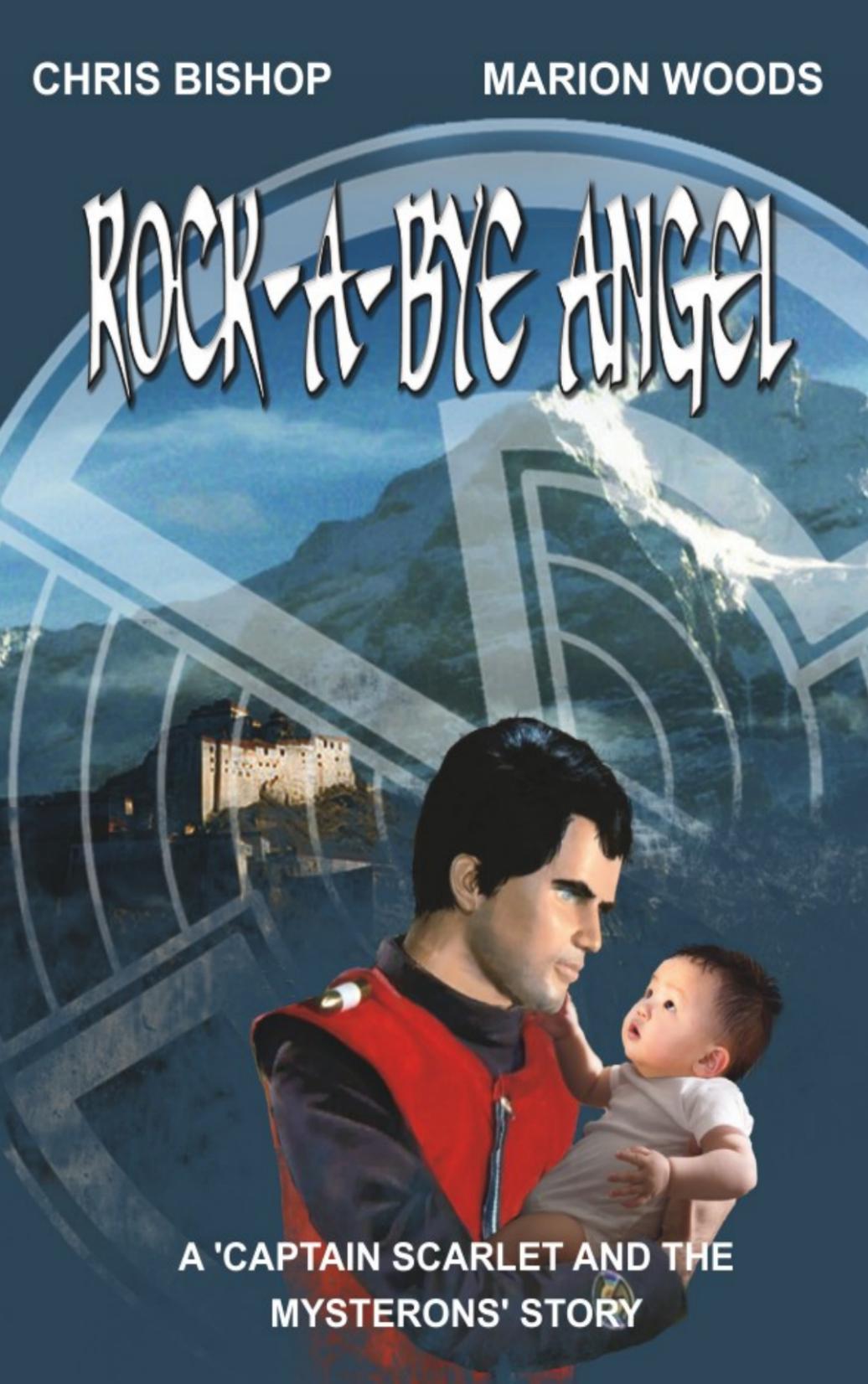


CHRIS BISHOP

MARION WOODS

ROCK-A-BYE ANGEL

The background features a large, semi-transparent globe with a grid of latitude and longitude lines. In the lower-left quadrant, a castle is perched on a hillside, illuminated by warm lights. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greys, with the red of the man's uniform providing a strong contrast.

A 'CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE
MYSTERONS' STORY

Rock-A-Bye Angel

ROCK-A-BYE ANGEL

A
CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE MYSTERONS

story for Christmas

by Chris Bishop

and Marion Woods

Based on characters from "Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons",
created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, © Carlton International.

