside the dirty, moderately large room when the Spectrum commander finally released his arm and pushed him in. He turned around furiously, to see that the two grim-looking men had stepped inside too, and that the door had closed behind them. Scarlet was checking around to see if any of the cubicles were occupied.

"Nobody in here," he declared, after a brief moment. "We won't be disturbed."

"Thank you, Mister Metcalfe," White declared, keeping stern and gleaming eyes on Billy. "Now, Mister Dawson... We would very much like you to talk to us."

"What do you think you're doing?" Dawson exploded, his face livid. "I got friends the other side of this door! In a minute, they'll come here and take care of you two!"

"You've got friends," Scarlet repeated, with disdain. "Is that why you were sitting all alone at that table, playing solitaire?"

"I'm warning you, pal..." Billy growled. "You'd better let me go, before I call some reinforcements!"

"You hear that, Mister Dawson?" White thumbed toward the closed door, through which sounds of laughter were almost drowned by loud country music. "I doubt very much that anybody would hear your calls."

"Or your screams," Scarlet deadpanned, cracking his knuckles.

White nearly rolled his eyes, over the melodramatics displayed by the captain. He knew he was playing the tough guy, presenting a falsely brutal appearance just to impress the young Dawson enough to make him talk. White wasn't fooled, as he knew Scarlet and doubted that he would go that far, even considering his earlier performance. And maybe it was a cynical answer to his commander's crack, some minutes ago. Nonetheless, seeing Billy's face, now as white as a sheet, it was working, and the young man believed his safety was in jeopardy. White decided to go along with it. He had not played 'good cop, bad cop' for a long time.

"Mister Dawson," he said, eyeing Billy with attention, "I believe you may be able to help us. Mister Metcalfe and I are looking for a friend of ours – Adam Svenson. Mister Metcalfe is convinced you know where we can find him."

"I don't know nothing!" Billy snapped with anger, defiantly glaring daggers, despite his evident fear.

"Now, Mister Dawson," White replied casually. "I'd advise you to answer the question." He nodded toward Scarlet. "My friend here doesn't have much patience."

"You wouldn't DARE hurt me in here!"

"How's your brother's arm, Billy?" Scarlet reminded him, his eyes turning very cold. "I'm sure it's still sore. I went easy on him. Much easier than I'll be on you, if you don't tell us what we want to know. Especially now that our friend Karen Wainwright has also disappeared!"

"I know nothing about where the lady's gone!" Billy protested.

"But you know about Adam Svenson, don't you?" White asked.

Billy nervously shifted on his feet; his hand reached for his pocket, and a knife suddenly appeared in it, aimed toward the two men. White addressed an annoyed look at Billy and shook his head, as Scarlet tensed and stepped forward.

"That ISN'T a very bright move, Mister Dawson."

"Keep away from me!" Billy lashed out savagely. "I swear, if you come any closer, I'll kill you!"

"You'll just have ONE chance, mate," Scarlet growled, his eyes fixed on the younger man. "And that won't do you any good. So you'd better drop that knife, right now!"

"I'm getting outta here. I'm warning you... You try to stop me and I won't hesitate!"

Billy edged toward the door, carefully keeping the two men at bay. He was more wary of Scarlet, having already seen what he was capable of. He wasn't expecting any trouble from the older, more poised man, casually standing there. He should have suspected he could be as dangerous, just by the gleam in his eyes, but Billy didn't notice. He was too busy keeping his eyes on Scarlet; so when the dark-haired Englishman took an ominous step in his direction, Billy flashed his knife at him; White, however, surprised him by swiftly taking hold of his arm. It was simple child's play for the two Spectrum men to disarm the young ruffian. Panicking, Billy tried to punch Scarlet in the face, but the latter sidestepped and the fist never landed. Colonel White's however, connected, and sent Billy sprawling on the floor, stunned.

Scarlet turned to his commander, a look of disapproval on his face. "You should have left me to handle it."

"And let you have all the fun?" White replied, scowling.

"Sir... he had a knife. He could have hurt you."

"Drop it, Metcalfe. I'm not helpless, and you should know very well that I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

Scarlet frowned, not having anticipated that bitter reply. Obviously, his commander was still annoyed with him. The captain couldn't blame him, considering all that had happened. He couldn't see any reason, however, for the colonel to take unnecessary risks, other than the fact that he probably had to let off some steam.

Better Dawson than me, then.

Billy was trying to get back on his feet, groaning in pain following the punch that had hit him squarely in the mouth. Scarlet took him by his collar, and hauled him up, before pushing him against the nearest wall. Billy's back collided roughly with it; feeling a bitter taste in his mouth, Billy spat out some blood onto the floor. He looked down at it with incredulity, then reached for his bloody mouth.

"You crazy old man," he moaned, "I think you broke one of my teeth..."

He suddenly felt two hands grabbing him by the front of his shirt, pushing him further against the wall. He blinked and looked up, staring right into two angry faces leaning close to him. The older Englishman seemed now as angry as his compatriot, who was holding him so tightly. His eyes were simply cold and ruthless.

Truth to tell, Colonel White had now had enough. He wanted some answers to his questions, and if resorting to intimidation was the only way to extract information from Billy Dawson, that's what he was ready to do.

"Now, Mister Dawson," he said, with an ominous tone to his voice, "I have even LESS patience than Mister Metcalfe. You shouldn't have tried it. Because when I lose my temper, BAD things can happen."

Scarlet winced. *Okay, the old man has really got into character*, he mused. Billy noticed his reaction and took it as a bad sign. He blinked again, staring into the older man's eyes with a mix of incredulity and fear.

"You're not serious, right?"

White shook his head. "Do you want me to ask my friend to break anything more useful to you than a tooth?"

Billy blanched. It became painfully plain to him that the man wasn't kidding at all. He was deadly serious. He became increasingly worried when he saw White putting a hand on Scarlet's shoulder.

"Show this young man how serious we are, Paul."

The smile crossing Scarlet's face was like the snarl of a tiger. He roughly pushed Billy around, twisting one of his arms behind his back and directing him toward the nearest cubicle.

"Hey!" Billy protested, struggling in vain in Scarlet's clutches. "What do you think you're doing, man?"

"You're a bright boy, try to work it out!"

Scarlet pushed open the door of the cubicle; eyes wide with horror, Billy stared down at the dirtiest, most unsanitary and disgusting toilet he had ever seen.

"Can you swim, Billy?" Scarlet said icily to the horrified man.

"Hey, no!" Billy struggled even more when Scarlet tried to shove him inside the cubicle, now knowing far too well what the Spectrum agent had in mind for him. Surprisingly, he found that he was unable to break Scarlet's grip even a little.

"You're crazy! You don't really intend to..."

"Take a deep breath, Billy."

Even though he was thrashing about wildly, it was evident to Billy that the man holding him was stronger than he was and would eventually succeed in forcing him into the cubicle. He was already one step inside. "No, please, don't do that!"

Dawson was suddenly out of the cubicle with his back against the sink on the opposing wall. He winced, feeling the sink pressing between his ribs, sending a wave of pain up his spine. Scarlet had taken him by the collar again, leaning over him, his eyes flashing with sinister intent.

"If you want me to leave you alone, you'd better tell us where we can find Adam Svenson!" Scarlet barked furiously at him. "Because if you don't, I promise you, you'll get a dip in the crapper!"

"I don't know where he is!" Billy yelled in panic.

"But Grover has him, right?" White asked calmly from behind Scarlet.

"Yes! Yes, he has him!"

White drew a deep breath. "He's alive, then."

"Yes, he's alive! At least, the last I heard of him, he was..."

"What does Grover want from him?"

"I don't know..."

"Dawson," Scarlet growled, "my patience is reaching its limits!"

Billy swallowed hard, looking into the Brit's icy blue eyes. One look over at White told him that he couldn't count on any intervention from him. He shivered. He was still very afraid to open his mouth, Scarlet realized, wondering what kind of influence was being held over the man. At the present moment, however, Billy was even more worried about what would happen to him.

"Will said... he said that he wanted to cash in big with Svenson," Billy finally conceded, nervously. "He said that he owed him a lot, and that he intended to get every last penny of that debt." His eyes moved from White to the hard features of Scarlet, and then back. "He said that if we helped him get his hands on Svenson, we would have our share of the deal."

"We?"

Billy nervously shook his head. "My brothers and me... and the other guys. I swear, that's all I know..."

"What about Karen Wainwright?" White asked again.

"I told you, I don't know where the lady's gone. I admit my me and my brothers went after her," he added quickly. "But I don't know how, she disappeared suddenly..."

"She escaped, then?" White remarked.

Billy nodded. "And we haven't been able to find her since then..."

"Why were you after her to begin with?" Scarlet asked. Billy didn't answer; he simply averted his eyes. It was that obvious he was still reluctant to give a response because he was afraid. Scarlet's face hardened even more. "What did Grover want from her?"

"I don't know... I – I think he wanted to put some pressure on Svenson, somehow... But I don't know where she is, I promise!"

He's too frightened to lie, Scarlet mused grimly. *At least, Karen isn't in the hands of that Grover scum...* Now WHERE she could be, that was another question...

"A last question, Mister Dawson," White then said quietly. "We would like to know what the relationship between Wilson Grover and Pietro Gardenia is."

Billy's eyes trembled suddenly, before opening wide. He stared incredulously at the two Englishmen; apparently, he didn't expect them to ever mention that name.

"Please," he pleaded in a whisper, wincing. "Let me go... My back is hurting me. I'll tell you anything you want after."

Scarlet hesitated. He glanced at White who briefly nodded an order, then he released Dawson. Drawing a deep breath, Billy straightened up, trying to relax.

"Now, Dawson," White demanded, "about Mister Gardenia..."

No sooner had the name escaped the Colonel's lips that Billy suddenly rammed into Scarlet, sending him backward, colliding right into his commander. Then Billy took advantage of the moment and swiftly took off toward the door and then out of the bathroom. Getting over their surprise, both Scarlet and White rushed to the now closing door. By the time they had opened it, Billy was running through the tables and perplexed clients of the Bull's Horn Bar, toward the exit. He didn't even look over his shoulder as he ran. Scarlet went after him, crossing the room swiftly, pushing people out of his way, vaguely hearing grumbled protests in his wake, and aware that White was following close behind.

Reaching the door, Scarlet stepped outside; from the doorway, he scanned the area for Dawson. From where he was standing, he couldn't see him. He was about to step into the street, when White, putting a hand on his shoulder, stopped him.

"Let him go, for now. I think we got everything we could out of him, anyway."

Scarlet slapped the doorframe with his open hand in frustration. "I'm such a fool! I'm sorry, sir, I should have suspected that he would try something like that."

"It's as much my fault as yours. I didn't realize how afraid Dawson was. Now, whether it's of Grover or Gardenia, is another question."

"You think he'll go to Grover and tell him what happened?"

"I doubt our young Mister Dawson would confess to him what he told us," White said in a low tone. "It's still a possibility, though."

"In the meantime," Scarlet added grumpily. "We still haven't found either Adam or Karen."

"At least we know two things: Symphony escaped those ruffians. We just don't know where she is now."

"And Adam is alive."

White nodded. "Of course, provided that Dawson didn't lie to us. I don't think he would have dared, though." He paused a second. "What do you make of all this? About Grover wanting to 'cash in big' on Adam?"

Scarlet scowled. "In view of what you told me of their relationship, I think that should be obvious. Grover is up to the same thing as twenty-five years ago."

"You mean he's going to ransom him."

"It looks that way, yes."

"Right. That's what I suspect, too." White looked over his shoulder, making sure there wasn't anybody around listening to their conversation. "Of course, we still can't be sure of anything. We only have the word of a two-time ruffian to back that theory."

"We can easily check. If Grover's made contact with the Svenson family..."

"Already? Well, it's possible... I'll contact Green, and ask him to make a call to Boston to..."

Scarlet stopped his commander suddenly, drawing his attention to a car that was presently pulling out of the highway and coming toward the gas pumps. It was a police vehicle, and the outlines of at least three passengers, including the driver, were apparent through the windows.

"Why do I have the feeling that this car may be here for us?" Scarlet noted grimly.

"You may be right," White agreed. "We'd better get back inside. We haven't been spotted yet."

They went back into the bar, and Scarlet gave a puzzled stare at his commander. "Don't tell me you're afraid to face the sheriff or one of his deputies, sir," he noted quietly. "That wouldn't be like you at all."

"Afraid? No. I just think that we might want to avoid them for the moment. Just in case, and until we find out their role in this affair." He conspicuously eyed his junior officer. "And seeing your disposition of late, I don't think it would be in your best interests to face the local law. You had me worried for a while, in there."

"Come on, you didn't really think I was going to seriously hurt Dawson?"

"Seriously hurt him, no. Push his head down that nauseating toilet, maybe." White gave the faintest of smiles. "Not that he wouldn't have deserved it." He looked around, checking on their surroundings. "Now I'll try to find a quiet place to make that call to Green. In the meantime, try to keep a low profile."

"Are you worried that I might get into trouble, sir?"

White narrowed his eyes, asking himself if Scarlet was somehow mocking him. "Constantly. Especially in a place like this." He nodded slowly. "I won't be long. Wait for me."

He left the younger man where he was standing and went towards the bathroom he had left some minutes ago. Scarlet watched him disappear through the door, wondering if it was such a good idea for them to separate like this, even for a short time. Seeing as how everybody kept disappearing, every time they were left alone... Shrugging the concern aside, he went to the nearest window to look outside. Through the dirty panes, he had a good view of his rented car. The police vehicle had stopped right next to it, and he could see one of the uniformed officers checking it thoroughly. Two other policemen were standing nearby. *Damn*, Scarlet thought, scowling with discontent, *they're really here to check on us... What is it this time?*

"Still having trouble with the authorities, are you, Paul?"

Scarlet turned around, hearing the mocking voice that had boomed out behind him. In the smoky environment of the bar, he narrowed his eyes, scanning the area. He saw a big man, with dark sunglasses, casually seated at a table, some ten feet from him, and looking in his direction with a bemused smile. The man raised an arm, covered with tattoos, and saluted the Spectrum officer with a half-filled beer glass.

Scarlet's eyes widened. "Jake?"

The man's smile broadened, and he nodded with satisfaction, as Scarlet approached. "Nice to see you again, buddy!"

"You're out of jail?" Scarlet asked with puzzlement, stopping in front of the man. He eyed the sleeveless vest he was wearing, with the *Road Rovers* logo on the back.

"Yeah, I was just s'posed to be there for the night," Jake answered quietly. "I left about an hour after you, actually. So I came here, to join up with my buddies. We're s'posed to hit the road shortly." He pulled up a chair. "Sit down a little, make yourself comfortable, and have a beer with me."

"I don't know if I'll have the time for a beer, but..."

"What's pressing you? Ain't like you can go anywhere at the moment!" Jake thumbed through the window next to which he was seated, and outdoors, where Scarlet could still see his car and the interested policemen around it. "I think the sheriff's deputies are keeping their eyes on you and your pal."

"I don't see any reason why," Scarlet noted, finally accepting Jake's offer of a seat, and looking out.

"I don't think that creep McNamara needs any reason. You should have heard him screaming at his boys at the station! Oh, he was furious, all right! I think he will be looking for any reason to put you back in the joint, along with your friend."

Why, I wonder... Scarlet was becoming more and more convinced that McNamara had something to do with Blue's kidnapping – maybe even had a direct hand in it – and that he was trying to stop him or Colonel White interfering.

"I'd advise you to keep your head down," Jake pursued. "Avoid McNamara and his boys. Especially that scum Ringward. That one is a nasty back-stabbing heel."

"Thanks," Scarlet grumbled, remembering how the man had crept up on him to hit him from behind the first time. "I'd already noticed that."

"I saw that wimp Billy Dawson coming out of the bathroom, running like a scared rabbit," Jake continued. "He looked like he had a real bad time in there. Then I saw you coming out of there as well, with that white-haired guy that got you out of jail. So I figured out what could have frightened Dawson that way." He chuckled. "You were trying to get information out of him?"

Scarlet simply nodded, not wanting to debate the subject fully with Jake; after all, he didn't know where the man stood in this whole affair. Jake didn't seem to notice the suspicion in the Spectrum agent's eyes.

"So, you still haven't found your friend Svenson?"

"No, not yet."

Jake grunted. "Ah, that's bad... That's really bad. Listen... You need help, any kind of it... You just ask, y'hear?"

A perplexed Scarlet furrowed his brow. Now that was a curious offer... "Tell me, Jake... Why would you want to help me? I fail to see your motive."

"My motive?" Jake laughed out loud. He leaned forward in his chair, toward the Spectrum officer, and removed his glasses, to show the black eye he was sporting. There was no resentment in his expression, only a kind of amusement. "Anybody able to do *this* to me deserves my respect, buddy. Furthermore, anything that would bug the police, especially that bastard of a sheriff, McNamara, would be an intense pleasure, for me and my buds..."

"I have a feeling it's not only because he threw you in jail for the night."

Jake snorted derisively. "I was caught off guard. I was drunk brainless, and couldn't put a foot in front of the other. I got into a scrap with somebody for a reason I don't even remember... And I was alone in town. You can be sure that if some of my buddies had been with me, McNamara would never even DARE arrest me!"

A faint smile crossed Scarlet's face. Somehow, he had no doubt about that...

"So you're a tough guy, eh, Jake?"

"Of course I am!" Jake almost snorted. "I'm a *Road Rover*! Ain't nobody tougher than us guys this side of the States!"

Scarlet nodded again. He didn't have the heart to tell Jake that he had no idea what the *Road Rovers* were, and that Jake's obvious pride in the name didn't mean anything to him. He leaned over the table toward the man, and Jake, feeling that he had something to tell him in confidence, did the same in his direction.

"So if you're so tough," Scarlet murmured quietly, "maybe you can give me the information I need that might help me locate my friend."

"What is it you want to know?" Jake asked in the same tone.

"I'd like to have further information on Pietro Gardenia."

Jake grumbled, and sat back in his seat. "You don't know what you're asking, bud," he growled.

"I thought you were a tough guy," Scarlet replied.

"That's a very touchy subject, Paul."

"Right, maybe I was wrong, then." Scarlet let out a frustrated sigh and straightened up, staring coldly at Jake. "You're not as tough as I thought you were. If you're that frightened of this Gardenia chap, than I guess you're no better than that wimp Dawson."

"Hey!" Jake warned him, pointing a finger at him. "Watch it! Comparing me to Dawson, you're insulting me!"

"What am I to think, then?" Scarlet continued without changing his tone.

"I ain't afraid of nobody, bud. I ain't no stoolie, that's all. You imagine the kind of trouble I'd be in if word got out?"

"I don't want you to give me confidential information," Scarlet protested. "You told me a good deal already in prison. Now I only need one last detail out of you. And it wouldn't cost you much."

"What detail?" Jake mumbled.

"I'd like to know where I can get in touch with Pietro Gardenia."

Jake shot him a perplexed stare. Then he laughed and took a swig from his glass. "Why didn't you say so before? Yeah, that wouldn't cost me that much, you're right. It's common knowledge, in fact. Gardenia has a lot of businesses in Las Vegas. But most of the time, you can find him at his casino, the *First Base*, it's called. Apparently, a good, honest gambling establishment, where you can play roulette, blackjack and such. But also the front for some illegal operations. You want a good big time poker game, you go there."

"Thank you, Jake. That's all I wanted to know."

"You plan on going there to threaten Gardenia?" Jake shook his head. "Didn't I tell you he was in league with the Vegas mob? You know what you'll be getting yourself into?"

"I would risk anything to get my friend back, Jake," Scarlet replied with blazing eyes.

Jake shrugged. "Your funeral, bud. I must admit, either you don't understand the danger, or you've got even more guts than I first thought!"

Colonel White had come out of the bathroom, and was searching the bar with his eyes, obviously looking for his officer, and finally spotted him. Seeing him come his way, Scarlet excused himself to Jake and got up to approach his commanding officer. The latter pointed toward the still seated Jake.

"Isn't that your friend from jail?" he asked with a frown.

"Yes, that's him," Scarlet concurred. "He gave me some more information about that Gardenia character I already told you about. Of course, I don't know how reliable the information is, and we'll have to check it, but I don't think we'll have any trouble confirming it. I don't think Jake has any reason to lie to me."

"You think Gardenia is mixed up in this affair?"

"It's possible, considering what we've found out about his involvement so far."

White nodded slowly. Scarlet looked at him closely. He could see, by the hard expression on his face, that something was afoot.

"What is it?" Scarlet asked. "Did you contact Cloudbase?"

"Yes, I did." White swiftly checked around, and took his junior officer into a corner, to talk to him in confidence, without risking any prying ear hearing their conversation. "Green called Boston. He reached the Svenson estate, and the company offices owned by the family. He talked to Adam's sister, Katherine. Well, for starters, it doesn't seem as if anybody out there is aware of what's happened just yet. Everything seems normal enough, except..."

"Except?"

"It seems John Svenson left the city today, soon after lunch, following an important phone call. He's gone to the West Coast."

"The West Coast?" Scarlet murmured with suspicion. "Nothing more specific?"

"Apparently, he didn't say that much to his secretary. Just that he had some important business to attend to there, and that he'd be gone for a couple of days. Green did the necessary research, though. It was rather easy to find out, as Svenson didn't take the Company jet and booked an airline ticket for the next available commercial flight... For Las Vegas."

"Vegas." Scarlet nodded, his suspicion taking form. "So Grover might have already contacted him."

"That's quite possible. Svenson left in a hurry. He didn't even tell his wife he was going, which makes his leaving Boston like that even more curious."

"Could be he was instructed not to say anything to anyone."

White nodded slowly. "Kidnappers usually operate under the same modus operandi – they instruct their victim's relatives not to talk to anybody, especially the police, and then order them to go to a meeting point for them to either be contacted again, or deliver the ransom. If Grover has contacted Svenson, it's probable that he was given the same kind of instructions." White grumbled with annoyance. "I'd wish Svenson had contacted Spectrum. Surely, he must be aware that we're more than capable of handling these situations. I can't believe he agreed to any kind of demand from Grover, and go to face him alone."

"If John Svenson took the first plane after lunch," Scarlet mused, "it's quite possible he hasn't reached Vegas yet?"

"According to Green's research, his plane hasn't landed in Las Vegas, yet," White agreed. "We may still be able to intercept him, and stop him from walking right into the lion's den."

"What do you suggest we do, sir?"

White was about to answer, when his eyes caught Jake who, rising from his chair, was making large movements in their direction, beckoning them to join him. "I think your friend wants to tell us something."

Scarlet noticed Jake's gestures in turn; the biker was looking out the dirty window next to which he was standing. Curious to know what he wanted from them, both Spectrum officers went over to him. He motioned them to keep clear of the window.

"What is it, Jake? Is there some kind of trouble?" Scarlet asked.

"Don't know exactly," Jake grumbled. "You tell me. I thought you should SEE this."

Scarlet and White looked through the window. A few feet in front of the bar, where they had left their car, they could see the three deputy sheriffs, as if they were standing guard next to it. One of them was listening with attention to Billy Dawson, who seemed to be explaining something to him with great agitation, and large gestures. He was showing his damaged and bruised face, and was pointing toward the bar. Scarlet recognized the policeman listening to Dawson's declaration as Harvey Ringward. His face was set enough, but he was taking lengthy notes in a small notebook.

"Told you I wasn't a stoolie, Paul," Jake noted with a tone of disgust in his voice. "But as you can see, Billy Dawson doesn't have the same kind of scruples!"

"He's probably complaining about what's been done to him," White replied dryly.

"You can be sure those deputies will take advantage of this to arrest both of you," Jake agreed.

"It's probably the sheriff's instructions, too," Scarlet added with a grim enough tone. "Or he wouldn't have assigned three deputies to follow us around. He certainly want us out of circulation." He sighed in frustration. "I suppose that's partly my fault."

"Not entirely," White replied. "I think I may have some responsibility for that too. I came down rather harshly on McNamara."

"How harshly?" Scarlet asked with curiosity.

"I don't think it's important for now. We must find a way to avoid arrest."

Scarlet nodded. Evidently, under the circumstances, telling the local authorities about Spectrum was out of the question. Colonel White wasn't even considering it, not knowing where the sheriff and the rest of his men stood. He didn't want to take that risk. And neither did Scarlet. There was no telling what impact it might have for Blue.

"Well, as long as you stay in here, you've got nothing to fear," Jake then said with a broad grin of satisfaction, sitting down quietly again. "They won't come in here to take you."

"And why's that?" Scarlet asked, puzzled.

"Why?" Jake scowled loudly. "Because they're too yellow to come into a place full of *Road Rovers*!" He took his glass and raised it high in the air. "Isn't that right, boys?" he called loudly. "You think the police will come to bother us on our own turf?"

Cheers of joy and derisive snorts made themselves heard all around the barroom, along with whistles, laughter and applause. Both Captain Scarlet and Colonel White looked around with some perplexity – and certainly amusement, as glasses and bottles were raised in answer to Jake's invective. Jake sat back comfortably, waving casually through the window.

"Consider yourselves under our protection, gentlemen," he added, in an assured voice.

White nodded. "Well, that's all very kind of you, Mister... er..."

"Just call me Jake."

"But we can't stay in here forever," White continue.

"Well, the minute you show your nose outside, those deputies out there will fall on you."

"All the same, we must go back to Las Vegas," White insisted. "As soon as possible. As corny as it may sound... it could be a matter of life or death."

"Matter of life or death, eh?" Jake stroked his chin, apparently pondering something. After a few seconds, a thought seemed to cross his mind, and he looked up at the two Englishmen standing in front of him. "Maybe I can help you out, guys..."

"We're not asking you to risk confronting the police, Jake," White responded. "You or any of your friends."

The biker scoffed loudly. "You're kidding, right? Any *Road Rover* would jump at the chance to screw *those* guys up!"

"We appreciate it, Jake... I think."

"Okay, then. I'll get you out of this place. Getting to Las Vegas will be up to you after that."

White nodded. "Whatever you have in mind, I'll just ask you for a few minutes. I need to make a call." He looked at Scarlet, who had turned an interrogative stare at him. "There is someone I want to contact in Las Vegas," he explained, more for the benefit of his officer than for Jake. "Concerning meeting with... a friend, if we happen not to be there to do it ourselves."

Scarlet nodded his understanding. As for Jake, he simply shrugged.

"Of course. Go make your call. That'll give me time to make preparations."

"Preparations for what exactly?" Scarlet asked, frowning in puzzlement.

"Oh, yeah. Got to tell you that, haven't I?" Jake chuckled softly, as if he had made some kind of a joke only he could understand. "Either of you know how to ride a bike?"

Scarlet and White exchanged puzzled, interrogative stares.

"Why do you ask?" Scarlet asked with a frown, addressing Jake.

Without answering, the biker raised his head. "Rios, Sharkey!" he called loudly. "Come over here a minute!"

Both Scarlet and White turned around as two other bikers approached them from behind. The men were tall, impressive fellows, dressed in jeans and leather jackets festooned in badges and chains. One of them wore a bandana on his head. Neither Scarlet nor White were really sure if these men were not some kind of threat to them. They were intimidating enough, staring at them, with their eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, making it impossible to read their intentions. For all they knew, all of the *Road Rovers* could gang up on them at any moment.

Their concerns disappeared when Jake spoke next, waving toward the two other men, a faint smile crossing his lips.

"Meet my buddies, gentlemen. Fellow *Road Rovers*. It will be a pleasure for them to help you." His smile broadened. "They're your tickets out of this dump!"

* * *

Upon arriving at the Las Vegas MacCarran International Airport, John Svenson nervously checked his watch for the nth time. The trip had seemed to last an eternity for him; an endless time of worry that he knew could only be far worse for Adam. He was just certain that Grover, now having Adam in his clutches, would be able to do anything he wanted with him. That wasn't a very reassuring thought. During those long hours in the plane, for all Svenson knew, Grover could have been slowly killing his son.

Svenson felt physically and morally drained, and it was showing, to the point that a clerk at the information booth asked him if he was all right. Svenson simply shrugged it off, saying the trip had been very tiring, and only asked where he could find a good hotel. The clerk instructed him to go to the hotel check-in counters, south of the baggage claim area, where somebody would take his reservation for a room in 'one of the best hotels in Las Vegas'.

Frankly, John Svenson couldn't care less if the hotel was that good. He just wanted to keep a low profile, and he was rather doubtful that the hotel check-in counters would be able to find him a place that would give him just that. He picked up his portable computer, hoisted his travel bag on his shoulder and directed his steps there anyway, hoping they could help him.

After having made a reservation for an hotel room at the Las Vegas Hilton, Svenson reflected on how to get to his hotel. Limo or cab... He had one last stop to make on the way – one that would need the discretion a limo wouldn't be able to provide. So he settled his choice on a taxi.

Walking out of the building, Svenson looked around for the first available cab. He had to wait ten minutes, before finally losing the first one to a young woman who seemed in a hurry. She apologized profusely, explaining quickly that 'she was to be the maid of honour at a wedding, that she was late, that the ceremony would not start without her and that her best friend would probably be mad at her for the rest of her days if she was to ruin this beautiful day.' Svenson

stayed standing on the sidewalk, looking aghast as the cab sped away, for a good few seconds before realizing he had been lied to.

"You seem lost, Mister. Want any help?"

Svenson turned around to see a very young man behind him, casually leaning on a wall. He couldn't be more than seventeen. Seeing the way he was dressed, and the insolence clearly evident in his eyes, Svenson decided that he wasn't of much interest to him, so he paid no further attention to him and turned back, looking for his taxi.

"Sorry," the young man snorted. "Didn't mean to bother you. I just thought I might be of help to you."

"If you're a cab driver, then yes, you can help me," Svenson answered rather bluntly. He knew he wasn't being very civil, but he didn't care. He had too much on his mind to bother showing any courtesy to someone who wouldn't mind his own business.

"No, I don't own a cab," the young man answered, chuckling, leaving the wall and approaching beside Svenson. "But maybe I can call you one."

"No, thank you." Svenson took some steps away from the youth. Years of doing business with different kinds of people had sharpened his judgement of character. He didn't know why, but he felt that he shouldn't trust this one.

"Oh, come on, I'm good at it."

Svenson felt the young man approaching again and grabbing his arm. He turned in anger to face him and to tell him to get his hands off him, when he heard an ominous click, and felt a nudge against his side. Lowering his gaze, he saw a very small, but deadly pistol in the hand of the other man. So small was the weapon that it was almost entirely hidden by the folds of Svenson's vest. He stared in incredulity at the young man.

"You're a cab," the youth deadpanned, with an evil smile. He then nodded, taking a very cold tone. "Walk with me and be careful. This thing can go off on its own!"

Svenson nodded nervously. The young man dragged him along the sidewalk, driving him away from the taxi area. Svenson had no choice but to follow him docilely; he was feeling for certain at the moment that Grover was now making his move, before he would be allowed to find a way to stop him from hurting his son or the rest of his family.

The youth pulled him into a dark corner, where another young man was apparently waiting. This new one took Svenson by his collar and threw him against the wall. Svenson's shoulders connected roughly, driving the air out of his lungs. His portable computer and bag were jerked out of his hands, and at the same time, he stared right into the barrel of the small gun.

"Okay, pops! Time to give us your wallet!"

Svenson blinked in surprise. "W-what?"

"Your wallet," the youth with the gun repeated insistently, while his companion briefly checked around for any witnesses. "Give it to us quickly. Don't force us to be rough!"

Svenson's frown furrowed. "You're not sent by Grover?" he murmured.

The second youth came closer; he drew a knife and Svenson stiffened nervously. "Who's this Grover?" he growled, his eyes flashing. "Come on, don't waste our time! Give us your wallet, your watch, that ring on your finger, and anything else you've got on you. Then we'll go and leave you alone."

Svenson swallowed hard. So these guys were only petty thieves. They weren't accomplices to Will Grover, as he had first thought. "Listen, boys, I don't have time for this. I'll give you anything you want, but you've got to leave me my portable. I need it."

The knife flashed dangerously close to his face. "Who do you take us for, pops?" he said between his teeth. "You're giving us everything, and I suggest you cooperate! You're in no position to make ANY demands!"

Svenson felt his heart sink, seeing how badly things were turning out for him. If he was left without his computer, and all the precious data he needed within in, how would he be able to buy back Adam's freedom? Without any money left, how would he be able to even buy a new one? And how would Grover be able to contact him, if he didn't have his cell phone with him? He wouldn't even be able to report the robbery to the police, without going against Grover's instructions and seeing his son die!

"Please," he whispered. "It's a question of life and death. I can give you much more money than..."

"You're wasting our time!" the youth with the knife interrupted him suddenly, without hearing him out. He was obviously nervous that somebody might finally see what was going on in that dark corner. "Now GIVE us your wallet, man! Or I'll swear I'll slit your throat from ear to ear!"

"You will do no such thing."

That was an ominous tone if ever the two youths had ever heard one, coming from behind them. They turned around, to see a strikingly beautiful blonde woman, not very tall, staring at them with a hard and cold glare. They frowned in disbelief, and Svenson, who did not know who the small person coming to his rescue could be, did too.

"Well, look at this!" the boy with the knife laughed with contempt. "Seems like your girlfriend is coming to your rescue, pops!"

"I mean it, *punks*," the young woman warned, the heavy French accent they had heard earlier now even more evident. "Let that gentleman go, or..."

"Or WHAT?" the boy with the gun snorted. He didn't even think of raising his own weapon and simply made a threatening step toward the woman. If he had expected her to draw back, he was mistaken. She swiftly raised her arm, and put a gun – a little bit bigger than his own – right under his nose. He froze into place and went pale.

"Don't push it, punks," she warned again, her golden eyes flashing with righteous anger. "You'd better drop your weapons right now, before I get nasty!"

"You wouldn't use that!" the boy holding the knife retorted insolently. He had let go of Svenson, but was keeping the knife close to him. "How about I stick your friend here?"

"You do that, and you'll be dead at my feet the very next second," the woman replied coldly. "And don't think I wouldn't do it either. I've had a VERY bad day, today. You have NO idea. So all I'm asking is to drop the two of you like the skunks you are!" She cocked the hammer of her gun, sending a shiver down the boys' spines. "So go ahead, it'll be my pleasure!"

Gun and knife fell from her opponents' hands and dropped on the ground. The boys could see the woman was itching to shoot at them, so they didn't dare take any chance.

Destiny Angel nodded her satisfaction. Her free hand searched the pocket of her coat, and drew out a pair of handcuffs that she tossed to Svenson. He caught them with one hand. "*Monsieur*, would you care to lock one end of these bracelets onto one of these gentlemen? Don't worry, I'm keeping them in my sights. If they try anything funny, I'll shoot."

Svenson snapped the handcuff onto the closer punk's wrist. Destiny motioned the three of them to come out of the corner and onto the sidewalk, closer to the side of the street. There was a taxi waiting there, with its driver reading the newspaper at the wheel. Svenson scowled with frustration. *Why wasn't there one available just five minutes ago*, he reflected. *That would have spared me all that anxiety!*

Destiny looped the handcuff through the handle of the passenger door and snapped the other end around the other boy's hand, squeezing it tight. The two boys protested vehemently. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm just making sure you won't get away, boys," she explained casually. "I'm sure the Airport authorities will have a lot of questions to ask you. This gentleman here certainly isn't your first victim, right?"

"You've got no right... Let us go!"

The taxi driver, hearing the ruckus near his vehicle, stepped out of it and walked around. He saw the two young men shackled to his door and his eyes opened wide with surprise and disbelief.

"What's going on, here?" he asked the group, especially addressing the well-dressed young woman and the older gentleman standing next to her, looking about as confused as himself.

"*Monsieur*," Destiny said quietly, "I suggest you use the radio in your taxi to call the police. These two punks here will surely interest them. They tried to rob this gentleman."

"You had to shackle them to my cab?!"

"I had to make sure they wouldn't escape. Now, please? Would you...?" She addressed the man with her most charming of smiles and, still fairly confused, he found himself only able to nod his agreement. He returned to his seat to use his onboard radio. Meanwhile, Destiny took an uneasy John Svenson by the arm and dragged him away from the cab and the two quarrelling youths handcuffed to it. Each one of them was accusing the other of the bad idea of mugging apparently rich persons at the very doors of the airport.

Another taxi was pulling in to the kerb at that moment, and Destiny, opening the back door wide, pushed Svenson inside and climbed into it. "Drive away, quickly," she called to the driver with urgency, before a stunned Svenson's eyes.

The driver didn't need to be told twice, and pushed the accelerator down hard. Destiny looked over her shoulder; she could see the other taxi's driver getting out of his vehicle, looking even more puzzled than before and staring hopelessly, as they sped away.

"The police will be arriving soon to take care of those punks," Destiny explained to a gaping Svenson. "But I suspect you don't want contact with them yourself, do you, *monsieur*?"

"Who are you?" asked Svenson, perplexed that she should make such an assumption – and be right about it.

"A friend, don't worry. Do you have a place to stay?"

"I... I took a room at the Hilton," he answered, not really sure if he should confide in her.

She rolled her eyes. "That would not do. You could be too easily spotted there. I'm taking you to my hotel. It's far more discreet."

"Beg your pardon?" Svenson was rolling eyes of surprise now. This young woman's behaviour was becoming more and more confusing. Not to mention suspect. He shrugged, trying to regain a little of his past confidence. "I'm sorry, young lady, but I have VERY pressing business to attend to here, and I'm not sure where you stand in all this. Now I'm very grateful that you came to my rescue, but if you don't explain yourself properly..."

"You're John Svenson, right?"

"Yes, I am. Now, who are you and WHERE are you taking me?"

"I'm simply following orders, *monsieur* Svenson."

"Orders?" Svenson nodded slowly. Now he thought he was beginning to understand. "You've been sent by Wilson Grover?" he asked tentatively.

She shook her head to the negative, looking at him gravely. "*Non, monsieur* Svenson. I wasn't sent by Wilson Grover. I told you, I am a friend. We all are. All we want to do is to help you, you and your son."

"What do you know about me and my son?" Svenson asked, suddenly defensive, feeling uneasy about this and unsure whether he should trust the woman or not. "For the last time, who are you, and who sent you to help me? Who are you talking about?"

Destiny looked squarely at him, her face very calm. Then she carefully drew a cardholder from her purse, and, with a reassuring gesture gave it to him, and watched as he opened it nervously.

"You don't have to worry about us, *monsieur* Svenson," she then declared, as he looked at the card, his brow furrowed. "We only want to help you. And help your son. Spectrum takes care of its own."

Chapter 13

Marsha Billings nervously glanced toward the little door behind which she knew was the prisoner. The boy was keeping quiet. He hadn't made a sound since the evening before, and the young woman was worried. She closed her eyes, and shivered. She couldn't escape all those awful memories of Will striking the Svenson kid so brutally.

It had gone on for a seemingly endless time, until the moaning sounds had weakened to the point where she could hardly hear them anymore. Will had then come out of the small, dark room, and Marsha, narrowing her eyes to see inside, didn't get a chance to glimpse the boy she just knew had been left in there in a sorry state. Then a grim-looking Grover had pulled the bolt home to make sure the boy wouldn't try to get away, had had a late dinner, and went to bed, without giving another thought to the boy. As for Marsha, the sounds of the beating, and the painful cries of the child, muffled by the closed door, had been haunting her sleep.

Around midday, when Will Grover had left their little rented house, he had specifically forbidden Marsha to unlock and open the door to Adam's prison. Even though she argued that he might need water. He had explained that the kid was a 'sly one' and that he would probably take advantage of the moment to try and escape, which was something Grover didn't want to risk. Marsha, however, couldn't help but wonder if this was really his reason for not wanting her to go in there. He probably didn't want for her to see what he had done to the boy, and that frightened her.

It was near evening and Will Grover was long gone. Marsha couldn't find in herself the strength and courage to go open that door. She kept staring at it for long hours, not knowing what to do, almost hoping to hear just one sound from behind it. Could the boy be dead? she wondered, worriedly. Maybe he needed some medical attention. And he had not had anything to eat for a long time... Despite Will's interdiction, she had to go and see for herself, she finally reasoned. She had to see if the young Svenson boy was all right.

She poured a small quantity of chicken soup that was simmering on the stove into a bowl, went into the medicine cabinet in the bathroom to get a first aid kit and, drawing in a deep breath to finally find the nerve to stand up to Grover and go against his instructions, went to the door and pulled back the bolt.

The door creaked open in front of her, and the light entered, if just a little. Marsha narrowed her eyes, searching into the dark corners of the small room.

"Adam?" she called in an unsure voice. "Can you hear me?"

Not a sound, at first. Only a deadly silence. The only thing that the worried Marsha could hear was her heart, beating wildly. Then she heard a soft moan, coming from the mattress they had put in there to serve as a bed for the kidnapped boy. Her eyes scanned in that direction. She had been so nervous, that she had not seen Adam there at first, but now she could see him, sprawled on the thin mattress, not moving, and whimpering faintly.

"Adam?" she whispered, entering the dark room. The boy didn't seem a threat to her, and certainly, he didn't appear in any shape to try to make a run for it. If anything, moving with effort, he tried to back away, hearing her voice, like an injured small animal would. He didn't get that far, as the wall behind him stopped his progress. He stayed there, half slouched, curled up, hiding his face from her sight with his bound hands, shivering.

"Don't worry, Adam," she said with a reassuring, soft voice, approaching him, "My name... My name is Marsha. I won't hurt you." She bit her lip. Now why did she have to tell him her name? She couldn't really tell. Maybe she just wanted to reassure him. She presented him with the steaming bowl. "See, I just brought you some soup. You must be hungry..."

"Leave me alone," the boy sobbed with effort, not moving one inch from his position.

"Now, please, you must eat something," Marsha tried again, her voice ever so soft. "Please, Adam, let me come close... I swear, I won't hurt you, in any way."

She moved in the child's direction. He didn't draw back, but didn't move either. When she reached him, she looked closely at him, but didn't get to see past his hands in the semi-darkness

of the room. She could see however how damaged they were, from his earlier attempts to free them. She winced slightly, feeling a pang of guilt in her heart. She put down her bowl.

"Adam, don't be afraid," she told the child, reaching to him. "Let me get a look at you. I brought something for your hands, and..."

She stopped and gasped, seeing the young, swollen face, covered with bruises and cuts, as Adam finally lowered his hands. His clothes were bloody and torn from the vicious treatment inflicted on him by Grover. He looked as if he was in terrible pain.

"Oh, Adam," she murmured, her voice shaky. "I'm so sorry..."

"You're sorry?" he tiredly repeated, blinking his eyes, as if either he didn't understand or didn't believe her.

"I never imagined it would go that far. I... Don't worry, I'll clean those nasty bruises."

She drew closer, and opened her first aid kit, under the boy's watchful and concerned gaze. When she reached again to him, with a pad soaked with disinfectant in her hand, he backed away, wincing as he did, and let out a faint moan.

"What is it?" Marsha asked with a concerned frown. "Are you in pain?"

"Hurts a little... when I breathe."

Marsha shivered, hearing those words. She was already convinced that Will had been far too brutal with the boy; now, seeing him like this, and knowing that he more than probably had a broken, or at the very least a cracked, rib, she was feeling really uncomfortable. She tried to discard the thought from her mind, difficult though that proved, and gently pressed the pad onto the cut the boy had on his bruised cheek, just under his right eye. Adam moved nervously, and grimaced again, letting out a grunt.

"Don't move," she said in a hushed tone. "I know it stinks, but it's for your own good... You'll feel better after."

Adam had stopped struggling to get away. Whether he stopped because he couldn't find the strength to escape her, or because he was beginning to trust her, Marsha couldn't really tell. He obstinately kept looking away, as if he was ignoring her presence. He was still obviously nervous, but he calmed down gradually, letting her do as she pleased, probably realizing that she really wanted to take care of him.

After a couple of minutes, with his eyes still looking down, he finally addressed her in a tentative, hesitant voice: "Why are you helping me? I thought you were with him."

Marsha hesitated, not really certain how to answer that. "Stay quiet," she replied, keeping her voice gentle. "You must not tire yourself."

"He's gonna kill me."

She frowned. "Now, stop talking nonsense," she admonished the boy.

"I know he's going to," Adam murmured with a shiver. "He practically told me so."

"Adam... You'll be back home soon."

"No, I won't. Even if my Dad pays up. Mister Grover's gonna kill me. He can't let me go. Not after this. I know who he is. I'm too dangerous a witness..."

Marsha could hear the fear in Adam's voice. There was a fatalism in his insistence. He had a very clear view of his situation, and had no illusions about what his fate would be. In fact, she realized bitterly, he was much more lucid that she had been herself.