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Chapter One

Standing on the glass-encased balcony, protected from the strong high-altitude winds and bitter cold, Captain Scarlet looked thoughtfully toward the valley far below his feet. This was a remote enough area of the Tibetan plateau, with only one small village settled just down the side of the steep mountain, almost directly beneath the large power complex set on the flank of the mountain. Barely a hundred souls inhabited that village, almost all of them workers at the dual energy plant which almost all of Tibet had relied on for power for the last ten years. It had been an interesting and revolutionary concept by engineers, combining wind turbines and solar panels to create a new form of power supply - one that would be reliable, totally clean, and about as infinite as the sun and winds themselves. In the early days of the project, many people didn't believe it would succeed - rather thinking that it would be impossible to put together the two systems and to make them operate smoothly as one. That was clearly a major challenge, but the engineers took it on, backed by United Asian Republic and Tibetan officials alike, who obviously believed in the project.

With good reason, since it worked.

It worked so very well, in fact, that the Tibetan authorities had decided to expand the use of that form of energy over all of the country. It would only be another couple of years, before this would become the only available source of power in all of Tibet, replacing all the other sources previously used.

Consequently, the energy centre had grown considerably, until it covered the entire side of the mountain on which it had been built. Other, smaller plants had been built all over the country, to be linked to this central one, in order to answer the increasing demands for energy. The production system was so reliable, that Tibet had even started to sell electricity to the neighbouring states, thus generating income that could only profit the people. Aside from minor problems that were quickly taken care of, with all the efficiency of the Tibetan people, everything was working like clockwork, and nobody imagined that any major difficulty would ever come troubling the quiet, stable situation.

That was counting without the Mysterons.

The threat had come the previous day, relayed, as usual, to Cloudbase's speakers, while all the officers were busy with their last-minute preparations for the upcoming Christmas celebrations, just a few days from now. 'THE ROOF OF THE WORLD WILL COLLAPSE AND DARKNESS WILL FALL ALL OVER THE ENTIRE HIGH COUNTRY.' It had only taken a couple of hours for Spectrum to realise that the threat was directed at a Himalayan state - and barely a few minutes afterwards to narrow the field to Tibet, whose unique source of energy - however reliable it might be - made it far too vulnerable if that energy should ever cease to exist.

The central energy plant was the most obvious target for the Mysterons, and so Captain Scarlet had been dispatched to the facility to keep watch over it, with only a handful of Spectrum security guards. No one had been allowed to come armed with any weapon, and that fact was annoying Scarlet greatly. No matter

that the strict Tibetan law forbade any firearms on its territory, particularly on Government land, and especially not held by foreigners.

Granted, Scarlet fumed, the Tibetan Non-Violence Act was an admirable one. Ever since the country had gained its full autonomy and had subsequently freely joined other independent states in the United Asian Republic, under the guidance and teaching of the Dalai Lama - the ever resourceful head of state and religious leader - there had been no quieter or more peaceful territory on the surface of the Earth, with one of the lowest crime rates ever to be registered.

But the Tibetan authorities didn't seem to realise the gravity of the situation, nor accept Spectrum's assurance of just what kind of threat the Mysterons represented. The Mysterons didn't care about non-violence, and the universal peace proclaimed by the Dalai Lama's teachings - for them, all humans, all life on Earth, were to be destroyed. But trying to convince the Tibetan authority of that was next to impossible.

"It looks to me, Captain Scarlet, that your previous worries about the safety of this power plant were groundless."

Scarlet slowly turned on his heels at the sound of that gentle voice. The director of the plant, Kunchen Norbu, had entered the terrace and was presently approaching very quietly, a faint smile playing on his rounded face. He was at least two heads shorter than the Spectrum captain, and that difference was quite obvious when he stopped right next to him to look out through the large window.

"Isn't it a peaceful panorama?"

Scarlet could only agree with that statement. "It is very peaceful, Mister Director. You have a very

beautiful country. And it's to keep it peaceful and beautiful that I am here, as you well know."

"You will forgive me, Captain, but I will repeat myself by saying that I am not convinced of the necessity of your presence," Norbu retorted, his quiet tone not leaving him. "We are a peaceful people. Surely, your... 'Mysterons' must know that."

"They do not *care* about peacefulness, sir," Scarlet replied. He paused for a second. "Their... definition of 'peace' is not the same as ours, I'm afraid."

"Don't they know we don't involve ourselves with the politics of outside countries?"

"Again, sir, with respect - they do not care. All they care about is to crush their enemy."

Norbu shrugged. "Tibet is no-one's enemy, Captain." Obviously, he was thinking the Spectrum officer was greatly exaggerating, and deliberately darkening the image of the Mysterons, to show them in the most evil light possible. The minute he had set foot in the centre, Scarlet had the definite impression that the director was under-estimating the seriousness of the Mysterons' menace - or that, maybe, he was convinced that, on realising Tibet's non-violence principles, they wouldn't carry out their threat.

"Mister Director," Scarlet said patiently. "Remember what they did to Director General Xian Yoh, a couple of years ago. They destroyed his plane on take-off, and there was hardly anything left of him. The same went for his entire staff - they knew nothing about the Mysterons and had never acted against them. They were all killed by the Mysterons."

Norbu lowered his eyes. "Director General Xian Yoh was a very wise man... His death meant a great loss to all of the United Asian Republic." Scarlet simply

nodded briefly to that comment, in silence. "Were you present when he died?" Norbu continued.

Scarlet hesitated slightly. "I was," he said finally. "And I tried everything in my power to save him. All of Spectrum did. Without... success." He didn't want to tell Kunchen Norbu how deeply involved he had been with the operation, nor that he still saw it as his greatest failure - for it had been him who had made the final desperate attempt to save the Director General. It had been his first 'death' on duty since his return from Mysteron control, and although the events had served as a proof of his loyalty and dedication to the fight against the aliens, he still had a most bitter taste from the experience. He didn't like to dwell on it. Nor did he want to talk about it much. He hoped that Norbu would not ask any more questions.

As a matter of fact, he didn't have time, for Scarlet suddenly started to feel nauseous. He visibly paled, and swayed on his feet, catching himself against the wall to get his footing back. Norbu made a step forward to help him, and was surprised to see the captain's face covered with sweat.

"Are you feeling all right, Captain Scarlet?" the man asked with concern. "You look sick... I hope you have not caught a cold?"

Scarlet didn't answer the question, and looked around in confusion. He wasn't ill, it was his sixth sense telling him of the presence of a Mysteron nearby. But where? He and Norbu were the only people on the terrace right now... He gave a suspicious stare at the small man. He wished he had been allowed to bring a Mysteron Detector with him, but even that had been denied, because the tool looked too suspiciously like a weapon; so to avoid a diplomatic incident, it had been

decided to leave it in the SPC, with the *real* weapons. That was a terrible mistake - to have come in the middle of the danger zone unarmed.

That was the trouble with dealing with less-than-cooperative authorities.

The threat didn't appear to come from Norbu... Then, where...?

From the corner of his eye, Scarlet caught sight of a man who was passing by in the corridor beyond the large arch leading to the terrace. He was walking at a rather quick pace. Gently brushing aside Norbu's helping hands, Scarlet strode to the arch and looked in the departing man's direction, narrowing his eyes at him.

"That man..." he murmured.

"That's Palden Sangye," Norbu informed him, "our chief technician. He's been with us since the beginning, and knows everything there is to know about the plant."

"He would know how to stop it from operating, right?" Scarlet asked, stepping into the corridor, with the obvious intention of following his suspect.

"Palden...? Surely, Captain, you're not *implying* that he could be in league with these...'Mysterons' of yours? Palden is totally trustworthy!"

But Scarlet wasn't listening to Norbu's protests. With a determined step, he walked down the corridor, his pace quickening as he approached Sangye. Norbu was following behind, as quickly as he could, trying to keep up with him.

"Captain Scarlet, I must object... Palden is a firm follower of the Dalai Lama's way..."

Scarlet would have preferred it if Norbu had stayed quiet. As it was, his outburst attracted Sangye's

attention and the man looked over his shoulder to see the Spectrum officer approaching him...

... And then he broke into a run.

"Damn!" Scarlet muttered. He gave chase. He left Norbu behind, still protesting that, if his trustworthy technician was fleeing that way, it was, quite reasonably, because the Spectrum captain had scared him away.

Scarlet could have told Norbu that no matter how faithful and trustworthy a person had been to a cause, whenever the Mysterons had need of that person, they would make sure he would be totally devoted to *their* cause and nothing else. He could have told him that Palden Sangye was not the same man anymore, that the man Norbu knew had been killed and replaced by a Mysteron duplicate... and that the teachings of the Dalai Lama had very little influence on this new Sangye's actions. He would have little respect for them.