She couldn't explain to herself why she had agreed to participate in Will's plans. Sure, she had done a lot of bad things in her life, even ended up in prison for a short period of time, but never had she ever done anything as serious as this. Kidnapping a child, to ransom him to his family. That had appeared so wrong, to begin with, when Will had started talking about it. At first she had thought he was only joking, but gradually, she had understood that he was serious. Serious enough to use the knowledge he had learned from his gardener father to win himself a job in the Svenson's household, one of the richest and most respected families in Boston. He had finally convinced her that it would be easy, that afterwards, they would live the high life, even if it meant leaving the country, and that they would never be short of anything ever again. Marsha had finally let herself be tempted by his promises, and she had given in, agreeing to be his accomplice, to eventually keep the child captive in this house until his parents paid up.

She had never thought, for one second, that Will Grover would want to get rid of the child. Even knowing his violent behaviour. She had always assumed that he would give Adam back to his parents. But maybe she was just blinding herself to the obvious. Adam was right. Grover

would probably not let him go free. Not with the boy's present state, serving as a reminder of her boyfriend's contempt and even hate for him. He was so jealous of him, held him in such contempt that he would not hesitate one instant to kill him.

Marsha was finally realizing how wrong all of this was, how stupid she had been to believe Will Grover. She should never have listened to him.

Her conscience was telling her that she would probably have to pay the price for it. One way or the other. She reflected that she wouldn't let it be the same price as Grover's. She would not lose her soul.

"I won't let him hurt you anymore, Adam," she declared to the young boy.

"Yeah?" he whispered, in a doubtful and shaky voice. "What you gonna do about it?"

Marsha swallowed hard. The last doubt she might have had faded away, and she put down the pad, sighing heavily.

"I'm going to take you back to your parents," she murmured finally.

Adam thought he had misheard. He looked at her, blinking. "What?" he whispered. He watched in disbelief as she started working on his bonds, frenetically. It wasn't long before they fell to the floor, leaving his hands free.

"I can't let Will hurt you more than he already has," she answered, getting shakily to her feet. She was shivering at the very idea that she was now putting herself in danger for the sake of the child. Surely, Will would never forgive her. She helped Adam to his feet. The boy couldn't believe it; it was beyond all his hopes.

"You're going to help me?" he asked timidly. As he stood upright, a wave of nausea caught him. He steadied himself against the wall; his body was hurting all over from the beating Grover had given him. He had trouble finding his balance. Marsha leaned toward him, concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm gonna be," Adam responded with some assurance coming into his still faint voice.

"You're really going to take me back to my parents, Miss Marsha?"

"That's what I said, right?" she assured him with the shadow of a smile. "Now we'd better get moving. Will has been gone for a long time, and I don't know when he's going to be back... We got to get away from here before he does."

Adam shivered; just the idea of facing Will Grover again was making his skin crawl. That was enough to give him some strength. He nodded briefly. With the help of Marsha, he stepped toward the opened door, grunting.

"You're going to be okay?" Marsha asked again. "Can you walk?"

"I'll CRAWL away from here if I have to!" Adam responded, biting his lip against the throbbing pain in all his muscles. "I don't want to stay here a minute longer!"

"You're a very courageous and strong boy," Marsha reflected. "Don't worry. I'll see that nothing bad happens to you. You'll soon be back home, safe."

Adam nodded his approval. That was what he wanted more than anything else in the world right now. To be safely back home. Away from the dangerous intentions of Will Grover. And to be able to make his peace with his father after the way he had talked to him the last time he had seen him.

He was finally stepping out of the dark room in which he had been kept a prisoner for what seemed to him like an eternity, Marsha close to him, blinking at the light in the kitchen. He froze when he heard a loud rumbling. Marsha reassured him quickly.

"That's only a thunderstorm, breaking out," she explained. "The weather forecasts have been announcing it all day."

Adam shook his head nervously. He wasn't really afraid of thunderstorms. It was just that this one was adding to the dreadfulness of the situation. He couldn't shake off that uncomfortably creepy feeling.

A flash of lightning suddenly lit the room more, and then was quickly followed by a thunderous sound. The lights went out, and they were plunged into darkness. Adam shivered almost despite himself. He had been in the dark for far too long; it was making him nervous.

"It's all right," Marsha comforted him. "The lights'll be back in a minute. Come on, I'll guide you to the door."

She took the boy by the arm and together they tottered out of the kitchen, and then into a small, dark hall. They couldn't see much. A sudden rush of cool wind suddenly hit them in the

face, and they heard a sudden crash. It wasn't only the thunder, but another sound also. Seeming to come from nearby. Adam couldn't stop himself from feeling afraid.

"I can't wait to be back home," he murmured thankfully to Marsha.

There was another flash, lighting the hall through a nearby window... and from the open door, right in front of them. A powerful silhouette was suddenly framed in the doorway, and both Adam and Marsha let out a cry of surprise and panic.

Then, the lights came back, and Adam and Marsha blinked, as Will Grover, his face set, stared at them mercilessly.

"Is that so, boy?" he asked in response to Adam's last statement, stressing cruelly on the last word, his eyes flashing with an anger that matched the bad weather. Adam's face quickly drained of what little colour it had left, as Grover, walking further into the house, stared fixedly at him. Then the big man looked up at Marsha. The young woman was shivering, and her features were as pale as Adam's. She swallowed hard.

"Let him go, Will," she pleaded with him.

"Are you crazy, Marsha?" he asked her bluntly.

"Please, you've got to let him go back to his parents. You can't..."

"We're going to have the money soon. TONIGHT. I come back to tell you that good news and what do I find? You, trying to help that little twerp to escape! You're really out of your mind!"

Marsha swallowed hard. Adam was standing a little behind her, hoping, without really believing it, that she would be able to protect him.

"You'll have the money," she noted with as firm a voice she was able to muster. "So you can let him go..."

Grover snorted derisively, and nodded towards the frightened boy. "Be realistic, Marsha! What do you think he's gonna do when he's back with his parents?" he said between his teeth. "He knows who we are. He can identify us, and the cops will be after us before you know it!"

Marsha felt her heart miss a beat. She now had confirmation of what she suspected. As for Adam, she could almost hear his breathing suddenly increase with his mounting fear.

"Will, I know what you're implying... But you can't seriously plan to..."

"What do you think I was planning all along?" Grover growled, interrupting her suddenly. "I... WE can't let him go like that. He's too dangerous." He produced a switchblade from his pocket, and released the blade. That made Marsha jump in surprise, while Adam's face drained of colour, as he stared at the knife with dread. Grover addressed him a faint but evil smile. "I'm real sorry, kid. S'nothing personal, you must understand that. Only business..."

Realising that time was quickly running out for the fearful youth by her side, Marsha then took a very quick and sudden decision. She didn't hesitate one instant, and jumped Grover with all the courage and determination she could call upon. He didn't expect such a fierce attack coming from her and stumbled backwards.

"Run, Adam!"

Adam didn't hesitate. Taking advantage of the time Marsha was buying him, and despair making him regain his strength, he darted toward the open door, passing within inches of Grover. The big man attempted to catch him, but the boy was too fast, and Marsha was literally all over him, obstructing his efforts. Adam disappeared into the thick of the darkness outside, into the raging rain. Grover swore forcefully; he could see the boy would escape him if he didn't quickly get rid of Marsha's hindrance. He turned to her.

What Marsha Billings next saw was the big hand of Will Grover balling into a fist and raising high in the air. Then it came right at her and caught her on the temple. She literally saw stars. The pain made her let go of Grover, and he pushed her away from him, so brutally that it sent her crashing to the floor. Her head hit something...

The last image her blackening mind registered was that of Will Grover running out of the house, in pursuit of his escaping prey...

* * *

Seated in the small office where she had been brought, waiting for her host to finish her phone call, Symphony Angel looked thoughtfully down at the picture she was holding in her hand.

Slowly, she traced the contours of the face of the blond man on it, seemingly smiling at her. She missed Adam, and she was so worried for him.

Marsha Billings had told her all about Wilson Grover. What he had done years ago to Adam, when he was a boy. The kidnapping, the ransom, the savage beating, the plans he had to kill the boy to protect himself from a potentially dangerous witness, instead of giving him back to his parents. How Marsha herself had been at the receiving end of Grover's fury when she had finally decided to help the endangered child. All that had sent a shiver down Symphony's spine and turned her stomach. Now she understood the hatred Adam had for that despicable man, and his fear for her, if she were to face him all alone. And she understood why he wasn't so eager to tell her much about that horrible experience he had had as a child. It was probably something he would rather forget than talk about.

Symphony's concern for her missing fiancé had increased considerably since she had learned the full story. Now that Marsha had confirmed to her that Grover was, indeed, responsible for Adam's disappearance, that he was holding him, she feared what the man might do to him. She was growing ever more desperate to find him. She would have given anything, done anything, just to have him back and make sure he was safe and sound. She felt sure she would be ready to make a deal with the devil himself.

On the other side of the desk, Marsha put down the phone, casting a thoughtful glance at the younger woman. Seeing her so lost in thought, and apparently unaware that she had finished with her call, Marsha manoeuvred her chair around the desk and approached the girl. She looked down at the picture Symphony was staring at.

"He's become a very handsome man," she reflected quietly.

Symphony raised her eyes, seemingly seeing her for the first time at her side. Marsha shook her head. "Sorry about the delay. That client couldn't afford to wait."

"What kind of business do you run here exactly?" Symphony asked. She pocketed the picture and then looked around the office in curiosity. There were some posters hanging from the walls, announcing shows and sporting names in various Las Vegas casinos and clubs. Marsha nodded and gestured toward them.

"I'm an agent," she explained. "I make bookings for artistes here in Las Vegas and in other towns in Nevada. Singers, dancers, stand-up comedians, musicians, any kind of act you can find in casinos, cabarets, clubs and restaurants... Individuals or troupes, depending on what the business calls for. Small shows, mind you. And nothing too fancy. I even got a couple of magicians under contract." She shrugged, thoughtfully. "I was a singer in a troupe in Atlantic City, years ago. Before I encountered Will Grover. I... did something stupid back then, and I ended up in prison for a short period of time. Since then, it's gone from bad to worse. The worst being Grover himself." She moved her chair and stopped in front of Symphony, to address her face to face. She gave a deep, regretful sigh. "After the... 'Svenson affair', as the newspapers called it, I served a full ten years, without parole. Because of my co-operation with the police and the fact that I tried to... help Adam, ending up in this chair for it. When I got out, I had to learn to live again. I couldn't get back to my old life as a singer; for me, that time was finished. But I could at least use the contacts and the knowledge I had acquired back then, to start a new business."

"And you moved to Las Vegas?" Symphony asked, her brow furrowing. "That's some kind of an odd coincidence, don't you think, considering Grover came to these parts in turn, years later?"

"Coincidence has NOTHING to do with it," Marsha responded, shaking her head again. "Will Grover and I used to mix with the same crowds. That's how we met actually, much to my misfortune. We have many common... friends. Or at least acquaintances. And in reality, I started my business in Atlantic City. That's where I learned from one such acquaintance that Grover had been released, about five years ago, and that he was hanging around here, doing odds jobs and calling in old favours, to make a living." Her glance became thoughtful. "He did twenty years for the kidnapping and attempted murder of Adam Svenson. Not counting what he tried to do – and did – to me. I couldn't believe that the law could have considered that he had paid his debt to the society in full. I knew him. I knew he wouldn't stay straight. He would eventually go back to his old tricks. I was sure of it. And I wanted to be there, to catch him in the

act, and have him sent to prison again. So I left Atlantic City, and moved my business here, to Las Vegas."

"To keep an eye on him."

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Symphony wondered about the older woman's motives. "Why didn't you do something against him before today?"

"Because... Will Grover's kept pretty quiet, these last five years. If anything, the small things he did weren't enough for him to get in deep trouble, and I didn't have enough against him to hold up in a court of law. Will is well-protected, by somebody with big influence in the community. I needed something big, to nail him good. And now, with his kidnapping of Adam again – I have that something."

"So this is all about revenge," Symphony murmured, nodding.

"Call it what you want. Wouldn't you want the same if you ended up in a chair because of a punk like him?"

Symphony narrowed her eyes. "I don't know that many punks, to begin with," she replied, rather coldly.

"Don't be condescending, young lady," Marsha warned her. "Remember that I want to help you. If not for my having sent Butch to fetch you, Grover would probably have succeeded in getting his dirty hands on you."

"You can't know THAT for sure," Symphony retorted. "I can take care of myself."

Marsha gave the faintest of smiles. "Yes, I saw that. Poor Butch'll be nursing his wounds for days!"

"I hope he doesn't hold it against me," Symphony said. "But he should have told me, in the first place, rather than 'kidnapping' me the way he did!"

"And you would have followed without any protests?"

"Of course, I would have protested!" Symphony scoffed. "For all I know, Adam is still in Los Lobos. And I have a friend locked up in a prison cell there! I feel as if I've abandoned both of them!"

Marsha slowly shook her head. "Well, for starters, Adam is not in Los Lobos, anymore. Of that, I'm sure. And... your other friend was released from jail, a few hours ago."

"Released?"

"Somebody came into town and paid his bail. So he was allowed to leave."

"Wait, that sounds suspiciously like what happened to Adam!"

"It's nothing like what happened to Adam," Marsha reassured her. "No, from what I know, your friend left with the man who paid the bail... His boss, or something like that."

"Boss?" Symphony murmured, suddenly becoming pale. "A... silver-haired English gentleman?"

"I don't know about the description, really... But it was an Englishman, yes."

Lord, we're in trouble, Symphony thought with a feeling of doomed certainty. If Colonel White had travelled to Los Lobos to have Captain Scarlet released from jail, then it was almost certain he had learned what had happened and what was going on – or at least part of it. To what extent, she couldn't imagine. Whether he knew now of the wedding plans or not... But it was certain that he must be angry. And an angry Colonel White wasn't something she was ready to face in a hurry.

But she'd have to worry about that later on. Now, she knew that Paul was out of jail – not out of trouble, certainly – but free, anyway. And she still had Adam to concern herself about. She had to find him. And obviously, Marsha Billings would really be able to help her do just that. That woman knew a lot about this whole affair. Suspiciously so, in fact. Symphony felt that she had to act cautiously, in any case.

"How come you're so well-informed?" the Angel asked the older woman. "Do you have an informant in Los Lobos?"

"Yes, somebody's been keeping tabs for me about what's going on in that town. Not that it's difficult. Everybody knows everything going on there..."

"And that's how you found out about what was happening with Adam? And what Grover could be planning?"

Marsha sighed. "I told you. I have many contacts in common with Grover. Not all of them are good people, you can imagine. I had to keep in touch with those people to know what Grover was about. One of those people is called Pietro Gardenia..."

Symphony suddenly cut in, her brow furrowed: "He used to be a baseball player, right?"

"With the Boston Red Sox, yes," Marsha confirmed. "He and Will Grover used to play in the Minor Leagues, long ago. After retiring from the game – a rich man – Gardenia opened a couple of clubs and a casino here in Las Vegas. He's a crook, mixed up in a lot of shady business, especially illegal gambling. Word is that he's in league with the Vegas mob, but the police haven't been able to prove anything against him so far. I don't know the exact story between them, but it seems Gardenia owes a lot to Grover. Or the other way round, for that matter. The fact is, however, that Gardenia has a lot of influence around here. And at the moment, he's using it to help Grover."

"I know that guy paid the damages to that cantina in Los Lobos," Symphony reflected. "And that he most probably paid the bail to get Adam out of prison there."

"So it would be easier for Grover to get his hands on him," Marsha confirmed with a nod.

"I already figured that out, yes. But you still didn't tell me how you found out. No matter how many contacts you have, you can't have received that information by chance. Gardenia wouldn't let word get around that easily."

"The fact is that I'm in business with Gardenia. I provide him with artistes for his lounge acts. And I have some other 'friends' working there that give me information they think might be useful to me. And since I pay well..."

"How reliable is the information?" Symphony asked suspiciously.

"Reliable enough to have learned that Grover contacted Gardenia recently, and proposed they should be partners in a 'business' that's going to pay big bucks." When Symphony stared back at her blankly, Marsha shook her head. "My... 'inside man' then learned about Adam Svenson's abduction in Los Lobos and told me about it. Knowing Grover like I do, it wasn't difficult for me to figure out what it was he and Gardenia were up to. They're keeping Adam somewhere, as a prisoner. They want to use him again, to get money."

Symphony frowned deeply, doubtfully. "To get money? Adam isn't a rich man, Miss Billings. How did Grover think he could..."

"You didn't let me finish, Miss Wainwright. I told you I knew Grover. Much better than I would really care to admit. He's a creature of habit. And a very stubborn one at that. If something didn't succeed once, he'd try it again another time. Twenty-five years ago, he wanted to ransom young Adam to his father. I would bet anything that he'll try it again this time. Plus... he wants revenge. That whole affair had him ending in prison. He hated the Svensons so much back then. You can easily imagine how much he hates them NOW..."

"When I met with Grover, I told him it was obvious there was some kind of unfinished business between him and Adam," Symphony reminded herself. "My Lord... He already was planning to get his revenge..." She looked straight at Marsha. "Where is he holding Adam?"

"I don't know that yet," Marsha answered with a sigh. "That's something I still need to find out."

"Well, your inside man had better work quicker!" Symphony spat with impatience. "Because it's obvious time's running out for Adam!"

"You think it's an easy task?" Marsha answered bitterly. "This isn't a professional spy we're talking about! If my informer is discovered, he'll be killed. And do you think we'll be able to help Adam, after that?"

"You must have an idea where Adam might be," Symphony insisted. "You already told me he wasn't in Los Lobos anymore..."

Marsha hesitated a moment. "Perhaps..." she started carefully, "perhaps there is a possibility. He may be at Gardenia's casino. The First Base. The basement is some kind of a bunker. Way underneath the casino, with concrete walls, a foot thick... Gardenia keeps stolen goods there. And... it may be a good place to keep a prisoner."

"Can't your inside man check that out?"

"Not without putting his life in danger, no."

Symphony let out a disgruntled sigh. She sat up straight in her chair. "Then I guess I'll have to do it myself," she declared.

"Are you crazy?" Marsha protested, frowning. "How do you plan to do that?"

"It's a casino. It means I can get in without difficulty, right?"

"Well, you can get into the casino without trouble, that's for sure, but you won't be able to run around the house freely! Much less visit the basement and find the bunker! Even people working there can't go that far."

That got Symphony thinking. "But if I was an employee, rather than a client, I'd have more freedom of the place, wouldn't I?"

Marsha gave her a disbelieving stare. "Miss Wainwright... Karen... I'm almost afraid to follow your line of thought..."

"I don't have much choice, Marsha," Symphony replied with assurance. "I have to go there and find Adam. I need your help to get inside that casino." She narrowed her eyes at the still doubtful woman, and put on the most persuasive voice she could muster: "You already helped me a great deal with all that information you gave me. See this through, please. Get me inside that casino... and you'll see Will Grover back in prison for his crimes before long."

That was enough for Marsha Billings to finally take her decision. She slowly nodded her consent, and turned her chair around to grab the phone on her desk. "Linda, give me Hallway, please. I need him right away in my office. Without delay." She hung up the phone, and turned again to face Symphony. "Now, Karen... Do you have any particular talent that may be of use?"

* * *

For Juliette Pontoin, today was most probably one of the worst days she had ever had. Probably including that disastrous day when she and WAAF Captain Paul Metcalfe had split up, some years ago.

So far she'd had to lie to her commander, keep him occupied so he would not discover what was going on behind his back, had to act silly and innocent – which was definitely not in her nature – but all to no avail. He had seen through her, was infuriated by her behaviour, and yelled at her. What was making it worse was that it seemed so useless. After that moment of fury, Colonel White had calmed down considerably, and even went to the extent of offering to help in Captain Blue's predicament. That was before they all learned the rest of what had happened, actually. Blue's disappearance, and apparent kidnapping, Scarlet ending up in jail, AND Symphony disappearing in turn. And all the while, Colonel White had been behaving himself admirably, involving himself directly in the search operation, keeping his fiery temper in check, despite the fact that he would have good reason to be furious with all of them. That was making her feel ashamed... and uncomfortable.

And he didn't even seem to know the whole truth, just yet. She felt for certain that, along with all the others, she could end up in front of a firing squad, if ever THAT was to happen. Or, at the very least, a court martial.

Now for the worst part. Following their investigation in Los Lobos, where they had discovered what had happened to Blue, and what that man Will Grover seemed to be up to, neither Colonel White nor Captain Scarlet were able to get back to Las Vegas in time to meet John Svenson at MacCarran Airport. They had been delayed – for what reason, Destiny didn't know exactly. Colonel White hadn't given her many details when he'd called. The colonel's instructions to her were to fetch Blue's father from the airport, to make sure he was safe, and to bring him back to the St-Maurice Hotel, where they would all meet later. Under no circumstances was she to let John Svenson out of her sight. Given what was happening, there was no telling in what danger he could find himself, if he were to be left to handle this alone.

All in all, that wouldn't be such a bad mission, if John Svenson had not been so disagreeable to begin with. After all these years of hearing about the man, Destiny finally understood why Adam couldn't get on with his father. All the way from the airport to the hotel, Svenson kept protesting that Spectrum would spoil everything, that they would endanger his son's life by their mere presence, because the abductors had specifically demanded that the authorities did not get involved. Destiny tried to argue that Spectrum was more than capable of facing this kind of situation. Svenson wouldn't listen. There was so much bitterness in him, it was almost palpable. According to him, Spectrum was nothing but trouble, to begin with. It had already taken Adam away from him, the family, the business. And now that organization would

more than likely cause his death. That was enough to make Destiny's head spin. She had to call on all her strength and patience not to deck the man to finally keep him quiet.

He stopped complaining when Destiny finally made it clear that, whether he liked it or not, Spectrum would get involved. And if Svenson had anything to say against it, he would have to discuss it with the Spectrum commander himself, when they met.

It was impossible to find a free room for Svenson at the Saint-Maurice Hotel. They were all taken, and in any case, suspecting that Adam's father might take any opportunity to slip away from her, Destiny wanted to have him close by, to keep her eyes on him. So she took him directly to her room, pretending that they'd get him his own as soon as possible. Apparently, Svenson couldn't care less. All he was thinking about at the moment was his son's safety, so his personal comfort was a poor second in his mind. That was all to his credit, Destiny reflected. Despite all the grievances between them, she realized that John Svenson still loved his son very much, and would probably do anything to have him back safe and sound.

Svenson was polite enough to acknowledge Amanda Wainwright's presence in the room, but that was it. The two never had met before. Not even during the Spectrum commissioning ceremony, some years ago, to which family members of the Spectrum senior staff had been invited. If Amanda and her husband, proud parents of their Karen, had attended this important moment for their daughter, that had not been the case for John Svenson. He had totally disapproved of his son's choice of career and had not come. Only Adam's mother did, probably against her husband's wishes. Adam had been so very pleased to see his mother, but not greatly surprised by his father's absence. He had acted as if he didn't care, but it had been apparent to those who knew him that he had been hurt.

Svenson obviously wasn't aware of his son's recent wedding plans. No, evidently, there was no reason for Blue to even mention it to him. He didn't even question why Amanda Wainwright was there to begin with. Probably the thought never crossed his mind, so concerned he was for his son. And he also felt drained, with the flight from the East Coast and then the encounter with the thieves at the airport. He needed to freshen up a little, and wanted a hot shower. That way, he reflected with some dry irony, he would be suitably presentable to meet with the Spectrum high commander himself – whenever he arrived.

The shower was running in the bathroom, with a grim-looking Destiny staring at the closed door, when Amanda Wainwright finally voiced the question she was asking herself:

"When will they arrive, anyway? I would have thought that they'd be here by the time you came back with Mister Svenson."

Destiny checked her watch. It had been a little less than three hours since Colonel White had called to give her his instructions. She was beginning to worry. "They shouldn't be long, now," she told Amanda, trying to hide her concern. *I hope they will arrive soon*, she added inwardly to herself. She didn't want to stay alone with Svenson that much longer. She didn't feel that she would be able to stand up to him, without having to resort to physical violence if he would not behave himself.

"Well, I'm hungry," Amanda declared, leaving her chair and getting to her feet. "I'm going down to get something to eat."

Destiny stared at the older woman with something akin to a glitter of admiration in her eyes. When she had learned that her daughter was missing, some hours earlier, Amanda had showed some concern for her safety. Of course she was worried about Karen's disappearance, even when Destiny had assured her that it was more than certain, from all the appearances, that she had not been abducted by the same men who presently had Adam. Knowing Symphony as she did, Destiny was sure that she had gone in search of Adam all by herself. Colonel White seemed to have come to that same conclusion, although probably not for the same reasons as Destiny. He couldn't know about the two of them being so close. Could he?

In any case, Amanda had showed herself confident in her daughter. She knew her much better than anyone else, with her impetuous temper, her strong-willed character, and her dedication. She had worried enough about her when she was in the Secret Service, and then later on as a fighter pilot for Spectrum, to know she could take very good care of herself. And that she had the habit of throwing herself completely into a mission, becoming totally oblivious to anything else surrounding her, until she saw it through.

Since her current mission was to find out where her fiancé could be, Amanda knew very well that Karen wouldn't stop until she had found him. She could understand that, and that wouldn't stop her worrying. But she would worry in silence. Destiny couldn't help but be impressed by her attitude. How different she was from that obnoxious John Svenson.

"Want me to bring you something, honey?" Amanda asked the French girl. She then nodded towards the bathroom door. "And for him too?"

"Raw fish would do for Mister Svenson, I'm sure," Destiny mumbled in a low tone.

"You mean sushi."

"Whatever. I hate that, but I'm sure he loves it. He looks like the kind of man who'd eat raw meals."

"You're mean, Juliette," Amanda noted with a faint, but amused smile.

"Not as mean as he is, Amanda," Destiny sighed. "How such a disagreeable man could be the father of somebody as sweet and kind as Adam is beyond me!"

"I'll bring back something delicious for you," Amanda promised, laughing. "I think you've earned it. It's been a long day for you."

"And it isn't finished yet," Destiny remarked. She addressed a smile of her own to the older woman. "Thank you, Amanda. You're very kind."

Amanda walked toward the door and opened it to exit the room. But she suddenly stopped right in the doorway when her eyes caught two figures standing in front of the door leading to the next room – the one that was originally shared by Captain Scarlet and Colonel White. Carefully, she closed the door, leaving it open just a crack to get a glimpse at what was going on in the corridor.

"Juliette!" she called in a whisper over her shoulder. "There's two strange fellas in front of the men's door!"

Her senses suddenly alert, Destiny got to her feet and joined Amanda; she gently pushed the older woman aside, and peered through the crack. She just had the time to see two tall men, dressed in big boots, leather, jeans and wearing chains all over, finally opening the next door and entering the room. A very ominous logo sporting a mean-looking dog and the words *Road Rovers* were the last things she saw on the back of one of the men. She closed her door.

"They're inside," she informed Amanda.

The latter grew pale. "Who are those guys?" she whispered, as if afraid they would hear her through the wall and adjoining door.

"I don't know, but they certainly mean trouble," Destiny replied. "And seeing as neither Colonel White and Captain Scarlet are here at the moment..."

"Could these guys be in league with the ones that kidnapped Adam?" Amanda asked.

"It's possible." Destiny narrowed her eyes at the adjoining door. She went to it, picking up her purse from the bed, and taking her pistol from it. "Why not ask them that?"

"Are you crazy?" Amanda protested, still in a hushed voice. "We'd better call the police!"

"And put Adam in danger?" Destiny replied. "No, Amanda. Let me handle it. I'm trained for this, you know?"

"Oh, I know!" Amanda examined the young woman with her eyes. She knew, all right, and she could imagine that more than likely, Juliette had received training comparable to Karen's. But she had trouble envisioning the French girl being able to hold her own against two tall and apparently strong, tough guys. She was so petite, in comparison to the tall, athletic Karen.

Amanda watched in concern as Destiny carefully opened the adjoining door, only a small crack, to peek inside the next room. The Angel pilot immediately saw one of the men standing there, his back turned to her, and going through the stuff in the top drawer of the dresser on the other side of the second bed. No sign of the other man. Destiny nodded towards Amanda. "Wait here!" she whispered.

The older woman nodded her consent. This was way out of her league. She had no intention of hindering Destiny's work by imposing her presence on her. Without a sound, Destiny entered the room, closing the door behind her.

The man had still his back turned to her and didn't hear anything. He seemed to grow frustrated with his search. Destiny looked around. A light under the bathroom door told her where the second man was. Destiny caught sight of the lamp standing next to the first bed and, tucking her pistol into the loose belt of her dress, lifted it with great care. She tiptoed her way

toward the man standing there, still unsuspecting of her presence. He just had slammed the drawer closed, when she finally reached him, standing only a foot or so behind him. Then he started to turn around. She didn't hesitate another second.

The lamp came crashing down on the man's skull before Destiny had even had a chance to glimpse his face. He fell down heavily on the floor, groaning in pain, bits of the porcelain lamp lying all around him. The French girl quickly drew her weapon to cover him.

"Don't move or I'll blow your brains out!"

Not only a moan from the man lying at her feet answered her. But the sudden shout coming from behind her, as the door of the bathroom flung open, nearly made her jump out of her skin.

"Destiny, what do you think you're doing?"

It was pure instinct that made Destiny turn around, gun at the ready. But she had already recognized the voice, and lowered the gun almost instantly. She opened her eyes wide with surprise, however, and stared in disbelief at her commander standing there in the open doorway. She barely recognized him, dressed in leather and jeans, with a red bandana on his head; he quickly removed it, revealing the white hair it concealed, and walked briskly over to her.

"What are you doing with that gun?"

"Sir," she sputtered uneasily, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was you, at first. I..."

A loud groan made her lower her eyes. She saw the man lying at her feet turning over onto his back, and then trying to sit up. Her already wide eyes opened up wider still, and she crouched by the man, helping him to straighten up. "Oh, *mon Dieu!* Paul, it's you! Oh, I'm so sorry..."

"Juliette," he grumbled painfully, holding his throbbing head and trying to get his bearings, "I realize you were angry at me, but I would never have thought you'd try to break my skull open!"

"I didn't recognize you!" Destiny defended herself. "I thought you were a thief, or maybe someone connected with Captain Blue's kidnappers!"

"Are you all right, Scarlet?" White asked, looking down at his officer.

"I will be," Scarlet muttered, shooting an angry look at Destiny. "Fortunately, I have a thick skull."

Destiny helped him to his feet. She scrutinized him from head to toes, taking in all the bizarre details of his attire, than stared again at her commander, dressed in the same fashion. "If you'll pardon my asking, sir... Why are you dressed like that?"

"It was the only way to escape the sheriff," Scarlet mumbled, gingerly rubbing the back of his head, where the lamp had hit him.

"Pardon?" Destiny said, rolling confused eyes. "Escape the sheriff?"

"The sheriff of Los Lobos," Scarlet explained with a mocking smile. "You see, *chérie*, the Colonel and I are now outlaws in that State..."

"Oh, stop talking nonsense!" the young woman admonished him. "What REALLY happened?"

"It's a long story, Destiny," White replied. "One we'll gladly tell you when we'll have more time. For now, we have more pressing business. Did you get John Svenson at the Airport?"

"Of course, sir," Destiny answered quickly, reverting to a more official tone. "He's in the other room, taking a shower."

"Did you have a talk with him about what's going on?"

"More or less, sir. The... talk we had confirmed what you were suspecting: Captain Blue has indeed been kidnapped, and the abductors have contacted his father for a ransom."

"Mister Svenson didn't say more about it, I take it."

"No, sir. He's rather upset that Spectrum would intervene."

Scarlet scoffed. "Upset? Whatever for?"

"He seems to think we'll be putting his son in danger."

"Is that so?" White grumbled with bad humour. "Perhaps I should have a talk with Mister Svenson."

He started towards the adjoining door. Destiny called to him just as he put his hand on the handle. "Sir, I've got to warn you: he's in a bad mood."

"That's perfect, then," White replied over his shoulder. "So am I."

He opened the door and entered the other room.

"We'd better follow, Juliette," Scarlet then told Destiny, tapping on her shoulder to get her attention. "He really IS in a bad mood. Poor Svenson will have the devil to deal with, if he pushes the old man too hard."

Destiny nodded quietly, but permitted herself a faint smile; *maybe there'll be justice after all*, she mused, thinking that Svenson would probably get to meet his match. She and Scarlet followed White into the room.

* * *

Since Destiny had disappeared in the other room, to deal with the two men they had seen entering, Amanda Wainwright had been waiting impatiently, wondering what would happen and how she could help. She had heard the commotion, and the shouts coming from the other side of the door and was now growing increasingly worried about not hearing anything else for the past few minutes. She was pondering whether or not she should phone for help, when the door finally opened wide; she jumped to her feet when one of the men she had seen in the corridor briskly walked in. She gasped in surprise upon recognizing him.

"Colonel White! What..." She conspicuously examined him as he stopped only a few feet from her, searching for the right words. "...What strange garments you're wearing," she finally reflected, finding nothing more to say.

Destiny stepped in, in turn, closely followed by Scarlet. Amanda eyed the younger man, and the clothes he was wearing, very similar to those of his commander, with the *Road Rover* patch and all. She rolled her eyes. "What, Paul, you too? So it was you two I saw earlier in the corridor? You gave me a scare. What's the story with those clothes?"

"The new fashion for undercover agents, Mrs. Wainwright," Scarlet replied, with a faint smile. That seemed to cause a twinge of pain in the back of his head. He reached for the aching spot and gave a murderous look toward Destiny, who only answered with a bashful smile.

"Very classy, don't you think?" White added in turn, addressing Amanda.

"It's not you at all," the woman answered, looking at him thoughtfully. "All that is missing is the bike..."

"There's two of them parked outside," Scarlet came back, grinning mischievously. "You should have seen the colonel. You would have thought he's been riding motorbikes all his life. I had trouble keeping up with him."

"Just because I never talk about something I've done, doesn't mean I've never done it, Captain," Colonel White replied coldly. "It was a long time ago, but there are things you don't forget."

"Come to think of it," Amanda suddenly said, her eyes still set on the colonel with the same amused curiosity, "that style's growing on you. You're planning to join that club, the *Road Rovers*?"

"Who knows?" Scarlet chuckled. "Maybe recruiting some of them for Spectrum might be a good idea."

"Why not?" White deadpanned, his eyes flashing. "I may be giving one of them *your* job..."

The door of the bathroom opened at that moment, and John Svenson came out, fully dressed in the same clothes he had been wearing when he had arrived, minus the jacket and necktie, apparently refreshed but, to Destiny and Amanda, looking as grim as he did before. Seeing both White and Scarlet standing there, in their biker clothes, he stopped dead, unsure of who they could be. Realising that their garments were distressing him, Colonel White took a step towards him, his hand held out. "Mister Svenson, I presume? I'm Colonel White."

"Colonel White," Svenson repeated, still uncertain. He looked at the hand for a short instant, then took it to exchange a handshake, not taking his eyes off the man standing in front of him, scrutinizing him circumspectly. "That's your organization's new uniform, I take it?"

"It's a long story, Mister Svenson," White replied. "One that has to do with your son, I'm afraid."

"Yes, my son." Svenson let go of White's hand. He searched around for his shoes and found them near the bathroom door. Taking them in his hands, he went to sit down at the end of one of the beds to put them on. Everybody was staring at him, especially Colonel White, who came to stand in front of him. Destiny, Scarlet and Amanda stayed in the background, waiting.

They knew it was better to let the colonel handle this on his own, and so, with a common and silent agreement, they would not interfere. Unless it became necessary to do so.

"Will Grover has your son, Mister Svenson," Colonel White started. "We know that as a certainty."

"So do I," Svenson replied coldly, tying his first shoe. "That's the reason why I'm here in the first place. To get Adam out of this mess he's in."

"By paying the ransom Grover demanded?"

"By any means necessary." Svenson put on his second shoe, then looked up at White. "How did this happen? How did Adam find himself in the clutches of that maniac, to begin with? Was it because of one of his damned missions for your organization?"

"No, Mister Svenson, absolutely not. Believe it or not, your son was on vacation when he stumbled on Wilson Grover. Quite by chance, actually."

"Talk about chance!" Svenson had finished tying his second shoe. He sighed deeply. "You Spectrum people will ruin everything. Grover specifically said no police, or Adam will be killed."

"We're not the police, Mister Svenson."

"No, you're not," Svenson replied, coming to his feet to face Colonel White with a defiant stance. "From my point of view, your presence is far more dangerous for my son's safety! If Grover discovers that Spectrum is in on this, that my son is part of your organization, what do you think he will do to him?"

"What he would do anyway, Mister Svenson," White replied, forcing himself to remain calm. "You can't believe that Grover will let your son go free, once you pay the ransom. I don't believe it. Not after learning about the history there is between you, your son and that man."

Svenson sat down on the bed, sighing. "So, you know about all of it, do you? Adam told you about it?"

"He's never said anything to anybody about that childhood incident."

"*Childhood incident*?!" Svenson scoffed derisively. "You have a strange way of putting it, Colonel. My son was the victim of a brutal crime. That madman nearly killed him, back then. That was a complete nightmare for me and my wife. Not to mention for Adam." He looked up at White again. "And now it's starting again. Twenty-five years later, Adam is back in the hands of Wilson Grover. And I have all the reasons in the world to believe that this scum will kill him, unless I follow his instructions to the letter. Your intervention will only get my son killed. Let me deal with Grover my own way."

"I don't think you've heard a single word I said, Mister Svenson," White replied bitterly. "You can't hope to 'deal with it your own way', without endangering yourself and your son. This is Spectrum business. We will take care of it."

"I thought Spectrum dealt with terrorism and Mysterons," Svenson grumbled. "Since when does it also deal with kidnapping?"

"Since it involves a Spectrum officer. That's what your son is."

"Don't remind me," Svenson growled, his impatience increasing by the second. "Well, you'd better not get involved in this, Colonel. You or anyone in your organization. Adam is MY son. He's MY responsibility."

"That's where you're wrong, sir. Your son isn't your responsibility. He's mine."

Svenson bristled at the remark. "YOURS?"

"Ever since he signed up with Spectrum, Mister Svenson," White explained. "I'm his commanding officer. That makes me responsible for him. He's one of the best men I have ever had under my command, and I don't intend to let a common criminal slit his throat simply for money. Or because his father obstinately refused to let Spectrum do its job properly in order to get him back, safe and sound."

Svenson blanched, hearing the meaning of those words. He jumped to his feet a second time, to stare levelly at Colonel White. The latter didn't back away when the man took a step in his direction. Scarlet was watching closely, ready to step in if Svenson posed a threat towards his commander. So far, the businessman had contented himself with verbal abuse.

"You have no right to insinuate that I would foolishly put Adam's life in danger because of my stubbornness!" Svenson bellowed. "I'm still his father, and he's still my son!"

"Really, now?" White shot back with a very cold tone. "It doesn't seem to me that you've shown much paternal regard over the last few years. You didn't support your son in the decisions he took about what to do with his life."

"That's between my son and me! You have no business in our personal lives!"

"I have, if Captain Blue's life is in danger!" White answered in a tone matching Svenson's.

"His name is *Adam*!" Svenson raged on. "That's the name we gave him when he was born, my wife and I! That's the name he grew up with. He's not some colour-code named agent to me! He's my son! My first born!"

"Your son is more than a 'colour-code named agent', Mister Svenson," White replied, his voice calming down a little. "Far more than that."

"Oh, that's right!" Svenson replied bitterly. "One of the best officers you've had. I'm not into this pseudo-military life you seem so proud of, Colonel. If you really want to feel responsible for somebody, let it be for your own family."

White twitched, hearing these words. "I don't have any family, Mister Svenson. Not anymore. The only child my wife was to give me died with her, before it even had a chance to be born."

That seemed to suddenly throw a cold shower on John Svenson. He calmed down instantly, and just stood there, staring at the Spectrum commander, measuring him with his eyes. He could see that what he had just been told wasn't some kind of a trick in order to get his attention. It was the truth.

"I'm sorry, Colonel. I couldn't know. I shouldn't have said that. I have a tendency to let my temper speak my mind for me."

"Yes, you have, haven't you?" White grumbled.

Svenson averted his eyes, under the intense look White was resting on him. It was rather easy to guess what was on the colonel's mind. He was thinking the same, actually: how many times did the same happen with Adam? How often had he had harsh words with his son, saying inconsiderate things to him, without even thinking of the consequences?

"I guess you never got to know what it is to be a father," he murmured, turning to sit down again. "You can't know what it is to worry about one of your children."

"No, I never had the chance," White replied, more harshly than he intended. "I regret to say." He found it in himself to calm down, while looking down at the distressed man sitting there, obviously worried sick for his son. He thought it best to come back to the problem at hand. "Mister Svenson," he continued in a less severe tone, "you can't hope to resolve this situation all on your own. We in Spectrum are better prepared to deal with it. We know your son is in deadly danger. We won't let him down."

"Because he's one of your own, right?" Svenson closed his eyes and sighed tiredly. "You don't know how right you are, about him being in deadly danger. That madman is killing him... When Grover contacted me, he used a visual communication... He showed me what he's been doing to Adam. He's been beating him." He swallowed hard and then looked up at White, pleading with his eyes. "Something must be done, Colonel. And quickly. Or my son will die."

"We won't let that happen," White assured the man. "But you have to let us do our job."

Svenson nodded his consent, finally giving in. Behind him, Captain Scarlet, Destiny Angel and Amanda Wainwright let out a sigh of relief. White gave a thoughtful frown.

"You said Grover contacted you by visual communication?"

"Yeah," Svenson murmured, pointing a tired finger in the direction of his portable. "On my computer. Showed me quite a distressing image of my son. I... I don't know why, I recorded nearly the whole conversation. Image and all."

"That could be useful," White mused. "Can we see the recording?"

"Of course. And then... What are you going to do?"

"Well, this may surprise you, but we have a trail to follow," White explained quietly. "It may not be a sure thing... But it's the only one we have at the moment." He raised his head to fix his eyes on Destiny Angel and Captain Scarlet, standing side by side, waiting patiently. He nodded slowly, and rubbed his chin, in a thoughtful gesture. "We'll start there. And I have an idea how to proceed. We're moving in tonight."

Chapter 14

"I hate this. This is a bad idea."

Captain Scarlet sat at the bar of the *First Base Casino*, running a finger around the collar of his shirt. He felt uncomfortable, even in the casual clothes he was wearing. He looked down into the untouched glass of whisky he had in front of him; it was only there to help maintain his cover in this casino setting. Trying to look inconspicuous, he took a quick glance over the rim of his glasses at the blackjack table not far behind him.

"You're only saying that because you feel awkward in a casino," he heard a French-accented female voice say in his ear, from the speaker inserted in the frame of his glasses. "You've been like that since your last mission in one, you remember?"

"It's different this time," Scarlet mumbled, taking a sip from his glass. He took another glance over his shoulder, at the same table as before, where he could see the back of a white head. "He shouldn't be here. He should've let us handle the operation."

"Try saying that to him."

"I did. Without any success. How's he doing, anyway?"

"Still winning. Now keep quiet, I've got to concentrate. And if you continue like this, people around you are liable to think you're talking to yourself! What, are you nervous?"

Scarlet shook his head, disgruntled. No, not nervous. He was a professional. Undercover missions were part of his job, he was used to them. But he didn't like the fact that Colonel White was getting involved in this one. He didn't need to do that, as he usually stayed on Cloudbase, safely away from any danger, and co-ordinating his agents' moves. Now he was in the thick of the action. Not that it was a first for him, Scarlet mused, glancing round at his commander, sitting only a few metres away from him. Surely, with all the experience he had acquired in the Secret Service all those years ago, *he* must be used to undercover missions. He seemed pretty cool at the moment, playing away at the blackjack table as if he was a long-time gambler. And winning.

But he was winning through cheating, and that was potentially dangerous. Even more so in a place that was run by a guy known to have contacts with the local mob. Scarlet was wondering if his commander was really aware of the danger he could be putting himself in. He rather doubted it, judging by the way White was enjoying himself. But was he enjoying himself because he was playing in this casino, or because he was getting involved in the mission? Maybe Colonel White had been stuck too long at his Cloudbase desk and was yearning for some action. Maybe that incident a couple of months ago with the Mysterons and the Network that had kidnapped him – even considering how close that had come to disaster – had stirred in the Spectrum commander some long-repressed need to be active again.

Scarlet would have preferred him not to get so involved. Scarlet himself would have been able to do the job, just as White was doing it now. But the colonel wouldn't hear of it. *Instead, I'm sitting here, playing bodyguard, in case he hits trouble*, Scarlet thought gloomily. He took another sip from his glass. The thought that he could have drained half the BOTTLE, without feeling any effect from the alcohol, crossed his mind. That wouldn't bring him any solace, though. And after all, he was on duty.