Because Scarlet was certain, beyond a single doubt, that he was chasing a Mysteron agent and that this Mysteron agent was intending to destroy the Power Centre.

He lowered his cap microphone. "Cloudbase, this is Captain Scarlet. Am in pursuit of Palden Sangye, senior technician at the power plant. Suspected Mysteron agent. Notify all Spectrum personnel on the premises to apprehend him."

"S.I.G., Captain," the voice of Colonel White answered. *"Keep him in sight, and be careful. We must not let the Mysterons carry out their threat. That could have devastating consequences for the people of Tibet and their neighbours."*

As he was about to reply, Scarlet realised that Sangye was heading toward a maintenance door leading

out of the Centre. He swore under his breath. He had vainly hoped that he would be able to catch up with the suspect before he could escape or that - at least - Spectrum security guards would reach him in time and help in his capture.

"Scarlet to Cloudbase! The suspect has left the building. Am giving chase!"

He pushed the door and went outside, as oblivious to the cold winds as the man he was pursuing. Sangye's pace had quickened very significantly, and he was now running down a steep and treacherous footpath down the side of the mountain, his footing assured as only a man having the knowledge of the ground could have. Down below was the village Scarlet had been watching earlier. The Spectrum officer would have given anything for a gun, if only just to wound his prey and slow his pace. Grumbling, he followed suit, running as quickly as Sangye, careless of the rolling stones and unsteady ground under his boots, driven only by his determination to catch up with the man he was now more sure than ever was a Mysteron agent.

He had no intention of letting him get out of his sight...



High above the Tibetan plateau, Spectrum Helijet 223 swooped through the clear air. Watching the barren terrain below them was not exactly the most interesting job he'd ever been given to do, but Captain Grey had an enviable ability to get down to even the most boring jobs with thoroughness. Next to him, Harmony Angel was humming to herself as she directed

the craft up and down the valley with precision. She was rather enjoying herself. Usually, it was either Melody or Symphony who got to fly the helijets, and it made a nice change to have nothing more complex to worry about than running out of fuel.

"One more sweep should do it, Harmony," Grey said, breaking into her reverie with a smile.

"Of course, Captain," she said in her lilting English. "I take it there are no signs of any trouble?"

"No, there is nothing to report, Harmony - which is all to the good, of course. If anything happens to this central power plant, the whole country and those in the immediate neighbourhood could be condemned to some very cold and dark nights."

The Chinese Angel nodded stoically. "It is true that progress benefits everyone," she said thoughtfully, "but sad that traditional ways are also lost. There was a time when the people would have known other ways to light and heat their homes, Captain."

"Yes, you could say that," Grey agreed with some hesitation. "But follow it through to its logical conclusion, Harmony, and we Americans would still be living in log cabins and drawing water from streams and wells."

She gave him a disbelieving glance and opened her mouth to argue, but - with a mental shrug - she closed it, her thoughts remaining unspoken.

Grey raised an eyebrow and sighed. Holding a conversation with Harmony could be hard work. Of all the Angels - and even of all the officers from Cloudbase senior staff - she was the quiet one. Even to the point of seeming withdrawn. She didn't like to involve herself in any debates. Not that she didn't have

opinions, but she preferred to keep them to herself and couldn't see the point of arguing over any subject. It wasn't just worth quarrelling with friends. Harmony was a gentle and kind soul - a very intelligent and feminine woman, whom everybody appreciated, and respected very much.

The helijet swerved around at the end of the valley and began its journey back towards the power plant for the last time. Still nothing to report. Harmony was looking down towards the village below, with curious eyes.

"Captain Grey," she asked suddenly, "I have wondered what is that building... the largest one in the village?"

He consulted his map. "A hospital run by the World Government's Health service. See, another example of the advantages of progress?"

"Most assuredly," she agreed and fell silent again.

Grey waited a few moments and when he was certain she wasn't about to speak again, he returned to his survey of the ground below them.

A flashing white light on the onboard radio indicated to Harmony that Cloudbase Control was contacting them. She flipped up a small lever, and the voice of Captain Magenta - who was presently manning the communication console on Cloudbase - made itself heard through the speaker:

"Helijet 223, Captain Scarlet is in hot pursuit of a suspected Mysteron agent who has just left the Power Plant and is heading down to the village. Request immediate assistance."

"S.I.G.," Grey answered quickly. "Come on, Harmony, let's move. Let's not let this one get by us!"

Harmony acknowledged the order with a grim nod, and the helijet veered toward the village.