A white van, marked *Honeybell's Florists*, was parked at a strategic point of the *First Base Casino's* private parking lot with a clear view of the service door. Inside the van, Destiny Angel sat in front of a large computer board with a mic suspended in front of her mouth, checking over two monitors. They showed two different scenes taken inside the casino, as recorded by the micro-camera set into the frame of Captain Scarlet's glasses for one, and Colonel White's for the other. On one of the monitors, Destiny had a perfect view of the cards displayed on the blackjack table.

"Don't look too often in his direction," she recommended into her mic, addressing Scarlet. "You might start looking suspicious."

"I'm supposed to keep my eye on him, remember? Let me do my job, and you do yours, *chérie*."

Destiny rolled her eyes. *Sometimes, that man can be so infuriating*, she thought to herself. She knew he was indeed doing his job, making sure Colonel White was safe, and she also knew

he was probably feeling somewhat frustrated. Maybe he should realize she was feeling that way too. Granted, she wasn't inside the casino. She wasn't in the thick of the action. But she was also working.

And whether Paul would admit it or not – it was SHE who was doing the more difficult job, studying the cards, counting them as they were displayed on the felt-covered table, keeping tabs on every card that appeared, and giving instructions to Colonel White. Making sure he would win.

Her next instruction to White resulted in yet another winning move, and was followed by applause she could hear through her headphones.

"He's won another hand," she heard Scarlet's voice murmur in her ears. "How do you DO that?"

"Professional secret, my dear *capitaine*," Destiny chuckled. THAT, and the fact that she felt no guilt or remorse whatsoever, in using the computer she was working on. But she wouldn't tell Paul that. She was ready to use every trick in the book, for, according to Colonel White, it was imperative that he should win enough to attract attention to himself, making believe he was a big-time player.

"We're wasting time, if you want my opinion."

The voice behind Destiny nearly made her cringe. Since the minute he had set foot in the van, John Svenson had done nothing but complain. From the beginning, he had shown his disapproval of Colonel White's plan of action, criticizing it all the way, making it very clear that he found it far too dangerous for his son's safety. Not that it surprised the young woman very much. The problem was that SHE was the one who had to stay with him, inside this van, while the men were doing the undercover work inside the casino. That was definitely the WORST part of her job. Colonel White didn't want to risk leaving Svenson on his own, fearing that he might do something rash that would put Captain Blue's life in jeopardy. So, when he called the Spectrum offices in Las Vegas – asking for that specially equipped van, the improved communicator-glasses, and a couple of Spectrum agents as driver and back-up – he had ordered one of the men to stay and assist Destiny in her tasks, especially in regard of keeping an eye on Svenson. Even with the presence of this agent, the assignment didn't please Destiny in the least. John Svenson had been getting on her nerves since the moment they met.

"Be patient, Mister Svenson," she told him, trying herself to follow her own advice. "We will have results soon."

"It's been hours," Svenson declared.

"In fact, a little more than one," Destiny defended quietly.

"And so far, NOTHING's happened," Svenson added, without listening to her. He leaned over her shoulder and gestured toward the screen. "What's your commander doing, anyway? He's doing nothing but play cards. And you're helping him to win by cheating."

"You're blocking my view, sir," she replied politely. Fortunately, after a quick glance at the screen, she noted that nothing had changed. White was still on his winning streak. She took note of the new cards that had appeared on the table.

"Doesn't he realize he runs the risk of being recognized by one of those hoods he met in that town, if one of them shows up?"

That thought was what worried Destiny the most. And she knew it was foremost in Captain Scarlet's mind, too. But they both knew it was part of the colonel's plan. So they couldn't argue much with it.

"Actually, Mister Svenson, he's already got a back-up plan, if that was to happen."

"A back-up plan?"

"Yes, so he could use that event to his advantage."

"Whatever it is," grumbled Svenson, "I'm sure it's highly risky."

Destiny shook her head, returning her attention to the screen. "One way or the other, it will not be long before he draws attention to himself," she declared thoughtfully.

"And then what?" Svenson grumbled.

"Then, Mister Svenson, is when things will really get interesting."

Svenson's brow furrowed. None of the Angel's answers satisfied him. He glanced round at the man seated beside her, watching him and at the same time keeping an eye on the brightly-lit front of the casino. He knew there was another man checking the back entrance too, just to make sure no-one suspicious slipped through there, without them knowing it.

In all probability, according to these Spectrum agents, Adam was in there. Only a few metres away from him. Probably getting himself killed by Grover. John Svenson wanted to DO something. He would have given anything to run there and try to save his son, but he couldn't. Spectrum wouldn't let him. The guy in the van with them, Palladino, Destiny had called him, would stop him before he could make a move.

"I don't like it," Svenson stated again. "My son is in there, why don't you just... force the door?"

"We have no proof that he is indeed in there. Or that Mister Gardenia is, indeed, involved with his kidnapping. We can't enter like that. And it could put your son in danger, if we barge in there without caution."

"He's already in danger, young lady," Svenson declared gloomily. There was a crack in his voice, that Destiny noticed instantly. Despite the dislike she felt for Svenson, she couldn't help but feel sorry for the man. And also for his son. Adam didn't deserve what was happening to him.

"Heads up," the voice of Captain Scarlet suddenly said in her speakers. "Somebody's moving towards the old man."

Destiny's attention was drawn to Scarlet's camera. She saw a tall, overweight, Italian-looking man walking quietly in Colonel White's direction. She narrowed her eyes.

"Sir, someone approaching you," she announced into her mic. "The man with black hair, who welcomed you at the door at the beginning of the evening. He's coming to talk to you, by all appearances." She flicked back to Scarlet's concealed speakers. "Approach position, Captain. I think we'll have contact soon."

"S.I.G."

Scarlet took another sip from his glass and, leaving it on the bar, left his place to casually walk toward the blackjack table. As he rose from the barstool, he hooked his thumbs into his belt and adjusted his trousers slightly. It was something most men did after sitting for any length of time, but it had an added purpose for the Spectrum agent – it gave him a comforting reminder of the pistol holster tucked into the small of his back, hidden by his light sport jacket.

Since the colonel had started playing blackjack, less than two hours ago, people had been surrounding his table, watching with interest, curious to see this English gentleman who was apparently going to win big. Already, a few young women had gotten themselves really close to the player, forming a cosy circle around him, most obviously lured in by all his gains at the table. By the way they looked and acted, fighting for the older man's attention, there was little doubt of these girls' profession, or exactly what they had in mind. They had set their sights on a potentially wealthy client. It was all Scarlet could do not to chuckle at the thought. He wondered what the colonel's impression of the situation was. Maybe he was a little embarrassed by it.

If that was the case, he was doing a marvellous job of not showing it. In the middle of it all, Colonel White was seemingly concentrating on the cards, untouched by all the sounds surrounding him. Scarlet saw him adjust his glasses. Probably to better hear the speakers built inside the frame. Scarlet watched intently, and drew closer still, close enough to actually hear the big man's words, as he leaned toward the colonel to speak to him in a polite and affected way.

"Are you enjoying yourself, sir?"

Informed of the man's approach by Destiny Angel, Colonel White knew exactly how to react to his presence. He had just to keep in character, to play the role he had set himself, that of a big-time gambler in search of an exciting and rewarding time. It wasn't so difficult after all, although admittedly, it had been a long time since he had been in this kind of game – he didn't count the regrettable incident of a couple of months before, as he wasn't really himself then. He waved his hand at the man, as if asking him not to bother him, and did not even look up, seemingly keeping his attention focused on the blackjack table. He lost the current hand, and sighed in annoyance.

"Not as much as I thought I would," he grumbled in a irate tone. "Too many people around..."

"Yes, I see. However, you're winning big," the man remarked.

White shrugged, indifferently. "This is only pocket money. I would probably enjoy myself more if blackjack wasn't such a boring game..."

"Ah! You did mention something about preferring a more exciting game when you came in earlier tonight," the man replied. "Something more... challenging?"

"And I received nothing but a blank face from you, Mister."

"Are you still up for it now?"

White raised his head to the man, a spark of curiosity in his blue eyes. "What are you suggesting?"

"If you're interested, sir, you only have to follow me. You've been invited to the Guests' Lounge."

"The Guests' Lounge?" White asked with a puzzled and interested tone. "What is that?"

The man grinned. "Come with me, sir," he invited the colonel. His smile broadened. "And there won't be spectators there to bother you."

"That sounds intriguing," White stood up; to each one of the young ladies gathered around him, he gave a couple of chips, thanking them for the good luck they had brought and offering them his most courteous smile. That made Scarlet, witnessing the scene, frown in perplexity. He DEFINITELY didn't look embarrassed by the situation at all. This was yet another side of his commander he thought he would never see.

No, he decided. He's just staying in character.

Isn't he?

"Leave your winnings, sir," the big man suggested. "The pit boss will see that they'll be transferred to the lounge."

"This is getting more and more interesting," White declared. He turned to address the dealer. "Make sure you take a generous tip for yourself. You certainly deserve it."

"You're much too generous, sir," the dealer answered with a bow and a very large grin.

White then addressed the big man. "All right, where's this lounge of yours?"

The big man only grinned again and gestured toward a section of the casino where a thick green curtain was drawn in front of a door. White followed him, walking in front of Scarlet, who let them get a little way ahead before following in turn. White disappeared behind the curtain with the man, and Scarlet was about to follow, when somebody stepped out from behind the curtain and stood tall in front of him, making him stop in his tracks.

"Where do you think you're going, buddy?" he asked roughly, in a thick Italian-accented voice.

Scarlet offered a shy grin, and pointed past the curtain, where voices and music could be heard. "Isn't this the bathroom?"

The man's answer was a very deep, threateningly-furrowed brow. Scarlet backed away a couple of steps. "Sorry. My mistake."

"Only special guests are invited in," the man replied harshly. "On your way, wise guy."

Scarlet shrugged, as if indifferent to the interdiction, and retreated, seemingly giving up. He kept an eye on the man, though, and it wasn't too long before an opportunity presented itself. Almost right away, in fact. His attention drawn to two other customers who seemed ready to start a fight, the man momentarily left his post in front of the door, turning his back on it to go over to them. Scarlet swiftly slipped through the curtain to find himself into a small, dark alcove. A couple more steps and he was in the Guests' Lounge.

"Sneaky one, Captain." That was Destiny's voice in his ears. There was an amused tone to it.

"I couldn't leave the old man all on his own," Scarlet whispered in answer. "Where is he?"

"Look over the far side of the lounge."

Captain Scarlet scrutinized his new surroundings. There was less light in the lounge than in the room he had just left. Far less. The lounge had all the feel of a small saloon bar, with about a dozen round tables, a bar along one side-wall – the brighter spot in the room – and a small stage, with five musicians playing some dull music. The ambience was quiet enough, with only the music and the murmurs of the clients – the lounge's guests. There were about twenty people at the most, as far as Scarlet could evaluate, half of them smoking big cigars, which explained the smell and the spirals of smoke spreading through almost all of the room. The majority were occupying tables and playing poker in an almost religious fashion, hardly paying any attention to what was going on around them. Scarlet was about sure his presence had gone unnoticed, or at least that nobody would bother about it, so he was free to wander around as he liked. Narrowing

his eyes, he glanced to the far side of the lounge to see Colonel White standing there, in front of a group of three men seated at a table.

"Can you open a channel so I can hear what they're saying?" Scarlet muttered for Destiny's benefit.

"Of course I can! I'm not Lieutenant Green, but I do know a thing or two about communications!"

Scarlet smiled faintly at that, knowing full well that the extent of Destiny's knowledge of communication devices would put to shame most so-called 'experts'. He quietly walked toward the bar, where he sat down, ordering another glass of whisky that would serve as his cover as the preceding one had done. Then, making believe he was savouring his drink, while distractedly listening to the nostalgic instrumental music played by the band, he concentrated all his attention on the conversation relayed to him by his glasses' hidden speakers.

"Sir, may I introduce the owner of the *First Base Casino*, Mister Pietro Gardenia."

Colonel White looked down at the man seated on the other side of the table, obviously studying the cards in his hands. Having already seen a picture of Gardenia, White already knew who he was. Gardenia wasn't an impressive man. Not a big guy, rather a slender one, of about his own age, with a small moustache, and black, greying hair, almost non-existent on the top of his head. Hardly what White would have expected a former baseball champion to look like. He barely raised his eyes to acknowledge the newcomer, while he continued checking his hand. In front of him, there was already a high pile of chips of various colours. An imposing amount of winnings, as far as the colonel could judge.

"Welcome to the *First Base Casino*, sir," Gardenia finally said, languidly. He was chewing a cigar, that he didn't even bother to remove as he spoke. Quietly, he threw a small pile of chips in the middle of the table, into an already growing mound. White saw the two other men folding their hands, grumbling. Gardenia brought the winnings to his side. "I heard tell you won big at the blackjack table."

"Big is a relative term, Mister Gardenia," White replied with an affected shrug.

Gardenia nodded. Piling up his gains, he waved a finger at the man beside White. "Guido here told me you expressed the desire to be part of a more satisfying game," Gardenia continued. "Is poker to your liking?"

"It all depends on the stakes, Mister Gardenia," White replied rather coldly. "I'm not interested in kiddies' games."

Gardenia grinned broadly, expertly fanning the cards in his hands. "Five card stud. A hundred to open. No limits."

"How much to buy in?" White asked, using the phrase Destiny had given him. She said it was the term the experienced gamblers used when they wanted to enter a high-stakes poker game.

"Minimum five thousand."

"Dollars... or pounds?"

Gardenia lifted his eyes to stare into White's face. He couldn't read anything on it. So he didn't know if he was serious or not. What he knew, however, was that the man had won big at the blackjack table. He certainly had the five grand. The casino owner puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"Just put down what you won earlier, sir. Then if you wish to continue, it'll be up to you. No limits there, either. Is that okay by you?"

"It suits me fine, yes. This should be an interesting game."

Gardenia cocked an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that Englishmen could be such high rollers."

For the first time since he had entered the casino, White allowed himself a faint smile. "So maybe you've never heard of Lord Sandwich, Mister Gardenia."

In answer, Gardenia extended his right hand. "Pleased to meet you, your lordship."

At the bar, Scarlet nearly choked on his drink, hearing Gardenia's reply in his ear. He dared a glance towards the table. He wasn't able to get a good enough fix on Gardenia, if only to see if the man was kidding, or if he was as ignorant as he sounded right now. He couldn't tell. But none of the other men at the table had reacted to his mistake. White had stoically shaken his hand,

without giving any sign of surprise. "Please, I'd prefer you to address me as... Montagu. John Montagu."

Scarlet couldn't believe his ears. He rolled his eyes. *I knew the old man had a strange sense of humour, but he's pushing it a bit here! And what if those guys are really tricking him?*

It didn't appear that way, by the looks of it, but then again, these were poker players. Who could tell what was going on in their minds?

Gardenia nodded negligently toward the two men seated with him. "May I introduce Mister Morelli, and Mister Craig? They'll be playing with us."

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Montagu," the man presented as Morelli said, as the other simply nodded his acknowledgement.

From his place at the bar, Scarlet took a sip from his glass. "Destiny?" he muttered.

"On it, Captain." Destiny was already questioning the Spectrum databank to which the van's computer was hooked. She typed both names and entered in a pic of their faces, taken by the camera in the colonel's glasses. It wasn't long before the machine spat out an answer. She nearly whistled, and passed on the information to both White and Scarlet. "Mario Morelli, one of the top representatives of the Sicilian Mafia in Las Vegas. Closely watched by the police but up until now, it hasn't really been possible to pin anything on him. The other man, Orson Craig, is affiliated with the Los Angeles mob, but has been settled in Vegas since 2065. Once tried for murder, but was discharged through lack of evidence."

"Figures," Scarlet mumbled.

"Be careful, Colonel White," Destiny informed her commander. "Both are considered very dangerous."

There was little White could do to acknowledge Destiny's recommendation, but he was sure she knew he had received the message perfectly well.

But he didn't think there was cause to worry just now. After all, they were in a public place, even if this was Gardenia's establishment. Surely, all those people around weren't part of the mob, or any related organization. He wouldn't risk anything in a room full of people.

Gardenia was waving his hand towards an empty chair, inviting him to sit down. With which White complied. The blackjack pit boss had arrived at that exact moment, to put down in front of the Englishman a pile of chips that he recognized as his previous winnings.

"Now, if you don't mind, Mister Montagu," Gardenia continued with a thin smile, "we will get down to serious business."

"Yes," White acknowledged with a nod. "I agree. Let's start getting serious."

Scarlet settled himself comfortably. *Okay, contact achieved. End of phase one. Phase two begins now...*

It was still up to Destiny. Hopefully, before the end of this new phase, they would be able to locate Captain Blue.

And have him back safe and sound.

* * *

Where was that damned kid?

A furious Wilson Grover was running through the lashing rain, tensely looking all around him. It was so dark, with heavy clouds covering the sky and blocking the light from the moon and the stars. He had left the door of the house open, hoping that the light from the hall would help him see a little. But it was hardly enough. The kid was nowhere to be found.

He couldn't have gone that far. There were not many places around to hide. The woods nearby, perhaps, but he would never have found his way through there, barefoot, and not knowing his surroundings. And he would not have had the time to reach them, without being seen. There was absolutely nobody around to help him, either. Grover had chosen this house well, when he was planning to keep the boy there, some weeks ago. The perfect place to hide a prisoner. No neighbours, no roads with busy traffic. The only access to the house was by a

beaten path through the woods. The kid could not possibly escape. No, he was close. Very close, cleverly hidden from his pursuer. And probably keeping his eyes on him.

Grover looked down at the muddy ground, searching for clues. He could barely see the traces of small bare feet imprinted deep into the mud. He leaned down, narrowing his eyes, looking at the direction taken by those prints. A crack of lightning briefly lit the scene, and Grover saw that the prints lead directly to the car, parked in front of the house. An evil grin of satisfaction crossed Grover's face, and he stood up, looking towards the vehicle.

"I know you're around there, kid," he said in a syrupy tone. "What do you plan to do? Take the car to escape? You can't possibly drive it!"

He slowly moved towards the car. He couldn't see any movement in it, but it was dark inside. He figured the boy was using the obscurity, hoping it would hide him.

"Now, boy, you should know you can't get away from me," he growled ominously. "You're just delaying the inevitable."

Within the darkness of his hiding place, Adam was looking in fear at the man who was approaching him. Adam's heart was beating wildly. He couldn't still it, and he was so very afraid that Grover would hear him, and find out where he was. Lying in the mud and water, just under the car, the boy could see the man's feet coming closer. They stopped just in front of his eyes, a mere foot away from him, and silently, Adam tried to slide further away from him, flattening himself closer to the ground. He was soaked to the bone and shivering from the cold, but he had no intention of giving his presence away. He just knew that the minute Grover found him, he'd be dead.

He saw the man's feet moving alongside the car, as he looked into it, searching for the quarry he thought was hiding in the darkness inside.

Grover suddenly opened the door nearest to him. Adam heard him searching in the car, noisily. Then he slammed the door, cursing furiously.

"You can't hide from me forever, kid!" he bellowed into thin air. "Sooner or later, I'll get my hands on you!"

He moved away from the car, mumbling imprecations and maledictions that made Adam's skin crawl. Grover directed his steps towards the woods, looking around, growing impatient and even more nervous with each passing second. Adam tried desperately not to breathe too loudly; he was shivering violently, the cold and the fear mounting in him.

Keeping his eyes on Grover, he crawled to the other side of the car, and wriggled out from underneath it, hoping that the big man would not come back. Keeping low, he dared to peer over the car hood, in Grover's direction. He saw the man, back turned to him, scratching the back of his head, obviously wondering where his intended victim could have gone in such a short time.

Then it seemed to occur to Grover that there was a place he hadn't checked at the car and he turned on his heel. Adam just had the time to shrink back, to keep out of sight; his heart was now racing. His enemy was coming back; he could hear his steps, as he slowly padded across the muddy ground.

"You think you're so clever, kid?" He heard the ominous tone growing closer with each step. "You think you can take me for a fool like that? Turning my girl against me... I'm gonna make you pay. There's not a snowball's chance in hell you're gonna escape me now!"

Grover had reached the other side of the car; holding his breath, Adam was still keeping low, leaning against the vehicle's side, trembling. "I know you're under there, brat! So you'd better come out on your own..." The boy heard the man's wicked cackle. "I'm gonna slit your obnoxious little throat anyway... And I just know I'm gonna take real pleasure in it!"

If Adam hadn't reached the limits of his terror before, he felt that he had now. His heart was pounding so wildly and loudly that he feared Grover would hear it. He felt completely paralysed. How could he escape, without that horrible man seeing him? He glanced toward the house. Marsha... She wanted so much to help him, he was hoping she would come out now. But the last he had seen of her, she was struggling to keep Grover busy while he was trying to get away, and since then... What could Grover have done to her? And what could she do to help him now?

The sound of Grover's footsteps approached. Realising that he would soon be found, Adam thought he had nothing left to lose. He darted out from behind the car and ran as fast as he could toward the far side of the house.

Grover saw him, of course. Letting out a loud curse, he gave pursuit. He wasn't about to let that little creep get away from him. He knew he had the advantage. The boy was exhausted, weak, and bare-footed. He would not be able to get far.

Adam turned around the side of the house. In the raging rain, he could hardly see where he was going, and the footing wasn't that good. His bare feet were slipping on both mud and rocks. He nearly lost his balance once or twice, all the while very much aware that Grover was gaining on him. He could hear him panting loudly.

The effort and the will were there, but it was plainly impossible for Adam to make good his escape. He had ended up in the back of the house, in a garden that left to run wild. So much so, that it had almost become part of the nearby woods. A flash of lightning showed Adam the line of trees, not that far away. His heart renewed with hope, seeing a genuine chance to get away. His only chance, he was aware. He ran towards it.

There was another flash of lightning, illuminating the scrubby path in front of Adam, enough for him to see a deep, dark hole opening only two feet in front of him. He stopped dead, slipping and almost falling to the ground, his heart jumping with fear. Eyes wide open with horror, he peered down in the hole. Pebbles disturbed by his feet rolled down into it and disappeared, without making a single sound. By the look of it, if Adam were to judge from all those carved stones surrounding it, most of them fallen to the ground, but other still in place around the hole, it was an ancient well, no longer in use. He had almost stepped into it.

"Now I got you!"

The cackling sound behind him made Adam shiver. He turned around at the exact same moment Wilson Grover laid his big hand on him; the boy let out a cry of both fear and surprise. It died on his lips almost instantly when a violent wallop caught his head and sent him rolling on the muddy ground.

His body already hurting all over and his head reeling, Adam could only watch in total terror as Grover marched on him and suddenly took him by his collar, heaving him up with ease. The big man kept the boy upright, holding him in a near-choking grip. Adam could barely feel the ground underneath his feet. One look back informed the child that Grover was holding him just over the edge of the dark hole he had nearly fallen into seconds earlier. His heart went cold and he stopped his struggles; he turned a disbelieving look toward Grover, who was staring at him with a mix of contempt and satisfaction upon his features. The big man was trying to catch his breath, after all the effort he had expended to capture the fugitive.

"End of the road, kid," the man growled, with an evil laugh. "You really thought you would escape me, didn't you? Well, all you did is make me run like hell, and I didn't appreciate that at all! That makes me angry..." Grover's knife appeared in his free hand; he flashed it in the boy's face. The latter let out a frightened whimper. "There's something you gonna learn the hard way." Grover smiled evilly, looking at the terror so obvious in the boy's face. He was taking his sweet time.

"...You can't have everything you wish for, kid," he continued ominously. "No matter how hard you try."

The knife was approaching its victim, and Adam just knew Grover was only seconds away from slitting his throat. He didn't have any time to spare, nor any chance to lose. Once more, oblivious to the hole opening behind him, he struggled to get free. Then, as a last-ditch, desperate resort, he used his teeth, and savagely bit into the hand that was holding him tight.

Grover let out a yelp of pain. Instinctively, he released his hold. Adam felt his feet sliding on the ground behind him, and instantly understood, with growing horror, what was happening.

A cry of terror escaped his lips as he fell head first into the pit opening below him, and darkness surrounded him, body and mind.

Still breathing hard, Grover stood over the edge of the well, watching as the boy disappeared from his view. Narrowing his eyes, he looked down as far as he could, without seeing anything. Nor could he hear any sound. He knew it was deep, for he had himself nearly fallen into it when he had bought the house some weeks before; the hole was half-hidden by bushes, high grass and fallen stones. Surely, the kid was done for. Best thing would be to go down there and make sure, but Grover was in no hurry to do that. It would be nearly impossible and he would risk breaking his neck in the process.

No, the kid had to be dead. There was no way he would have survived such a fall. Grover grunted, somehow frustrated at not having had the chance to kill him with his own hands. But anyway, the result was the same. That little brat was out of his hair. He would never be able to tell who had kidnapped him.

Grover checked his watch. He still had some time before the delivery of the ransom money, he reflected. Plenty of time, in fact, to settle one last detail. He turned on his heel, away from the silent well, and went back to the house, walking around to the main entrance.

When he entered the house, wet and dirty, and still trying to get his breath, he found that Marsha had regained her senses, and, sitting on a chair in the kitchen, was nursing a bruised cheek. She rose and came to him, without any fear at all, her eyes even blazing with anger, and trembling with concern. Grover gave her a deep frown and brushed past her to go to the bedroom. First things first. He needed a change of clothes. She ran after him, eyes wide, apparently in complete panic.

"Where is he? What have you done to him?"

Grover shrugged. He removed his wet shirt, tossed it away on the floor and took a new dry one lying on the bed. "Crazy kid tried to run away," he mumbled, while putting it on. "He fell into the well."

"The well?" Marsha blanched. "He must be hurt badly!"

"Dead, more likely," Grover replied with a cold tone.

Marsha stared at him in complete disbelief. The horrified expression on her face was without description. "You killed him," she stated with a croak in her voice.

"Of course I did!" Grover answered brutally. "What did you think I would do? Let him go so he could tell everybody it was us who kidnapped him?"

"You never had any intention of giving him back to his parents," Marsha accused him.

"Did you honestly believe I would've handed the police a witness who would finger us with no hesitation?"

Marsha swallowed hard. "You didn't have to kill him," she replied, her voice coarse. "We could simply have gone away... left the country, changed our names..."

"What do you think I intend to do anyway?" Grover had changed his pants and was now putting on his coat, zipping it up. "I already made arrangements. As soon as we get the money, we'll be on our way out of this dump, out of this country and onto a Caribbean island. We'll live the good life, Marsha."

"No," the young woman murmured.

"Listen, honey... I'm sorry I hit you." Grover stroked Marsha's face, ever so gently, caressing her bruised cheek, and gazing deep into her eyes. "But you gotta admit, you lost your head for a moment. I couldn't let you free the boy like that. You don't realize the danger you nearly put us in!"

"I do realize," she replied. "Will, don't tell me you intend to go on with your plan?"

He scoffed loudly. "Of course I will! What do you think I am, crazy?"

He left the room, pursued by Marsha, who obviously couldn't believe her ears. "You're going to take the ransom, even though you can't keep your end of the bargain and give the boy back to his parents?"

"What do you think, Marsha?" he snapped suddenly. "Of course, I'll take the money! I didn't go to all that trouble for nothing! I didn't put up with that brat to come up empty-handed!"

"You're a monster."

Grover turned around to stare into Marsha's horrified features. She shook her head in disgust. "The way you treated the boy, I should have realized sooner... I should never have been involved in this whole deal in the first place!"

"Marsha, what are you saying? It's nearly done. Svenson's gonna pay us. In a couple of hours, we'll be as rich as we always dreamed we'd be. Five million dollars for that brat. Can you imagine what five million looks like? I never came close to that! Of course, I could have asked for more, but..."

"Even fifty million would not have been worth the life of a nine year old kid!" Marsha suddenly interrupted him.

Grover nodded. "I see what it is. I warned you, Marsha. I told you not to get attached to that boy."

"With good reason you did," Marsha replied bitterly. "You knew you were going to kill him anyway. But you never told me. You never said that this deal would end up with the murder of a child."

Grover took a step toward the young woman, and reached to take her by the shoulders. She drew back, a glitter of disgust in her eyes. "Don't touch me!" she snapped. "Don't EVER come near me again! I don't want your dirty hands on me. And I don't want to be part of the awful deal you got me involved with!"

"Marsha, we're gonna be rich. The money..."

"I don't want the stinking money! It's stained with blood!"

Marsha turned around quickly, looking away from Grover. He stared at her, first with disbelief in his eyes. Then his features became harder. And colder. "You can't POSSIBLY mean that!"

"Yes, I do." Marsha didn't even turn back to face him. She couldn't see the dangerous glow in his eyes, growing in intensity as she went on. "I can't go on with this. I can't stop you, so if you so want to continue, do it. But it will be without me."

"Don't you think it's a little LATE to have second thoughts?" Grover snarled.

He approached her and she finally turned around to face him. The glitter she saw in his eyes, the coldness of his features, was unsettling. There was something evil in his impassively set face, as she never had seen before. As evil as the smile that slowly crossed his lips, pulling them into a very thin line.

"You're kidding yourself, honey," he said quietly, approaching closer still to her. She made a step back to escape, but she couldn't avoid him reaching for her shoulder to stop her. His touch was ever so casual, and gentle, and yet she felt threatened.

"You can't leave me," Grover said, very quietly. "Not like this." He smiled faintly. "I need someone I can spend all that money with."

"I told you I don't want it." She shook her head, in complete disarray, looking him in the eyes. "Is that all you can think about?" she murmured. "The money?"

"No... I also think about safety, sweetheart. MY safety." His grip on Marsha's shoulder tightened suddenly. She could feel his fingers dig into her flesh. She suddenly realized she couldn't see Grover's other hand, as he was holding it behind his back. Fear mounted in her heart.

"Let go of me, Will," she said with urgency in her tone. "You're hurting me..."

"Sorry, hon..." Grover replied ever so quietly. "I can't afford to let you go... That would be too risky for me."

Panic spread through Marsha. She struggled to free herself, but to no avail; Grover's hand was holding her in a vice-like grip. Her body twisted around in an last attempt to get away and she found herself with her back turned to him. She heard the ominous click of his switchblade, a fraction of a second before she felt the stinging pain in her side. She could feel the blade going deep inside her, and stiffened. She gave a faint gasp, as her legs gave way under her, and she fell heavily onto the floor, at Grover's feet.

Overpowered by the growing pain, she raised frightened eyes toward the man standing over her, looking down at her with a totally unemotional stare. The long blade in his hand was covered with a dark red substance that was slowly dripping to the floor. Her own blood.

"I hope you understand, Marsha," Grover said quietly. "I can't afford myself the luxury of letting you get out of this. Considering your present state of mind, how am I to know that you won't go to the police and tell them everything about me?"

"Will..." Marsha choked on the name. She swallowed hard, that simple act sending a wave of pain throughout her body. "Please, don't..."

"I'm sorry, honey," was the cold answer of Wilson Grover as he bent down next to her. "I wish there was another solution. I really wish. But you simply know too much."

The bloody knife came really close to Marsha's neck and for a fleeting second, it looked as if Grover would slit her throat in one swift movement... The young woman closed her eyes, awaiting death.

The window suddenly exploded behind Grover and the door in front of him violently burst open. Grover jumped to his feet, startled, as a man wearing a wet trench coat, flanked by two policemen, appeared in the doorway, aiming a gun at him.

"Drop it, Grover!"

Grover obeyed, almost without thinking about it, and the knife clattered to the floor. He took a step back, giving a dumbfounded look toward the broken window, where two other policemen were training their weapons on him. The man in the trench coat entered, followed by the two cops, and another man in civvies. Grover frowned, watching as the first man walked toward him. He knew him, he reflected, as the second man crouched by Marsha's side.

"She's in a bad way, lieutenant," the second man announced, after a quick check on the young woman.

"Call an ambulance, quick!" the man in the trench coat ordered, re-holstering his gun. He stopped in front of Grover, who was being handcuffed by one policeman, another one reading him his rights in a monotone. Grover wasn't trying to resist in any way. He knew it would be useless; and he was too busy staring at the man standing in front of him, the one who just had been called 'lieutenant'. The latter's eyes glittered with inner fury, when he took one step to get very close to Grover, and spoke right into his face.

"Where IS he?"

"Who are you talking about?" Grover asked with a half-indignant, half-insolent expression. He gritted his teeth when he felt the handcuff bite into the flesh of his wrists.

"You KNOW who I'm talking about!" the lieutenant spat in disgust. *"The Svenson kid! Where have you hidden him?"*

"I've no idea what you mean."

"Right." Not letting Grover out of his sight, the lieutenant barked quick orders to the policemen surrounding him: *"Search the house! From top to bottom! Look all over the area. Find me that kid! He must be around."*

The policemen spread around, leaving one uniformed one to guard Grover, and the other man in civvies crouched near Marsha, talking into his radio to call an ambulance and back-up for the search. Grover looked around, as he heard the cops turning the house upside down and inside out.

"You're wasting your time, lieutenant," he muttered. *"The kid's not here. You've got the wrong man."*

The lieutenant took him by the collar; nobody made a move to stop him when he pushed Grover against the wall. *"Look at me, Grover!"* he barked into his face. *"You know me, right? You know who I am? You've seen me before."*

Grover hesitated. He did remember having seen the man but he couldn't put a name to his face. The policeman showed him his I.D., along with his badge. *"My name is Ellis. Michael Ellis. I'm a detective with the Boston police department. But more importantly, and unfortunately for you, I'm also Sarah Svenson's brother."* He saw Grover's eyes open up with understanding and recognition, and pocketed his badge. *"It's true I don't come visit my sister often, so maybe it's understandable that you wouldn't recognize me at first."* He shook his head in disgust. *"You made one BIG mistake, by not checking out more thoroughly the background of your victim, scum! And another, even bigger one, when you sent that ransom note to the Svensons earlier today... While I was there."*

Grover blinked. For a second, he felt like a trapped man. But it only lasted one second; then he came back, as aggressively as before, not willing to admit anything. *"I didn't send any ransom note!"* he spat back. *"You have nothing on me!"*

"What about the girl? What were you up to with her?" Ellis crouched down and carefully took the bloodied knife between his thumb and index, and raised it before Grover's eyes. *"Didn't want to leave a witness?"*

"Lovers' quarrel. Lost my head, that's all!"

"I don't believe you. Where's the kid, Grover? I KNOW you have him!"

Grover scoffed loudly. *"And HOW would you know that?"*

"You really want to know, scum?" Ellis fished out from one of his coat's large pockets a cloth object, wrapped in a transparent plastic bag, that he showed to Grover. *"You recognize this?"*

Grover stared at the object intently. Stained with blood, it was Adam's Red Sox cap he had sent to the boy's father as proof that he had him. He did his best not to show any reaction. Ellis waved the cap in front of Grover's eyes and showed him the interior of it.

"There's no recognizable fingerprints on it," the policeman said, "but it doesn't matter. Because of it, you're toast. Look closely. See anything of significance?"

Grover narrowed his eyes. He could see something that seemed to be written on the cloth surface. Big, capital letters, roughly drawn in some dark substance. There were only six letters, but they were enough to send a shiver down Grover's spine. All the colour drained from his face.

It was his name.

"Obviously, the kid has more brains in his little finger than you'll ever have in your whole body, no matter how long your miserable life will be," Ellis said darkly. He put the cap back in his pocket. Grover looked apparently shaken. "Again: where's Adam, Grover?" As the man kept silent, Ellis could feel the anger boiling higher inside him. "I swear, you scum, if you've hurt him, I..."

"Sir!"

Ellis turned on his heel. The policeman who had stayed near Marsha, crouched beside her, was raising his head to him.

"She just tried to say something," he told his superior. "About a well..."

Ellis' brow furrowed. "A well?"

His subordinate leaned closer to Marsha, pricking his ears to listen carefully. Ellis could see her bloodless lips moving, but she was speaking so faintly that he couldn't make out anything she said. The policeman stared at him. "An abandoned well behind the house," he repeated urgently. "Do you think...?"

Ellis turned toward Grover; he could see the man was dismayed that the young woman had mentioned this. Ellis didn't lose any more time. "Take some men and find that well, quickly," he ordered, still looking at Grover.

One of the men standing next to Grover nodded briefly and, leaving the prisoner in the care of his colleague, quickly strode outside. Ellis approached Grover; he could read the glow of pure hatred and frustration in the man's eyes. He lowered his head under the detective's intent gaze.

"You've lost, you despicable, miserable coward," Ellis hissed between his teeth. "You're under arrest for the kidnapping of Adam Svenson... and it will be my pleasure to take you in." Grover looked up in defiance for a brief second, before bowing his head again, keeping obstinately silent. "I hope for your sake that boy's still alive," Ellis continued with barely contained anger in his tone, "or, God help me, I don't know what I might do..."

** * **

Freed from his bonds, but with his hands still secured together, Captain Blue fell heavily to the concrete floor, where he lay, unable to make a single movement. After long hours of hanging, his arms and hands were now so numb that he could hardly feel them anymore; they wouldn't respond to him; the rest of his body was killing him. Mistreatment and deprivation had put him in such a weakened state that his head was reeling; his mouth was so thick and tasted salty, and his throat was aching for water. He had not had a single drop to drink for so long, while he was slowly melting away in this uncomfortable position. He was still unable to see a thing. Not that it would have helped him much if he had been able to.

He heard the sound of Grover's incessant cackling very near him. So near that he would be able to touch the man, if only he could move. That last beating he had just received had taken more out of him that he would have cared to admit. Through a haze, he heard Grover's limping steps slowly walking around him.

He was wondering why he had released him from his position. Perhaps Grover didn't think he would pose any threat.

He was almost right. It was as if his whole body weighed a ton. And it was all he could do not to lose consciousness.

"Not so cocky anymore, eh, kid?" the voice of Grover told him quietly enough. "Told you I was gonna teach you who's boss now. I'm calling the shots, and there ain't nothing you can do. No, you can just lie there, hurting all over, and wonder what I'll do to you next. Or when I'll be finished with you. Well, I ain't finished yet, kid. I still have plenty of grudge to go."

Blue thought of saying something in reply, swallowing with difficulty to clear his throat. He changed his mind, thinking Grover wasn't worth the effort. The man, on the other hand, took this as a sign of resignation. That brought a smile of satisfaction to his lips.

"Have you ever gone fishing, kid?" he asked matter-of-factly. He pondered the question himself and shook his head. "Of course you did. I remember you went with your father a couple of times, way back when... D'you remember when you caught those fish, and left them to suffocate slowly in that basket? They were unable to move, dying slowly, they couldn't breathe through those gills of theirs... And the river was SO close to them... They just couldn't get away. You give any thought to those fish, kid?" He stopped in front of Blue and chuckled evilly. "You're just like them, you see... Staying here to die slowly, unable to escape, nearly suffocating... until you die."

He kicked the prone body, as if he wanted to make sure he was still with him. There was no reaction, not even a grunt, and so Grover crouched over him, checking his pulse. He grinned evilly. "Out of it again, eh? Well that doesn't surprise me, Svenson." He took a cigarette from his pack and lit it, blowing smoke into his prisoner's face. Still, Blue didn't move. "Doesn't surprise me at all," Grover added with a satisfied smirk.

He turned away for a moment, to puff on his cigarette, and didn't expect, for one second, what happened next.

With unbelievable speed, the still body beside him suddenly came back to life; bound hands grabbed him by the throat, stifling the cry of surprise that burst from it. Blue sent him to the floor, with a strength born out of fury, and pinned him there, with his body, his fingers closing on the hated throat, savagely beating the man's head against the concrete floor. It was a supreme effort for him to move, a torture to command his wounded hands, but he wasn't about to stop. Now might be the only chance he would have.

"You thought you had me dead there, didn't you?" Blue's voice was but a croak. He almost didn't recognize it himself. God, what he would give for a drop of water... "Did you think I wouldn't be able to fight back anymore, Grover? You thought wrong, scum!"

Grover's head hit the hard concrete one last time, eliciting a loud moan. Hurried footsteps made themselves heard behind Blue. *No, not this time*, he thought. In pain though he was, he managed to dodge the first blow when he felt the presence near him. His elbow went backward, and he put all his weight behind it. He hit something. So very hard that his assailant fell to his knees, letting out a huff. Blue could feel his breath; estimating the exact position of his face, he hit hard again, with both hands. He felt an intense satisfaction when something cracked on impact; a nose, or a jaw maybe. He heard the man crying out in pain, and then falling to the floor.

Blue didn't have the chance to claim victory. There was someone else in the room. Someone who violently hit him on the side of the head with something heavy and hard, before he could make another move. He was sent sprawling on the floor, clear of Grover who had begun to stir again. Blue desperately tried to stay focused and to hang on to what was left of his consciousness. He couldn't; that last attack, on top of all the mistreatments he had suffered those last hours, had claimed too much of his strength.

"Get him to his feet!" That was Grover's voice, strained, barely recognizable under the pain and rage the man was obviously feeling. Two strong pairs of arms roughly picked a dazed Blue up from the floor and held him upright. He didn't resist them; he couldn't anymore.

Wilson Grover staggered to his feet, finding he needed to lean on a nearby wall to keep himself up, while trying to regain his composure. He ran his fingers over the back of his throbbing head, before rubbing his throat. Then he looked into his prisoner's direction, his eyes burning with untold anger and hatred. And fear as well. He realized that if Wesley and Sam had not stepped in to stop Svenson, the man might have killed him. He had under-estimated him, never thought that he would have had enough strength left in him to fight back with such viciousness. Grover narrowed his eyes to his captive, the hatred burning stronger still, and approached, limping more heavily than before.

Blue nearly didn't react when he became aware of Grover's presence, standing in front of him. He could barely lift his head, so terribly heavy. He could feel a hot trickle of blood running down his face, from a wound caused by the brutal knock he had just received. Grover grabbed a handful of blond hair and pulled his head up, forcing a grunt from Blue's tightened jaws.

"You should have killed me!" Grover growled between his teeth. "Cracked my head open and been done with it!"

Blue tried to focus, overcoming the pain and the haze in his brain, to force an answer through his lips. "Next time, maybe," he gasped with as much assurance as he could muster.

Grover pulled harder on the hair.

Blue let out a muffled moan, but kept silent as best he could. It was only by a supreme effort that he didn't cry out. "You haven't won... yet."

"You're kidding yourself, kid," Grover replied coldly enough. "You can't save yourself, you know that. You're in my power, I can do what I want with you. Nobody's gonna come to your rescue, like the last time."

"Wanna bet?" Blue hissed with a challenging tone.

That seemed to enrage Grover even more. His free hand closed into a ball and he violently rammed it into his captive's stomach; Blue doubled over with a loud grunt, but didn't fall to the floor, as the men holding him prevented this. He stayed hanging between their hands, gasping for air, and coughing.

"You're still trying to play smart with me, ain't you, you son of a gun?" Grover spat out. "You're gonna pay dearly for this!"

"Yeah," Blue whispered. "You said that already..."

He didn't need to see to know that Grover's massive fist was coming fast, to hit him right in the jaw. He felt something crack in his mouth. He had just lost a tooth. Maybe two. He coughed out some blood, the salty taste in his mouth becoming more intense. The following second, he was hit again in the stomach. The pain became nearly intolerable.

"Nothing more to say, smart guy?" Grover growled furiously, taking another handful of the blond hair. Too out of breath, Blue didn't produce any kind of response. Grover gave a somehow dissatisfied grunt. He raised his eyes to look at the two men holding his prisoner. "Let him go."

Released, Blue felt heavily on the floor, without a sound; he stayed there, still fighting so desperately to stay conscious. Grover snorted derisively, looking down at him, before addressing his accomplices again.

"You'd better tell your brothers that there's a change of plan," he announced. "We'll be taking him out of this place tonight."

"What?" Sam replied with a furrowed brow. "Why?"

"Just say I don't trust Gardenia. I don't know, I'm sure he's up to something..."

"Be honest, Will," Wesley retorted dryly. "You just want to take your sweet time with Svenson. You know that if Gardenia knew what you've been doing here..."

"It's none of your business!" Grover cut in savagely. "You'll be richer than you previously thought, not having to share the big money with Gardenia. So what do you care?"

"I care about living and I'm not sure Gardenia will take lightly to being double-crossed."

"You'll have enough money to change country and name, Wesley, so don't worry about Gardenia. He won't be able to touch you."

There was a short pause, before Wesley continued, in an undertone, "I don't know, Will. I'm all for it, but I don't see how we'll be able to get him out of here."