The air so high up was difficult to breathe, and Palden Sangye was more used to it than the Spectrum agent who was pursuing him down the slope of the mountain. From where he was, Scarlet saw his quarry arrive in the village, and then continue his race toward the hospital at the other end of it. *Hospital* was rather a grand name for what was basically a health clinic, providing the Tibetan villagers, the workers of the Central power plant and all inhabitants of the area with all the necessary services given by a hospital. And Sangye was going straight for it, probably hoping to find a refuge there from his pursuer. At least, that was what Scarlet deduced.

Despite the rarefied air, Scarlet was able to keep up - and even to narrow the distance between him and Sangye. So he was near enough to see the Mysteron agent push open a door and enter the hospital. Scarlet grunted; he didn't want to lose his prey, so he quickened his pace, at the risk of breaking his neck while sliding down the remainder of the slope. He barely slowed down until he reached the door and violently pushed it open.

At the other end of the corridor in which he found himself, he could see his prey still running away from him. Scarlet rushed after him; both fugitive and pursuer dodged past startled hospital personnel, ignoring their gasps, shouts and protests. Sangye looked over his shoulder, to see that Scarlet was still

gaining on him; he threw anything he was able to put his hands on into his path: trolleys, gurneys, even a nurse that came too close to him.

"Make way! Make way!" Scarlet shouted forcefully, concerned that civilians might be hurt, either directly by Sangye or during the course of the pursuit. "Spectrum business! Move! Let me pass!"

He wished again that he had a weapon; he would have used it, if only to order the fugitive to stop, or to shoot him in the legs if he would not obey. As it was, shouting after him was totally useless, under the circumstances. The Mysterion agent would not listen to him - of course, he probably would not listen even if Scarlet WERE armed... and the Spectrum officer wondered what the witnesses' reactions would have been if he had used a weapon in the hospital. He had noticed the concerned and suspicious looks they were giving him, rather than the man he was pursuing. He was the stranger here - and so they might be thinking he was the bad guy...

Closely followed by Scarlet, Sangye skidded to turn a corner and took a new corridor. It was empty, except for a young woman carrying a baby in her arms; she had just closed the door leading to an office and was quietly striding toward the exit door at the end of the passage. Scarlet's heart sank as he heard Sangye barking sharp words at the young woman, who, her hand on the handle of the door leading out, suddenly froze and turned around to investigate what was going on.

"Ma'am, get out of the way!" Scarlet yelled a warning. "He's dangerous!"

The young woman screamed when she saw the two men coming at her so quickly. It was unclear to Scarlet if she had understood him, but by the way she was

looking at him, she was as unsure about him as she was of her compatriot. She hurriedly pushed the door open just as Sangye reached for her. He violently shoved her outside; her baby's wailing covering the woman's new scream. Scarlet growled with anger as, in the space of two seconds, Sangye, the woman and the baby disappeared completely from his view. He literally leapt through the door...

...And found himself in a large garden, on the flank of the mountain. Panting, he quickly scanned the surroundings, but it was the cry of a child that made him turn on his heels. He found Sangye standing against one of the stone walls encircling the garden, keeping the young woman in front of him, as she held her crying baby. Scarlet made a move toward the Mysteron agent, but stopped suddenly, barely ten feet away from him, when his eyes caught sight of something metallic flashing in Sangye's hand.

"Hold!" the Mysteron agent said coldly. "Or the woman dies."

Scarlet recognised a knife in the Mysteron's hand. He had no doubt that Sangye would kill his hostages. The baby was wailing loudly, and its mother was staring at the Spectrum agent with wide eyes, filled with tears. She probably didn't understand what was happening. Keeping his distance, Scarlet tried to give the woman a reassuring nod, then glared at his opponent, whose murderous eyes he could see just over the top of the crying baby's head.

"Very brave of you," he stated coldly. "Using a defenceless woman and her baby as a shield..."

"Be careful, *Earthman*," Sangye hissed, the blade getting closer to the woman's cheek.

"Don't hurt her, Sangye. She's done *nothing* to you. *None* of her people have done anything to the Mysterons."

There was a disdainful huff from the man. "Can you *really* believe that argument would work with me?"

"Does your mission include hurting innocent people?"

"No *Earthmen* are innocent, as you should know, Captain... Not you, not this woman... not even this baby she's holding. Every one of you has the potential to do violence." Sangye nodded slowly. "As we learnt..." He smiled thinly. "But we will be avenged. I know my mission... I know what I must do."