Grover gave an evil grin in answer. "I don't think we'll have much trouble, Wes. We just have to wait for the right moment. When everybody will be looking the other way." He then looked down with blazing eyes at his apparently unconscious captive. "Then we'll be able to cash in on this bastard, and his father. All that money, just for us." He cackled evilly. "And then... vengeance will be mine."

Chapter 15

Symphony Angel consulted her watch for the tenth time in the last half hour. *Only two minutes left*, she reflected.

"Not getting cold feet, are you?"

Symphony looked to her side, where a big bulky Black man was standing. Rodney was Butch's older brother. He looked like Butch. Same build, same features, except he was bald and had a gold earring, and lots of rings on his fingers. Same obnoxious disposition, but with an easy, assured smile. He was also dressed in a much more elegant, almost fancy way, befitting the place he was working in. To his question, Symphony shook her head. "No, I'm not. But I must admit I am a little nervous."

"You're rusty? Haven't done this for a while?"

Symphony frowned. *A VERY long time indeed*, she mused. *And NOT professionally*. And in front of the kind of crowd that was awaiting her?! Not at all. But she kept that to herself. Instead, she checked herself out. The red sequined gown she was wearing was MUCH too revealing for her taste. No shoulder straps; a low, plunging neckline; and although the dress reached down to her ankles, it was slit nearly up to her hip on the left side, showing the whole of her left leg. The shoes were a real torture. At least three inches high, and so narrow, she could barely feel her toes. Obviously, the woman who had worn them before her had much smaller feet.

"Just uncomfortable, I guess," she muttered. "It's these high heels, more than anything. I haven't worn anything like them for a LONG time!"

"You'll do fine. Let me check that make-up." Symphony looked up at him. He was tall, but with her heels, she was nearly as tall as he was.

"Not too much?" she asked timidly. She felt absurdly like a circus freak, with all the glittering make-up that Esmeralda, the house make-up artist, had put on her face.

Rodney shook his head. "Naaa, you look great. Just what's needed for the show... And don't forget," he added in an undertone, "you don't want Grover to recognize you if he's in the house tonight."

Symphony nodded. When Marsha had helped her to enter the '*First Base Casino*', by taking the place of one of the regular performers in the Guests Lounge, she had hoped she would have the time and the opportunity to search for Adam right away. But it had not been possible. Not even with the help of Rodney who, Symphony had learned, was Marsha's inside informer. There was simply not enough time left, after Marsha had made all the arrangements to get her in, and convinced the person in charge that she was 'reliable'. And then there had been Marsha's instructions to Symphony, how to act like a professional performer, and the preparations for tonight's show. Symphony was deeply disappointed. If only she could have been able to free herself to go in search of Blue... She would have freed him and got him out of here, and then she wouldn't have had to perform at all.

Now, she simply couldn't avoid it. She was backstage, minutes from the show, all ready to go.

She hoped the cover would work. And she was starting to get a severe case of stage fright.

But that wasn't what was really worrying her the most. Not the way she was dressed, and not the fact she would have to go on stage. Not by a long shot.

She had not checked in with either Paul or Colonel White yet. Now that she knew that Captain Scarlet was out of jail – although not really out of peril, considering WHO had got him out – she wasn't as worried about him as before. She knew, however, that HE would worry about HER. But with all that was going on, she didn't have the time to call him. At least, she was desperately trying to CONVINCE herself that she didn't have the time. She knew she was lying to herself. The truth was that she didn't WANT to call in at all. She wasn't in any hurry to face Colonel White just yet. He would be so very angry at her, she just knew it. The fact that she had not checked in, for so many hours, despite the urgency of the situation AND Spectrum's

regulations, didn't help matters. Pushing the deadline forward would only be worse, she was aware of that, but she felt as if she had no other choice. She just knew that her commander would forbid her to put herself in danger so blatantly, as she was doing right now. And it was a sure bet Paul would add his concerned voice to their commander's.

Well, she wouldn't have it. She had to do everything in her power to find Adam. Especially now that she felt she was so close to him.

She was ready to face court martial if need be.

Rodney had moved to push aside the curtain, to check on the stage and beyond it into the lounge. Then he turned to the young woman, who was fidgeting with her radio mic. "The place is full. Gardenia's in there, playing cards."

Symphony nodded. Up until now, she hadn't had to meet Pietro Gardenia. The man, it seemed, had other, more important preoccupations about the casino than hiring performers. He left that task to a Mister Martinelli. It was Martinelli that Marsha and her right-hand man, Holloway, had contacted, explaining that the lounge performer was sick and unable to appear, and then proposing a replacement. Although Martinelli had shown some reluctance in accepting Symphony, he had quickly had to give in, seeing as he had no other choice if he wanted to have a show tonight.

All in all, the substitution had gone rather smoothly.

"I don't see Grover anywhere," Rodney continued, turning around to face Symphony. "I know he was in the house today, but... I wasn't able to find out what 'business' he had here. Except for what I already told Marsha." He blew out a sigh. "Wish I was able to find your boyfriend for you, honey. But it's just not possible. There's places where employees like me are not allowed."

"You think he may be in that bunker Marsha told me about?"

"It's possible." Rodney shrugged. "It's common knowledge that Gardenia keeps... 'things', there. Illegal stuff. If your friend is here, that's where they would put him. But I've never been able to get in there, though. I'm an honest employee, you know?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll find a way to check that out myself."

Rodney scowled. "You're courting danger, lady."

More than you can ever know, Rodney, Symphony reflected inwardly. I'm in big trouble next time I face Colonel White.

"I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, so I've heard. But if you have any problems..."

"Are you afraid I'd blow your cover, Rodney?" Symphony murmured.

"It's not that... Well, not that much."

"What is it? Did Marsha ask you to keep your eye on me?"

"No. My brother."

"That's so kind of him."

Rodney's face cracked with a broad grin, revealing a gold glitter in the middle of two rows of very white teeth. "It's not that. He says you're trouble with a capital T, and quite a handful. Seeing the state of his face when he told me that, I figured he was worried for me, rather than for you."

Symphony chuckled. "Well, you have nothing to fear from me, Rodney. I won't be as rough with you as I was with your brother. Because at least I KNOW you're on my side."

"I appreciate that very much, little lady." He checked one last time beyond the curtain.

"Okay, prepare yourself. You'll be going on in a minute."

"Oh, can't wait," Symphony grumbled, not even a hint of enthusiasm in her tone.

* * *

"You're a real card shark, you know that, Mister Montagu?"

Behind the high piles of chips he had amassed, Colonel White raised an eyebrow upon hearing Orson Craig's remark.

Folding the cards he had in his hands, the man put them down on the table, and rose from his seat, blowing a deep sigh. There was but a single blue chip in front of him, that he picked up

solemnly. "I'm out," he announced grumpily. "That's all I have left." With a casual gesture, he put the chip onto the plate of the young waitress who passed near him, and took the glass of brandy that was standing on it. "My Mom always told me to treat the girls like they were all ladies," he said, winking at the girl. He then raised his glass, and swallowed the contents in one gulp, before putting it down the table. He took his vest from where it hung on the back of his chair, and nodded to White. "A pleasure to have played with you, sir."

White nodded in turn and Craig turned to leave.

"Now, it's just between you and me, Mister Montagu."

White looked up at Gardenia seated on the other side of the table. An hour ago, Mario Morelli had left the table, having lost all of his previous winnings during the poker game. The man was now seated at the bar, drinking jovially, as if he hadn't just lost a small fortune. Now Orson Craig had left in turn, leaving Pietro Gardenia and 'John Montagu' to face off, each with a great quantity of chips in front of them. Gardenia's stacks, however were just a little higher than White's.

"As it was meant to be, isn't it, Mister Gardenia?" White reflected quietly.

Gardenia shook his head. "Orson is right. You're a real card shark," he said between his teeth. "Where did you learn to play like that?"

"I have an angel looking over my shoulder," White answered evenly.

"Is that the way the English say they have luck on their side?" White didn't answer; Gardenia discreetly checked around and leaned over to him, offering a faint smile. "Or is it the expression they use to say they cheat?"

Scarlet had left his position at the bar to take a table not far from the stage, distractedly playing solitaire, with a glass of beer in front of him. From there, he had a perfect view of the table where Colonel White had been playing poker for the last hour or so, in company of Gardenia and the two other mobsters. Up until now, everything had gone according to plan. Thanks to Destiny's 'helpful advice', the colonel had been able to drive each of the other players from the table, leaving the Spectrum commander to face only Gardenia. As it was intended to be. But now, hearing Gardenia's words, Scarlet had a feeling that things could very well go haywire. He tensed, and touched the frame of his glasses.

"Destiny?" he murmured.

"I heard it too," the voice of Destiny answered. "Be ready to interfere if need be, Captain."

"S.I.G.," Scarlet replied in an undertone. He had his eyes closely set on the table where the two men were confronting each other. He waited.

White didn't even react to the accusation; which rather sounded like a remark than anything else. "Are you saying I'm a cheat, Mister Gardenia?"

"Come on, we both know you are," Gardenia answered, with a confident smile on his face. "Of course, you were cheating at the blackjack table too... How did you do it, anyway? I'm curious to know."

"If you feel so sure I was cheating," White replied rather coldly, "why not say so in front of the others?"

"Because it wouldn't have served my purpose." Gardenia sat back; his expression had turned to one of satisfaction. "You won a great deal at this table tonight, Mister Montagu. And I enjoyed seeing you cleaning out Craig and Morelli. Now, it's only a little matter of you... losing it all to me."

White raised an eyebrow. "So that's what you have in mind," he noted. "You 'win' all my gains, most of it the money I took from those two gentlemen, and they will never know that you actually robbed them of it. You're nothing but a common thief, then."

"So strange to hear the word 'thief' coming from the mouth of a cheat. You'd better watch your language, mister."

"And if I refuse to lose to you?"

"Then I'll reveal you for the cheat you are. Believe me, cheats and conmen are not welcome in this city. Especially if they cheat two notorious members of the mob."

"Which your two... 'friends' are," White noted.

"So, you know that, do you?"

"Yes, I know. As I know about your... contacts with the local mob, Mister Gardenia. You are a very influential man in that circle."

"You better believe it." Gardenia took a sip from his glass. "Like you better believe that I won't hesitate one second to use that influence to throw you to the wolves, if need be." He smiled lightly. "And don't bother to defend yourself by saying that I knew all about it. You think they will believe you? They'll believe me instead."

"I don't doubt it." There was a cold edge to White's tone. He tilted his head to the side. "You've done this sort of thing many times, Mister Gardenia?"

"What makes you say that, Mister Montagu?"

"Experience, really. I know a crook when I see a crook. And a weasel, when I see a weasel."

Gardenia bristled at the insult. "I told you to watch your mouth, Montagu. I don't like being insulted."

White nodded quietly. He leaned over the table, his fingers intertwined in front of him. Gardenia was surprised to see that a man in his apparently difficult position could still appear so calm. "I have a proposition for you, Mister Gardenia."

Gardenia scoffed loudly. "And what kind of proposition could you possibly be able to offer me?"

"You have... something, that I want very much."

"Really? And what's in it for me? Frankly, sir, that doesn't sound that interesting."

"But you WILL find it interesting, I'm sure. And it'll be in your best interests to accept."

"That sounds like some kind of threat," Gardenia remarked ominously. "Surely, you must realise I'm not a man to react kindly to threats, Mister Montagu."

"Why don't you stop the pretence, Mister Gardenia? You must know my name isn't Montagu."

"Really? I had my doubts, but..."

"Come on, you really don't have any idea of who I am?" White shook his head. "I would have thought that that sheriff of yours would have talked to you about me."

"What sheriff?"

"The sheriff of Los Lobos. A certain McNamara. I was in his town today. And if I'm not mistaken, he wanted so very much for me to stay there a little longer than I had planned."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

White narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing the man in front of him. "You don't fool me, Gardenia. You must surely be aware of two Englishmen who were in Los Lobos today, asking too many indiscreet questions. One of them, I'm sure, fitting my description."

Gardenia scoffed. "You're not the ONLY Englishman ever to come into my casino, Mister Montagu. Or whoever you are. I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"Haven't you?" White's voice became very icy. "I'm talking about Adam Svenson."

"Sorry?" Gardenia gave White a somehow innocent and perplexed look. That didn't fool the colonel at all. "Who is this... Adam Svenson?"

"The man Wilson Grover kidnapped, with your complicity." White raised his hand swiftly, seeing that Gardenia was about to protest. "And don't bother to tell me you don't know Mister Grover. I know perfectly well that you two were... buddies, of some sort, when you were in the baseball minor leagues."

"I don't deny I know Wilson Grover, no. It was a long time ago... Nearly thirty years."

"And he made contact with you again some years ago."

"That may be true," Gardenia admitted carefully. "But that doesn't mean that this accusation of yours is also true." He took a very cold tone. "You like to live dangerously, Mister Montagu. I suggest you moderate your tone, before I have one of my men do it for you. You have no right coming waltzing in here and accusing me like that, without any proof." With a satisfied smirk he casually picked up his cigar, which had gone out, from the ashtray on the table and fished in his pocket for his gold-plated lighter.

"I don't need proof to know you're in this right up to your neck," White replied between his teeth. "Furthermore, I've got proof enough of my own, of a different sort, to put you behind bars for the rest of your life, before we even *mention* the subject of kidnapping. You see, I know all about your... extra-curricular activities. I managed to build up quite an interesting file on you, with

some VERY interesting names. A Mister Fisher from New York, for example? I heard you owe him a great deal of money... " The lighter stopped just short of the cigar. White narrowed his eyes at him. "I think you're a very lucky man, Mister Gardenia, that Mister Fisher is still trying to sort out his Swiss bank account, after that nasty business with one of his rivals. He's too busy to come after you for his money."

Gardenia sat up straight, hearing that. That information had never leaked to the press. "How did you...?"

"I have very reliable contacts, Mister Gardenia."

"You've got some nerve..." Gardenia choked on the rest and kept silent a moment, staring with a murderous look at the set-faced Englishman seated in front of him. An evil smile slowly spread on his lips. "And what make you think you'll be able to leave this place, with all that information you say you have on me?"

White's brief grin was anything but amused. "Quite easily, I imagine."

"You're nuts. Where's your evidence? What can you show me, right here, right now?"

"Surely you don't think I'd have any incriminating evidence with me?" Gardenia scowled deeply, apparently annoyed to hear that answer. "Now hear my proposition, Mister Gardenia," White continued, with the same even tone. "You give me back Adam Svenson, in good health. And I'll forget everything that I know."

Gardenia chuckled. He sat back quietly, eyeing the Spectrum commander. "You really think you can get out of here like that, unharmed, after all that you just said to me?"

"I did escape your sheriff, earlier."

Gardenia narrowed his eyes. "Okay, maybe you'll be able to leave this room. You may even be able to walk through the casino and reach the door. And then, take your car and go back to your hotel. But I can guarantee you, sir: you would never leave this town alive."

"I take it you don't accept my arrangement," White replied, still very calmly.

"There can be no arrangement between us," Gardenia growled with anger.

"I'm not so sure about that." Quietly, with measured moves, White reached into his jacket pocket to fish out a thin card-holder. For a moment, Gardenia seemed distressed, but the Spectrum commander was careful enough to show him the interior of his vest, thus demonstrating that he wasn't carrying any weapon. "Do you think me careless enough to come in here armed, Mister Gardenia?"

From his place at his table, not so far from there, Scarlet was waiting, ready to swiftly intervene, his hand reaching behind him for his pistol. He felt as nervous as a cat. Should Gardenia misinterpret White's gesture...

But nothing happened, and he saw the man relax as White produced the inoffensive card-holder, and then threw it on top of the pile of chips in the middle of the table. Scarlet relaxed, but still kept on the ready.

"Here. I think you'll find this new stake quite interesting. And enough to convince you that it would be better for you to accept my proposition."

"What are you, a cop?" Gardenia grumbled, reaching for the card-holder. He stopped in mid-movement, and his eyes went wide, as they fell on the rounded symbol stamped on the leather. It was staring him right in the face, with its rainbow of colours and the bright stylised 'S' dead in the centre.

He quickly put his open hand onto the card-holder, covering the symbol entirely, and looked around nervously to make sure nobody had noticed it. When he was satisfied that it wasn't the case, he turned his attention back to the still set-faced White. "Spectrum?" he murmured. There wasn't any reaction from his interlocutor. Gardenia licked his lips. "Where did you get that?"

White raised an eyebrow. "Why, it's mine, of course. What do you think?" He could see Gardenia suddenly becoming livid. He pressed on. "If you care to look inside, you'll see my picture and ID card..." He reached out his hand with the apparent intention of taking the card-holder to prove what he had said, but Gardenia's sudden protests stopped him as he was near his goal.

"Will you leave that alone? I don't want anybody to see it!" He was still talking low, very quickly this time, but he had the impression he had still talked too loudly. He checked around. He

didn't dare open the card-holder himself, in fear somebody would catch a glimpse. He then scrutinized White's face attentively. The man was icy calm, and waiting patiently.

There was no doubt in Gardenia's mind that he was facing the real deal.

He took the card-holder, taking great care to hide the Spectrum emblem within his palm, and drew a deep breath. "What is it you want?"

"I thought I'd already told you," White replied. "I want Adam Svenson back."

Gardenia paused, and carefully weighed his answer. "This is not a good place to talk," he finally said in a low tone. "Too many ears. We would be better to continue this... discussion... in my office."

White stared at him, with a doubtful expression. Gardenia quickly shook his head. "I know what you're thinking. But have no fear. I give you my word I'm not leading you into a trap. I certainly don't want any trouble with Spectrum."

White nodded carefully. Obviously, the man was impressed enough by the mere thought that he was presently facing a Spectrum agent that he was now completely sincere. "You and me alone, then."

"Of course," Gardenia quickly accepted.

"All right, then. I agree." White gestured negligently towards the chips on the table. "Won't people be suspicious if you leave all that there and take off?"

Gardenia nodded in turn. "You're right. I'll have someone pick them up. Excuse me a minute." He rose from his seat and went to Guido, who was standing next to the stage talking to a bald and bulky Black man wearing a gold earring.

In his ear, Colonel White suddenly heard the voice of Captain Scarlet; the younger officer's tone sounded urgent, and certainly worried. *Destiny must have put him through*, thought the Spectrum commander.

"Sir, this is too risky," Scarlet was saying. "You'll be without protection if you go with that man alone."

"And what do you suggest?" White grumbled under his breath, negligently playing with the deck of cards left in front of him.

"I'll follow you."

"No, you're staying right where you are. You'll be able to monitor my situation with the camera and speakers."

"But..."

"I said no, Captain. That's an order." White looked toward Gardenia, who was now coming back to him in the company of Guido, and then stood up. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

From his table, Captain Scarlet was wondering how in Heaven's name he would not worry, as he watched Gardenia inviting his commander to follow him. The two went in the direction of a door near the bar, while Guido was busy getting the chips from the table and putting them into a sack. Scarlet didn't take his eyes off White until he disappeared behind the door, which closed on him. He didn't like it. For all of White's assurance, there was no guarantee that Gardenia would keep true to his word and would not cause any trouble. Scarlet had half a mind to follow, despite the orders given to him. He had begun to rise from his chair.

"Don't worry, Captain," the voice of Destiny told him at that moment, bringing him back to order. "The colonel usually knows what he's doing."

"Does he?" Scarlet grumbled under his breath.

"I'll keep close watch, don't worry. And the channel will still be open, so you'll hear everything that goes on in there."

Scarlet sat back, drawing a deep sigh and took back the cards he had left on the table. "S.I.G.," he finally murmured reluctantly. It wasn't as if he had any choice. He knew that the colonel was only following the plan, and that they had to trust that it would succeed, in order to get Blue back.

* * *

After following a corridor, Colonel White and Pietro Gardenia arrived at the latter's office; it was a big spacious room, with very classy decor, and a large oak desk set to the far side opposite

the door. The minute they entered in, White walked right into the middle of the room, while Gardenia was closing the door behind. All sounds coming from the lounge were instantly cut off, as White realized Gardenia must have had his office soundproofed for more privacy.

"I should have realized," the casino owner said, White turning to face him. "Gray. That's a colour-coded name from Spectrum, then?" He approached the Spectrum commander.

"So you do know who I am," White noted, not correcting Gardenia's mistake. "Thank you, I was wondering if McNamara had really contacted you about me."

"Is that a forged identity, or is there a real Gray somewhere, not aware that you're using his name?" White didn't care to respond. Obviously, Gardenia mused, he didn't want to beat around the bush and wanted this situation settled as quickly as possible. He sighed. "Yes, McNamara did contact me," he admitted. "He told me about you snooping around his town, searching for that friend of yours and for Wilson Grover. He told me how excruciatingly annoying you have been, making the same accusations that you're making now, right here in my face. Trying to incriminate me with kidnapping..."

"If you WEREN'T involved, Mister Gardenia... why would Sheriff McNamara inform you of my whereabouts? It seems obvious to me that you're very interested in knowing who's looking for Adam Svenson and Wilson Grover. And you were also very anxious that this person - me, or anybody else - didn't ask too many questions or eventually find these two men. So, in view of what I told you earlier, what do you think is the obvious conclusion about your involvement in this affair?"

Gardenia had stopped in front of White to stare at him for a moment. He seemed to ponder the remark. Then, quietly, he handed him his card-holder. He had not even opened it. He felt that he didn't need to. White accepted it and pocketed it.

"What is it you want from me, sir?" Gardenia asked quietly.

"How many times do I have to tell you? I want Adam Svenson."

"Since when does Spectrum take interest in..." Gardenia lifted an eyebrow, "...that kind of business?"

"Call it a personal favour," White replied coldly. "One I'm doing for a friend."

"And you're using Spectrum's influence for a personal favour? That seems... odd."

"You don't have to know all the details behind this... 'operation', Mister Gardenia. Just so you're aware: I WILL use all the influence and power that I have, without any hesitation, to see Adam Svenson free." He tilted his head. "Believe me, you don't want to see me using the heavy artillery."

"You're serious about this," Gardenia murmured, frowning.

"I'm always serious, Gardenia," White replied. "That's why I intend to keep my end of the bargain."

"Which is?"

White nodded toward the closed door. "How much did we leave on that table? Thirty, thirty-five thousand? That's yours."

Gardenia scoffed loudly. "You're kidding! In a 'business' like you're implying – and I'm not saying I'm involved! – that would hardly pay off the hired hands!"

"It's also the price of your freedom." White's icy tone got Gardenia's total attention. He stared squarely at him. "You don't have any choice but to accept the offer, Mister Gardenia. I know the police are disappointed that they've not been able to pin anything on you so far, no grounds for arrest. But Spectrum is another matter. We have means other law authorities can only dream of. I will have you investigated, and tracked down around the world if need be. Believe me, I can do it. And I will."

"So you're telling me... if I do not agree to your demands... I will be spending the rest of my life running away from Spectrum?"

"Oh, I don't think you'd be running for long. I'm sure Mister Fisher would find you rather quickly. From what I hear, you'd better pray that Spectrum DOES find you first..." There was an assurance in White's tone that was enough to convince Gardenia that he meant every word he said.

"And what... if I wasn't to let you get out of here?" Gardenia asked ominously.

There was a low chuckle from White. He had been waiting for this threat. "If I accepted this proposition of yours to come alone to this office to discuss our 'business', it's because I took out

some insurance, Mister Gardenia. Every move, and every word we exchange is being monitored. Everything from the moment I set foot in this casino. Which, by the way, is currently under surveillance by Spectrum agents. There are many of them, outside and inside the house. The SECOND they think I may be in life-threatening danger, they'll be on you like a ton of bricks."

Gardenia frowned. He still had some doubts, but he had heard of Spectrum's effectiveness. And White's assurance, while standing there in front of him, gave him no reason to believe he wasn't hearing the truth. "I don't want any problem with Spectrum. It would not be good for my business."

"Especially concerning your relationship with the mob, eh?"

"I heard rumours of the trouble those families in New York AND Philadelphia had with your organization recently. I don't want the same."

"I'm not interested in your business with the mob, nor any of your other businesses, Mister Gardenia." White paused a second, seeing that Gardenia was still hesitating. "There is ONE more thing I can offer you," he added carefully. "Let's say I... can see to it that Mister Fisher has other things on his plate besides collecting your debt..."

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"Believe me, Mister Gardenia, I can as easily go after him as you. But YOU have something that I want: Adam Svenson. And I want him safe and sound. And I want Wilson Grover too, for good measure." Gardenia seemed thoughtful about that last demand. White took his silence for hesitation. "Don't tell me you have scruples about..."

"I don't care about Grover," Gardenia cut in. "He cares about nothing, except his revenge on the Svensons, whom he considers responsible for his imprisonment, all those years ago. He only called upon me because he needed my help. He doesn't have any loyalty to me. So why should I have any to him?" He shook his head. "But Grover could be dangerous for my business, if he is incarcerated. It seems this fool plan of his got me in enough trouble as it is. I'd prefer it if you let me handle him."

"I can't condone murder, Gardenia."

"All you have to know is that he won't cause trouble to anybody anymore. Least of all, to your... friend."

White pondered that; he wouldn't certainly let Gardenia kill Grover, despite the fact that the latter certainly would deserve such a fate. He had read the report of what had happened twenty-five years earlier. He knew how badly Grover had then mistreated the boy he had kidnapped from his family. How he had nearly killed him, having no intention of giving him back, despite the ransom he was to receive. That young Adam had escaped that fate was pure dumb luck. White had also seen the recording John Svenson had made when Grover had contacted him earlier. The way he had already beaten Captain Blue, it was not only to intimidate his father into paying a new ransom. It wasn't even about money. It was obvious Grover had nothing else in mind but revenge. He wanted blood.

John Svenson had understood that, White knew, and he could himself comprehend the man's anguish for his eldest son. He could also understand his concern at seeing Spectrum getting involved, and his anger at being pushed aside, during this operation to save Adam. If he had had a son, and a brutal criminal had threatened his life in order to get to him, as was presently the case for the Svensons, White wasn't so sure he would have acted any differently. As he wasn't so sure the kidnapper would have survived an encounter with him.

As much as it would be fitting for Grover to meet his end by the hand of Gardenia, Colonel White couldn't bring himself to give his agreement to this. It would be in opposition to all he believed in, and everything that he and his organization stood for. Yet, he sensed that a refusal might make Gardenia back off. As afraid as Gardena was of Spectrum's involvement in this affair – and it was so very obvious he didn't like that at all – he was also very concerned that Grover would prove too hazardous a loose end if left alive. The best thing for now, the colonel decided, was to let Gardenia think he had got his way. There would be time later to improvise.

"I just want Adam Svenson, Mister Gardenia," White said, his voice as even as before, "before that maniac can do him more harm than he has already done. I know that he has hurt him already. And I have no intention of letting him continue this game for long."

Gardenia nodded at these words. He then moved toward his desk, and picked up the phone, pressing a button.

"Emilio," he called, "Would you go to the bunker, and bring back our guest, please?" He looked over to White and saw him relax a little, upon hearing the request. "And don't hurt him," he continued. "Yes, just bring him to me. And try to see if Grover is around too. I want a word with him." Without anything else to add, Gardenia hung up, and then turned to face White. "Satisfied now, Mister Gray?"

"Mister Gardenia," White replied still very evenly, "I won't be fully satisfied until I see Adam Svenson in front of me. Safe and sound."

* * *

Through the radio relay provided by Destiny to the speakers in his glasses, Captain Scarlet had been able to follow the conversation in Gardenia's office. Now, along with the Angel, and John Svenson who he knew was listening closely to what was going on, the captain knew that, in theory, Adam would soon be released from his tormentor and back to safety. He wasn't ready to cry victory, yet. He knew that there could still be some hitches to the operation. Like the colonel, he wouldn't be satisfied until he actually saw Adam. He knew that Destiny shared the same concern, but neither voiced the thought; Destiny had reported that, since he had heard Gardenia's last words, John Svenson had relaxed considerably. Keeping Svenson as calm as possible, and under control, considering the situation, was foremost in the Spectrum agents' minds.

Now it seemed assured, however, that Colonel White wasn't in any danger, so Scarlet relaxed his surveillance a little, leaving Destiny to maintain a close watch on things. However, if any kind of trouble should arise, the captain would be ready to intervene instantly. In any case, he would probably be called upon soon, if just to take delivery of Captain Blue. After having seen that awful recording of his captivity, Scarlet didn't doubt that his friend would need assistance to walk out of this place. He would be there to help. In the meantime, since he could do nothing but wait, and so he wouldn't attract too much attention, he began a new game of solitaire, his mind not really on it.

That's when he noticed a presence near him.

"Hello, handsome."

He looked up; a woman was standing in front of him, offering her most angelic smile. Scarlet raised an eyebrow when he recognized one of the girls who had flocked around Colonel White at the blackjack table. One of those to whom White had given some chips.

Without being invited, she sat down on the empty chair beside him; and got very close. "What's a guy like you doing all by your lonesome?" She took his glass and drank a large gulp of it, before a perplexed Scarlet could react. "Want to buy me a drink?"

"I'm sorry," Scarlet replied with a bashful smile. "But... I've been washed out at the tables."

"Oh, really?" She closed in on him; she was so near that her cheap perfume became really overwhelming. "You wouldn't be here if you didn't have anything left, hon. They don't allow people without cash in the Guests Lounge. Did you sneak in, perhaps? Tito, the bouncer guarding the door... He's very strict about it. If he finds out you're out of money, he'll have you thrown out."

"You'd tell him?" Scarlet asked, unsure.

Her smile went wider. "Naaa... I wouldn't do that to a hunk like ya... who has such an adorable accent. I have a thing for guys with an accent."

So I noticed, Scarlet thought to himself, remembering how she'd been all over White. He nearly chuckled over the thought but then, the thought quickly disappeared, as she started playing with HIS jacket. Now she had settled her sights on HIM. Scarlet felt a bit embarrassed.

"Come on, just one drink," she insisted. "And a little company? You'll draw attention if you stay on your own like this!"

"She has a point, Captain." That was Destiny's voice in Scarlet's ears. He could hear the annoying snigger behind it. She was apparently enjoying herself. Tremendously. "You'd better keep her around. Just to be around." There was a small hesitation, then she continued, in a mocking voice. "Of course, you'd better behave yourself... Or nothing will stop me telling Dianne..." Scarlet scowled. Of course, he knew she was only teasing him, but it didn't make the situation less discomfiting. On the contrary.

That's when the lights suddenly went off in the room, to be replaced by a softer, more ambient light. Scarlet was wondering what was going on, until he saw the bald Black man who had been with Guido earlier stepping onto the stage, into a bright spotlight. He figured out there was some kind of show about to begin. The woman with him was settling herself comfortably on her newly acquired chair; still so very close to him, it was making his skin prickle. He saw her wave to the barman and him nodding in answer. Obviously, she had asked for a drink, and the barman knew perfectly well what she would like.

And Scarlet had a pretty good idea WHO was going to pay for it.

"I'll stick with you, handsome," she declared. "We can watch the show together, do you mind? I'm sure you'll love it."

"I'll take your word for it, er..."

"You can call me Dolly, honey." She pointed to the stage, where the Black man was adjusting the mic. "You know, I performed on that stage, not so long ago?"

"Why did you stop?"

She shrugged. "I got involved with a client. Performers aren't allowed to do that, house rules. So they put me on another job..."

"I see."

"But... that incident brought me close to a fantastic guy. He became my boyfriend."

"The client in question?" She nodded. Scarlet seemed puzzled. "And he doesn't mind that you... do this new kind of job now?"

"Oh, not at all! I'm not with him anymore."

Scarlet nodded at the innocent way the young woman had stated that fact, apparently so natural to her. He was looking at her with even more perplexity. *Well, we do meet INTERESTING people in this business*, he mused.

"Ladies and gentlemen..." That was from the man standing on the stage. Distractedly, Scarlet turned toward him. "I know a lot of you regulars are waiting for our Lady Marlena to make her performance tonight, but, I'm sorry to announce that, due to sickness, she won't be here tonight..." Protests started to make themselves heard from all corners of the lounge. Scarlet was barely taking any notice; wanting to keep track of what was going on in the room where Gardenia had taken the colonel, he was busy adjusting the volume of his speakers, manipulating the frame of his glasses as inconspicuously as he could, the semi-darkness helping him.

"Now I know you're all disappointed, especially you, gents..." There were some laughs, and the Black man smiled a little. "... But have no fear, 'cause the management of the '*First Base Casino*' has found a replacement for your favourite lounge singer..." A waitress had come to Scarlet's table and put two glasses on it; she then stood beside him, waiting. The Brit quickly left the adjustment of his speakers to take his wallet from his pocket, in order to pay her. "So now," the man on stage continued, his voice taking a stronger tone, "it is our pleasure tonight, to introduce you to the house's newest sensation. Ladies and gentlemen, bid a warm welcome to the talented, delightful and very beautiful... SYMPHONY!"

The money Scarlet was about to give the waitress literally dropped from his hand to hers. He nearly jumped on his seat upon hearing the name and turned around quickly, eyes wide open with astonishment, hoping he hadn't heard what he thought he had heard.

The spotlight had left the man and a new one was now illuminating another, slender figure, standing right in the middle of the stage, wearing a long ruby red dress that revealed a large portion of bare back, which was turned to the audience. The musicians, barely noticeable in the background, had started their first notes, and Scarlet kept on staring, his frown now very deep, as the singer began her song, in a low, and very slow note:

The minute you walked in the joint,

Scarlet blinked in disbelief. *Oh bloody hell! Tell me this isn't happening!* He had certainly recognized the voice. He had heard it a couple of times. The song too he had recognized. So fitting for a place like this, but at the same time, so unlike what he knew of its present performer. It was slightly different, slower than its usual tempo. It gradually quickened, however, to the pace of the music played in the background.

*I could see you were a man of distinction...
A real Big Spender!*

And then it took its usual pace, as the singer suddenly turned around to face the crowd, pursuing more forcefully, rowdily even, onto the next line, and starting to walk along the stage.

*Good looking, so refined!
Say, wouldn't you like to know what's going on in my mind?*

Scarlet could only watch, slack-jawed, totally transfixed with utter shock, as the crowd was going wild around him, whistling and applauding at the sight of the very beautiful woman giving them a performance HE never thought he would see in all his life.

"Oh no..." he heard Destiny murmur in his ears. "I'm dreaming..."

Scarlet shook his head. She was not dreaming. And he wasn't either.

Symphony – THEIR Symphony – was singing 'Big Spender' to a room full of VERY appreciative men.

* * *

Wilson Grover and Wesley Dawson had dragged a half-conscious Adam Svenson through the dark corridor leading out of the bunker situated under the *First Base Casino*. Still stunned by his last punishment and the blow to his head, the Spectrum captain was hardly able to put one foot in front of the other. He was simply hauled along, unable to resist, his arms secured tightly against his torso. He couldn't see a thing, as they had left the obnoxious tape on his eyes, and neither could he call out for help. In fear that he would alert Gardenia's men, they had gagged him. *Dejà vu*, Blue thought, dazedly. It really felt as if he was reliving the events of twenty-five years ago.

It was in total silence that they progressed along the corridor, and climbed some steps, forcing their captive along with them. As they arrived at the top, they pushed open a door. Then, they stopped to take a breather, and listened; Blue could hear some music. Not very clearly, almost drowned out by his two captors' heavy breathing.

"We're almost there," growled Grover. The door they had pushed was a concealed panel, that lead into a cold room plunged in semi-darkness, filled with rack upon rack of bottles. It was the casino's special cellar, where Gardenia kept his best bottles; these were reserved for the Guests Lounge, right over their heads. Grover nodded to their left, where they could see a door. "What's Sam doing?" he grumbled. "We can't wait here long!" Sam Dawson had been sent up front to check if the coast was clear, before the two others moved out with the captive. Grover took it as a bad omen that he hadn't shown his face yet.

A creaking sound made itself heard, and then footsteps coming down the stairs. Grover looked into the direction of the door leading up to the casino. "Somebody's coming!" With Wesley, he rushed Blue behind the shelves, into a dark section of the room. The prisoner was pushed against the wall, and forcibly kept there. A moan barely escaped the gag, as Blue's still throbbing head roughly connected with the surface. He heard a click, then something cold and sharp grazed his throat. "Not a sound, Svenson!" he heard the murmured warning of Grover. "Or you're a dead man!"

Blue couldn't see the knife that was held against his throat, but he had little doubt that Grover would gladly kill him. In any case, he wasn't in any shape to offer much resistance; it was all he could do to stay conscious.

Grover and Dawson watched in total silence as the door opened and a man walked into the cellar. The music coming from upstairs came a little more clearly to their ears, as the man, holding the door open, had stopped to light a cigarette. In the feeble light, Grover recognized Emilio, one of Gardenia's most trusted aides, a man he knew was thoroughly loyal to his boss.

Through the thick haze that still clouded his mind, Blue heard the music as if from far away. And yet, he knew it wasn't that far. He wondered where it could be coming from, and where he

might be to hear it. He had recognized the melody; it was an old song still heard in some old-fashioned cabarets.

*So let me get right to the point,
I don't pop my cork for every guy I see!*

Blue froze. He thought he had recognized the voice singing the song. But... it was impossible. Surely, he was dreaming.

*Hey! Big Spender!
Spend a little time with me!*

No, he wasn't dreaming. It WAS Symphony singing. The voice was unmistakable. She had a beautiful, rich voice when she was singing. He had often joked about the fact that her singing voice was SO much better than his own, which sounded like someone strangling a cat. He couldn't NOT recognize her now.

Blue began to agitate himself, but the pressure of the knife on his throat became more insistent. He felt the blade nicking his skin, drawing blood. He instantly stopped his struggles. Symphony... She was so near to him. And yet, so desperately far. And she couldn't be possibly alone. Scarlet must certainly be with her. They had surely traced him to this place – wherever it was. But he couldn't even let them know he was here.

Throwing down his cigarette, Emilio closed the door, and walked past the three hidden men towards the concealed entrance to the bunker. Both Grover and Dawson watched his progress with attention. As soon as he disappeared through the door, they would be able to leave with the captive. This was becoming too close for comfort.

But at that moment, something went wrong, as new, hurried footsteps made themselves heard and Sam Dawson appeared, coming from the bunker, running. He stopped the second he found himself face to face with Emilio, and became suddenly pale, under the other man's hard and curious gaze.

"Hey, Emilio," Sam said with a tentative smile. "How you doin', *paisan*?"

"What are you doing here, Dawson?" Emilio retorted rather roughly. "Aren't you supposed to be in Los Lobos, with those bum brothers of yours?"

"Hey, cool, man," Sam replied. "They're no bums, and neither am I."

"You're *trouble*, that's what you are," grumbled Emilio. "Like that Grover scum, who hangs around with you. Why Pietro keeps you around is beyond me. Did you see Grover?"

"N-no. Why do you ask?" Sam answered, becoming even paler.

"The boss wants to see him, right away." Emilio narrowed his eyes at the man. "What is it? You don't look so good. Like you've seen a ghost or something..." A doubt insinuated itself in his mind and Emilio approached Sam closely. "Are you hiding something?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dawson, I swear to you, if you've been helping yourself to the boss's booze..."

"Hey! I ain't stealin' nothin'!"

"So what's wrong with you? You look really suspicious!"

Grover cursed the fool Dawson brother for not being able to hide his feelings better. Now Emilio wouldn't leave before finding out what was going on. If he found out the truth, it would be disastrous. Feeling that things weren't going according to plan, Grover left his hiding place, leaving Wesley to keep Blue in check, and silently sneaked around behind Emilio.

Sam Dawson was drawing back, away from the bigger man's approach. Clearly, something was going on, Emilio decided. He didn't like it one bit. "What is it, Dawson? I can smell something fishy going on here..."

"You're imagining things, buddy," Sam stammered.

"Could it have something to do with Grover? Tell me where he is."

"Right here, man." The ominous voice behind him startled Emilio and he spun around on his heel. Just in time to receive Grover's knife right in the abdomen. Grunting in pain, gasping with surprise, Emilio doubled over and fell on his knees, opening wide eyes at his attacker.

Grover finished him off with a violent fist to the jaw. Emilio sprawled on the floor, where he didn't move.

"My God, Will!" Sam gasped. "You killed him!"

"I didn't have any choice!" Grover replied roughly. "If you hadn't been so incompetent dealing with him..." He looked around, as Wesley brought Blue out of hiding. He mumbled the rest of his invective and turned again toward Sam. "I hope the coast's clear?"

Sam nodded. "Nobody's in the parking lot and I brought the van as close as the door as I could get it," he answered nervously.

"All right, then," Grover snapped urgently. "Let's get out of here before somebody else comes around."

"But... what about Emilio?"

"Forget about him! You want to be around when Gardenia finds out what happened here? Move out, Sam! Don't you see that you have no choice left, now?"

Sam nodded nervously, finally giving in. The three men rushed toward the exit, pushing and dragging a stumbling Captain Blue with them. They didn't look back, so they didn't see that Emilio was stirring from his position on the floor, and reaching for his portable phone...

* * *

Captain Scarlet was waiting impatiently for the song to finish. He wasn't very happy. In fact, he was literally fuming, to see Symphony making a spectacle of herself like that. He realized why she was doing it, but he didn't like it one bit. And to put herself in such a hot spot, drawing attention to herself like that... Didn't she realize the danger?

"Be easy on her, Captain." That was Destiny's soft voice in his ears. Knowing him as she did, the French woman knew perfectly well what was on his mind. And Scarlet was pretty sure that she was feeling approximately the same way. But as always, Destiny was playing her role as the over-protective leader of the Angels pack. One of her girls was in trouble, so she felt that she had to step in. She was almost a surrogate 'mother' to them all, although she wasn't that much older than they were.

Scarlet wasn't in the mood to listen.

"Keep out of this, Destiny," he mumbled between his teeth.

"Who are you talking to, hon?" Scarlet didn't care to answer Dolly's intrigued question. He promptly stood up from his seat, totally ignoring the woman, and walked with long strides toward the side of the stage closer to him. Dolly sprang to her feet, to follow suit. The handsome Englishman was a potential client, and she didn't want to let him slip away. Plus, by the looks of it, he was after trouble. He was trying to reach the stage wings.

"Hey, what are you thinking? You can't go there! You're gonna be thrown out!"

I'd like to see someone try! an irate Scarlet was thinking. He would welcome it. He needed to let off some steam.

* * *

*Hey! Big Spender!
spend a little time with me!*

Those were the last lines of the last refrain. As the music finished, Symphony heard the crowd's wild applause. Offering her most gracious smile, she bowed her thanks. *Well, that didn't go too badly*, she thought with some satisfaction, slowly backing away toward the opposite side of the stage, still facing the audience. *At least, my cover seems assured. Nobody would be suspicious of me.*

The thought had not even left her mind when she felt a strong hand grabbing hold of her wrist and literally dragging her into the wings, out of the public view, and holding her tight. Automatically, she whirled around, ready to strike out with her free hand, but the person grabbed that one as well, turning her to face him.

She froze upon seeing the livid face of Captain Scarlet, his blue eyes staring angrily right at her, from behind a pair of glasses.

She blinked in surprise. "Paul! What are you doing here?"

"What I am doing here? What are YOU doing here?" he snapped back in annoyance, releasing her roughly. "And dressed... like THAT?"

He inspected her from top to bottom, and then back again, his angry eyes set once again on her face, disapproval so very plain in them. Symphony felt herself flushing. She was grateful that the thick makeup she was wearing would conceal that from him. It would look SO unprofessional if he should see her go red.

"Honey, are you all right?" Rodney had just appeared from backstage. He looked concerned, glaring daggers at Scarlet. The latter tensed instantly, and the two men faced each other with the same intimidating stare. No doubt, the Angel reflected, Rodney had meant what he had said earlier. He would try to keep her out of trouble. But against Scarlet's anger, and extensive training in combat, he wouldn't stand a chance. She didn't want for him to get needlessly hurt.

"It's okay, Rodney, he's a friend," she explained. "You don't have to worry about it."

"I don't know about that," Scarlet said between his teeth.

Rodney seemed even more wary of him and took a step forward. But Symphony stopped him with a reassuring gesture. "Don't worry, it's okay. Would you leave us to discuss things, please?"

"You're sure?" Rodney insisted.

"Rodney... I tell you, he's a friend of mine. We're here for the same thing."

"All right," Rodney grumbled, still staring at Scarlet. "But if you need help..."

"I won't, believe me. You can leave me alone without any problem. Please?"

Rodney shrugged. "Okay. I have some errands to run backstage, for the new show, so I'll leave you alone for now." He gave Scarlet a warning glare. "I'll be back later, then."

Rodney went away quietly, without asking any more questions. Scarlet watched him go, before turning his attention to Symphony. "New friend of yours? Now, what are you doing here, Karen?"

"I'm... undercover," she explained uneasily.

"I HARDLY think so!" was the sharp comeback. "You look like... like..."

"Hey, hon, what's going on?"

Dolly had just appeared beside Scarlet. Symphony opened her eyes wide with surprise, seeing her and the way SHE was dressed, and even wider eyes still when Dolly took Scarlet by the arm. Symphony looked at the Englishman who now appeared slightly embarrassed.

"You mean like HER?" she offered to Scarlet, gesturing towards Dolly.

"That's beside the point, Karen!" he answered roughly. "We were worried about you! You had disappeared. And I find you here in this dump, singing your heart out to a bunch of drooling men!"

"Oh, like you didn't do some drooling of your own with this... lady, here!"

"Karen!"

"Hey!" Dolly protested loudly, "Who do you think you are, blondie? I was first!" She was clinging to Scarlet's arm as if she would never let him go. Now he looked as if he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. Symphony instantly saw red.

"Back off, sister!" she said right in Dolly's face. "He's already taken!"

The ominous glow of total anger she saw in the blond woman's eyes convinced Dolly that she was a dangerous adversary to face. Most certainly, she wouldn't come off unscathed from an encounter with her. She quickly let go of Scarlet's arm.

"Okay, okay. Since you're taking it that way," she mumbled. "I don't want any trouble. Gee, you didn't have to get on your high horse!"

She turned her back and hurriedly left the stage wings, going back to where she would most surely find less difficult clients.

"Bravo!" a voice said in Scarlet's ear, with a satisfied tone that was more than obvious.

"I told you to keep out of this, Destiny!" he growled.

"Destiny is here as well?" Symphony asked, looking around. "Where...?"

Scarlet had to admit he was grateful that Symphony had succeeded in driving Dolly off, but he wasn't about to let his anger cool down. "Forget Destiny for the moment! You have a lot of explaining to do!"

"Paul," she said with a sigh. "Lower your voice, please. You'll attract attention!"

"What are you doing here?" he growled. "And using your Spectrum code-name, for crying out loud!"

"I could HARDLY use my own name!" Symphony protested. "And you got to admit that 'Symphony' is a perfect name for a singer."

"Karen..."

"Nobody would think of linking it to Spectrum, you know! Look, I was following a lead to find Adam... And obviously, it was a good one, since you are here too!"

"WHY didn't you contact us?!"

"Paul, please. You don't know what a horrible day I've had!"

"You want to talk about a horrible day?" Scarlet lashed out. "What about MY day? I was electrocuted, put behind bars, where, of all the humiliations, I had to be bailed out by none other than Colonel White! On top of that, I had to put on a biker's reeking leathers, to escape a filthy dump surrounded by policemen! So DON'T tell me about how horrible your day was!"

"You're really angry at me?"

"I'm angry because you don't seem to realize the danger you could have been in if that Grover maniac had come in and recognized you! Karen, what were you thinking?"

"Oh, lay off, please! Why do you think I put on so much make-up, in this hot weather? So he WOULDN'T recognize me..."

"I recognized you!"

"Well, he doesn't know me like you do!"

"It's not much of a disguise!"

"Oh, and those glasses are?!"

"What's going on here?"

Upon hearing the voice coming from behind him, Scarlet turned around; he moaned, seeing the big bouncer who had tried to stop him from entering the lounge earlier. *What did Dolly call him earlier? Oh yes... Tito.*

By the big frown that was now creasing his face, it was obvious he had also recognized Scarlet as he was walking toward him. "What are YOU doing here? I thought I told you that only the guests could enter the lounge!" He narrowed his eyes at Symphony. "And NOBODY is allowed to disturb the performers!"

"It's... all right," Symphony tried to interfere. "You see, this man is my..."

She managed to stammer 'boyfriend', but at the exact same time, she distinctly heard Scarlet say 'brother'. She rolled her eyes. *Why do things always have to be so difficult?*

"Well, WHAT is he?" Tito asked with impatience.

"He told you," she sighed, catching a glance of Scarlet's eyes still glowing with anger. "He's my brother."

"Your brother. He's got an accent."

"I was adopted." This time, BOTH Scarlet and Symphony had said the same line. Tito opened eyes wide with exasperation. He was feeling like they were leading him on.

"Now, WHO'S been adopted?" he demanded forcefully.

"Would you leave us alone?" an annoyed Scarlet asked of the man. "We have... 'family' business to attend to." He didn't wait for Tito's answer before turning again toward Symphony. "Speaking of which... you realize you're SO lucky that you-know-who hasn't seen you up on that stage right now?"

She frowned slightly. "Paul... You don't mean... who I think you mean?"

"I think that's EXACTLY who he means."

The new voice behind her made Symphony shiver. *Oh no! Don't tell me...* This was unexpected. Of all the people she would have expected to meet in this place, HE would have been at the very bottom of the list. It was very uneasily that she turned around to face the man she knew would be standing there.

Wearing glasses similar to Scarlet's, Colonel White was looking at her with that same rigid stare she had often seen in him. His face was completely set, and it didn't show any of the feelings that might be brewing inside his mind. Except for his eyes. There was a strange glare in his blue eyes that betrayed his irritation. "Nice dress, Symphony," he commented in a very even tone.

"Er... Sir, I didn't know you were here," Symphony stammered, not really sure how to address him.

"Obviously," he noted, moving around to stand beside Scarlet. "And I certainly didn't know you would be here either."

"I can explain myself," the young woman started. She didn't know where to begin, in fact. White raised an eyebrow.

"I expect it to be good."

"That's enough!" Tito then shouted, making everybody turn to face him. He was now standing only a foot away from both White and Scarlet and had taken the latter's arm rather roughly. "You think I would buy this 'family business' of yours?" the big man raged, looking furiously at Scarlet, then at Symphony, White and finally back to Scarlet. "Adopted, my ass! You're gonna tell me this guy is your old man, while you're at it?" He gestured toward White. The latter was a little at a loss as to what the man was saying. It didn't make any sense to him.

"My good man, I know you're probably only doing your job here, but we would greatly appreciate if you would leave us alone to settle things between us," he politely asked of Tito.

"I've had quite enough of this!" growled the man. "You can't tell me what I have to do, pops!" He turned to Scarlet. "And neither do you! I know troublemakers when I see them. And that's what you are, the three of you!"

"I'd advise you to let me go," Scarlet warned him.

"So you think you're the brawn in this little gang of yours?" Tito chuckled wickedly. "Well, I'm throwing you out. You, the pimp and the hook..."

He never got the chance to finish his sentence. At the same time, two fists had hit him squarely in the face, with the same deadly accuracy. The blow drove him to the floor, at Symphony's feet. Dazed as he was, he was still figuring out how the two men could have punched him so quickly, when Symphony took a pitcher filled with water, left on a nearby table for the benefit of dry-throated performers, and crashed it over his head. He collapsed on the floor, in the middle of a small pool of water, grunting loudly.

Colonel White was rubbing his fist, looking down with contempt at the now-unconscious man. "I hate it when men are needlessly ill-mannered in front of a lady," he grumbled. He turned to Scarlet, who was rubbing his fist too, while Symphony was stepping over Tito. "Nice right," he commented.

"Impressive left," Scarlet answered.

Wonderful! Symphony thought gloomily. *Even the colonel is playing John Wayne now!*

White turned his attention back to her, and examined her from head to toe. "Where did you find that dress?"

"It's a long story, sir," she admitted, still unsure of what to make of his reaction.

"One I'm sure I'll find captivating."

"How did you find out I was here, sir?" Scarlet asked suddenly.

The colonel tapped the frame of his glasses. "Destiny told me. Remember her?"

Symphony rolled her eyes. Destiny... The glasses... Of course! Those were the special glasses with the concealed communication devices. And Destiny was monitoring everything. How could she not have thought of it sooner? She could have kicked herself.

White was addressing her again. "You followed your own lead here to find Captain Blue, didn't you, Symphony?"

"Yes sir. I'm sorry I didn't contact you sooner, I... things got a little out of hand, at some point."

"You're telling me," he mumbled. "Well, whatever your lead was, it was a right one."

He saw the young woman's beautiful face light up instantly. "Sir? He's here?"

He nodded. Now wasn't the time for a reprimand, he reflected. He would have time for that later. It seemed to him that he would have A LOT of explanations to receive, and a lot of lessons to give out. "He's here," he confirmed. "And it won't be long now, before he's back with us."

"I don't understand," Symphony murmured, shaking her head. "How...?"

"Through civilized talks, that's how," White remarked. "I just had a conversation with Mister Gardenia concerning his release."

"The colonel... 'negotiated' his freedom," Scarlet explained.

"He did?" Symphony said in a little voice. She looked at their commander, a frown of perplexity upon her face. "You did, sir?"

"What did you expect?" White replied rather harshly. "That I would leave him to die at the hands of a homicidal maniac? You forget there's been a lot of investment in Captain Blue since he joined Spectrum. You think I would let all that go to waste?"

"Oh! Of course, sir. You're right." There seemed to be some disappointment in Symphony's tone now. The colonel looked squarely at her.

"And in you as well, don't you know that?"

"Yes, sir."

"So you should have NOT risked your life in some foolhardy plan to try to free Captain Blue on your own."

"No, sir," she murmured, looking down. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you."

"You have no idea how much." He stepped closer to her. "Next time you need help, COME to me," he said with a gentler, but still severe enough tone. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," she murmured, feeling even more ashamed.

"We'll continue this discussion later," White stated. "When this is all behind us. For now, we'd better join Mister Gardenia."

"We, sir?" Symphony asked with a puzzled tone.

"Now that I have found you, I have no intention of letting you out of my sight. I don't want you to disappear again." The colonel inspected her once again and cleared his throat. "In any case, this 'cover' of yours has outlived its usefulness."

Symphony reddened violently under the make-up. She had to admit, being caught in that rather revealing dress by the colonel wasn't something she was very happy about.

White and Scarlet were now moving down the stage, and Symphony was about to follow when she saw Rodney coming over. Gone since he had left the young woman in Scarlet's company, he was pretty amazed to find the huge Tito lying on his back, in a pool of water. He knew of Tito's being a simple-minded brute, always ready to hit first and ask questions later, and he also knew of the man's stamina and strength. It would have taken someone out of the ordinary to have flattened him like this. He widened his eyes and stared at the departing trio. "What happened to him?" he asked, the surprise obvious in his tone. "Who did this?"

"The young lady here," White deadpanned, pointing to Symphony. "The man insulted her." Both the Angel and Scarlet stared at him with perplexity. It wasn't that often that they had a demonstration of his rather unique brand of humour.

"YOU did that to Tito?" Rodney's eyes couldn't be any wider. A large smile spread across his lips and he chuckled. "If I still had any doubt that Butch was telling me the truth about you, you've convinced me! You're really something, lady."

"You've been a great help, Rodney," Symphony answered with a smile of her own, extending her hand to the man.

"Hey, don't mention it. By helping you, I was trying to help Marsha." He gently squeezed Symphony's hand in his own. "But I have the feeling I didn't have to do much, you know what I mean?"

Symphony shook her head. "The important thing is my friend has been found."

With a last thanks to Rodney, she left him to join Scarlet and White, who had been waiting for her, and they left the stage. While going down the last step leading to the main floor of the Guests Lounge, Symphony felt the urge to remove her too tight shoes. She could hardly feel her feet anymore. Still uncomfortable at seeing her dressed as she was, Scarlet started to remove his jacket, but stopped just in time, remembering the weapon it was concealing. It was Colonel White who, noticing his dilemma, removed his own jacket, to offer it to the young woman. She gladly took it, nodding her thanks. It was just then that she realized the fancy way HE was dressed, and she couldn't help but ponder the reason why. It was no wonder Tito had thought he was a pimp.

"Sir?" Symphony asked White, a note of trepidation in her voice. "You said you had found Ad... Captain Blue? Is he all right? Grover didn't hurt him, I hope?"

White stared silently at her for a moment. It would have been hard not to notice that the concern on her face was more than just concern for a fellow officer in danger. Much more than that. He could recognize the look of a woman deeply worried for the man she loved. Even if he

hadn't already known, he would have suspected right here and now that there was some history between the two Americans. And at the moment, Symphony seemed oblivious to the fact that her behaviour might lead her commander to the truth. She might have been too worried, or maybe she didn't care that much anymore. All she wanted was the confirmation that Captain Blue was alive and well.

White was about to reassure her when he caught sight of Gardenia, who had just come through from his office into the lounge, a cellular phone held to his ear. He was obviously agitated, as he gesticulated wildly while talking into it. He then gestured toward Guido and two other men, standing in different parts of the room, and they moved toward him.

"Something's going on," White murmured, realising that instantly.

Scarlet and Symphony close behind, he hurried toward Gardenia who was now asking questions and giving brief instructions to his men. It didn't take long for them to rush through the door behind their boss. The three Spectrum officers arrived in front of Gardenia as he was putting the phone back to his ear.

"Gardenia?" White demanded, taking the man by the arm. Everything in the casino owner's attitude was telling him that something was terribly wrong, and, considering recent events, he was afraid it might have something to do with Captain Blue. The pale look he saw in Gardenia's face confirmed that, before the man could even open his mouth to voice it:

"I'm sorry, Mister Gray... Emilio... Something happened in the bunker."

"Scarlet!" White barked instantly behind him, nodding toward the opened door. "Follow them!"

"S.I.G.!" Scarlet dashed past Gardenia, without the latter trying to stop him. The captain gave pursuit to the three men he saw running along a corridor in front of him. Behind him, he could hear people following close; without being sure about it, he could only imagine it was Gardenia, White, and most likely Symphony.

Damn! He cursed inwardly, as a deep sense of catastrophe quickly replaced the expectation of finally seeing his friend safe and sound. *We were so close!*

He wished, beyond any hope, that nothing bad had happened to Adam.

Chapter 16

"Who's that guy?"

Hiding in the darkness of the alley, just outside the door they had used to leave the *'First Base Casino'*, Wilson Grover and Sam Dawson were watching with suspicion the man standing at the corner of the building, not that far away from them. He was apparently doing nothing but chewing gum and wasting his time. It was so obvious he was on surveillance.

"I saw him five minutes ago when I went to get the van," Sam explained in a hushed tone. "At first he didn't look suspicious, but since he's still here... Maybe he's one of Gardenia's goons?"

Grover shook his head. "Don't think so. Looks more like a cop."

Sam felt suddenly uncomfortable. "Could he be here for Svenson?"

"That's possible. But Gardenia may be under surveillance too. Remember the cops have been after him for a long time." Grover looked toward the dark blue van, parked only ten feet from them, the rear facing the door. He was aware that they had a good chance of being spotted by this man if they were to try to reach it. He looked around, searching for a solution. He then discovered an almost empty bottle of whisky lying on the ground, nearly at his feet. That gave him an idea; he narrowed his eyes at the stranger. "I'll take care of him," he announced. "Go get Svenson. When you get the chance, you and Wesley bring him into the back of the van."

"What're you gonna do?" Sam asked.

"Don't worry 'bout that," Grover cackled, taking the bottle. "I know a few tricks the cops and even Gardenia's men don't. Now go. We can't afford to lose time."

Sam nodded and disappeared behind the door. Grover stepped into the alley, bottle in hand, and started walking toward the man standing in the corner, exaggerating his limp and moving so unsteadily that he looked as if he were drunk...

* * *

For John Svenson, it was probably one of the worst days he had ever experienced. Ever since Grover had called him with those terrible demands and shown him what he had already done to Adam, things had gone from bad to worse. Svenson was famous in the financial world for having nerves of steel, but those nerves had gradually eroded during those long hours, almost to breaking point. Waiting in the van, while Spectrum was working to try to get his son out of danger, had been excruciatingly difficult for him; and he was very aware that he had not been very accommodating to anybody.

Then Spectrum's operation had shown some very encouraging results, and Svenson had cooled down and started to breathe again.

All was going so well, with Colonel White having been able to extract from Gardenia the promise of letting Adam go free – and with the added bonus that Gardenia would eventually 'take care' of Grover, an unexpected surprise Svenson had to admit he would have been particularly satisfied with. As far as he was concerned, after all, Grover was nothing but scum. And if another scum were to dispose of him, he had no problem with that whatsoever.

But now, things seemed to suddenly go haywire. There was so much confusion on Destiny Angel's two monitors, that John Svenson's head spun. All they could see, from two different points of view, was people running down a dark corridor, and quickly descending a staircase, before arriving at what looked like a badly-lit cellar, with row after row of bottles. Destiny had been trying to reach both Colonel White and Captain Scarlet to learn what was going on, only to receive the hurried answer to stand by. Apparently, both men were too busy at the moment, and neither seemed to have a clear understanding of what was going on.

"What's happening in there?" growled an impatient Svenson. "What is it? Why don't they answer?"

He kept his eyes riveted on the screen, wanting to know more, but at the same time dreading it. One of the cameras – the first one to enter the cellar, and worn by Scarlet – was now showing Gardenia's three men surrounding another one who lay on the floor, moaning in pain.

There was some more confusion in the picture as Scarlet obviously pushed aside the standing men to kneel near the wounded.

Having found Emilio lying in his own blood, but alive and groaning with pain, Gardenia's men were too stunned to react to the presence of the tall dark-haired stranger who had followed them down into the cellar. Neither did they react when he shouldered them roughly aside to lean over Emilio, and check him over. They found they could do nothing but help him get their friend into a sitting position against the wall. Emilio gave a brief cry.

"What happened?" Scarlet demanded, putting a hand on the man's shoulder to force him to look him in the eyes. "Who did this to you?"

Emilio blinked. He didn't know the man, but accepted his presence without comment. He was feeling too bad to ask himself where the stranger had come from. "Grover..." he said between clenched teeth. "...surprised me... He stabbed me..."

"Grover?" Scarlet went pale. "What about the prisoner?" Emilio's head tilted forward. He was about to lose consciousness. Not wanting any of that, Scarlet shook him insistently. "Svenson? Where's Svenson?"

"Hey, can't you see he's been hurt?" Guido protested.

"Tell me where Svenson is!" Scarlet shouted at Emilio, not taking any notice of the other's intervention.

The wounded man grunted. "I was on my way to get him... Must still be in the bunker..."

A worried Scarlet turned toward the other men. "Where's that bunker?"

"Who the Hell do you think you..."

Guido didn't get to finish his sentence. In a flash, Scarlet was up, and had grabbed him by his collar to push him violently against the wall. Guido blinked in surprise when he saw the muzzle of a gun under his nose. The two others didn't even have time to react, so swiftly had Scarlet jumped at their companion.

"WHERE IS IT?" Scarlet barked into Guido's face.

Scarlet's eyes were flashing with anger. He was wasting time. For all he knew, it was a question of seconds before his friend would be killed.

"Luigi, Fabio." Gardenia had entered the cellar, closely followed by both Colonel White and Symphony Angel. He had heard Scarlet's demand, and was now addressing his men who were obviously wondering if they should move in to jump the Spectrum officer. Gardenia's call stopped them in their tracks. He nodded toward a spot on the cellar wall, which was shrouded in shadow. "Show him the way to the bunker."

The two nodded. "Follow me, sir," Luigi then said to Scarlet. The latter let go of Guido and quickly followed the man, while Fabio brought up the rear. Luigi pushed a portion of the bottle-covered wall and an opening appeared, revealing a flight of stairs. Swiftly, the three men headed downwards. Symphony moved in to go with them, but White stopped her before she could take more than a couple of steps.

"You're staying with me," he told her sternly.

"But, sir..."

"That's an order."

He didn't know what might be found in that bunker, whether Blue was alive or dead. He was perfectly aware that Symphony was a tough girl, able to cope with any situation, but if the worst should have happened, and knowing what he knew about her relationship with Blue, he didn't want for her to experience such a shock, if he could prevent it. He had gone through the same thing himself in the past, with his wife, and he knew far too well how devastating a situation like that was. He could see that the young woman was beside herself with worry, and so very disappointed that he had forbidden her to go. It was with reluctance that she nodded her acknowledgement.

White and Gardenia then turned back to the injured Emilio. Guido knelt beside him again.

"How is he?" Gardenia asked.

"He needs medical care, boss," Guido explained. "Looks like he was cut badly with a knife." He looked up at Gardenia. "Said it's Grover who did it."

"Can he tell us anything else?" White asked, frowning.

"Look here, Gray," Gardenia protested, "he's been hurt..."

"Gardenia," White cut in sharply, "you'd better understand that if SVENSON has been hurt, all deals are off!"

That shut Gardenia up completely. He hadn't gone through all those negotiations to keep Spectrum's nose out of his business to see it all go bad now. He certainly didn't need that, nor did he want it. He instructed Guido to call for medical assistance immediately, and then crouched beside his downed man. "Emilio, can you tell us HOW it happened? Where is Grover? And where's Svenson?"

* * *

In the van, John Svenson was growing increasingly impatient. And more worried as the seconds passed by. He was restlessly pacing behind Destiny's seat, checking the twin screens nervously. What he was seeing on them wasn't helping him calm his fears. On the contrary. Not knowing what was really going on, what could have happened to his son, if he was still alive...

"I knew it," he mumbled under his breath. "I knew it was a mistake to let you Spectrum people in on this..."

Destiny was very annoyed. How could Svenson blame Spectrum for what was happening right now? A moment ago, everything was going according to plan. It would have been only a matter of minutes, before Blue would be released. Wasn't his father aware of that? It was only due to an unexpected turn of events that things were now going wrong.

"WHAT'S going on?" Svenson growled again, stopping his pacing right behind Destiny. "What's happening to my son?"

"Mister Svenson," Destiny tried, turning to him. "Please, do calm down. We have no indications that your son..."

"You have no indications?!" Svenson barked with hostility. "You're right about that! For all we know he could already be dead!"

"Mister Svenson, sir..."

Svenson couldn't take any more of this. "I'm going there," he decided suddenly.

Destiny twisted her head swiftly in his direction. "Mister Svenson, I don't think it's wise..."

"I don't care what you say!" he snapped at her. "My son needs me! I'm going!"

He walked purposefully toward the back doors of the van and grabbed the handle. Destiny gestured toward Palladino, who swiftly jumped to his feet to cross the distance separating him from Svenson. The latter had already opened the doors and stepped outside. He felt Palladino's hand on his shoulder and turned furiously to face him.

"You should stay in the van, sir," the Spectrum agent advised him. "It's not safe for you outside..."

"Let go of me," Svenson retorted. "I've got to go help my son!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have to insist..."

Perhaps Palladino was too sure of himself; and perhaps he didn't count on Svenson totally losing what little was left of his patience. Svenson himself didn't consciously plan his following actions. He vigorously shrugged Palladino off him, removing his hand from his shoulder with one swift movement. At the same time, he had seized the outside handle of one of the doors to slam it shut, as Palladino was about to step down from the van. The Spectrum man received the metal door straight on his forehead, violently enough to knock him down. Destiny, who was following the scene, winced when she saw the man falling backward, nearly at her feet. She automatically knelt by his side.

"Palladino?" The man groaned and only gave her one very stunned glance before passing out on her. Destiny raised her eyes just in time to see Svenson closing the second door. She rushed to it and grabbed the handle at the same time as Svenson was locking it from the outside.

"Mister Svenson!" She thumped on the door, but heard nothing but the hurried footsteps of Svenson as he left the scene. She gave a frustrated sigh. "Oh, great! We didn't need this!" She hurriedly left the back doors, quickly checked one last time on Palladino, making sure he was only stunned, then, taking her purse, she moved on to the front of the van. Squeezing herself in the narrow space between the computerized instruments, she reached the driving cabin. Settling herself in the driver's seat, she looked around, into the darkness of the night, in search of Svenson, the blinking lights of the city doing little to help her. It didn't take her long, however, to

see him weaving through the cars in the parking lot, making his way towards the casino. *Damned fool!* she thought with irritation. *Isn't he aware of the risk he's taking? He'll ruin everything!* She searched for the key in the ignition and discovered it wasn't there. *Palladino must have it on him,* she realized instantly. She could have kicked herself for having forgotten to search him. She stepped out of the van and took her communicator from her purse.

I have to call the Colonel, she reflected gloomily. *He certainly won't be happy to know that Svenson is on the run!*

* * *

With Luigi and Fabio, Captain Scarlet had reached 'the bunker' situated below the casino. If he noticed a large amount of crates and boxes in some of the rooms he passed by, he wasn't really interested in them. He just figured that Gardenia kept goods in this place he didn't want the authorities to find out existed. He couldn't care less. Gardenia didn't have a history of weapons traffic, or terrorism, so, in principle, that put him out of Spectrum's jurisdiction. Whatever was in the crates was for the police to check out. For now, the only thing that interested Scarlet in this place was Blue. And whether he was alive or not.

Luigi guided him to a thick wooden door sporting a heavy lock that, Scarlet noticed instantly, was half-opened, which made the man stop in confusion and hesitate to enter. Obviously, he wasn't counting on finding the door that way. Probably, judging by the lock, it was Adam's prison. Scarlet didn't hesitate; drawing his gun, he pushed the door to enter.

He took a few steps into the dark room, before stopping and looking around. The place wasn't much different from what he had seen so far of the rest of the bunker: thick concrete walls and floor, robust door, little lighting... Except there was a bunk alongside one of the walls, with a thin, worn mattress on it. Scarlet noticed some rope tied to the metal frame of this bunk. It wasn't difficult for him to figure out the reason it was there.

Right in the middle of the room, a length of rope was hanging from one of the ceiling rafters. Scarlet approached to examine it more closely. There were stains of blood on it; his jaw tightened upon remembering the recording from John Svenson's portable. On the floor, there were also bloodstains. Fortunately, Scarlet noted grimly, not enough to indicate that the prisoner could have killed in this place. Still it didn't prove anything.

Adam wasn't there, and that was worrying enough.

"Where is he?" Scarlet asked, turning to the two men behind him.

"I don't know," Fabio replied. "He should be here..."

Grunting, Scarlet turned back toward the door to leave this sickening place that had been his friend's prison, and headed toward the stairs he had previously taken. He was unconcerned that only one of the men was following him, while the other, for some reason, had decided to stay behind. He tapped on the side of his glasses. "Scarlet to White."

"Yes, Captain?" came the voice of White in his ear.

"He's not here, sir," Scarlet reported, starting to climb the stairs. "Did the injured man tell you anything else?"

"Not much before losing consciousness," White replied. "Just that he was aware that Grover had left with some of the Dawson brothers."

"They must have taken Adam with them," Scarlet realised, running toward the stairs leading up to the cellar.

Using his personal communicator instead of the concealed device in his glasses, White nodded thoughtfully, hearing Scarlet's reflection. He turned toward Gardenia. "Which way would Grover and the Dawsons have gone?"

Gardenia pointed toward a door they could see at the other end of the room. "There's a corridor behind this door. It leads to a side door in an alley, which is used for deliveries. That's the shortest way from here."

"Damn," White grumbled. He changed the channel on his communicator, to contact the man they had left in surveillance of the back door. "Agent Winslow, do you copy?" There was no reply. He frowned deeply. Now, that wasn't normal. He didn't have the time to try again, as a

new beeping sound made itself heard from his communicator, giving the emergency signal. He took the communication.

"This is Destiny Angel..."

"Go ahead, Destiny."

"Sir, we have a problem."

"What, again?" White muttered. Destiny didn't have the time to tell him, as he heard the sound of rushing movements to his right. He turned his head in time to see Symphony relieving Guido of his gun, which was hanging from his belt, before the man could even make a move. In a fraction of a second, the young woman was on her way to the exit door previously indicated by Gardenia. "Symphony, wait!"

White was pretty sure she had heard him, but she feigned not to and disappeared behind the door. *Naturally*, thought the Spectrum commander with annoyance. *Blasted impetuous young fool...* He prepared himself to follow in turn, at the same exact moment Scarlet appeared from the concealed entrance he had taken earlier, removing his glasses.

The Spectrum commander moved toward the door. "This way!" Both men left the cellar without another look behind. They were only followed by Gardenia's half-assured statement that he had kept his part of the bargain and that he was hoping that Spectrum would keep its part. In all honesty, neither of the two officers could care less about him.

"Call Winslow!" White instructed Scarlet. "Tell him Grover and the others are probably coming his way!" Leaving Scarlet to contact their man, the colonel came back to his own, previous communication. "State your problem, Destiny!"

* * *

Destiny was moving around the cars, running toward Svenson, whom she could see was nearing the casino. In brief sentences, she explained the situation to her commander. She almost heard him curse out loud; by the sound of it, he had bitten it back at the last possible second.

"Doesn't Svenson realize the trouble he could get into?" White barked furiously. "Get him back as quickly as possible!"

Destiny rolled her eyes. She had been afraid she would hear that.

"S.I.G., sir," she answered decidedly.

"By any means necessary, Destiny! He must not enter that casino!"

A faint smile crossed the French woman's lips. *By any means necessary...* well that could prove satisfying, come to think of it...

John Svenson was only a couple of metres away from *'The First Base'* main entrance when he suddenly stopped, in the middle of people coming in and out of the house. The two minutes it had taken him to leave the van and finally get to the entrance had been enough for him to cool down from his sudden outburst of temper. He hadn't really intended to knock Palladino down, it was only an accident, but he didn't really regret it. He was so angry, and worried at the same time, that all he wanted was to see what was happening to his son, to come to his aid if he could. Now that he was so close to the place where Adam was detained, his good sense came back to him enough to realize the danger he could be facing if he went in by the main entrance. It would be like presenting himself to the kidnappers, with a nametag on his vest.

He looked over his shoulder in the direction of the van he had just left and could see that Destiny was coming his way. He frowned deeply; he hadn't come so near to his objective to have Spectrum interfering again. He had had quite enough of those people and their crazy plans that would probably end with his son's death.

There must be a back door to this place, he mused, looking at the main entrance. He checked to the left and right, and then saw a dark alley, apparently going round the building. He left the main entrance in a hurry, using the crowd surrounding him as a cover, and went that way, hoping to find there a new way to enter.

* * *

"Agent Winslow, this is Scarlet. Do you read me? Come in, Winslow!"

Wilson Grover looked down in curiosity at the odd, stylus-like communication device protruding from the jacket pocket of the man stretched out at his feet, the remains of the bottle Grover had used to knock him out lying all around him. The guy had only suspected at the last possible second that the drunk coming his way, singing a rather saucy song, could be a threat; but already it was too late. Grover had violently broken the bottle on his head before he could even reach for the weapon that hung from his belt.

But now, that thing in his pocket was flashing a red light and a voice was coming out of it. Faint, but loud enough for Grover to hear the words clearly. He crouched to check the communicator and quietly took it between his index finger and thumb, raising it to his eyes to examine it more closely. *"Agent Winslow, do you copy? This is Scarlet calling..."*

"Well, hello, there..." he murmured thoughtfully. It was nothing like any police communicator he had ever seen. He wondered who those guys could be, who were using such sophisticated equipment.

He put the communicator in his own pocket, with the intention of finding out more about it later. Then he relieved the man of his gun, tucking it into his belt, took the man under the arms and hauled him behind a large pile of garbage, near the corner of the alley. Getting to his feet, he checked in the direction of the blue van, where he could see that his two accomplices were now bringing Adam Svenson through the back door to drag him toward the rear of the vehicle. Grover grunted, a faint smile of satisfaction playing on his lips. Whoever these people were, he reflected, they would not be in time to stop them from making good their escape.

While his brother Wesley was keeping Blue upright, preventing him from collapsing to the ground, Sam Dawson was hurriedly opening the back doors of the van. He then helped to shove the still-dazed captive inside, sending him sprawling on the hard floor.

Barely a sound escaped the gag, as Blue stayed motionless, lying on his back, his mind in a nearly total fog. He was scarcely aware that they had brought him outside, to throw him in the back of a large vehicle. Even if his hands had been free, he would have not been able to defend himself. He didn't even react when the doors were slammed shut on him and he was left alone. All he really wanted, and desperately needed, was to lie there, rest and gather his strength.

Grover watched as both Wesley and Sam closed the doors and swiftly walked toward the van driver's cabin. He just had to wait for the vehicle to come and pick him up. The sound of rushing feet behind him made him turn around, and, in the semi-darkness of the evening, lit only by the flickering lights of the casino, he saw the figure of a tall man hurriedly coming toward the alley, frequently looking over his shoulder. Grover opened his eyes wide with disbelief, wondering if he wasn't dreaming. That man coming in his direction couldn't possibly be...

Yes, he realized almost instantly. It was him. Quickly, Grover faded into the shadows, at the same moment as the Dawsons were climbing into the driver's cabin.

* * *

"No answer from Winslow," Captain Scarlet declared ominously, pocketing his communicator, as he was rushing down the corridor with his commander, only a short distance behind Symphony Angel, whose red sequined dress they could see glittering in front of them in the dark. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I," White replied dryly. "This is NOT turning out at all well!" *If only Symphony would wait for us!* he added inwardly. He didn't dare call out after her, not knowing how close they might be to their quarry, and not wanting to betray their presence. That would put all of them in a dangerous position.

I really hope she doesn't do anything stupid!

Symphony could see a red sign announcing the exit door, straight ahead of her. *There. It was surely through there that Grover and his accomplices had taken Adam.* And if they had brought him all the way through here, he was surely still alive and they still had plans for him. Her

heart was beating fast, in the hope that she had a chance to reach them before they escaped with him. Her mind was racing at the thought of what Grover might have done to her fiancé; she was sure that they must have molested him badly for them to be able to take him like that, with no resistance. Worry and rage boiled inside her, and her hand squeezed the handle of the pistol she had taken from Guido. God help her, if they had hurt Adam, she wasn't sure what she would do.

* * *

John Svenson had hoped he would be able to escape Destiny Angel's pursuit. For now, she had stopped in front of the casino, about the same place he had paused himself a few minutes before, and was looking around in concern, obviously searching for him. The incessant coming and going of the casino's clients was hindering her investigation and that seemed to make her frustration grow. By now, there were no crowds surrounding Svenson, but he was hoping the semi-darkness would help him avoid the young woman's attention.

He had slowed down considerably, so as not to look too suspicious, but he was still walking more quickly than normal pace. He had now reached the alley he had previously noticed, and stopped at the corner, looking into it. He could see a dark van, parked near a closed door; he breathed a sigh of relief, thinking he would be able to get into the casino through there.

That's when he noticed, on the ground, a pair of feet sticking out from behind a pile of garbage bags. He frowned in perplexity. Out of morbid curiosity, he slowly moved toward it. He saw the legs attached to those feet, and then the rest of the body. At first, he thought that it might be a drunk, having found a place to sleep it off, but now, with a start, he recognised the face of the unconscious man. It was Winslow, the other Spectrum agent who had come with Palladino to assist in the operation to rescue Adam.

Svenson had no idea what he was doing there, but something bad had obviously happened to him. He started to wonder if it had been a good idea for him to leave the security of the Spectrum van. Nervously, he started to back away from the alley. He had taken no more than a few steps when he collided with something – or rather someone, as he felt a hand roughly grabbing him by the arm, just above the elbow, and holding him tight.

He turned around, and found himself face to face with a grim-looking Wilson Grover.

"Hello, Johnny-Boy. Fancy finding you here tonight..."

Svenson's heart missed a beat, and he blanched instantly upon seeing the evil expression and satisfied smile spread across the man's scarred face. He looked down as he felt something pressed against his torso, and saw a blade in Grover's hand. It wouldn't take much for it to be thrust inside him, he knew. He swallowed hard, before looking straight at Grover again. He couldn't believe his bad luck to have stumbled upon him like that.

"Grover," he said, in little more than a whisper.

"Don't call out," Grover told him ominously. "I don't want to kill you... yet."

* * *

Looking around for John Svenson, whom she had not seen enter the casino by the main entrance, Destiny Angel noticed to her right that a tall, light-blond man was walking rather quickly along the side of the building, toward a dark section where an alley could be half-seen. *Naturally*, she thought with a grunt. *Svenson would try to use another entrance.* He was presently looking for just that. Giving a sigh of frustration, she darted in his direction, just as he got to the corner.

He had reached the alley and was entering it, when she saw him back away slowly, and then, at almost the same moment, she saw a big man, as tall as Svenson himself, coming out of the darkness to accost him from behind. Destiny couldn't see clearly from where she was, but she nevertheless got a glimpse of a silvery gleam in the newcomer's hand. The man was armed, she realized. With what, she really couldn't say, but it was obvious he was threatening Svenson with it.

It was only when the man took his victim by the arm and pushed him into the alley that a flicker from the upper side of the casino briefly lighted his face, and Destiny recognized Wilson Grover, from the photos she had seen of him.

"Oh, damn!" she muttered under her breath, running harder than before. "We REALLY didn't need this!"

* * *

Upon Grover's beckoning, the dark van had pulled out from its parking place and approached, while Grover hurriedly pushed Svenson toward it, keeping his knife pressed against him. Wesley Dawson jumped out of the cabin to take the captive by the other arm. There was no way Svenson could escape now, as he was roughly dragged by both men toward the rear of the van.

"You're coming with us, bud," Grover told him with a ominous tone to his voice. Upon reaching the rear of the van, he brutally shoved Svenson against one of the doors, and pressed the point of his knife against his throat, gazing deep into the fearful eyes, a flash of anger burning in his own. "I expect you'll have a lot of explaining to do..."

Svenson felt his throat tightening. "Tell me what you've done to my son," he said, half pleading, half demanding.

"You want to see your precious Adam?" Grover said between his teeth. "Well, you gonna have your wish!"

Wesley opened the door wide and Grover took John Svenson by his collar, pulling him away from the van and dragging him in front of the opened door. For a short second, Svenson made an effort to resist, as both Grover and Wesley started forcing him to climb into the back of the vehicle. He then glanced inside, and saw the bound body slumped in the middle of the floor, motionless. His eyes went wide with shock.

"Adam!"

A last effort from Grover and Wesley was enough to shove him inside, sprawling on his hands and knees next to the still body. Grover slammed the door close and locked it. "Happy reunion!" he cackled evilly as he quickly limped toward the driver's cabin with Wesley, and climbed into it after him.

* * *

Symphony Angel violently pushed the exit door upon reaching it, oblivious to the danger she could be facing if her fiancé's kidnappers were waiting for her on the other side. She was just in time to see a dark blue van, a short distance away, with a man about to close the door of the passenger side. It was dark, but Symphony was able to recognize the profile of that man, with his greyish beard, and rugged features.

The door closed noisily and the van suddenly moved off, its tyres screeching loudly on the dry asphalted surface, at exactly the same moment Symphony was raising her borrowed gun.

"No!" she yelled in frustration, seeing her prey escape her.

The door beside her slammed open and both Captain Scarlet and Colonel White stepped out, in time to see the van speeding toward the alley exit. They saw a petite figure appear right in the middle of the speeding vehicle's path, holding a weapon aimed at it. The same feeling of impending doom fell upon the three Spectrum agents.

"Destiny!"

Three alarmed voices shouted the name as Destiny Angel, at the last possible second, jumped out of the van's way, and into the large piles of garbage bags stacked at the corner of the alley. It looked as if the vehicle could have hit her, as it collided violently with a number of those bags, literally eviscerating them, and sending pieces of garbage flying all over the place.

Captain Scarlet, Colonel White and Symphony Angel broke into a run as the van screeched into a turn at the end of the alley. They reached the position where they had seen Destiny vanish from their view and looked for her in concern. She appeared, staggering on her feet, covered with pieces of banana peel, processed food and other kinds of disgusting – and smelly – trash. She was wildly kicking her left foot to free it from the remains of a bag which had become entangled around it. Seeing that she seemed unharmed, both Scarlet and Symphony continued to race out of the alley, and watched in dismay as the van was speeding away, out of their reach.

Scarlet lifted his gun and aimed it at the fleeing vehicle, but he realized almost right away the futility of his gesture, and lowered it.

"Damn it!" he growled with frustrated fury. "We were so close!"

"Yes," murmured a despairing Symphony at his side, "we were."

"Go and get the van!" Colonel White called behind them. "Maybe we can still catch up with them!"

"S.I.G.!"

Scarlet, closely followed by Symphony, darted from the scene to run toward the parking lot where the *Honeybell's Florist* van was waiting. Meanwhile, Destiny Angel, looking absolutely dejected, climbed out of the mess she was in, Colonel White offering her a hand which she gladly accepted.

"Are you all right, Destiny?" the colonel asked as the young woman staggered at his side, free from the pile of trash.

"I'm... all right, sir," she stammered. There was a note of embarrassment in her tone, as she looked down at herself, making a revolted face at her present situation and appearance. "My dignity's been hurt more than anything else." She removed with obvious disgust a handful of spaghetti from her shoulder. She shuddered, and turned a discomfited look toward Colonel White. "They have taken John Svenson with them," she announced, slightly hesitantly. "I'm sorry, sir. He ran right into Grover, while trying to find a way to enter the casino. I didn't arrive in time to intervene."

"You nearly arrived in time to be run down," White stated dully. "Do you realise what a scare you gave me?"

Destiny offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I... I was as scared as you to see that van coming at me like that."

White blew out a deep sigh of relief. He put a comforting hand on the young woman's shoulder. "Next time, try to be more careful."

"S.I.G., sir," she answered.

"I hope we'll be able to catch that van before it gets too far."

"Well, even if we lose visual contact with it, sir, we'll be able to find it."

White gave Destiny an inquiring glance. It took him only a second to realize what she was saying. "Of course," he murmured. "You put the bug on Svenson, as instructed?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "Now all we have to do is get the surveillance van and follow the beacon."

White nodded approvingly. So, maybe these kidnappers had taken off with Captain Blue, and in addition had taken John Svenson with them, but they hadn't entirely escaped yet. There still was a good chance that they'd be captured. And with any luck, the hostages would come to no harm in the meantime. "Good work, Destiny."

A faint moan made them look down into the pile of garbage, where they saw movement. A sprawled figure of a man lay there, half-covered by the trash, and moving to free himself. They cleared some of it off, and Destiny crouched beside him, with White looking down.

"Winslow," the Colonel noted gloomily. "Whatever happened to him?"

"Looks like he was knocked out," Destiny offered, delicately turning the injured man's head to show the bleeding wound in his scalp. He let out a louder moan, and she winced. "Sorry, Agent Winslow..."

The man groaned, and opened his eyes to look up at her, apparently still bewildered by his ordeal.

A sudden sound behind them made White turn around suddenly, with Destiny raising her weapon in an instinctive movement. One of Gardenia's men, Luigi, gun in hand, had loudly exited through the side door, making it slam violently against the wall. He froze instantly upon seeing the grim-looking young woman crouched down with a pistol aimed at him, and seemed to hesitate whether or not he should use his own. It wasn't long before Gardenia himself appeared behind him, with Guido. He put a calming hand upon the barrel of Luigi's raised weapon, motioning it down. "Put that away, Luigi, before you make a mess of things."

He approached White, and an apparently still very edgy Destiny, who hadn't lowered her pistol yet, and was slowly getting to her feet. He looked down at the young woman, unimpressed by the weapon she was handling, before looking up at the colonel.

"I take it Grover has escaped you, Mister Gray," he noted evenly.

"He has, but not for long."

Screeching tyres made White look over his shoulder toward the entrance to the alley. He saw the white van coming to a halt, with Scarlet at the wheel, and Symphony seated by his side. He motioned Destiny to join the vehicle and turned one last time toward Gardenia.

"We're going after him," he said. "He won't escape us."

Gardenia nodded. "What happened wasn't my fault, Gray. I hope you'll keep your part of the bargain."

White was moving toward the van, as Destiny was opening the back door to climb inside. "See that our man receives medical attention," he said, pointing to Winslow, "and I'll consider the deal fulfilled."

Without another word, he climbed into the van and closed the door, just as Scarlet pressed down the accelerator.

* * *

A puzzled Marsha Billings had seen the dark blue van speeding out of the alley and hurriedly taking the street. Seated in the passenger seat of her estate car, parked close to the casino, she had recognized Grover, through the open window of the driver's cabin, as the van passed by her. He was looking back, with what seemed like concern, in the direction of the alley he had just left. Marsha was wondering what could have happened. What could have motivated Grover to leave the casino in such a hurry? And with two of the Dawson brothers with him, all three of them crowded into the driver's cabin.

"What now?" Butch asked her. He had driven her there, to the front of the casino, and they had been waiting a good part of the evening. Marsha had told him it was just in case Karen needed help if her attempt to locate Adam turned out badly and she was discovered. But Butch wasn't a fool. He knew perfectly well that Marsha wanted to be there for her own reasons too.

"Follow them," murmured the woman. "At a safe distance."

The estate car pulled out from its parking place and Butch drove it to the street. Marsha could still see the dark van, still going at a good speed. She narrowed her eyes, pondering. Whatever the reasons that pushed him into fleeing the casino, it seemed Grover was in a hurry to put as much distance between him and the casino as possible.

Knowing Grover as she did, Marsha was sure he had taken off with his prisoner. His thirst for vengeance would never have allowed him to leave him behind. It was a sure bet that Adam Svenson was in the back of that van. Maybe that was why he was running away like that. He had his own agenda for Svenson. An agenda that had nothing to do with what Gardenia wanted.

She then noticed the direction the van was taking, and she nodded thoughtfully.

She thought she knew where he was going.

* * *

"I have a positive signal."

Colonel White looked over Destiny's shoulder at the radar screen she was watching. A green dot was blinking on an electronic map of the city. Behind them, a still slightly stunned Palladino was trying to get his bearings, slouched on one of the seats, an ice-pack on his forehead.

"They're not that far away," White nodded thoughtfully at Destiny's remark.

"I can't see him yet," Scarlet called from the driver's seat.

"Continue in this direction," Destiny instructed him. "Looks like they're going to take the highway."

Palladino risked an eye on the map, and took note of the route followed by the green dot. "It looks like they want to leave the city," he declared.

White looked down at him. "Are you sure?"

"Looks like it, sir." The man shook his head. "I've lived in Las Vegas all my life, and I was a cop here for seven years before being recruited by Spectrum. I was stationed here because of

my knowledge of the city.” He pointed to the electronic map. “Seeing the road they’re taking, those guys want to leave the city. I’ll bet my life on it.”

“I have to concur with Agent Palladino, Colonel,” Destiny declared, after scrutinizing the map herself.

White grunted. “That’s not good. Once out of the city, on the open road, they’ll be able to spot us easily. There’s no way of knowing what they’ll do to their captives if they realise they’re being followed.”

Scarlet had to agree with his commander’s statement. “The same could be said for a SPV, if we were to take one,” he added.

“Yes, a SPV isn’t actually inconspicuous,” White murmured. “In the circumstances, it would be a mistake to use one.” He frowned, thinking hard of what they should do, looking down at the map displayed on the screen, noting the direction both the fugitives and they were taking. Something seemed to leap to his attention. He pointed toward a spot on the screen. “If I read this correctly, we’ll be passing by the *St-Maurice* in a few minutes, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Destiny agreed. “In about five minutes from now.”

“Mmm...” White rubbed his chin thoughtfully, a plan quickly forming in his mind. He turned toward the driver’s cabin. “We’ll make a stop at the hotel, Captain.”

“Sir?” a perplexed Scarlet replied, frowning.

The order seemed to surprise Symphony as well. And revolt her. They couldn’t afford to lose precious time by making such a pointless stop. She all but jumped from her seat, and turned around, looking at White through the instruments. “Colonel, if I may, we’ll lose Grover and his gang, and there’s no telling what they’re planning to do...”

“Don’t be too impatient to throw yourself in the fray like that,” White replied, frowning with disapproval.

“But...”

“Do you or do you not want Captain Blue to be recovered safe and sound?” Colonel White had turned a very annoyed look at Symphony. His tone of voice and the warning gleam in his eyes told her beyond any doubt that he would not tolerate any questioning or infringement of his orders. Not from anyone, and especially not from her. Symphony shut up instantly, but it was so obvious she was dying to reply, and that she was fighting herself not to. White gave a low grunt. “We have to be very careful, if we want to get him back, along with his father,” he continued. “But we will have to act together. I don’t want any mistakes now, and I certainly won’t permit a loose cannon to hinder the operation. So from now on, if you want to be part of this, you’ll do exactly what I tell you. Is that clear, Symphony?”

“Yes, sir,” she murmured reluctantly, lowering her gaze.

White gave a deep sigh, and shook his head. “I don’t want to see him dead either, Symphony,” he added, his tone slightly less edgy.

She shot him a sideways look, but didn’t say another word; Scarlet had seen the glow in her eyes, and wasn’t quite sure she wouldn’t suddenly explode and let the colonel know exactly what she was thinking right now. It wouldn’t be a good idea at all to come down too hard on the old man. Especially in his current state of mind.

And he was sure White had a good reason for that stop at the hotel. He wouldn’t lose time so needlessly.

“What are we going to do, Colonel?” he asked his commander, interrupting the young woman before she had a chance to say something she might regret.

“We’ll need something to follow that van inconspicuously,” White answered. “So Grover and his men won’t suspect we’re after them. Destiny, you, Symphony and Palladino, continue to follow the van, but at a safe distance, using the beacon, so you won’t be noticed.”

“And what about me?” Scarlet inquired.

White grunted, noticing that Scarlet was yet again trying to sideline him. That was annoying, but for the moment, he really didn’t have time for a come-back. “WE, Captain, will use another method of transport,” he declared with a somewhat icy, yet determined tone. “One that will permit us to approach Grover more closely...”

* * *

As soon as the doors had been closed and he found himself in nearly total darkness, John Svenson crawled on his hands and knees to try to find his son he knew was lying so very near to him. The elder Svenson was oblivious to the fact that he was now trapped in the lion's den, that his own safety was now also an issue. The only thought in his mind was related to what he had seen seconds ago. He bumped into the motionless body and nervously felt it with his hands. He found the bound hands on Adam's belly, then moved up. He was relieved to feel the heart beat strongly in his son's chest and let out a deep sigh.

He's alive... Thank you, God, he's alive! But John was so deeply aware that it was only a matter of time. Both he and his son were now in terrible danger. He had seen it in Grover's eyes: the latter wanted nothing more than have his revenge on both of them. He would see them dead, and would enjoy every minute of it.

Adam was not responding to his calls, nor did he react when his father nudged him gently, trying to bring him out of his torpor. John had previously noticed the length of tape covering his son's mouth, and his fingers were now grazing it. He needed to remove it, but he couldn't see a thing. *Calm down, John*, he told himself, trying to still his rapidly beating heart. *You're in a rear compartment, closed off from the driver's cabin. Some of these vehicles come with lighting in the back. You've got to find if there isn't a switch somewhere...* Reluctantly leaving his son, Svenson reached for the side of the vehicle, and despite the bumps and jolts taken on the road, rose to his feet, searching the surface of the wall with his hands. All the while he tried to remember if he had seen a roof light when he had been thrown inside. He thought he indeed had seen one, just over the back doors. He blindly made his way in that direction, hoping to find what he was looking for, as his fingers feverishly probed the ceiling.

He found something; under his fingers, he felt a small, plastic protuberance. He held his breath, searching for some kind of a switch, and hoping it would work. He found a small button and pushed it all the way. A feeble light flickered on, and John Svenson exhaled noisily. He turned around and came back to Blue; he fell to his knees as the van swerved, landing next to his son. He leaned over him.

"Adam! Can you hear me?" His calls remained unanswered, and Blue didn't make a single move. John looked down in deep concern on his son's bruised and bloody face, his eyes and mouth covered with two lengths of duct tape. John grunted with displeasure, as his fingers moved to remove them. The one that was over the eyes was relatively easy to remove, as blood had soaked it enough to weaken the adhesive. It came away without any effort, and Svenson wasn't surprised to find that his son was unconscious, his eyes closed. The left eye was swollen, surrounded by an ugly bluish colour, with a deep, blood-encrusted cut just over the side.

The next tape was another matter. It seemed to have been more recently put on, and it was stuck to a one-day growth of beard that had started growing on Blue's cheeks and chin. John carefully removed it, cringing as he did, hoping he wouldn't cause his son too much discomfort. As it was, Adam started to stir, and then agitated himself, turning his head from one side to the other, grunting. "Easy," his father told him in a soothing tone. "Don't move, Adam. I'll have this thing gone in a moment." His son's efforts to seemingly escape him didn't help in the least and John found himself tearing the length of tape more roughly than he previously intended to. Blue gave a pained groan, before growing quiet. And totally still.

"Adam..." John sat down on the floor and gathered the powerful frame of his son to cradle him in his arms. It was with deep worry that he looked down into his injured and set features, trying to see in his face a single sign of consciousness. "Adam, son... Can you hear me? Please, answer me... Adam!" His voice was shaky and uncertain. His throat was so tight he felt almost unable to breathe. He gently patted his son's cheek. "Adam! For the love of Mercy, answer me!"

He first heard a moan, then, in the feeble light bathing them, saw Blue's eyelids flutter. They slowly opened, the left one not entirely. John saw the right eye searching the semi-obscurity, then stopping to look at his anxious face. There was a flicker of recognition in the eye that now looked straight at him, with a furrowed brow surmounting it.

"Father?" Blue croaked softly.

"Yes, son. It's me," John Svenson confirmed, nodding his head vigorously, so pleased that his son had identified him. He held him tightly, comfortingly. "It's me. I'm here..."

Blue grunted again, trying to shift his position in his father's arms. But his hands were still bound, and he found he couldn't even move without a shooting pain lancing through his tortured body. He needed more time to collect his strength. He fell back, giving a low sigh, against his father's chest.

"You shouldn't have come..." he said in a slurred voice.

He didn't stay awake long enough to hear his father's reply. Tiredly, his eyes closed again, and he let himself be drowned by the darkness and peace of a merciful slumber.

Chapter 17

It was ever so quietly that John Svenson pushed the door leading to the hospital room and entered, holding his breath. He was welcomed by the consistent bleeping sounds coming from the medical monitor on the wall, just above the bed where he could see the still motionless body. No other sound at all, but the smooth swishing of the respirator, going in synchronization with the monitors. How strange, Svenson reflected sadly, for his son to be so utterly quiet – he who was usually so loud and active at home. So much so that his father had often found the need to try to put a stop to it, so he wouldn't turn the entire house upside down with his brother, who was always too eager to follow in his footsteps. What lively pursuits the two of them often engaged in, John reflected with a faint smile. Now, he would give anything just to see Adam running around freely in this hospital, and driving the nurses and doctors crazy.

He tentatively approached the bed and looked down at the sleeping boy, hooked up to oxygen by a tube in his nose.

He felt his legs wavering underneath him and found the need to sit down, on the chair next to the bed - a chair he had occupied for so many hours since Adam had been brought to this hospital nearly a week ago. Adam had been lucky that the well he had been thrown into was so damaged that it had been obstructed halfway down by debris. That's probably what had saved his life, but the fall was still terrible. He had suffered a massive trauma to the head, the doctor had said. Not to mention multiple fractures to several parts of his body, and a punctured lung, which had called for him to breathe through that tube in his nose. Lucky indeed to be alive. But he was still unconscious, plunged into a deep coma, and had not regained his senses once since he had been found. Svenson was so worried; he wanted so much to be reassured on his son's fate. He wanted to tell his wife that Adam was all right, and would be back home soon – but he couldn't even do that. All he could do was wait until Adam opened his eyes; then he would know for certain that the boy was recovering.

He looked down with concern on the young face, half hidden under the bandage around the upper half of his head; even the eyes were covered. The bruises he had seen on Adam's face the first time he had come to visit him had mostly faded now, and the skin was regaining a rosy appearance, if still a little pale.

If only he would wake up, John Svenson was telling himself for the nth time, in near desperation. He covered with his own the bandaged hand of his son. It seemed so frail at the moment, so small in comparison to his own. No match for the strong hands of the man who had so brutally mistreated him. A wave of disgust and hate came over Svenson, thinking about the way Wilson Grover had beaten his son. The first moment he had seen what Grover had done to Adam, John had flown into a tearing rage – wanting nothing more than to put his hands around Grover's neck. He would probably have killed him, he mused grimly. Mike Ellis had reasoned with him, and had successfully calmed him down. Now he hoped justice would be done. And if not, he vowed, he would see to it that the man paid for what he had done.

A strident beeping sound made itself heard from the monitors his son was hooked to. He raised his head in alarm, wondering what it could be, but couldn't find anything remotely worrying on the screens. A nurse came into the room almost at the moment he was about to call to her. He didn't have time to tell her anything, as she walked toward the monitors to check on them. Svenson realised that the machine must have been connected to her station, just outside of Adam's room, and so she had been notified of the change.

She turned towards him, with a gentle and reassuring smile upon her face. "Don't worry," she said upon seeing the father's worried expression. "Your son will be regaining consciousness soon." She glanced in Adam's direction and turned toward the door. "I'm going to call the doctor. He will want to examine him when he wakes up. You can stay in the meantime."

John Svenson had every intention of doing just that. There was no way in Hell they were going to be able to take him away from Adam now. He barely noticed as the nurse quietly left the room, his attention fully focused on his sleeping son.

The first thing Adam truly became aware of was a chill upon his skin. Then a foul, salty taste in his mouth. His mind was still fuzzy, so he had no idea of his surroundings. He couldn't

move. Or rather, didn't have the strength to. All he wanted to do was sleep, but there was a beeping sound, very nagging, that was stopping him from doing just that. Strangely, he found himself focusing on this sound, even though he didn't know where it was coming from. Stranger still, it was even reassuring. The bed he was lying in was comfortable enough, with a nice clean feel to it. The rotten, humid smell he had known in that awful place that had served as his prison wasn't present anymore. Instead, he was sensing other, very different odours, which he wasn't able to put a name to, but which reminded him of the stuff his mom rubbed him with when he had the flu and was feeling sick. That, too, was reassuring.

When he tried to open his eyes and found out he couldn't, panic suddenly took hold of him. There was still something covering his face; and he could feel that something was wrapped around his wrists and hands. He thought the nightmare wasn't finished, that Grover, instead of killing him, had decided to keep him alive after all and to go on torturing him.

He wanted so much to escape that he started to struggle, oblivious to the beeping sound that had suddenly gone wild. He tried to tug on the thing that he could feel was stuck in his nose, but a firm hand stopped him, and he heard a soothing male voice call to him:

"Adam, calm down, son... It's okay, you're safe."

Adam stopped his thrashing. The voice had successfully reached his tormented mind, and he thought he had recognized it. But he wasn't quite sure... He could smell a new odour, over the smell of medicine that kept haunting him. A very distinctive aftershave he knew well. His father's.

"Dad?" he croaked. That was all he could say. His throat was sore, and his voice so very slurred. He wasn't so sure he had actually said the word, until he heard the voice again, and felt a hand reaching for his and squeezing it warmly.

"I'm here... Adam... Don't worry, I'm here. You're in a hospital now... They're taking good care of you. You're going to be all right."

"Mom?" Adam whispered with a desperate note of hope in his voice.

"I'm sorry, she's not here." John Svenson looked down at his son with a mix of pity and despair, and horror for what had been done to him. "But she'll come to see you as soon as she can," he quickly added, seeing that Adam suddenly seemed upset by his mother's absence. "You see, we had to bring her to the hospital too, a couple of days ago, for her to give birth to the baby. You have a beautiful baby sister," he finally said with a faint, awkward smile.

Truth to tell, he felt so relieved and at the same time, so nervous, he couldn't help babbling or keep his voice from shaking. He was concerned that Adam would notice.

"I can't see," Adam moaned. "Why...?"

"Easy," his father told him, reaching to put a soothing hand on the boy's chest. "You've been hurt... You took a bad fall, and..."

"The well..." Adam murmured. He started shaking violently. "Grover, he..."

"It's finished, he won't hurt you any more," John assured him. "The police arrested him. Your uncle Mike, he was the one who found out where you were and..."

"Dad..." Adam's voice choked into a sob. John Svenson was himself so very near to tears that he felt the need to take his son's hand between his own, wanting to reassure himself as much as the boy that this whole terrible ordeal was finished and that everything would be all right now.

"I'm here, I won't leave you..."

"I'm sorry I was such a bad boy..."

The child's voice was little more than a shaken whisper, and suddenly, John felt the tears flow into his eyes. He tried to stifle a sob, but found he couldn't. He leaned over his son, wanting to hold him tight, but remembering that he was suffering from broken ribs, he contented himself with squeezing his shoulder, and put a comforting hand to his heart. He then let go of all the anguish he had felt these past days.

"You were not a bad boy, Adam... You were not. You're my son... and I love you. And I will see to it that nobody hurts you any more. Ever..."

* * *

"Things were never the same between us after that, were they?"

Nearly dropping from the heat, Captain Blue was thoughtfully examining his wounded hands, now free of their bonds, and was exercising his numb and sore fingers, when the voice of his father made its way through his brain. He looked past his hands toward his father, seated against the other wall of the van compartment.

"You really think our problems originate from that incident?"

John sighed, hearing the doubtful tone in his son's voice. "I don't know. I guess... I thought maybe, unconsciously, deep down inside... you were holding me responsible for what had happened?"

Blue grunted, and shook his head. "I never held you responsible, you should know that."

"Yes, now you would say that... but when you were younger, when you were still a child..."

"Father." Blue looked intently in his father's direction. "I told you: I never held you responsible." He kept staring at him for a moment, then added with a frown, "but maybe *you* hold yourself responsible. You shouldn't. What happened wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" John replied in a deep voice. "I keep turning all this over in my mind, Adam. Maybe there were things that I should have done - others that I shouldn't have asked of you. It's because I insisted you treat Grover right that he was able to get his hands on you. And if I had not grounded you that day, you would never have run away to go to that ball game..."

"Stop it." There was a tired tone to Blue's voice as he murmured those words. His head still felt heavy, and he rested it against the wall behind him, closing his eyes. He sighed again. "It won't do us any good, tormenting ourselves with what might have happened if we had acted differently all those years ago. You or me. I doubt it would have changed anything, given the circumstances. Grover would have made his move anyway, just differently. He could have gone after Peter."

"Peter would never have survived all you endured," John murmured, looking down. "He's not as strong as you are. He never was." He nodded thoughtfully, raising his eyes back to his son. "How're you feeling?" he asked in concern.

"Better than earlier, thank you." Blue opened his eyes to look again at his father. The right side of his vision was still a little blurry, but that didn't surprise him very much, as his eye was nearly closed. He took in his surroundings for the *n*th time, searching for a way to get out. Hours had passed since the van had stopped moving, but nobody had come to let them out. *It's a prison like any other, I guess*, he mused inwardly. Grover must think they wouldn't be able to escape, when they had finally reached their destination. And of course, he was right.

"If it wasn't so hot in here, I would probably feel even better," Blue murmured.

His father could only concur. He too, was feeling the heat badly; having previously removed his jacket had done little to help him.

"What are they waiting for now?" Blue added, with a deep frown. He looked at his father. "What time is it?"

"Eight in the morning," John announced, after consulting his watch. "I guess that, after that long drive, they wanted to settle in for the night."

Blue nodded. "Any idea where we could be?"

"Sorry," John replied with a rueful smile. "But as you remember, I was only taken for the ride. Nobody confided in me about our destination." He paused a second. "We drove for nearly three hours. My guess is we left Las Vegas."

"Well, that much I could gather," Blue murmured. "There's no sound outside, like a big city's normal traffic. Or much of anything else for that matter. They left us here, on our own, confident that we won't be able to escape or call for help. We must be far away from civilisation." He thought about it a second. "Or inside a parking garage," he added. "But that would be surprising."

"You're a much better detective than I am," John replied quietly. "So I'll take your word for it."

"Being a... 'detective' is part of my job, Father," Blue noted.

John caught the flash in his eyes. "I know," he murmured, lowering his gaze. "You can say it: 'that job I don't approve of...'"

"I didn't say it."

"But you were thinking it. Adam, I know you consider I haven't been fair to you concerning your choice of career..."

"Make that 'choices'. Plural."

John conceded that with a nod. "Right. Choices. But you've got to understand how hurt I felt when you chose, over and over again, not to join the family firm. Not to come... working with me."

"And how do you think I felt when you didn't support me in my decisions?" Blue replied rather coldly. "And when you didn't come to the commissioning ceremony, when I joined Spectrum? Don't you think that hurt ME?" He saw the look of pain in his father's face and cooled down instantly. "I'm sorry, this isn't really the place and time to discuss that."

"And when WILL it be the time? Let's face it, Adam, what chance do you give us to get out of this alive?"

"I'm not dead, yet," Blue replied defiantly.

"I know you're not the kind to give up hope," John murmured.

"Neither do you, normally," Blue noted, narrowing his eyes. "Mom always says that I get that from you."

John chuckled faintly. "Could that be our problem, then? We're too much alike?"

Blue didn't answer that. He looked down again at his hands, thoughtfully. John thought he didn't want to elaborate on the question. He looked down himself, and cleared his throat. "Your mother said... that you looked so handsome and dashing in that uniform." Blue stared up at him. John nodded. "At your Spectrum commissioning, three years ago? I didn't want to go, and I didn't want her to go either. But there was nothing I could do or say that would have prevented her from being there. She had said that at least one of us had to be there." He looked away. "I was so angry when she came back and couldn't stop saying how proud she was of you, of the man you had become. You probably didn't know it, but we had a fight about it. I'm not proud to say it, but I... don't remember that I have ever yelled that angrily at your mother before or since that day. Nor her yelling back at me in the same way."

"I had a feeling that would have caused problems between the two of you," Blue declared gloomily.

"She left the house for a couple of weeks after that."

"I didn't know it would be that bad either."

John sighed. "Well, things quieted down, and she came back. We never talked about it again, at least openly. I was too damned stubborn, you know..." He paused a second, pondering. Then he cleared his throat. "I should have gone to that ceremony with her."

"And why would you have done that?" Blue grumbled. "To make believe you were supporting me?" He shook his head. "I know you could never do that, Father. It's just not your style."

"I should have been there, by your mother's side. By YOUR side. Adam, no matter my opinion on your choices, you're still my son. That new career you were taking up was important to you – even if it didn't mean anything to me at the time."

"Has your opinion changed, then?"

John hesitated a moment, before providing his answer. "I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't prefer for you to come work with me," he murmured.

"Where you think I belong," Blue stated, less coldly than he would have previously said it. He smiled briefly. "One thing we can say for sure about you, Father, is that you say exactly what's on your mind. Nobody can accuse you of duplicity." He shook his head again. He didn't like the direction this conversation was going. It sounded too much as if they were trying to make up, to settle things between the two of them, while waiting to die. That didn't please him at all. "We're wasting time, here. Surely there's something I could do..."

Blue supported himself against the wall to get up; but he was still unsteady, and so he stumbled once on his feet. John quickly got up and went to his son to help him keep his balance. Blue thanked him with a murmur.

"You should stay down, son," John remarked with a deep, concerned frown. "You're overexerting yourself."

"I won't stay idle and wait until Grover comes to kill us," Blue responded with a growl. "We've got to find a way out of here."

"You're exhausted, Adam. And the beating you took..."

"I'm tougher than you may think, Father," Blue replied with a faint scoff. "I'm a Spectrum officer. I was trained hard to face these kinds of situations." Trying to find his footing and breath, he looked at his father. "You told me you met some of my colleagues from Spectrum..."

"While they were trying to get you out of Grover's clutches, yes," John admitted. "Things really didn't go as well as they thought they would. And I'm afraid I didn't make it easy on them either. Why, getting myself captured in turn by Grover, I really messed up!"

Blue preferred not to go into that. "They'll find us," he murmured instead.

"How?"

"They are resourceful people, Father. The best Spectrum has to offer. If there is only ONE chance to find and free us, they'll use it."

John offered a faint smile. "They seem resourceful, all right," he conceded. "But I'm still wondering how you can put up with that obnoxious Englishman you work with... It's true I've been difficult with him, though."

Blue looked at him with curiosity. He thought he meant that he had clashed with Scarlet. Which was plausible enough, considering the British captain's fiery temper. He didn't know about Colonel White being there. His father had not gone into too much detail about his encounter with the Spectrum agents in Las Vegas; he didn't have the time and Blue had been too groggy to listen carefully to his explanation.

Blue meant to ask what exactly had happened when they heard a sound coming from the door. Instantly, they turned toward it, and saw it open wide. Sam and Wesley Dawson appeared in the opening, the latter waving a pistol in their direction.

"Step back, the two of you," Wesley warned with a threatening tone.

The Svensons backed away, and the two men climbed carefully into the back of the van. Blue's eyes glittered dangerously. He was looking for an opportunity to jump into action. At the moment, neither of the Dawsons seemed willing to give him that.

Sam threw a length of rope to John, who caught it awkwardly. "Here you go, pops. Tie up your son's hands nicely behind his back."

John gave him a nasty glare. "I will certainly not!" he protested with a scoff.

"You'll do as you're told!" Wesley growled, turning his gun toward Blue. "Or do you prefer he loses the use of his hands PERMANENTLY?"

John paled upon hearing the threat. He didn't doubt for one minute that those miserable men would shoot Adam right in front of his very eyes. He turned an apologetic look to his son, turning the rope into his hands. "Adam, I..."

"You don't have any choice, Father," Blue replied with a gloomy tone, shaking his head, and turning around to present his back and his hands behind it. "You'd better do as he says."

"And make sure you secure them ropes nice and tight," Wesley Dawson instructed. "We'll be checking them afterwards. Then, you step back from sonny... so my brother'll be able to tie you up too."

"I'm so sorry about this, Adam," John murmured while starting to encircle his son's hands with the rope.

"Don't worry," Blue mumbled between his teeth, as he could feel the bite of the rope against the already abraded flesh of his wrists. "I know who I have to thank for this." *And I do intend to make him pay*, he added inwardly. *At the next available opportunity...*

* * *

Seated on a wooden box serving him as stool, with a mug of coffee on an old table in front of him, Wilson Grover, a portable phone to his ear, was listening with interest to the report given to him.

"You're sure there's no suspect car on the road that seems to have followed us from Vegas?" he grunted into the receiver. He sounded doubtful, and his contact wasn't very happy, hearing his implication.

"Give me a break, willya? This is a main road. There's been some vehicles travelling on it this morning, and a lot could've come from the big city. But as far as I can tell, nothing seems to be following your trail." There was a short pause, before Grover's interlocutor continued: *"There was a couple of vans that could have been suspicious, but they passed the exit without a glance*

in your direction. Oh, and don't be surprised to see some Road Rovers riding around in the desert."

Grover snorted. "What's the deal with those bums?"

"I don't think it's anything. But I saw a couple of 'em leaving the road and heading for the desert. No doubt to have some fun with their machines."

"Well, they'd better not come this way," Grover mumbled. "We have some business to attend to, and I don't want witnesses around. Or else, they'll regret it."

"I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

"Yeah, do that. And call only if you really have to." Grover hung up without waiting for an answer and turned around, as Billy Dawson was entering the small shack. He approached and handed him a portable computer.

"That's the best I could find, at such a short notice."

"Where did you steal it?" Grover asked, lifting the lid to check the machine.

Billy shrugged. "Does it really matter?" He frowned. "I hope it'll do, because I don't think I..."

"Don't worry," Grover cut him off abruptly, closing the lid. "It will do perfectly." He put the portable on the table and looked back at Billy. "Did your brothers let the Svensons out of the van?"

"They were going to do it," Billy answered, nodding his head. "They must be waiting outside."

Grover got to his feet, finishing his coffee with one big gulp. "Well, then... Let's not keep them waiting."

"What are you planning to do, Will?"

"Don't worry, Billy." Grover took a plastic bottle filled with water and a length of leather cord from the old wooden table. He put the cord into his pocket, and opened up the bottle, to take a sip. "I have it all figured it out," he added, looking at Billy with an evil smile.

He left the small shack, followed by the younger man, and stepped outside.

Wesley and Sam Dawson were forcing both Adam and John Svenson out of the blue van they had taken to flee Las Vegas. Blue nearly missed his step to fall on the dry ground. Dazzled by the sudden light, both prisoners blinked and looked at their surroundings with some confusion. They were right in the middle of a junkyard, with piles and piles of old rusted automobile parts lying everywhere around them. *Odd place to bring us*, Blue reflected. But admittedly, a perfect place to eventually get rid of embarrassing witnesses.

Grover had just stepped out of a small dilapidated wooden shack, not ten metres from there, marked with the sign *'Dawson Auto Parts and Scrap'* over the door. He was waiting, looking their way with some glitter of satisfaction in his eyes. They were roughly pushed towards him. Again, Blue missed a step but managed to keep his footing, as best he could. The smile on Grover's face widened, and he slowly drank water from the plastic bottle in his hand. John Svenson felt his anger rising a degree. In his mind, there was no doubt that this gesture was deliberate, and meant as further torture for his son. Adam looked almost dehydrated. He was obviously in dire need of water – and probably food too. What wasn't helping the matter was the fact that it was so terribly hot. It was probably one of the warmest days of the year. John looked up at the sky. Although the sun still wasn't at its zenith, it was hitting hard. It would surely be unbearable at midday.

They stopped a mere three feet in front of Grover, the Dawsons standing behind them. John tested the strength of his bonds. There was no hope of getting his hands free, he knew that, as he felt the rope biting his flesh. He'd wished he could have been able to put his hands around Grover's throat. One look at Adam's fiery glance told him that he was thinking exactly the same thing.

Grover looked them over, one after the other, with the same look of contempt Blue remembered of him, twenty-five years ago. "So here we are, the three of us together again," Grover noted quietly. "Don't you feel like celebrating? Johnny, it's so good to see you amongst us..."

"It's not like you left me with any choice," John replied dryly.

"No, I didn't, did I? And did you follow my instructions to the letter?" Grover could see the hesitation in the older Svenson, and smiled wickedly. "You didn't..."

"I didn't warn the police, if that's what you want to know," John cut in swiftly.

"Should I believe you?" Grover scoffed. "What I want to know is... How come you were at the casino last evening? How did you trail us back there?"

John maintained an uncomfortable silence. To be truthful, he would have had difficulty in answering. He didn't know how Spectrum had managed that, in fact. That was their investigation. But he couldn't tell that to Grover.

"What's the matter?" Grover asked in a syrupy tone. "Forgot how that happened? Or the cat got your tongue?"

"Why don't you just shut up?" Blue suddenly lashed out.

He felt a violent nudge between his ribs and fell to his knees, grunting. John looked down at him in distress, then turned furious eyes in Wesley Dawson's direction. The man was rubbing his right fist with a smirk of satisfaction.

"Be careful with your language, kid," Grover quietly told Blue. "Didn't your old man teach you any manners?" He motioned Wesley to help the downed man to his feet. Which he did, rather roughly. Blue did his best to stand as tall as he could, defying Grover with a piercing, furious gaze.

"Still the arrogant brat you used to be, aren't you, my boy?" Grover cackled evilly. "You must get that from your old man, I guess." He turned to John. "There's a lot of unanswered questions that you will eventually respond to, Svenson. It doesn't matter if you went to the police or not..."

"I didn't go to the police," John repeated insistently.

"We'll see about that later. For the moment, you must realize something: there's nobody around to help you now. I've got you both in my power. I can do anything I want with the pair of you."

"Cut the crap, Grover," Blue cut in sharply. "Stop beating around the bush and get down to business!"

"Eager to have this finished with, aren't you, kid?"

"I won't have you torturing my father with your taunting. It's money you want, isn't it? You, and your... friends?" Blue knew very well that it wasn't Grover's ultimate aim. He was well aware that the man had vengeance foremost in his mind. But it certainly wasn't the case for the others. The Dawsons certainly wanted more than just that. Maybe his and his father's survival could reside in the fact that the Dawsons wouldn't be so eager to kill them – at least not before having been paid for their trouble.

"He's right, Will," Sam Dawson then said in echo. "Let's get on with business. After that, you'll have all the time you want to settle your personal feud with these two."

Grover looked around at his accomplices, a dangerous glitter in his eyes. After a short moment, he nodded slowly.

"Okay, then. Let's do business." He turned again towards John. "I noticed you didn't bring your portable with you."

"It's in my hotel room," John replied gloomily. "If you need it, you'll have to let me go get it, or send someone there for it."

"And run into whoever might be waiting for us there?" Grover scoffed loudly. "Think again, Johnny!" He nodded towards Billy who disappeared inside the shack, to come back seconds later with the portable he had brought in earlier. "I took the liberty of finding one for you," Grover continued addressing John. "Okay, it's not specifically yours, but I'm sure you'll be able to use it to easily transfer funds from your personal accounts to a number of different Swiss accounts I opened ready for this operation."

"And how much are we talking about?" John asked with a sigh.

"About fifty million dollars."

John became pale. "Are you insane?" he lashed out. "I don't have instant access to that kind of capital!"

"I'm sure you will have when you sell stock holdings, shares, businesses, and real estate you might have around the country," Grover replied implacably. "And maybe well over it, by the end of the day."

"You want me to sell everything I have... most probably at a fraction of their value... and all this in one day?" John Svenson was stunned by the demands. Granted, he had imagined that Grover was envisioning something big, but he never thought it would prove as big as this. He shook his head. "It's impossible."

"You'll never know if you don't try it," Grover retorted.

"It is impossible," John insisted. "And certainly not without drawing any attention."

Grover shrugged. "So, we'll attract attention. What do I care? Before someone reacts and freezes your accounts, the deal will be complete."

"I refuse to see you go through this, Father," Blue protested loudly. "Don't give in to his blackmail!"

"Then you're ready to die to stop your father giving me any money?" Grover growled at him.

"I don't want for you to receive ANY reward for all the awful things you have done in your life!" Blue spat at him. "If my father does as you ask of him, he'll be ruined not only personally but professionally. HIS company will go under, and thousands of people all over the world will suffer!"

"So? You really think I should care?" Grover's expression hardened. "And if your father doesn't pay up, YOU will lose your life."

"You're really the most despicable scum I have ever encountered in all my life, Grover!" Blue turned to his father. "Don't give him one penny, Father," he urged him.

"Your kid is really an obstinate man, Johnny," Grover cackled. "Why, he doesn't seem to care about his life at all... And apparently, he seems to forget that YOURS is also at risk."

"Why, you dirty..."

Blue made a threatening step towards Grover, but evidently, he couldn't expect to be able to do anything against him, with his hands tied behind his back as they were. Nevertheless, advancing one step himself, Grover hit him in the stomach, and sent him sprawling at his feet, groaning. Then he kicked him brutally, keeping him down. John made a move forward too, but felt the hands of Sam Dawson holding him in place. "Stop it!" he shouted. "You're going to kill him!"

"That's not the way I want to see him die, Johnny-Boy," Grover replied, looking down in contempt at the younger man sprawled on the ground, grunting. There was an ominous smile upon his lips that made John Svenson shiver. He saw Grover putting his hand into his pocket to produce a length of thin leather cord. "I have a way to make you decide quickly to accept my demands, you'll see..."

Svenson narrowed his eyes, wondering what Grover may have in mind. He watched as the man poured the remaining water from his bottle onto the leather, soaking it completely. Then, throwing the bottle aside, he looked down at Blue, still prostrate at his feet, moaning in pain. "Get him to his knees." Both Wesley and Billy Dawson obeyed the order without question. Blue gave some resistance, but he was apparently still too weak to escape them. Grover crouched in front of him; it was only when he started to tie the cord around his prisoner's neck that John Svenson, opening eyes wide with horror, understood what he was up to, and tried to break free from Sam's restraining hands.

"No! What are you doing to him?"

His task done in mere seconds, Grover rose to his feet, and watched as Blue, released from the Dawsons' hands, collapsed on the ground, grunting, the leather cord tied tightly around his neck.

"That's an old Apache torture," Grover explained, turning to the still bewildered John Svenson. "I learned it in prison, from one of my cellmates. He was from around these parts, you see – where the Apaches used to live. You know they were one of the last tribes to resist the white invaders?" He smiled evilly, looking down at Blue. "Soaked leather. As it dries, it shrinks... and tightens around the victim's throat, slowly suffocating him." He looked up to the sky, towards the sun. "Young Adam here is lucky it's not midday yet, or he'd be dead in a few minutes."

The horror in John Svenson knew a new depth. Licking his dry lips, he looked down at his son, who was slowly trying to get his bearings back, and get to his knees. The leather was already uncomfortably tight around his neck, although apparently not yet tight enough to endanger his life. But Adam was so obviously aware of the peril he was in. He kept his head

obstinately down, and didn't dare to look up this time in the direction of his torturer. Grover had found a way to beat his indomitable spirit. It was a torment for John to see.

"You're a monster, Grover," John said, with a quiver in his voice. "What do you hope to accomplish by doing that to him? Release him, please!"

"Not until you start doing what I want," Grover replied cruelly. "And only when I see some results."

"But he will be dead before I could transfer one million!"

Grover nodded slowly. "Then I guess you'd better get on with it quickly."

He was so busy watching with complete satisfaction the despair fairly apparent in John Svenson's face that he didn't count on the seemingly defeated Captain Blue to make a move. Blue had allowed both Wesley and Billy Dawson to pull him back to his feet, before suddenly lashing out at them. He rammed with all his strength and weight into Billy's stomach, and sent him sprawling against his brother. Then, seeing a unique chance, he ran, with all the speed he was able to muster, putting as much distance away from these men as he could, heading between the many piles of rusted vehicles, and going deep into the junkyard. The rare speed with which he had acted surprised everyone, his father included, and it took some seconds before there was a reaction. Grover took a gun from his belt to fire a shot in the fugitive's direction. The bullet rang against some junk, just as Blue disappeared from view.

"You're useless!" Grover shouted angrily at the Dawson brothers. "You let him go!"

"How were we to know he would try to get away like that?" Wesley protested.

"The fool..." Grover muttered under his breath. "Doesn't he realise what he's risking? Go after him!" he barked again, addressing the Dawsons. "Find him quickly and bring him back to me!"

The three Dawsons went after the fugitive, leaving Grover with the remaining prisoner. The latter was looking in the direction they had taken – the one Adam had disappeared in. His mind was in complete turmoil. Adam's sudden action had startled him, as much as Grover and his goons. In a way, he was glad that Adam had escaped his tormentors, but he was concerned that it was also to be a mistake that might well mean his death. He couldn't very well see how his son would be able to get free of his bonds – and more importantly of the tightening noose around his neck.

"You're staying with me," he heard the voice of Grover say. Grover took him by the collar and roughly pushed him against the jagged surface of a junk pile, presenting the menacing end of the gun under his nose. John could smell the distasteful odour of the powder in his nostrils.

With his free hand, Grover took a small cellular phone in his shirt pocket. He pressed a single button before putting it to his ear. "Yeah, it's me. You'd better come quickly, we need you here." There was a moment of silence, as Grover's interlocutor was obviously saying something. John saw Grover's features grow hard with impatience. "I don't care about those *Rovers* bums! Adam Svenson has escaped us and is roaming free in the junkyard, probably hiding. I need all available hands to find him as quickly as possible... He can't be very far." Another pause. "Yeah, that's it," he growled, hearing the new reply. "If you want your share, you'll get your butt here right now. GET A MOVE ON!"

He hung up, with a frustrated gesture, put the phone back into his pocket and looked up to the silent and frightened John Svenson. "You've got every right to be concerned," he told him in a very ominous tone, his blue eyes burning with pure hatred. "If my boys don't find your son, he'll be dead in fifteen minutes."

John blanched at those words, and Grover gave him another malevolent smile.

"Not that I care about that, really. I would have preferred to actually see him die, but... That'll do perfectly, I guess. At least, his attempt gives me the opportunity to stay alone with you, so we can have a little chat together." With that, he roughly pushed his prisoner towards the shack behind them, and forced him to enter.

* * *

The Dawson brothers stopped in the middle of an empty space – what could be described as a clearing, in the middle of the rather large junkyard. Running that hard under that particularly

hot sun wasn't really easy for them, and all three were drenched and breathing hard. They looked around for traces of the fugitive – without finding any.

"Where to?" asked Billy, trying to catch his breath.

"Don't have any idea," Sam grumbled.

"We have to find him quick, or that noose will strangle him," Wesley added in turn. "He'll be good for nothing, if he's dead."

"Why should we care?" Sam replied.

"Use your head! You think his old man will agree to transfer all that money if his son dies now?" Wesley took a deep breath. "Right. We'd better separate, we'll cover more ground that way. Billy, go to the left. Sam, cover the centre. I'll take the right. He can't be far!"

The three went their different ways. Billy headed toward the left, as suggested by his brother, looking around feverishly. So far, still no trace of Svenson. This was getting frustrating, and he was beginning to wonder if they would find the man in time to free him of his noose before he would choke to death. *What a stupid move, to try to escape that way, in the situation he was in...*

It occurred to him that Svenson may have tried to leave the yard to take his chances on foot in the desert. He was certainly stupid enough to attempt such a foolhardy plan. Billy made his way to the limits of the junkyard. There was no surrounding fence, just one at the front, so it would have been rather easy for anyone to leave at will. But as he reached his goal and looked out into the desert all around him, Wesley realised that Svenson had not taken this way. He would have easily spotted him.

Instead of Svenson fleeing the yard, he saw a pair of motorbikes seemingly coming his way. He grumbled with bad humour, remembering the conversation he had heard earlier in the shack. *Those damned Rovers*, he thought, *they're always there when you don't want them*. He hoped the two bikers would change course and go away. If they were to come into the junkyard, they could become unwanted witnesses. They would have to be disposed of. And Billy was fairly sure that neither one of his brothers would hesitate one instant to make those two disappear. After all, the *Road Rovers* were only bums. Nobody would miss a couple of them.

They came about ten metres from the junkyard limits before they suddenly changed course, one of them going to the right, and the second to the left. Billy watched them go, listening to the roar of their engines, and nodded approvingly, as he saw one of them disappear from his view, at one corner of the yard. *Those two never knew how close they came to trouble...* Billy turned around and prepared to continue his search.

That was when he noticed that the roaring behind him – instead of decreasing – was now increasing quickly. He turned around in time to see that one of the bikes had turned back and was now coming straight at him. Top speed. He stepped back, instinctively, opening eyes wide with surprise and fear.

By the time he thought of giving the alert, it was already too late. The motorcycle was almost on top of him. The biker braked at the last possible second, and the machine skidded to a halt, lifting a large cloud of dust from the dry ground. It slid to the side – and hit the shocked Billy dead centre, sending him sprawling on his back with a loud thud.

Stunned by the impact, Billy was vaguely aware of the biker killing the engine of his machine before stepping down to stand over him, looking down at him through a pair of dark glasses that hid his eyes. He saw the man touching the side of his glasses and then heard him speak, in a quiet enough, but still urgent voice. "*Red Cardinal to Honeybell*. I'm at the rendezvous. Proceeding as planned toward the signal's position."

Before losing consciousness, Billy Dawson recognized the voice of Adam Svenson's dark-haired English friend.

* * *

Captain Blue was running through the rusted junk piles as fast as he could, under his current circumstances. His body was still hurting all over, due to his recent ordeal at the hands of Grover; he felt weak and dehydrated. Every move was little short of torture. And with his hands tied behind his back, it wasn't really easy to keep his balance. Furthermore, he could feel the

noose gradually tightening around his neck, as it slowly dried. He knew he only had minutes to remove it, before it would choke him.

It had been so hard for him to leave his father behind, still in Grover's hands, and to take off the way he did. But considering the situation, he felt that he didn't really have a choice. He had to flee, to escape the fate Grover had prepared for him, and then come back to free his father, before it was too late.

The first thing to do, if he wanted to actually accomplish anything, was to free his hands. He stopped for a short instant, and glanced about, searching for something that may help him with that. A jagged edge from one of those piles of junk, a broken car window, anything... Hearing hurried footsteps behind, he quickly started running again and, turning a corner, carefully hid himself behind an old van, deprived of its tyres, and whose original colour must have been a deep red in its time. He looked over the side of the vehicle to see who might be coming, and waited for a possible chance to present itself to him.

* * *

Wesley Dawson came into a halt at about the same spot Blue himself had stopped a second earlier. The man looked around for any possible clue of where the fugitive might have gone. So far, he couldn't see anything. And the ground was so dried up and compacted that there wasn't any chance of finding footprints. He looked at his watch. It had been ten minutes since Svenson had taken off. Surely, the noose around his neck must be dangerously tight now – and maybe it was even too late. He could possibly be dead.

In that case, Grover would want to see the body – and so Wesley and his brothers had to find it. Not really something he was looking forward to doing.

Wesley started to move on to continue his search when he heard something behind him. He turned around; he didn't have the time to see a streak of white and blue coming towards him at full speed and ramming into him with the impact of a cannon shell. Wesley was driven backward, against the ragged surface of a large pile of rusted and crushed vehicles behind him. He felt the pain in his lower back as it connected roughly. He slid to the ground, moaning in pain, his hand searching for his knife in his pocket. He just had the time to produce it before a foot cruelly stepped onto his hand, forcing a gasp from his lips. Rising his head, he saw the furious face of Svenson, his blazing blue eyes set on him – and then the foot coming into his line of vision, to kick him under the chin. Wesley fell unconscious at his victor's feet.

Gasping for air, Captain Blue looked down at the man he had just knocked unconscious. He had just made a tremendous physical effort, and had strained a few muscles. He desperately needed some rest, but he knew he couldn't afford to stop. Time was running out for him at the rate of the noose tightening around his neck, slowly compressing his throat. At his feet was the knife that Wesley had taken from his pocket. A jackknife, its open blade glittering in the sun. Blue couldn't believe his luck. That was exactly what he needed.

He fell on his knees, turning his back on the knife lying in the dust, and leaned back as low as he could, his bound hands scrabbling in the dust for the precious tool. His arms and shoulders were almost screaming under the strain he was putting on them. When he finally reached the knife, he closed his fist around it, and positioned the blade to cut through the ropes binding his hands. His luck held: the blade was well sharpened, as he felt it inflict a deep cut to his forearm. It didn't really matter to him, as he feverishly continued to slice through his bonds. His breathing was coming very hard, now, his vision nearly a blur, so it was with tremendous satisfaction and relief when he finally felt the last rope holding his hands fall. He quickly shook off the remains of the ropes and brought his hands forward. *Now, to get rid of this noose before it's too late...*

He was aware that it wouldn't be easy, and that he risked slitting his own throat, but it wasn't as if he really had a choice.

Blue heard a faint sound coming from his right; from the corner of his good eye, he saw the tall figure of a man standing there, wearing jeans and leathers, festooned with chains. It was pure survival instinct that made Blue jump to his feet, on the defensive, keeping his balance against the surface of a junk pile, and flashing the knife in the direction of the man who was nearly on him. He was about certain that this man was part of Grover's gang, and consequently,

even though he had trouble focusing, and more and more difficulty breathing, he was ready to dearly defend his life.

The newcomer made a swift step back to put himself out of reach of the threatening blade.

"Put that knife down, Blue!"

The commanding voice froze Blue instantly. He blinked with uncertainty, staring at the man, with a puzzled expression. He thought he had recognized the voice but, it seemed so impossible... Surely he was dreaming.

The man swiftly removed the red bandanna on his head and the pair of dark glasses hiding his eyes, and Blue opened wide eyes of absolute disbelief when he recognized the hard features of Colonel White staring right at him. "Put the knife down, Captain!" White repeated with more insistence.

Seeing his commander standing there – and wearing those strange garments – was such an unbelievable situation for Blue that he didn't know what to make of it. He instinctively obeyed the order and lowered the knife. He had now so much trouble breathing, taking in rare breaths of air in long gasps; his mind was starting to fill with a deepening fog, making it so difficult to think straight.

Seeing that the knife was no longer a danger, White took a step towards Blue - at the same instant the younger man's knees buckled under him and he fell forward. The colonel caught him before he hit the ground. He could hear the rasping sound of his breathing, but couldn't figure out what could be wrong with him. Carefully, thinking he might be hurt, he laid him on the ground – and then saw how red his face was and the leather noose tightening around his neck, compressing his throat. He let out a loud, indignant curse – probably one of the worst Blue had ever heard him utter.

White took the knife from his officer's clenched fist. "Don't move, Blue. I'll have you free in a minute." Seeing the way Blue was gasping for much needed air, it was obvious he had to act quickly. Cutting the now extremely tight noose, without slitting the young man's throat was nearly impossible, so there wasn't much choice in how to free him. White sliced right through the knot, with one swift but careful movement. The noose loosened instantly, and Blue took in a deep gulp of precious air. The colonel removed the remains of the cord and threw it on the ground, in a disgusted gesture. He then helped Blue to a sitting position, and looked down at him in concern. The younger man was panting and coughing, still breathing heavily and trying to find a normal rate.

"Take it easy, now. Try to calm down... You should be all right in a moment."

Blue nodded to the advice. His throat was sore, still a little tight after the way it had been compressed, but he could breathe again, even if somewhat painfully. He still couldn't understand how Colonel White could be there, dressed like that, tending to him. The last time he had seen him was days ago, on Cloudbase, before he left for his furlough – and intended secret wedding – with Symphony.

"Colonel White... What..." Blue's voice was so raspy he barely could recognize it himself. He coughed again, and White thumped his back, comfortingly.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah... I'm better now, thanks... But..." Blue cleared his throat, trying to find his composure, and stared at his commander with perplexed and unbelieving eyes. "What... What are you doing here?" He eyed him from bottom to top. "And... dressed like that?"

White nodded slowly. The ghost of a smile appeared ever so briefly on his lips. "Well, it's a long story, but..."

A detonation interrupted him suddenly, and a bullet whizzed by, impacting against the surface of the junk pile Blue was leaning on. A fraction of a second later, White was pushing the surprised young man to the ground, behind a small heap of metal, and threw himself down next to him. Other gunshots made themselves heard, and bullets flew overhead.

White took his pistol and tried to get a clear view of who might be shooting at them. He could see a figure hiding some distance from them, behind a large tyreless station-wagon. "It appears that we are not out of the woods with your friends, yet," the colonel declared in a deadpan tone, addressing Blue.

"My father," Blue replied instead. There was a flash in his eyes as a realisation suddenly came back to his mind. "Grover's still got him. I've got to help him."

White was about to reply that they first had to help themselves when Blue got to his feet and suddenly shot out of hiding to run right into the open, in the direction of another pile of junk. He had acted so quickly that the Spectrum commander didn't have time to object. Bullets flew around Blue, hitting the ground at his feet, but none of them connected and he successfully passed through and continued his race without even slowing down. The person who had selected him as a target had carelessly stepped out of cover, so White used that to his advantage, and shot him down with one single bullet. He saw Sam Dawson falling down with a yelp of pain, letting go of his weapon.

White quickly got to his feet to rush to the wounded man's side, to find him moaning pitifully, holding his bleeding thigh. *This one won't be going anywhere*, he reflected with some satisfaction. He picked up the abandoned weapon and started making his way in the direction Blue had taken; he could see him running at some distance, and was hoping he would reach him without too much difficulty. He actually made only a few metres, when another figure suddenly appeared in front of him. The newcomer, wearing a police uniform, his back turned on him, obviously had not seen him; he was presently aiming his pistol in the direction of the running Blue. White nearly slid to a stop to avoid colliding with him, and swiftly put his own weapon to the man's head.

"If I were you, Sheriff, I wouldn't do that."

Angus McNamara froze instantly in the same position, not daring to make a single move.

"Drop it," White ordered with a cold tone.

The sheriff instinctively obeyed, and the gun clattered to the ground. "You're making a big mistake, Gray," he informed White. He was trying to render his voice official, but somehow, he had trouble concealing the undertone of fear in it.

"Am I really? I wasn't the one who were preparing to shoot an unarmed man in the back."

McNamara slowly turned around to face him.

"I could have you arrested for drawing this weapon on me," he said arrogantly.

"Somehow that would surprise me," White replied, his tone still icy calm. "Considering that you're an accomplice to a kidnapping... Make that double kidnapping, and extortion."

"You're crazy! I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Would you care to explain your presence here, then?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

White sighed. "Quite right. But eventually, you'll have to explain yourself to others." He paused a second. "Maybe even to your friend in Las Vegas, Mister Gardenia," he added quietly.

"Who?" McNamara replied, obviously on the defensive.

"Obviously, you haven't talked to him recently," White continued without seeming to note his interruption. He approached quietly, and took the handcuffs hanging from the sheriff's belt. "Otherwise, it's more than likely you wouldn't be here right now... So, I take it you decided to act on your own, following Mister Grover's lead."

He snapped one end of the handcuffs around the sheriff's wrist, and the other end to the handle of an old sports Chevrolet. The man protested vehemently. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

"Putting you out of commission for a while," White answered. He took the set of keys from the sheriff's pocket, and then crouched to pick up the gun lying on the ground. "There's still some cleaning up to do around here, and I certainly don't want you running free." He pocketed the gun, while McNamara glared angrily at him. "I'm sure it will be easy enough to prove your part in all this," the colonel added quietly. "In the meantime, I suggest you wait patiently here."

"I'll have your hide for this, Gray!" McNamara snapped furiously at him.

"Not before I have yours," White replied coolly. With that, he quickly went on his way, leaving the man standing there, pulling angrily against the cuffs holding him.

White took his glasses and, putting them on, tapped on the side to activate the radio communication and report his situation. "*White Dove* to *Honeybell*. Am moving in to the signal's position. Proceed with caution to the entrance and await further instructions."

* * *

Captain Scarlet arrived in view of the shack serving as the 'office' for the junkyard, about five minutes after disposing of Billy Dawson. He looked with some perplexity at the police car he could see parked in front of the shack. That was obviously the car that had previously been blocking the way to the secondary road leading to the junkyard. He had seen it earlier, when he had passed it on the motorcycle, with the colonel, before they both took a large detour through the desert, to head toward the point designated by the bug's signal. Scarlet had recognized Sheriff McNamara at the wheel, and that he should be there didn't surprise him very much – as he was already sure the sheriff was involved in Blue's kidnapping. So it was somehow to be expected that McNamara would continue to check things over, making sure, 'on the side', that everything was still working well. What was rather unexpected was that he would be so careless as to get himself involved so directly, after taking good care to hide his tracks.

So far, there was nobody in view. Not the sheriff, none of the other Dawson brothers. Neither was Wilson Grover, nor Blue or his father. Destiny had informed Scarlet that he was still moving toward the signal coming from the bug John Svenson was unknowingly wearing on his person. It would mean the centre of the junkyard – the shack in front of him.

Scarlet moved toward it, ever so carefully, all his senses at the ready.

He became aware the presence behind him before he could actually see it.

He moved around swiftly, in time to catch the hand of the man trying to hit him with a club. He wasn't surprised to recognize Harvey Ringward, rolling furious eyes at him.

"You ARE a sneaky snake, aren't you?" Scarlet muttered between his teeth.

Ringward tried to land a left, but Scarlet avoided it and pushed him away.

"You're good at attacking a man from behind," the Spectrum captain noted. "How good are you up front?"

Ringward let out a huge roar and launched himself forward, blindly, like a raging bull, holding up his club, ready to strike. Scarlet simply stepped aside... and the man collided violently with the pile of junk metal the captain was standing in front of, stunning himself. Scarlet took him by his collar and needed only one good punch to finish him off. Ringward crumpled to the ground, with a muffled moan, and lay there, on his back, arms outstretched.

"Not that good, eh?" Scarlet murmured. "Especially without your stun baton..." He swiftly handcuffed the man and relieved him of his weapons, throwing them out of reach. "And not that clever, either," he added with a mocking smile, patting the man's cheek. "Get some rest, mate. We'll come back to take care of you later."

He then carefully continued his progress toward the shack.

* * *

Wilson Grover took a last look at his watch, before staring over at the desperate-looking man standing only a few feet away from him.

"It's been twenty minutes, now. And not a word yet from my boys." He shook his head. "I guess we can presume that your son is now dead."

The words sank deep into John Svenson's mind and heart. He lowered his head, not willing to look Grover straight in the eye. Not willing to give him the satisfaction of seeing how grieved he was. "You can't be sure of that yet." He wanted so much to sound courageous, but somehow there was no conviction behind his words. Grover laughed at him derisively.

"Have it your way, then. If you prefer to live an illusion, instead of facing the facts."

"If anything happens to my son, you won't get a penny from me!" John challenged with a dangerous glow in his trembling eyes.

"Oh yeah? Think again, Johnny-Boy. As I already mentioned to you, you are in my power... and you still have a rather large family, so..."

"You keep away from them!" John lashed out, his heart missing a beat. "You keep away from them, or else..."

"Or else what? You're in no position to make any kind of demand, pal! Let alone threats. I'm still wondering how I'll punish you for having contacted the police..."

"I keep telling you, I haven't contacted the police!"

"Oh yeah! Like I believe ya!" Grover fished out an object from his pocket and, approaching John, shoved it under his nose. "Tell me what this is, then."

John gave but one glance at the stylus-like, black, shiny object. He shook his head. "How should I know what it is?"

Grover huffed his disdain loudly. "That, smart guy, is a communication device. Kind of a radio - albeit a very sophisticated one. I took it from a man who was standing guard in front of the casino's back door. Minutes before you fell into my lap, as a matter of fact." He paused a moment, staring intently at his captive, obviously in search of a reaction. But years of facing adversaries in the financial world had taught John Svenson to not show any of his emotions and thoughts. He kept a blank, unreadable expression on his face. Grover slowly shook his head. "Yeah, pretty sophisticated equipment," he continued, looking down at the communication device. "Very nice. Certainly not standard police equipment. Again: what do you know about it?"

"What makes you think I know anything?" John grumbled.

"Don't take me for a fool! That guy I took it from was watching the casino. And then you appeared there. Inexplicably, since I don't see how the hell you could have known that your precious kid was held there."

"I didn't know that," Svenson declared. It wasn't a lie, as far as he was concerned.

Grover brutally took him by the throat, squeezing tight, and shoved him against the back wall. Svenson's head hit hard and he blinked, looking straight into the furious eyes. He could see murder in them, as the hand held him like a vice. "I told you not to take me for a fool!" growled Grover. "I've got the feeling you know EXACTLY what I'm talking about! Who was that guy? And that girl we nearly ran over when we left the casino?"

"What girl?" John gasped, not sure he knew who Grover was talking about.

"A blonde girl who appeared out of nowhere and who, I would bet, was looking for you! Now I'm pretty sure you're a faithful husband to your wife, Johnny-Boy, so I guess you're not seeing pretty girls on the side when you're away from Boston. So who is she?"

From Grover's description, John was now almost certain he was talking about Destiny. He managed to keep a straight face. That infuriated Grover who slapped him furiously before throwing him violently to the floor. The pain reverberating through John's back made him flinch.

"Don't try my patience, Svenson! Your boy Adam tried that with me! See where it got him!" Grover gave a vicious kick to his victim's stomach, making him moan. "I'll break you, just like I broke him!"

John blinked, hearing those words. "Don't kid yourself!" he yelled suddenly. "You did your worst, but you didn't break him, and you know it! It would take BETTER than you to break him!"

Grover forced him to his feet; holding him by his collar, he looked furiously into his face. "What does it matter?" he growled. "He's dead now!"

"You won't benefit from his death," John replied, keeping a brave façade.

Grover chuckled wickedly. "You must have noticed by now, it's not money I want from you. I don't give a damn about your money. Oh sure, if I was able to get some... I'm all for it."

"It's what put you in this mess to begin with," John replied. "You landed in prison the first time, because of it..."

"Shut up!" Grover yelled, slapping Svenson into silence. "I'll kill you, Svenson. And I'm gonna take pleasure in it... I'll take my time. Too bad your kid died before I'd finished with him."

John paled, hearing those dreadful words. "You'll pay for that!" he forced himself to retort.

"And who's gonna make me?" Grover swung a brutal uppercut that sent his victim sprawling on the floor again. He cackled evilly. "You?! You can't even save yourself!"

John spat out some blood, following Grover's last punch. "I won't have to do anything..." Again he received a kick in the stomach, although not as hard as the first one. He grunted, and then coughed. "But I'm willing to bet you're already a dead man."

"You talk big, for someone in your position, pal!" Grover noted, taking him by his collar again, and half lifting him from the floor. "What'll you do? Hire some guys like you did twenty-five years ago, when I was sent to the joint, to kill me?!"

"I told you, it will not come from me!" John answered, looking up with anger at the threatening man. "You made a mistake, Grover, a DEADLY mistake. You should have left my son alone! Now his friends will come after you and there's nowhere in the world you'll be safe from them! I can assure you of that!"

"What are you talking about?" grumbled Grover. "So I should be scared?" He scoffed derisively.

"More than you think, yes," Svenson confirmed, his eyes flashing.

Grover hit him, before shoving him roughly to the floor; he then stepped back, taking his gun from his belt. He lowered it, taking aim at his panting victim.

"Tell me why I should be scared," he ordered with an ominous tone.

John coughed out blood and lifted his head to look at him. "Ever heard of Spectrum, Grover?"

"Spectrum?!" That made Grover laugh loudly. He cocked the hammer of his gun. "Spectrum has enough to deal with, with terrorists and Mysterons – whatever they are. I've had enough of this. I give you exactly ten seconds to tell me why Spectrum should want to go after me. They don't give a damn about guys like me!"

"Except when guys like you go after one of our *own*."

The stern voice coming from his left and the clicking of another weapon froze Grover where he stood. He slowly turned his head to see a tall dark-haired young man standing in the open doorway, his gun aimed at him, a severe expression on his face. Grover didn't seem to register the words the newcomer had said, but it was obvious what his intentions were.

"Drop the gun," Captain Scarlet said slowly. "Don't force me to shoot you."

A glitter of hope appeared in John's eyes at the appearance of the British captain. He figured he still had a chance to get out of this dreadful situation alive – maybe find Adam and yet have the chance to save him. He wasn't as sure as Grover that his son would be dead – the despicable bastard was just trying to torture him with horrible thoughts of Adam's death. But there was still a fair amount of doubt in him; he knew time could be running out for Adam.

John was surprised and dismayed to see the shadow of a smile upon Grover's lips, despite the gun trained on him. He hadn't moved an inch.

"Will you be quick enough, boy?" Grover asked, taunting the English captain. "I have my sight set on Svenson here. And this trigger is really, really sensitive."

"You'd be a fool to try," Scarlet said, slowly moving around toward John, his gun and eyes not leaving Grover for one second. He succeeded in concealing his concern. He knew he would be able to shoot Grover swiftly enough – but he wasn't so sure that he would be able to stop him pulling the trigger. It was even possible that the shot would instinctively force Grover's finger to squeeze the trigger. His chance was now to taunt the man into giving up, in order to save Svenson's life. "Give it up now, it's finished."

"Finished, really?" Grover mocked him. "Not by a long shot!"

"Grover, I'll fire if you force me too."

"Go ahead, then. The way I see it, I have nothing to lose," Grover replied stoically. Again, the smile appeared and briefly, a spark in his eye. "As long as I have vengeance!"

It was a split-second decision, as Scarlet sensed that there was no more time for debate. He had come close to Svenson. He dived in front of the intended victim, at the same instant as Grover's gun spat. He felt the impact of the bullet as his own finger squeezed the trigger. But his position didn't permit him to have a good enough aim at Grover; his bullet missed, although narrowly, and as he hit the floor, he continued to fire, making it impossible for Grover to try another shot at both John Svenson and himself. Grover didn't wait around to serve as a target; under the hail of bullets, he quickly retreated through the door and disappeared outside.

Not having moved from the spot on the floor where Grover had thrown him, John Svenson had watched, distraught, as the action had so quickly unfolded before his eyes. He couldn't believe he was alive; he couldn't believe that the young British Spectrum officer had so recklessly put his own life on the line to save his. Such dedication seemed impossible for him to conceive.

Scarlet gave a muffled groan, as he rolled on his side, apparently with great effort. John could see the young man's face creased with pain. "Are you all right?" he murmured in concern.

Scarlet checked his side, where the bullet had hit him. He could see a red stain forming on his T-shirt; he grimaced and quickly hid the wound under the leather vest. "Yes, I'm all right," he grunted, getting to his knees to approach John, who was struggling into a sitting position. "It's just a flesh wound."

"You took a bullet for me," John murmured, still hardly believing it, as Scarlet released him from the bonds holding his hands. "Why...?"

"It's my job, Mister Svenson." Scarlet offered a brief smile. "And you are Adam's father... And Adam's my friend."

"Adam!" John cried. "He's in deadly danger! We must find him quickly!"
"We'll find him, Mister Svenson," Scarlet answered sombrely. "Don't worry: we won't let him down."

* * *

As soon as he was out of the shack, Wilson Grover checked around, making sure nobody was waiting to take shots at him outside. The dark-haired Englishman couldn't be alone, he reflected, and so there should be others around backing him up. As it was, there was nobody in sight – except Harvey Ringward, lying in the dust, handcuffed and apparently unconscious. Grover groaned with annoyance, thinking he really wasn't lucky in finding associates able to do a good job. Things weren't going well, he was now aware of that, and so all he could do now was to put some distance between himself and this place.

The Hell with the Svensons now... At least, he thought with satisfaction, the son was dead. There was no way the fool could have escaped the choking death he had brought upon himself. There would be time to deal with the father another day... And, who knew, maybe even the possibility of getting to him through the rest of his family.

Grover ran toward the police car parked not far from there and hopped aboard. He turned the key at the same instant he saw the young Englishman stepping out of the shack, followed by John Svenson. *What a shame that he should be standing behind,* Grover thought ominously. The thought of trying another shot at both of them came to his mind, but he dismissed it as quickly as it came. Survival instinct demanded that he go without any further delay. Or risk his chance to escape.

He savagely pressed down the accelerator and the car jumped forward, taking the main path leading toward the junkyard's main entrance. Beyond it was the dusty secondary road, edged with ditches; there was hardly ever another vehicle on it, and it led straight to the main road.

On that secondary road, Grover noticed a white van coming, in a cloud of dust, and pulling out to take the path...

... toward the entrance to the junkyard.

* * *

"That's a police car!" Destiny announced, with urgency in her tone, seeing the car on the same path, coming at them. She was on the passenger seat, next to Symphony, who was driving the *Honeybell's Florist* van. The American Angel nodded gloomily.

"I know," she said between her teeth.

"That's probably the car we saw earlier, with that Sheriff McNabb onboard."

"McNamara," Symphony corrected. "Yeah, that's the car." She pressed down the accelerator. Destiny looked at the approaching car with concern. It was trying to reach the entrance before them.

"It's coming at us," she reflected.

"I know," Symphony replied, gritting her teeth.

"Don't you think you should pull over?" Destiny urged her.

"That's not the sheriff at the wheel," Symphony growled. "It's Grover!"

"I really think you should pull over," Destiny insisted.

"No way, José!"

With that, Symphony pushed the accelerator to the floor. The van jumped forward.

It screeched to a halt as it arrived at the junkyard's entrance, blocking any way to escape. The police car didn't have time to stop. It violently collided with the side of the van, with a loud squealing sound of twisting metal. The jolt violently shook Destiny and Symphony in the driver's cabin. Both women gasped under the shock, the air suddenly driven from their lungs. They were more surprised than really hurt, although that didn't stop Destiny from giving her American colleague a withering look.

"You're crazy!" she shouted at her.

"What's the matter?" Symphony answered, panting for air. "Didn't you know this van has reinforced panels?"

Destiny looked positively annoyed at the factual remark. She gave a concerned look to the back. "Are you okay, Palladino?"

"Next time, I'd appreciate a warning!" came the shaky but angry reply from afar.

"Yes, me too," grumbled Destiny in an undertone.

* * *

In his hurry to escape, Wilson Grover had not thought of buckling his seatbelt. His head had slammed right into the windshield, as the police car ploughed into the side of the van, stunning him instantly. He didn't know how he succeeded in staying conscious. All he knew was that his head and back hurt like Hell. But miraculously, considering the violence of the impact, he had survived.

He pushed the door open to step outside. He was so shaken by the accident that he fell forward in the dust, gasping for air. He could feel a trickle of blood running down the side of his head and had trouble seeing straight. Blindly, he crawled away from the accident scene as quickly as he could, and behind the safety of an old, rusted, windowless and tyreless Ford pickup truck. He sat down in the dust, coughing, his back against the vehicle, taking his head between his hands, and trying to get his bearings.

He saw a pair of feet entering his line of vision, and stopping right in front of him.

Looking up, he saw the grim-looking face of Adam Svenson looking down at him, his lips pulled into a thin line of barely contained anger. Strangely, on Grover's own lips, a strange, distorted smile emerged, while disbelief showed in his eyes.

"Hey, kid," he rasped. "You're alive..."

"No thanks to you," Blue croaked, icily. His throat was still hurting him badly, but his eyes, fixed on the man at his feet, flashed dangerously. He bent down to take Grover by the collar and hauled him to his feet, holding him tightly. The older man winced in pain as Blue shoved him roughly against the side of the derelict van, but the Spectrum agent's expression showed little concern for Grover's discomfort.

"Easy now, kid," Grover grimaced. "You wouldn't hurt a wounded old man now, would you?"

"Wouldn't I?" Blue spat between his teeth.

He punched the man in the face, and then in the stomach, sending him sprawling on the ground, moaning. He saw the sun glinting on the smooth metallic surface of a gun that suddenly appeared in Grover's hand – and ruthlessly stepped on it.

"Oh no, you don't, you bastard..." Grover yelped and let go of the weapon, which Blue quickly kicked away. He forced the man to his knees and looked down into his frightened eyes. "What have you done to my father?"

"Your father?" Grover sounded slightly bewildered. He took too long to answer, so Blue struck him again in the face, sending him back to the ground.

"My father, scum!" Blue yelled. "WHAT have you done with him?"

On his back, Grover crawled away as Blue approached him, watching with deep concern as the younger man bent down to pick up the gun. "Calm down, kid," he tried, in a soothing voice. "Your old man – he's all right. I didn't do nothing to him."

"You're lying!"

"I'm not... I swear." Grover had reached the side of the truck and, using it as leverage, sat up, still looking up with pleading eyes at Blue who stopped just over him. "A friend of yours... he came into the shack and freed him. You'll see, I didn't do nothing to your father."

"Only because you didn't have the time," Blue retorted. His hand was playing with the gun he was holding at his side, his finger stroking the trigger.

"Hey, kid... I know when I'm beaten," Grover quickly added, in a defeated but silky voice. "I gotta hand it to you: you're really a tough guy. I felt sure you were dead. But not you, right? You're a survivor..." He could see he wasn't even reaching the young man. "You're with Spectrum, I heard? Boy, I bet your dad's real proud of you..."

"Like your own dad was proud of you, I bet?" Blue growled angrily. He raised the gun to aim it at Grover. "How many people beside me know you killed him, all those years ago?"

"How d'you know that?" Grover asked, apparently surprised.

"You told me yourself, twenty-five years ago, remember? He used to beat you up – until the day you 'settled things all right with him'. It never really occurred to me, I guess... I was too young, too scared at the time... And afterwards, I wanted so much to forget that whole episode of my life. But you forced me to realize that lately, Grover. By putting me through Hell again!" Blue's voice cracked suddenly. This long speech had strained his throat. He cleared it, then ominously cocked the hammer of the gun, taking careful aim. "You're a despicable human being, Grover," he croaked. "Putting you out of your misery would be my pleasure!"

"Captain Blue, hold your fire!"

The shouted command behind him barely made Blue flinch. He had heard it, and recognized the voice, but he didn't move, standing where he was, his weapon still trained on the apparently fearful Wilson Grover, his hand barely faltering. He wasn't letting the man out of his sight.

Colonel White had arrived on the scene in time to see Captain Blue raising the weapon with the obvious intention of shooting the unarmed man sitting on the ground in front of him. White knew of all the abuses Blue had suffered at the hands of Wilson Grover – twenty-five years ago, as a child, and now, as a man. There was little doubt in the Spectrum commander's mind that he would now feel the very understandable urge to avenge himself on this loathsome man, to kill him and try this way to let go of all the pain and the hurt he had endured because of him. But it wasn't the way to settle things with him.

White heard hurried footsteps from his right and saw John Svenson arriving in turn, closely followed by Captain Scarlet, who was limping slightly. John stopped a couple of metres away from White, his eyes fixed on his son standing in front of the apparently grovelling Grover. Mixed feelings showed on the financier's features as he realised what Adam was obviously tempted to do.

White made a step forward toward Blue, and saw him raise the gun higher, to get a better aim. He stopped in his tracks. He was only feet away from the scene.

"Don't do it, Adam," he told the young man with a calming, yet firm voice. "He's not worth it."

There was still a moment's hesitation from Blue. Then he lowered the gun and let out a sigh, looking down in disgust at the man at his feet. "That's right," he muttered. "You're not worth it." Grover looked up with incomprehension in his eyes. Blue's expression became even harder. "I won't become like you, Grover."

That said, he turned his back on Grover, who crumpled at his feet, and started sobbing, like a man defeated and definitely crushed. Blue snorted derisively and walked away from everyone. White let out a sigh of relief, as Scarlet reached his side, and John Svenson started moving in the direction of his son.

"Is it finished?" Scarlet asked softly, looking at the scene with concern.

"Yes, I believe it's finished," White conceded. He looked down as he noticed how Scarlet was holding his side, and saw a stain of blood, barely concealed by his hand and the leather vest. "You've been hurt."

"Eh? Ah... Only a flesh wound," Scarlet explained, not willing to say how bad the wound really was.

"Don't give me that. I know a flesh wound when I see one, and this one isn't."

"I'll be okay in no time, sir."

"In the meantime," White grumbled, "I want you away from any civilian that might witness your annoying miraculous healing."

Scarlet lowered his eyes. "S.I.G., sir."

"And I want you to sit down before you fall down," White added less harshly.

Scarlet permitted himself a faint smile. "Yes, Colonel White, sir."

White mumbled something not very distinct, but in which annoyance was fairly obvious.

Exhausted beyond description, Captain Blue let himself drop on the side of the ditch bordering the road, sighing heavily. He had drained the last of his resources, just going there, with his body hurting all over and yearning for everything it had been denied for so long: rest, food and water. And peace. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to be left alone, to compose himself. If only for a short time.

He looked in disgust at the gun he was still holding; his hand began trembling and he put the weapon down at his side. He had come so close to killing Wilson Grover – so close he couldn't believe he had backed away from it. Now he was glad he had not pulled the trigger. He just knew he would have regretted it.

"Adam?"

The soft voice coming from not so far away made him look up. He saw Symphony standing there, looking at him with concern in her golden eyes. Quickly, almost clumsily, he scrambled to his feet. He had been wrong. Peace wasn't what he wanted most right now.

"Karen..."

He rushed to her and stood in front of her, his eyes trembling, his features betraying the warm and loving emotions he was feeling to see her there. Yet he didn't move, contemplating her with uneasiness, witnessing the horror more than evident in her eyes as she gazed upon his wounded features. She gently reached out to stroke the left side of his face, where his vision was still a blur.

"My God, Big Blue, what..."

The rest died on her lips as he swiftly gathered her in his arms to hold her tight against him. He still had strength enough in him to show her how he had missed her. And by the way she responded to his embrace, he had no doubt she had missed him as well.

"I'm so glad we found you..."

"Later," Blue whispered. "We'll talk later... Just let me hold you. Oh God, I missed you so..."

Symphony nodded and let her head rest against his shoulder.

John Svenson had almost reached his son when the young blonde woman – taller than Destiny Angel – had appeared and accosted Adam before he himself did. He witnessed how they fell into each other's arms and held each other as if there were no tomorrow. It dawned on John that this woman was someone special to his son. It was so obvious they shared a great bond of affection. John suddenly felt uncomfortable – he didn't want to impose his presence now, while they were experiencing this warm reunion. He would feel like an intruder. He would talk to Adam later.

He turned around to leave and saw that Wilson Grover was staggering to his feet. He put his hand behind his back, and produced a small gun that had been hidden under his vest and that nobody had seen until then. Panic took hold of John as he saw the man levelling the gun at his son.

He wasn't the only one to see. Both Scarlet and White had witnessed Grover's move. Guns appeared in their hands.

"Adam! Look out!"

Hearing his father's warning, Blue swiftly turned around, instinctively pushing Symphony behind him. Despite the distance, he saw the piercing, hating eyes of Wilson Grover and the barrel of a gun fixed on him.

There was a single gunshot.

In front of Blue's expressionless eyes, Grover staggered on his feet, the pupils of his eyes dilated, his mouth open wide in surprise, before falling forward in the dust.

It wasn't Captain Scarlet's or Colonel White's gun that had fired the fatal bullet. Somebody else had beaten them to it.

They looked in confusion as not far from them, a woman, seated in a wheelchair, was holding a smoking gun in her hand, a sad but determined expression upon her face.

Epilogue 1 – Las Vegas

"Ladies and gentlemen..."

Colonel White had stood up from his seat at the table, a glass of champagne in hand. He looked at the assembly of people seated before him, offering a smile some of them had not often seen from him. "I raise my glass to the happy conclusion of this adventure," he said with a joyful voice. "Here's hoping that our last evening here will be spent in peace and quiet - something that every one of us here is in desperate need of at the moment."

He caught sight of Captain Blue, seated opposite him, his bandaged hand absently turning his own glass on the table. The young man, half-lost in thought, merely glanced at him under the dressing applied over his left, still reddened eye. White nodded in his direction. "Some more than others," he conceded. Blue acknowledged the remark with a nod.

The evening was extremely comfortable, not too hot, considering how warm it had been during the day, and so, some of the guests at the *St. Maurice Hotel* had decided to make use of the terrace outside its private restaurant to have a nice, relaxing and quiet dinner. The terrace was set behind the Hotel, on the first floor, with a beautiful view over the city. Just below it was the ballroom, subtly lit with coloured lanterns. Already, the band was playing and several couples were dancing to the soft music.

Five Spectrum officers, wearing their most fashionable – and yet comfortable – civilian clothes, had gathered there for the occasion with Amanda Wainwright and John Svenson, in order to celebrate the end of the adventure with a last meal together before their departure. Colonel White and his officers were due to return to Cloudbase early the next morning, while Amanda was heading back to her ranch in Iowa – and John to Boston. It was obvious that everyone was happy that the escapade was finished, and that some could hardly wait to be on their way. But there were some within the assembly who were keeping unusually quiet. Namely, the Svensons, father and son. The events of the last couple of days had been particularly difficult for both of them; they didn't feel much like celebrating. Blue, for example, had kept to himself most of the evening, barely touching his meal, answering only when talked to, and obviously not willing to engage in any lengthy conversation. It was true he was still recovering, his bandaged hands and neck and the still apparent marks on his face bearing witness to his recent ordeal, and much of his strength and good humour not yet fully recovered.

After the conclusion of his captivity the preceding morning, he had passed most of the rest of the day and all of the night in the hospital, being checked and treated for his injuries. In retrospect, he had been very lucky. A couple of broken back teeth, bruises and cuts on various parts of his body, his back having taken the worst of his, only one cracked rib, but none of his internal organs had been touched. His left eye, which had at first caused some concern, turned out to be healing just fine. He had a concussion, and had suffered from dehydration, both of which he had been treated for; the doctors had advised him to rest and take it easy for a couple of days. Under that condition only was he allowed out of the hospital, early this morning. Considering the doctors' prognoses, and since Blue's last days of furlough had been so disastrous and that he would probably want to take advantage of what little was left of it, Colonel White had deemed it unnecessary to move forward their return to Cloudbase. But the Spectrum commander had insisted that Blue would have to see Doctor Fawn upon his return to base. To which Blue had agreed. But not as earnestly as White would have expected. Already, he was in a gloomy mood – which he had kept until this evening.

Symphony – seated at Blue's side, and opposite her mother – was putting on a brave facade herself, apparently trying to cheer him up as much she could, but apparently without much success. Blue had merely smiled at her, briefly, in a way that seemed to politely ask her forgiveness for not being as enthusiastic as she would have wanted, but apparently unable to do more. White had some suspicion that, leaving aside his rough hours, there was also yet another reason why Blue looked so glum tonight.

Captain Scarlet, on the other hand, seemed to be in a very good mood. Or maybe it was an attempt to brighten up his moody colleagues' and friends' dark mood.

"I don't know, Sir," he said tentatively, offering a large grin following his commander's toast. "The night is still young. Who knows what might happen before morning?"

"Bite your tongue, Captain," White replied, turning an old-fashioned look toward his number one agent. "Or do you have a death wish?"

"With our line of work, sometimes it seems so, sir," Scarlet said good-humouredly, raising his glass in turn. "But I second the toast: to peace and quiet."

"It would have surprised me if I would have had the last word with you," White mumbled gloomily.

It didn't stop him - or the others - from cheering the toast, and clinking his glass with his young compatriot and everybody else. Even Blue joined in, although still without much enthusiasm. He only sipped at his glass before putting it down next to the still half-full plate in front of him.

"Adam? Are you all right?" Svenson asked, gently nudging his son's arm.

"Yeah, I'm all right. Well... better, in any case," Blue added quickly, rubbing his bandaged throat.

John couldn't help but notice that he had flinched slightly under his touch. Obviously, contrary to what he had stated, he wasn't all right. Or maybe his son was still harbouring some ill-feeling towards him - seeing his father seated at this table, amongst all those Spectrum officers, maybe he was feeling awkward. Maybe he was reminding himself that his father had never supported his decision to join the organization.

No, it was simpler than that. He really hadn't recovered yet from all those dreadful hours of pain he had endured at Grover's hands. The memory of it was still too vivid. And the fact that Grover was now dead - and unable to do him any more harm - seemed to be of little consolation to him.

White had sat down again, glancing thoughtfully toward Blue. Inwardly, remembering the doctors' recommendations, he reflected that the young man would indeed need time to rest - probably, he would have to be signed off-duty for a couple of days. White wondered if he would complain, as he usually did on such occasions. Or if he would comply without any protest, seeing his present state of mind.

"Well, I for one am REALLY glad this is all over." The colonel turned to his right to look at Amanda Wainwright, who had said those words. She was looking particularly stunning tonight, in that simple but elegant dress she was wearing. She seemed hardly ten years older than her own daughter. She shuffled on her seat. "You have any idea how I felt, all alone in that hotel room, waiting to have news from all of you? Pretty bored and certainly useless. Next time, I'm joining you."

"Ah, so we have a new recruit!" White remarked with a broad smile. "Well, let's just hope, dear lady, that there won't be a next time."

"I'll say!" Destiny murmured, rolling her eyes. "Nearly being run down by a speeding van and jumping into a pile of garbage isn't my idea of a perfect holiday."

"I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble, folks," Blue noted, toying distractedly with the contents of his plate with his fork.

"We can hardly hold it against you, Adam," Scarlet replied with a placid smile. "It wasn't really your fault."

"You think so?" murmured Blue. "Maybe not directly, but... I can't help but wonder if there wasn't something I might have done to avoid all of this."

"Adam," Symphony called to him, taking his arm gently. "Grover was out to get you. And your father," she added nodding in John's direction. "He was ready to do anything to have his vengeance. And you weren't in any position to stop him."

"I let myself be captured like a common amateur," Blue grumbled with frustration. "If I had been more careful..."

"It does no good to dwell on what might have happened, Captain... Adam," White corrected unreservedly. "Everybody makes mistakes."

"Mistakes like that can be fatal, sir," Blue replied, locking eyes with his commander.

The latter nodded his agreement. This was all too true. Especially in their line of work, as Scarlet had said. But it wouldn't do Blue any good to brood over it. Especially at this moment. "The important thing," the Spectrum commander stressed, "is that you are alive. Free from that man's evil-doing. And safe from further attempts on his part."

"Right," Blue admitted. "And I have all of you to thank for helping me out. How I can start

to show my gratitude, I can't even imagine."

"Oh, I'm sure we can come up with something," Scarlet smirked. "Eventually. There's that little restaurant in Paris that is out of my reach financially, you see, and..."

Destiny landed him a brutal smack on the arm. He cringed, turning to her. "Can't you think of anything else but eating?!" she admonished him. "For God's sake, we ARE sitting in a French restaurant!"

"But not in France, *chérie*," Scarlet retorted with deadpan humour.

Destiny snorted. "Paul Metcalfe, you are incorrigible!"

Scarlet offered her a mocking smile. "That's not exactly what they say I am."

It was so obvious that the banter the two of them had engaged in was their own personal way of taking Blue's mind off his problems. It did succeed in drawing a thin smile on the American captain's lips, but that was about all. At that moment, he caught sight of someone in a wheelchair who was entering the terrace. A glitter briefly appeared in the young man's eyes as he recognized Marsha Billings. For a moment, it seemed as if the woman would come their way. But he saw her expertly manoeuvring the wheelchair toward the railing separating the terrace from the dance floor, at the other end of the terrace; she then stopped there, at an empty table.

He cleared his throat, and got up.

"Will you excuse me, please?"

"You barely touched your dinner, Adam," Symphony said in concern. "You're sure you're all right?"

He smiled down at her. With a real, genuine smile. "I'm fine. Just not hungry, that's all." He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'll be back shortly."

He nodded around and left the table, directing his steps toward Marsha. Everybody at the table followed him with their eyes. They noticed the direction he was taking and understood instantly.

"I didn't think she would be coming," Scarlet then remarked. "I thought she turned down the invitation?"

"She did," Symphony answered with a nod. "I don't know, maybe she changed her mind."

"It doesn't look as if she'll be joining us, though," Colonel White remarked, looking in the direction of Blue and Marsha. He turned back his attention towards the people around the table. "I think she may just want to have a private conversation with our friend."

"She helped a great deal," Symphony said. "If not for her, I..."

"...You wouldn't have been able to get into the casino," Scarlet deadpanned, "and meet us there." He was still unsure if he should still be angry with her or simply tease her. In any case, she got the message – and reddened violently.

"I was going to say: I would probably have fallen into Grover's hands myself," she corrected obligingly.

"Don't remind me," Amanda replied, shivering at the mere thought.

"Sir," Destiny then addressed Colonel White, sensing that it was better to change the subject, if only for the sake of keeping Symphony from embarrassment and Amanda from needless worries, "I wanted to ask you something, concerning the casino... And that poker game you played with Gardenia... You know you took a terrible risk when you presented him with your card-holder."

"And what risk exactly, Destiny?" White asked innocently.

"What if he had opened it to check your identity? Maybe he would have found it highly strange that Colonel White – the Spectrum commander himself – had come to him in person to negotiate the release of a kidnap victim... And wonder about his prisoner's identity. Furthermore – he knew your real name."

"Ah, but not exactly," White defended himself. "He knew me as someone called 'Gray'. Which could easily pass as my colour codename."

"I wonder what the real Grey would say about you swiping his identity, sir," Scarlet remarked, with a note of amusement.

"As for the card-holder, my dear Destiny, I was hoping that simply seeing the Spectrum stamp on it would suffice to impress Mister Gardenia. Enough so that he wouldn't feel the need to open it."

"You were bluffing, then," Destiny said, nodding approvingly. "You REALLY are a mean

poker player, sir.”

White lifted his glass to her, smiling lightly, with obvious amusement. “I had a good teacher.”

John Svenson had barely taken any notice of what was being said around the table, his eyes still following his son. He could see him as he finally reached Marsha and leaned against the railing to engage her in conversation. Even from this distance, John could see that Adam wasn’t totally at ease – not like he was, when he was his usual self.

“He will need some time to recover fully,” John reflected, a note of concern in his voice.

White followed the direction of his eyes. “I’m sure he’ll be on top of things in a very short time,” he noted, turning back to Svenson, and taking on a reassuring tone. “Your son is a remarkable young man, Mister Svenson.”

“I know he is, Colonel,” John conceded. “Believe me, I know.” He nodded quietly, and for the first time, offered a thankful smile at the Spectrum commander. “As I know he’ll be well taken care of...”

* * *

“Aren’t you going to join us at our table?”

Upon hearing Adam Svenson’s kind invitation, Marsha Billings smiled with gratitude, and also sadness. She shook her head slowly, lifting her eyes to meet his. “Thank you, but I don’t want to impose my presence...”

“How can you say that?” Blue asked with a frown. “We invited you to join us earlier, you remember? And you refused. When I saw you coming through that door I thought...”

“That I had changed my mind?” Marsha smiled and shook her head again. “I had a client to meet...”

“Here?” Blue asked, dubiously.

“I arranged to meet him here,” Marsha defended herself.

Blue nodded slowly. “I thought this was a private restaurant,” he said casually. “Only to be used by the hotel guests and *their* guests...”

He saw Marsha sighing deeply and giving up. “All right,” she murmured. “You got me. I know you’re leaving tomorrow... That’s why I came. I couldn’t let you go without saying goodbye.”

Blue crouched in front of her, to look her levelly in the eyes. “I’m glad you came,” he said in a low tone. “I never saw you again, after the events of twenty-five years ago... I was too young, and my father never allowed me... And later I... I’m afraid I neglected searching for you...”

“Don’t give it another thought, Adam,” she replied gently. “Why would you have come looking for me?”

“Marsha... I never got the chance to say ‘thank you’.”

“Whatever for? I don’t deserve it. I’m still the woman who helped kidnap you twenty-five years ago...”

“You’re also the woman who saved me, back then. And who saved me again yesterday. And also, if I understand correctly, more than probably saved Karen from falling into Grover’s hands.” Blue shuddered. “I can’t bear to think what he could have done to her to get to me.”

“She is a capable young lady,” Marsha remarked with a smile, remembering what Symphony had done to Butch. “I’m sure she could have managed without my help.”

“Still, I owe you more than I could ever repay you,” Blue insisted.

“I’m the one who feels like I’m indebted to you, Adam. Nothing I could do could make up for the wrongs I did you, all those years ago.”

“Marsha, you spent ten years in prison for that mistake. And have to spend the remainder of your life in that...” Blue gestured toward the wheelchair, as if uncomfortable to even say the word. He lowered his gaze, probably feeling he had some responsibility for her handicap. It was, he had learned, Grover’s knife that had done that to her, when she had helped him escape death, years ago. And maybe his father’s influence was partly responsible for her years in prison. He couldn’t tell for sure, however. He just had some suspicion about that.

Marsha nodded slowly, understanding the mixed feelings brewing inside the younger man’s mind. She put her hand under his chin and gently lifted it.

"The way I see it, I brought this on myself, Adam," she told him. "It was my mistakes that caused my undoing. I learned to live with it."

"You'll be facing trial shortly," Blue remarked gloomily. "For killing that monster... saving my life."

"Maybe I did it for myself too," she murmured, looking down.

"No. That, I can't believe." Blue forced her to look him in the eyes again. "If you need any help, the best lawyer money can buy..."

"Your father made the same offer," she replied smiling, shaking her head in refusal.

"He did?" Blue asked, just a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Yes, he did. Earlier today, when he posted my bail, for which I'm already grateful. I'll give you the same answer I gave him: thanks, but I can manage. Don't worry, I already have a good lawyer. He assured me that I have a pretty good case. Considering all that had happened in the past with Grover... Your kidnapping, my being in this chair and him wanting to kill you again... It should be an easy matter."

"Remember, you can always count on me," Blue replied, squeezing her hand as it rested on her knees. "You just have to ask, and I'll be there to help you. It's the least I can do."

"You have grown into a very good and kind man, Adam Svenson," Marsha said with a tender smile, stroking his cheek. "One any woman would be proud to call her son."

She gave him a gentle kiss upon the cheek, and then looked back into his blue eyes. "Take care of yourself, Adam. I wish you a good life," she smiled lightly, "with a very special young lady who, I think, is made especially for you."

"And you take care of yourself, Marsha," he answered, rising to his feet, keeping her hand in his. "You *deserve* a good life."

She nodded her goodbyes and manoeuvred her chair towards the exit, without turning around once. Blue watched her go, thoughtfully rehashing the events of the two times he had encountered her - and how she had come through for him both times. He truly felt he owed her much more than she was giving herself credit for. He vowed he would someday repay her. Somehow.

"Adam?" Blue turned on his heel. His father had approached him from behind, and was now standing there, looking in the same direction as himself. He seemed awkward, when he nodded in the direction of the departing Marsha. "She didn't want to come join us at the table?" John's tone didn't really sound dissatisfied. He was just stating a fact, asking a simple question. Blue took note, but didn't pick up the remark. He simply shook his head.

"No, she said she didn't want to impose. She just wanted to say goodbye."

John acknowledged the information with another nod. Despite the fact that he owed his son's life to Marsha Billings, he couldn't bring himself to trust the woman. For him, she was still one of the people responsible for Adam's kidnapping, twenty-five years ago. True, she had tried to help him - getting hurt in doing so, but she had been Grover's accomplice. Even if her actions had redeemed her, John would never feel truly comfortable in her presence. Blue was conscious of that. As he was conscious that his father had made a true effort by offering to help her out earlier.

"She told me you offered her a lawyer?" Blue asked, turning a curious glance at his father.

"It was the least I could do, Adam," John replied quietly. "She did save your life."

Blue narrowed his eyes. "Twice, Father."

"Yes, twice," John admitted.

There was an uncomfortable silence between the two men. Neither was really sure how to approach the other. For years, it had been that way, each knowing that nearly every one of their conversations often ended up with argument. Neither felt like arguing this time, but still there was that uncertainty that had grown with time between them. In fact, the talk they had had in the van, whilst prisoners of Grover and waiting to know what their fate would be, was the first civil conversation they had had in a long time. There wasn't much they could add to that.

"I..." John cleared his throat, loudly. It surprised him, how ill-at-ease he felt with his own son at the moment. It wasn't really in his character at all. "I just received a call from the airport. My plane is leaving for Boston tonight." He briefly checked his watch. "That is, in less than two hours. I was wondering... if you wouldn't come with me? I could have a ticket waiting for you." He saw the suspicion in his son's eyes and added quickly, "Your mother would be so pleased to

see you. It's been a long time since you came home."

Blue shook his head. "I'm sorry, Father. I mean, I truly am. But I can't. I'm due to return to Cloudbase tomorrow morning."

It was obvious that Adam was genuinely sorry to refuse the invitation, but it didn't make it less disappointing for John. However, he found the inner strength not to show it. And made a supreme effort to accept the refusal, quite graciously.

"All right, then," he murmured. "I understand. Your duty comes first. Is there something you want to say to your mother?"

"Tell her that I miss her. And that I'll come soon. To see both of you."

John lifted an eyebrow. "Is that a promise?"

"Yes, Dad. It's a promise."

It had been an awfully long time since John Svenson had heard his eldest son call him 'Dad'. It had always been 'Father', for all his teenage and adult life. Far too long, he considered. For years, since Adam had decided to follow his own path, and distanced himself more and more from his father, and the family business – and seemingly sometimes even his family itself. Something had broken between them, the two men had almost nothing in common – except their own pride and refusal to surrender. It seemed that this terrible experience they had shared lately had brought them closer together. They were not as close as John would have wanted to be. But at least it was a start.

It was only on impulse that John drew closer to his son and took him in his arms. He nearly thumped his back, but stopped just in time, as he remembered the beating Adam had been the victim of. So he contented himself with hugging him. And was so very delighted when he felt his son hugging him in return.

"I thought I would lose you yesterday," John declared with a catch in his voice. "I mean... REALLY lose you, for good."

"I felt the same, Dad. I'm so glad you're okay."

John nearly snorted at the remark. Compared to what his son had endured, HIS ordeal was really nothing. He broke the embrace, to look into his son's face. The usual confidence was back in the young man's eyes. He was going to be okay. John felt that nothing would ever be able to break Adam. He patted his forearm. "You take care of yourself, you hear me?"

Blue smiled brightly. "You too. And keep an eye on the family, will you?"

John nodded, offering a sad, but genuine smile. He then let go of his son and, pretending he had to go prepare his luggage for the upcoming trip back to Boston, said his last goodbye and went on his way, toward the exit. It was only when he reached the door leading off the terrace that he turned around to look in direction of his son; he could see him standing where he had left him, looking back. John saluted him briefly and departed, disappearing from view.

Left alone, Blue let go of his tension with a deep sigh. Despite strong appearances, it had always been difficult for him to face his father – privately or in public. Now was no different, although he was aware that something had changed between them. John Svenson had gained a new understanding of his son's life, and a renewed respect for him – as well as in the people he was working with. Maybe there was still hope after all that he would, one day, fully comprehend his son's choices in life and accept them.

There was hope, after all. But Blue wouldn't hold his breath in the meantime.

A slight smirk appeared on his face as he lowered his head and slightly turned it. "How long have you been there, exactly?"

From behind, he heard an exasperated sigh and turned around, smiling brightly, as Symphony Angel approached him.

"HOW did you manage to know I was there?" she asked him with a brief frown.

He scoffed. "Your perfume. I could recognize it a mile away."

She answered with a brief, but delighted smile. "I was waiting until you finished your goodbyes with your father. He told us he was going to leave tonight, when he left the table." She took his hand and started walking, drawing him with her. "Come on. I'm inviting you."

"Where?" he asked, unsure.

"To the dance floor, silly!" she laughed, starting down the steps leading to the lower floor.

"This is just what you need to relax."

"I don't know, Karen, I..."

"Trust me." She led him in the middle of the dance floor, and then turned toward him, in an inviting way. At first, he hesitated; then, he gave up, took her in his arms, and lifted his right hand. She smiled at him as she rested her left hand on his shoulder and they started to dance to the soft music. She listened to the melody and nodded.

"*Fascination*", she said brightly. "Quite fitting. That's exactly what I feel towards you."

"You know you're quite the seductress, Miss Wainwright?" Blue remarked with a smile of his own.

"You're in a better mood than earlier, I note."

"I am in a better mood, thanks. I think you were right: this dance may be what the doctor ordered."

"Not exactly my idea, I must admit. Look." Symphony briefly gestured to their right, for Blue to look that way. At some distance from them, in the middle of the floor, he could see another couple dancing: Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel who, by the looks of things, were having a great time together.

"They gave me the idea," Symphony continued. "Actually... Juliette did, when she practically dragged Paul onto the floor. He was protesting no end. I don't see him complaining now, though."

Blue shook his head. "So I take it dinner is over?"

"I had your plate packed in a doggy bag," Symphony said, matter-of-factly.

Blue chuckled. "The waiter must have given you one of those looks..."

"The colonel wanted to pay the bill. But then, just before leaving, your father stepped in and offered to cover everything."

"I shudder to think who won that debate."

"Oh, I guess you could say BOTH did," Symphony grinned mischievously. "The colonel is certainly more cunning than a fox... He LET your father think he won - after offering a not too obvious resistance." She chuckled. "From what I learned, the two of them didn't see eye to eye from the moment they met. Maybe it's the colonel's way of getting back at your dad?"

"Good for him," grinned Blue. "My father certainly can afford it, anyway." Inwardly, he was wondering about his father's remark concerning the 'obnoxious Englishman he was working with'. Now Blue was asking himself if he hadn't really been talking about Colonel White...

He looked toward the terrace, at their table. He saw the Spectrum commander standing there, leaning against the railing; he was looking down at the dance floor, apparently lost in thought. What he could be thinking of was anybody's guess.

"Do you really think he came here to spend his furlough with us?" Blue asked with just a touch of suspicion in his voice.

"That's what he told us," Symphony answered. "Why would he lie? And why would he be here, if not for that reason?"

"You have to ask?"

"I don't know, Big Blue..." Symphony sighed deeply. "I know what you're thinking. We all thought the same. But if he came all this way through here because he had some suspicion about us wanting to get married - and to stop us doing so - I expect he would have said so early on. He didn't let anything on that it could be his reason for being here."

"So... what he said may be true, then," Blue reflected. "It's not like he didn't need some free time of his own. His last furlough having been a harrowing experience for him..."

"Like yours," Symphony murmured.

"I feel like I spoiled his plans badly," Blue replied, shaking his head.

Symphony didn't answer, but her silence was eloquent enough. It wasn't only the colonel's plans that had been spoiled. Their own were, too. There was so little time left before they would leave for Cloudbase in the morning. Still, enough for them to pursue their goal - and finally get married.

But it wasn't as simple as that now.

Something had changed.

"I'm... so sorry, honey. I can't go through with it." Blue sighed deeply. It was the moment he had to tell her. He looked her in the eyes, his own reflecting his inner trouble, along with all the regrets he was feeling - and the love he had for her. He thought he would see dismay on her face, but he couldn't see any reaction. He felt like he had to explain himself anyway. "I DO want

to marry you. But not this way. Not by going behind the colonel's back. I... We can't do this to him. He's always been decent towards us – and... well, ESPECIALLY now, after the way he came through for me, it makes me realize that we should never even have considered this. It would be so disloyal – and so unfair to act this way towards him."

"Not to mention disrespectful." Blue lifted an eyebrow, hearing Symphony's further remark. She gently touched his cheek, and smiled, sadly. "I already figured out you would come to this conclusion. And I agree with you," she said with a nod. "We can't do that to him. I wanted to tell you all about it, but I didn't have the opportunity before now."

"We'll have to postpone our wedding," Blue said in a regretful tone.

"I know," Symphony said painfully.

"But, we WILL get married, honey," Blue added quickly. "Eventually. We'll just have to do it the right way." He paused a second, and briefly looked toward Colonel White; he could see him still in the same place on the terrace, near the railing. Now, Amanda Wainwright had joined him there, and they were talking with each other. Blue blew a confident sigh. "As soon as we get back to Cloudbase, I'll have a talk with the colonel. And ask his permission for us to get married."

"You're going to ask him?" Symphony asked. She didn't sound as surprised as she had expected to be. As a matter of fact, she was somehow expecting that it would come to that. But that didn't stop her from dreading what could happen next. "Are you sure? And what if he should say no?"

Blue hesitated a moment. In fact, he was wondering about that himself. He didn't know what Colonel White's reaction and possible answer would be. And how he would react himself should that answer be negative. Anything was liable to happen. One thing was certain: Blue didn't intend giving up Symphony. No matter what happened, he would fight his battle to the bitter end - with every intention of winning - even if it meant facing an adversary as fierce as Colonel White.

"Let me worry about that, darling," he said to Symphony with an indifferent - at least apparently - shrug.

"I'll be at your side, Big Blue. I want to..."

"You'll do no such thing. Let me handle it alone."

"So, now you want to play macho?"

"Being 'macho' has nothing to do with it." Blue addressed the young woman with a faint grin. "It's purely tradition, honey. It's up to ME to ask our commanding officer's permission to marry."

"I'm not sure I agree with that." Seeing the obstinate expression on Blue's face, Symphony gave up. "All right, he's all yours, then," she conceded. "But you'd better come back with results!" she added almost threateningly, making him smile with amusement.

"I will," he answered, his tone more assured than his actual conviction. He leaned towards her, seeing her still disappointed and pouting face. "Not too angry that we have to postpone our wedding?"

"I'm not angry," she replied. "Disappointed, yes, but... I know we're right in not going through with it. It just that... well, for a time, it was as if we really were going to make it. That we would finally be a couple."

"But *we are* a couple, honey," Blue retorted with a half-smile.

"But not officially." Symphony shrugged the thought away. "I'm sorry Adam, forget what I just said. It's just me being selfish."

"You, selfish? Never!" Blue lifted her chin and smiled mischievously at her. "We may not be married but... there's nothing to say we can't make use of the honeymoon suite... We'll be nice and cosy up there... all alone, away from the others..."

"You mean, you want to kick the present occupants out?"

Blue frowned at the intriguing question. He saw Symphony redden a little. "I... er... had a similar idea, you know. Seeing as we're both actually sharing a room with someone else, I thought we would be able to have some privacy there. But... It seems a couple has already booked it. A 'Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Beaulieu', I was told..."

"Karen, I reserved the suite."

"I know, that's what you told me already. I figured since we're not gonna be married, you cancelled and..."

"No, you don't get it." Blue sniggered quietly. "I reserved the honeymoon suite under that

name.”

Symphony blinked in surprise. “You did?” But... why?”

“I don’t know,” Blue laughed. “Maybe in case somebody from Spectrum traced us back here? And I did well, apparently. You imagine the colonel’s reaction when he found out that ‘Mr. and Mrs. Svenson’ were occupying the honeymoon suite?”

“Right,” Symphony admitted slowly, narrowing her eyes at her lover. “Very clever. You are always full of surprises, Big Blue.” She approached him, and then gently kissed him upon the cheek. Then she came to rest her head on his shoulder, and nibbled at his throat. He gave a low, amused chuckle.

“So I take it that’s a yes?”

The kiss that followed served to confirm the answer to his question.

* * *

Leaning against the railing, Colonel White was thoughtfully looking down the dance floor, silently watching the many couples revolving down there and apparently having a good time. He could easily see Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel, waltzing merrily, smiling at each other, laughing, and apparently unaware that he was watching them. *Well, they certainly have nothing to hide*, White reflected quietly. He knew they were not involved, and therefore were not feeling in the least guilty about having fun. They had no reason to think that Colonel White would find their behaviour suspect.

Curiously, the Spectrum commander mused, it seemed that both Captain Blue and Symphony Angel had adopted similar conduct – carelessly dancing with each other as if he wasn’t even there, so close and watching them. Their whole attitude spelled out their true feelings for each other – how close they were holding each other, the way they were smiling and looking into each other’s eyes. And now kissing... Oh yes, they were in love. No doubt about it.

White watched intently as the couple, their backs turned to him, broke off their dance and slowly left the floor. He narrowed his eyes, focusing on the way they were still holding hands.

“They make a nice couple, don’t they?”

White had all but forgotten the presence of Amanda Wainwright by his side. He nearly tensed hearing her words, but caught himself right away, and nodded.

“They do, indeed,” he said very quietly. He didn’t make a move when Blue and Symphony disappeared from his view, but kept staring at the direction they had taken.

“You don’t have any intention of stopping them, do you?”

White turned toward Amanda; only a glitter in his eyes betrayed the surprise he had felt upon hearing her question. He shook his head. “No, I have no intention of interfering with their plans. Whatever they are. If they want to marry – but I don’t think they would – I won’t stop them... However, I’ll be very disappointed in them.”

“Of course you will,” Amanda declared ever so softly.

“I never fooled you, did I, Amanda?” White noted, with amusement now replacing surprise in his blue eyes.

She sighed, and leaned on the railing at his side. “Not for one minute,” she said firmly. “I just knew you had come to stop this ‘secret wedding’ of theirs.”

“Was it that obvious?”

She chuckled. “Not to everyone, it seems,” she replied, nodding in the direction of the dance floor.

White followed her gaze to find Scarlet and Destiny, still dancing with each other. “Strange,” he mused. “My officers have known me for the past three years... while you’ve met me, what... three times during that time? And you found me out instantly.”

“I think your officers haven’t learned to know you, Colonel. Or to be more precise: I think you don’t allow them the chance to know you better.” Amanda paused a second, before adding, “And we’ve met four times, actually.”

“Four times?” Colonel White enquired.

She nodded. “The first time, at my daughter’s commissioning, with my husband. The second – not long after his death, when Karen was injured during a mission. The third... when she was convalescing at home, and you called to find out how she was doing.”

White nearly chuckled. "But that was over the videophone!"

"Well, that counts!" Amanda protested vehemently. She pouted, looking away from him. "For me it does, anyway," she muttered.

For a moment, Colonel White stared at her, not exactly knowing what she was implying or how to answer her. Her words certainly were perplexing him. His sudden silence finally got to her; she turned to face him, brows furrowed.

"Well, what are you looking at?" she asked vehemently.

He nodded appreciatively. "I'm looking at a very charming and attractive lady," he said with a faint but authentic smile.

She felt the red coming to her cheeks, and turned away a little, if only to avoid his probing eyes. "It must have taken you a lot JUST to say that, Colonel," she grumbled.

"Charles." He lifted a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I have a feeling you usually don't find it very easy to voice your emotions." She turned around to look at him again. "Can I call you 'Charlie'?"

"No." White shook his head. "You're right, I'm afraid I'm not very good at showing my feelings. Never have been." He paused, coming back to the other topic of their conversation. "Only my father called me 'Charlie'. And my wife, when she was angry at me."

"Which must have been often, then." There was only a slight smirk of amusement on the colonel's lips. "You loved her very much, didn't you?" Amanda asked carefully.

"She was my life," White offered simply.

"She must have been a very special woman."

"She was." There was fondness and sadness in White's expression as he thought of those very precious moments he had shared with his long lost love. "She was carrying our child when she died. When I lost them, I thought I'd lost everything."

"How long has it been?"

"Seventeen years," White answered, looking into space.

"A long time to be alone," murmured Amanda.

White nodded. "Well, I've... seen other women, over time," he said in a low voice. "But I must admit... I still miss her. Very much."

Amanda lowered her gaze. "I understand. It's been more than two years, and I still miss my Harry. However long it might be, I don't think I will ever forget him. But I count myself lucky. I still have Karen."

White nodded. He remembered how distressed Amanda had been a couple of years before, when, closely following the untimely death of her husband, she thought she would also lose her only daughter, after a nearly failed mission almost claimed her life. He had felt a closeness to the woman at that moment. He knew what she was going through and that had made him want to comfort her. But at the same time, he had found it rather unbecoming to approach her at the time, seeing how she had just become a widow and was mourning the death of her dear husband – and that her daughter was between life and death. Colonel White was too much of a decent man to even think of starting whatever relationship he would have wanted with any woman in those dreadful conditions. Let alone with the mother of one of his agents.

But now, the situation was far different. And he wasn't feeling that many twinges of conscience to get to know more of Amanda Wainwright – and to get closer to her.

The question was to know what kind of thoughts Amanda had about him. He had got the impression earlier on that they were something like his own, but...

"You know," Amanda then declared, looking up again towards White with a somewhat coy expression, "it's a terrible feeling."

"What is?" the colonel asked with a brief frown.

"Being lonely."

White nodded slowly. Well, if that didn't answer his question, then...

"It is, indeed," he agreed, the tone of his voice softening as a slight smile formed on his face.

Amanda smiled invitingly, and reached for his hand resting on the railing, gently squeezing it under her own. "I'm glad there are subjects on which we can agree."

Her smile was contagious, and White found himself smiling back and drawing closer to her. "I would think, my dear... that there are many subjects on which we will agree... and that we'll

find many others.”

* * *

On the lower floor, Destiny Angel, still dancing slowly with Captain Scarlet, was looking in the direction of the terrace, where she could see both Colonel White and Amanda Wainwright – getting closer to each other. Oddly, the melody then chose that moment to change. Clarinet notes died away, to be replaced by the rich and inviting tones of *‘Strangers in the Night’*. No words, simply music. But so very appropriate to the circumstances... Almost despite herself, Destiny chuckled, making Scarlet look down curiously at her. She grinned with her most malicious smile.

“Paul... Who will be sharing your room tonight?”

Scarlet thought he had misheard. “What?” he asked with a frown.

“Will the colonel be sharing your room?” she insisted.

“Er... No... The hotel management found him a room, earlier today.” He was starting to wonder why Destiny was asking those questions. “Adam should be sharing the room. In principle.” He kicked himself for having added the two last words. What if Destiny got the WRONG impression...

Destiny sniggered. “It would surprise me if Adam is in your room tonight. You did see him leaving with Symphony, yes?” And I have a feeling SHE won’t be in *our* room either... And probably, neither will Amanda.”

Now Scarlet was definitely worried. “Juliette, I don’t know what you’re driving at, but...”

She cut him off suddenly, seemingly oblivious to what *he* was implying, “I *just* mean that it’s probably a good thing for the colonel that the management found him a room.” Seeing the dubious frown on Scarlet’s brow, she nodded toward the terrace. He looked toward it just in time to see Colonel White and Amanda exchanging a brief kiss, and then slowly going away, holding each other’s hands. The scene was somehow perplexing. Scarlet turned around, addressing a falsely reproving look to his dance partner.

“My dear Juliette... whatever are you thinking of?!” By the tone of his voice, it was obvious he was thinking just the same.

“Isn’t that lovely?” Destiny added with a sigh.

“And strange, at the same time,” Scarlet answered with a knowing nod.

“You don’t seem at all surprised!” Destiny exclaimed.

“And why should I be? Scarlet replied with a low chuckle. “I did notice that there were sparks flying between these two. But still, the colonel and Karen’s mother... That’s certainly interesting! I wonder what Karen’s going to think of that...”

“Oh please, don’t ask her!” Destiny protested. “What if she doesn’t know? We shouldn’t be the ones to tell her... In fact, my opinion is that we shouldn’t tell ANYBODY about this at all!”

“Another of those conspiracies you’re so fond of, *chérie*?” Scarlet asked with a mocking smirk. “Well, I’m in total agreement with you.” He looked toward the terrace, where White and Amanda had disappeared from their view. “One of the reasons being that NOBODY would believe us!” he added, trying to keep a straight face.

“I still can’t believe ALL that has happened during this furlough,” Destiny said with another sigh, this time sounding rather upset. “Coming all the way here for a wedding, ending up mixed up with a kidnapping, and not having the wedding at all. So frustrating!” Scarlet had just taken the opportunity of this dance together to inform her of Blue’s change of plans – which he had learned himself just before dinner, when he had found himself alone with his friend. For the Angel pilot, it WAS disappointing, but she had to admit, it was also the wisest thing to do. “In a way, I’m glad they won’t carry on with this plan. With the colonel being here and all...”

Scarlet nodded quietly. “There will be another time,” he predicted, vaguely.

“Did either Karen or Adam say anything about that yet?” Destiny inquired with curiosity.

He shook his head. “No, nothing yet. But Adam told me... he had something to clear up first. Whatever that means.”

“Just make sure I’ll be invited that time too!” Destiny warned him. “After all, I’m entitled to participate, considering all that I have done *this* time, don’t you think? Covering for them and all...”

"Of course, *chérie!*" Scarlet assured her with a brief laugh. "I'm sure they won't forget! And if they do, I'll make sure to remind them!"

Destiny smiled with delight. Then she drew closer to Scarlet, much to his dismay, put her arms around his neck and kissed him quickly, before looking straight into his anxious blue eyes. "Now, that this is settled, Captain," she said coyly, with just a gleam of mischief dancing in her own eyes, "and seeing as we have been left all on our own, how about one last hurrah, you and I?"

The suspicion and worries she had seen before reappeared in Scarlet's handsome features. Destiny took unprecedented pleasure in seeing his face draining of colour. He started to sputter, obviously fighting to find the right words.

"Juliette, I'm... really flattered, you know that, but... You know, you and I... It's... Well, there isn't anything between us any more, except friendship and... Well, there's Dianne and... I love her, and..."

"Oh, Paul!" Destiny had forced herself to look at first intrigued, then perplexed, then finally outright surprised by his declaration. She then laughed out loud, unable to pursue the charade. "I meant *dancing*, silly you!" she giggled, thumping his chest playfully. "WHAT in the world were you thinking?"

He chuckled, not in the least fooled by her false innocence. "EXACTLY what you wanted me to think!" he told her, punching her chin ever so slightly. "You ARE some wicked lady, Destiny Angel!"

"I should tell Dianne about this," Destiny declared, still playing the innocent. "This, and that little episode with that Dolly lady... Should be pretty interesting to see her reaction..."

"You wouldn't dare!" Scarlet warned her.

"Oh, I wouldn't?" she challenged him.

Scarlet narrowed his eyes at her. "Juliette... how much do you value the secrecy of your relationship with Captain Magenta?"

"There is NO relationship between Magenta and me," Destiny protested with an icy tone, her eyes flashing.

"Then we understand each other perfectly," Scarlet deadpanned, looking into space, just over her shoulder. "There was *no* hooker named Dolly in that casino either..."

He had a near absolute poker face, but Destiny could see he was dying to guffaw irrepressibly. She thumped him again, and started laughing. "You really ARE incorrigible, Metcalfe!"

"Yes," he said, matter-of-factly. "You've said that already..." That was all that was needed for him to join his laughter to Destiny's.

* * *

On the top floor of the *St.Maurice Hotel*, Adam Svenson and Karen Wainwright had stopped in front of the door of the honeymoon suite; they exchanged a long, lingering kiss, as Adam inserted the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

Symphony, her hand holding Blue's, stepped first into the room, a smile of anticipation upon her lips. She felt a tug pulling her back after only two steps and turned toward Blue, with an inquiring expression. He was standing in the doorway, looking apologetically at her. She frowned in perplexity.

"What is it?" she murmured.

He shook his head sombrely. "I wish my back wasn't killing me," he said in a hushed, slightly bitter tone. "I wish I could take you, and lift you in my arms, and carry you across the threshold, like it's meant to be..."

Symphony smiled. She threw the keys onto a table near the door and approached Blue, putting her arms around his neck, and kissing him tenderly. "That's all right..." she whispered with an enticing grin. "It's not like we're really married, anyway..." The kiss became a passionate one as she stepped back into the room, forcing him to follow. Hugging her close against him, Blue closed the door behind them with one swift kick.

* * *

Epilogue 2 – Cloudbase

“Captain Blue is waiting outside to see you, sir.”

Seated at his round desk, in the Control Room, Colonel White briefly raised his silver head from the file he was working on, his pen stopping in the middle of the line he was writing. Since his return the preceding day, the paperwork hadn't stopped coming. *Incredible how much work is waiting for you when you come back from a well-earned holiday*, he reflected, almost bitterly. He glanced over toward Lieutenant Green, seated at his station, in front of the computer wall.

“Has he been waiting for long, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir, he just arrived.”

White nodded thoughtfully. He finished his paragraph, and started another one. “You may tell him to enter, Lieutenant.”

“S.I.G., sir.” Green pushed a button on his console to invite Captain Blue in. The green doors behind him opened and the captain stepped onto the conveyor leading to the Control desk, thus passing behind Green. The lieutenant had turned around to greet him. His jaw dropped, and he gasped upon seeing his battered face and the dressing on his left brow.

“Good God, Captain!” Blue turned a inquiring look in the younger man's direction. Green could only stare at him slack-jawed. “What happened to you? You look as if someone's used you for a punching bag!”

Almost despite himself, Blue smirked at Green's choice of words. He touched his bruised left cheek with his bandaged hand. Good thing the turtle-neck collar of his uniform was hiding the bandage around his neck, or that would have shocked Green ever more. “Well, you know, Lieutenant... That's actually what did happen to me.”

Blue didn't say more, and Green was left pondering what exactly had happened to him. Oddly, the lieutenant couldn't help thinking how Colonel White had stormed out of the Control Room, some days ago, apparently so very angry about something he just had figured out, to leave Cloudbase and go to Las Vegas where Captain Blue was supposed to be at that time – along with Captain Scarlet, Destiny and Symphony Angels. At that moment, Green had reflected that he wouldn't want to be in the shoes of the person who had angered his commander... But it seemed hardly possible to him that White could be responsible for Blue's appearance! Surely, he wouldn't...

I've got an over-active imagination, Green irritably told himself, shrugging the crazy thought away. He tried to go back to his work.

Captain Blue had stopped in front of the colonel's desk and had come to attention, putting his cap under his arm and saluting his commander. The latter didn't even glance at him. He was still busy working on his report. Seconds passed by, that seemed like endless minutes to Blue. Seeing that White wasn't about to acknowledge his presence, he cleared his throat.

“Colonel White, sir, I...”

White silenced him with a swift gesture, demanding that he wait an instant. Blue instantly closed his mouth and put himself at ease. The colonel continued to write on his paper.

The wait was becoming increasingly excruciating for Blue.

Finally, White put down his pen, checked his watch and looked up at the captain. “You wanted to see me, Captain?” he asked matter-of-factly.

“Yes, sir,” Blue said, snapping back to attention.

“I hope it's important. As you can see, I'm quite busy.”

“It is important, sir. And also... very personal.”

“Is that so?” White mused. “At ease, Captain.” As Blue obeyed, the colonel intertwined his fingers, and settled himself comfortably on his seat. “Lieutenant Green,” he called to the communications officer. “Captain Scarlet is due to bring me a file this morning. I'll need it shortly. Would you do me the favour of fetching it for me?”

“You want me to call Captain Scarlet to the Control Room, sir?” Green asked, unsure of what exactly he was being ordered to do.

“No, Lieutenant,” White replied patiently. “I want you to look for Captain Scarlet yourself and bring that file to me. And take your time, I'll manage communications in the meantime. And while you're at it,” he added, as if as an afterthought, “I'd very much like a cup of coffee, thank

you.”

Green blinked. That was an unusual order coming from his commander, to say the least. He hesitated only a mere instant, wondering what was going on exactly, staring at the colonel with perplexity. As usual, he couldn't read anything on his set face. White was patiently waiting for him to obey. As for Captain Blue... he was standing rigidly in front of the colonel. Understanding that White really wanted him out of the room, Green acknowledged the order and stood up to leave.

White waited until the door had closed on his communications officer, before turning once more toward Blue.

“I thought Doctor Fawn had signed you off duty after your return from Las Vegas, Captain. What are you doing in uniform?”

“Sir. Doctor Fawn put me on light duty. He said I should be back on full duty in a couple of days.”

White raised an eyebrow, eyeing the still bruised face that was looking past him, Blue still more or less standing to attention. “You have no significant injuries from the treatment you received over these last few days, I take it?”

“No, sir,” Blue said, shaking his head. “I just need a few days rest, that's all. And a visit to the dentist this afternoon. I have a couple of broken back teeth.”

White nodded thoughtfully. He sat back even more comfortably on his seat, his eyes set on the young man. “You haven't come up here just to give me a report on your health?” he stated quietly.

“No, Colonel!” Blue stood up once more to full attention. He fought the urge to take a deep breath, before diving in. “I came to ask your permission to get married, sir.”

For a moment, there was silence in the room, as White simply stared at his officer, without blinking. Blue was like a statue, looking straight ahead, barely noticing his commander's stare, and waiting. He didn't know what answer he could expect; it could be anything. The present hush was like a bad omen for him.

“Who is to be the lucky girl?” White asked in an level tone.

“Symphony Angel, sir,” Blue responded, as evenly.

Another silence followed.

“How long has it been going on?” The colonel's tone was picking up in intensity. Blue was about sure he would lash out at him – eventually. Telling him how bad an idea it was – that Spectrum and Cloudbase ran on military rules – that discipline forbade romantic liaisons between senior officers.

“A long time, sir,” Blue said, keeping himself from sounding miserable, just thinking that his request was doomed to fail.

“Do you love her?”

Blue swallowed hard. “Sir, I'm aware there are regulations. I'm ready to...”

“JUST answer the question, Captain,” White cut in rather abruptly.

Blue nodded nervously. “Yes, sir. I love her. Very much.”

“And does she love you?” White insisted, pointedly.

“I... believe she does, sir.”

White slowly nodded. He leaned on his desk, his eyes flashing brightly, not leaving Blue for one second. “One last question, before I give you my answer, Captain,” he said between clenched teeth. “Why, in Heaven's name, have you waited so long before asking my permission?”

“Sir?” Blue queried, with uncertainty.

White slapped his hand on his desk in an annoyed gesture, nearly making Blue jump. “Confound it, Blue! Don't you think I noticed that something was going on between the two of you? Almost from the very beginning, I knew!” He stood up from behind his desk and rounded it to stand in front of an obviously astonished Blue. “Did you think me so blind, Captain?” he grumbled ominously, his face only inches from his junior officer's.

“N-no, sir.” Blue frowned, still stunned by his commander's declaration. He lost his attention stance, and lowered his gaze, locking eyes with his commander. “You knew all along?”

“Oh, yes. It was so obvious! You might as well have put up posters!” the Spectrum commander scoffed derisively. “I doubt there's a soul on Cloudbase who doesn't know!”

That revelation was pretty annoying. As was the expression of superior satisfaction White

was displaying on his face. He looked like a policeman who had caught his man. Blue stood his ground, staring at his commander with a mixture of disbelief and irritation. "Then... why didn't you say anything?"

"And what would you have had me say?" White replied, stepping back to lean on his desk. "As long as you were both doing your jobs properly..." He crossed his arms on his chest, offering the younger man a slightly mocking grin. "And besides, you looked so... 'cute', I think is the word."

Now, *that* was even more exasperating. Being referred to by their commander as 'cute' was just – unbelievable. However, Blue now had a new perception of the colonel's recent behaviour. He nodded his understanding. "You knew about our plans in Vegas," he ventured.

There was a dangerous glow in White's eyes. "I guessed, to be precise," he corrected icily.

"That's why you joined us," Blue realized. "What were your intentions?"

"I wanted to stop you from making the biggest mistake of both your lives!" White lashed out suddenly, now fully letting go of his irritation. "WHAT were you thinking, going behind my back to elope? Don't you realize how close you both were to catastrophe? Breach of regulations! Indiscipline! Conspiracy! And more charges that could have been brought against you! I would have been forced to kick you out of Spectrum! There was nothing I would have been able to do to prevent it!"

"I see," Blue murmured, looking down, thinking he had figured out the colonel's answer to his question. "You don't approve then..."

"I don't approve?" White moved on. "I'm just glad you finally decided not to go through with your plans. My God, man! A secret wedding?! In Las Vegas?!" He approached the uncomfortable-looking captain who now found he was not willing to look him in the eyes. "Don't you think the girl deserves better than that?" White added in a low, calmer tone.

Blue instantly raised his eyes. "Sir?"

White nodded briefly. "Permission granted, Captain."

He then turned on his heel to go back to his seat, as much as not to show the mischievous smile spreading across his face as to allow Captain Blue to swallow the news. As he sat down, he could see the many reactions consecutively appearing on the younger man's face. From complete disbelief through doubt to total joy, that made the American captain chuckle nervously, once he realized that he wouldn't need to fight his commander for what he wanted so much. It was incredible. It had been so easy...

"I can't believe it," Blue murmured. Then the doubt returned and he stared in White's direction. "But... But what about Spectrum regulations? If Symphony and I get married... what..."

White arched a brow. "Oh, yes... Spectrum regulations. So NOW you're concerned about them, are you?"

Blue cringed, hearing the underlying reprimand. He opened his mouth to protest but stopped right away, without saying a word, realizing that there was little he could say to justify himself without actually pushing himself even deeper. White grumbled irritably and pointed an accusing finger at him. "Before going to the kind of extremes you already achieved, you should have come to me FIRST. I would have found a way to get round the regulations. As I will now."

"Sir?" Blue murmured.

"Am I not Spectrum's commander-in-chief?" White reminded him forcefully. "You are one of my finest officers. Symphony Angel is part of Spectrum's team of interceptor pilots. BOTH of you are invaluable to this organization. I'll find a way to arrange this. I don't know HOW, right now, but I will do everything in my power to arrange it. God knows WHY I'll make that effort..."

"Sir," Blue said with a faint smile. "I can't believe..." He swallowed hard. "How can we thank you?"

"By not acting as selfishly as you did, in the future!" White answered, still plainly angry. "And by not pulling ANY MORE stunts like this last one! Captain, I'm not taking disciplinary action for TWO reasons. First, it will be difficult to bring up charges on the basis of intentions only. It is very fortunate for the two of you that you changed your plans at the last minute... whatever your reasons were."

"Sir, you're part of the reason why we changed our minds," Blue answered truthfully. "We couldn't... we felt like we'd be betraying you, somehow."

"Well, I'm glad you finally realized that," White said in a very low tone, his eyes nearly

disappearing under his furrowed brows. He kept from telling Blue how very disappointed he had been when he had discovered their plans, some days ago. Considering how events had finally unfolded, there was now little point in mentioning it. And White wasn't so sure he wanted to reveal how hurt he had been. And how relieved he was at their decision not to go through with their plans.

"Er... Sir," Captain Blue said tentatively, "If I may ask... What is the second reason?"

White grumbled with irritation. "In view of what you've been through, I consider you've been punished more than sufficiently," he finally conceded. "Now, I don't EVER want to hear about secret weddings. ANY MORE! Next time, you'll do it the proper way, or else!"

"I... That is, WE will, sir, I promise." Blue was literally ecstatic. Seeing how his luck had turned out these last few days, he was having a hard time not to show his happiness – even in front of a more than obviously fuming White. Of course, he and Symphony would do it the right way next time – they had the consent of their commander, what else did they need?

"A warning, Captain," White continued, his tone now deadly serious, "and I will have to see Symphony, and your other co-conspirators concerning this too: NEVER AGAIN will you go conspiring behind my back, WHATEVER the reason for it. I won't accept such behaviour from my officers."

"Sir, I must say, on behalf of Captain Scarlet," Blue remarked cautiously, "he tried to dissuade us from going through with our plans."

"Did he, now?" Colonel White replied very icily, narrowing his eyes. "But you managed to convince him, didn't you, Captain?"

"I..." Blue stopped, conceding defeat. He sighed and lowered his head. "It won't happen again, sir," he finally said.

"Good! Because I can assure you, Captain Blue, that next time, I won't be so keen to forgive and forget."

Blue slowly nodded his agreement. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir."

"In that case, Captain," White said, his eyes still glowing intensely, "this interview is over. You're dismissed. I have work to do. And I'm sure you're dying to tell your fiancée the good news."

A large smile appeared on Blue's face. "Yes, sir... She'll be so thrilled... Thank you, sir!" As White was picking up his pen, Blue turned away from the desk and started walking toward the exit, his step now light and lively. He stopped suddenly, as a thought crossed his mind. He slowly turned around, unsure again. "Er... Sir? One more thing, if you please?"

White threw his pen down on the desk. "What, AGAIN?" he said with exasperation.

Blue quickly came back to the desk. "Sir... It's something Symphony said to me... Just before we left Vegas. We... discussed things between us, after we decided not to go on with... you know, the initial plan?" White's brow furrowed into a warning expression. Blue cleared his throat uncomfortably, and continued quickly, "Well, sir, it's really quite simple... We... That is, after we agreed that I would talk to you, Symphony was wondering, if ever by any chance you should agree to our marriage..."

"To the point, Captain!" White nearly shouted.

"...She was wondering if you wouldn't act as father of the bride at the wedding ceremony?"

White's jaw dropped several inches. He was left speechless. *Well, to say I wasn't counting on this reaction...* Blue reflected.

"You mean 'give her away'?" White asked.

"Well... Karen wasn't so sure she would use that exact sentence," Blue replied, with an apologetic smile. "She said she would consider it an honour if you would do it, Colonel." White kept silent. He was looking away, apparently pondering, a strange expression on his face. That gave Blue cause for concern. "Sir? Are you all right?"

"Of course I am," White replied, snapping back to reality. "It's just that I wasn't expecting this at all..." He blew a deep sigh, trying to get his composure back. He stood up to face Blue levelly. "The honour will all be mine, Captain."

The smile on Blue's face now threatened to crack it in two. "Thank you, sir!" he said eagerly. "Karen will be so excited about that too!"

"Well, if you don't mind, I'd like, at least, to tell her that myself."

"Of course, sir. It's your privilege. I... I'm going right away to see her, with your

permission.”

Without even waiting for White’s agreement, Blue quickly turned to go; right away, the colonel’s voice called him back to attention. “One minute, Captain Blue.”

Blue turned back, with an inquiring look. Gravely, Colonel White extended his right hand, at the same time as a smile was slowly spreading across his face. “Your hand, if you please.” Blue clasped his hand into his commander’s, and the latter squeezed it fervently. “Congratulations, Adam. You both deserve it!”

* * *

As he passed the door of the Control Room and it closed behind him, Captain Blue, still not believing what had just happened, saw Lieutenant Green and Captain Scarlet standing there, waiting. He addressed them a curious and interrogative look, wondering what they were doing there.

“Been here long?” Blue asked.

“I found Captain Scarlet without almost searching for him,” Lieutenant Green explained with an apologetic look. “When I told him you were in a meeting with Colonel White, he insisted that we waited outside before entering.”

“ESPECIALLY when the lieutenant told me the colonel was asking me for a file I didn’t have,” Scarlet added. “Obviously, it was an excuse to get him out of the Control Room to be alone with you.”

“I had already figured that out, Captain,” Green remarked. “The colonel seldom asks me to get him a coffee. What exactly went on in there?” he asked Blue with trepidation.

By the look on Scarlet’s face, it was fairly obvious the British officer had a good idea of that – and that he was also somewhat concerned. As for Blue, he was now leaning on the green door leading to the Control Room, his legs shaking a little, betraying the excitement he was feeling. The American captain blew out a deep breath, closing his eyes, as if letting go of a great tension.

“Adam?” Scarlet asked, worriedly. “What happened? How did it go?”

“Fairly well, thanks.” A smile appeared on Blue’s features, and he opened his eyes, now bright with happiness, to stare at Green, and then at Scarlet. “He said yes.”

“He said yes?” Scarlet repeated with scepticism.

“After giving me a lecture, he did, yes,” Blue confirmed, laughing.

“I can’t believe it!” Scarlet yelled loudly, laughing in turn, taking Blue into his arms and thumping his back with vigour.

“Be careful!” Blue grimaced, his good humour not fading.

“Sorry, old chum, I nearly forgot...” Scarlet took Blue’s hand to pump it heartily. He grinned at a confused Green. “I can’t believe it,” he repeated. “He said yes!”

“He said yes to what?” Green demanded, on the verge of losing patience.

“To me and Karen getting married,” Blue informed him.

Green’s reaction was one of pure amazement. And then of total joy, as he took Blue’s free hand with both his and shook it with such enthusiasm that the American captain thought he would pull it out of his shoulder. “Oh, that’s grand! All my congratulations, Captain!”

“Thanks, Seymour. Thanks to the both of you. And I’m counting on you both for the ceremony!”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world!” Green promised, laughing heartily.

“Especially you, Paul,” Blue said, facing Scarlet. “You know I want you for my best man.”

“Nothing would stop me being there,” Scarlet declared in a very solemn tone, squeezing his friend’s shoulder. “Nothing.”

It was at that exact moment that the speakers suddenly came to life and a deep, low voice, seeming to come straight from the grave, made itself heard in all parts of Cloudbase. The three officers in front of the Control Room door froze instantly, knowing very well what was coming.

“This is the Voice of the Mysterons... We know that you can hear us, Earthmen. Our next act of retaliation will be to kill the Prime Minister of Australia... We will be avenged!”

“Not even them...” Scarlet said between his teeth, finishing his earlier statement, and looking with antipathy at the speakers. It had now grown silent, the Mysterons having said all they had to say.

“Right to the point, this time,” Captain Blue declared gravely, putting on his cap. “Right, the colonel will want to see us, gentlemen. Let’s go.” He pressed the button to open the door and went back into the Control Room, closely followed by his partner and Lieutenant Green.

“Not you, Blue!” his partner advised sternly. “You’re supposed to be off-duty, remember?”

“During a Mysteron threat?” Blue replied with a derisive scoff. “Over my dead body!”

To that, Captain Scarlet could only smile.

“I believe that’s my usual line,” he added simply as both of them walked toward Colonel White’s desk, and Lieutenant Green took his place at his station.

THE END