Scarlet narrowed his eyes. "What can you possibly do out here?" he asked carefully. "Your target is up there. How can you destroy the Power Plant while you're so far away from it?"

"You're a fool, Captain," Sangye scoffed. "You *think* you know everything? There is more than one way to skin a cat... You came after me... But do you think I left the power plant without an exact purpose?"

As he pronounced those words, a violent explosion made itself heard from the top of the mountain. Scarlet swiftly turned on his heels, eyes opened wide with horror. He saw an enormous tongue of fire erupt from the power centre just over his head; thunder seemed to rock all over the mountain, and the ground shook under his feet. Scarlet realised, almost instantly, that either Sangye had installed a bomb inside the complex before leaving it, or that he had an accomplice, who acted quietly while Spectrum was concentrating on capturing the fugitive.

Shouts and cries came from all sides, as the echoes of the explosion continued to roll across the

valley; people were starting to panic. The ground continued to shake, more violently, as if the initial explosion had disturbed its delicate balance. Under Scarlet's horrified gaze, the side of the mountain slowly started to crumble...

A landslide!

A cry behind him suddenly attracted his attention and Scarlet turned to face Sangye again. The wall against which the Mysteron agent was standing was disintegrating under the violent tremors, and rocks were falling onto him. He had let go of his hostages, and Scarlet reached to take the woman's hand, pulling her towards him. Her screaming baby safely cradled in her arms, she leaned against the Spectrum officer's chest; he did his best to protect her with his arms, while watching as Palden Sangye suddenly disappeared under a rain of falling rocks.

"Come now!" he shouted to the woman over the thunderous sound all around them, and unsure that she would understand him. "We have to get to safety!"

With the Power plant now beyond his help and the Mysteron agent gone, Scarlet's main concern was to get the young woman and the child under his care to safety. But there was no real cover, no safe shelter to be found anywhere, as the ground continued to shake, and the rocks kept falling from the side of the mountain. All the houses around were crumbling, not sturdy enough to resist the earth's fury, and debris and falling rocks were a deadly threat to anyone in their path. The only building that seemed to have a chance to stand against the overall destruction was still the hospital... and so Scarlet guided the young woman through falling debris and shifting stones, the crying baby, protected

between both their bodies, in the vain hope of at least keeping this woman and her infant child from harm.

And maybe save their lives.



The helijet was about half way along the valley when the brilliant flash erupted before it, followed by a tremendous rumble as the sound of the explosion reached the occupants. The aircraft rocked with the blast impact and Harmony fought to keep it steady.

Grey swore. "That was the plant - the bastards have caused an explosion! Scarlet can't have found his suspect... He must have followed a decoy!" He slammed his hand against the side of the vehicle in frustration. "If only the authorities had taken our warnings seriously and allowed us to bring a full security team in... with weapons. Talk about not having the resources to do a decent job..." He activated his radio to report to Cloudbase.

Harmony nodded to show that she understood the situation. They were woefully understaffed on this mission and it was always going to make doing anything constructive that much more difficult. She directed the helijet towards the power plant. As the dust settled, it was easy to see that the majority of the buildings had been destroyed - but there were already some survivors staggering from the rubble, many of them bleeding from cuts or more serious wounds. In the distance a siren wailed mournfully. There was another, smaller, explosion and even that sound died away.

"We'll have to see if we can help," Grey said decisively. "There's no way any serious lifting or cutting gear can get here for hours."

As they flew closer, Harmony gasped out a warning:

"Captain Grey - look! The mountainside... it is moving!"

Grey swivelled round to the window on the other side and his face went ashen. It was as if a huge knife had sliced through the rock, for an enormous part of the mountainside was slipping with an awesome and seemingly slow majesty down towards the plateau. Standing between this rock fall and the vast, open ground of the plateau was the tiny village, with its proud hospital building, nestled in the shallow river valley. Slowly, the Spectrum agents became aware of the terrifying rumbling that signified the unstoppable descent of the rocks.

"Harmony, is there any way we can warn the villagers?"

The Angel pilot had already swerved the helijet away from the mountain and towards the village, but even at maximum speed, the helijet could not overtake the wall of destruction as it careered down the steep cliff face. They watched with horror as the first boulders - larger than the houses in many cases - crashed and rolled into the village. They could see the people fleeing out into the open, and running in all directions away from the avalanche.

"They don't stand a chance - the poor souls..." Grey muttered as the now swift-moving tide of death-dealing rocks flooded the small valley. Mothers with children were engulfed, old men and women mown down by the flow. The huge boulders crashed and careened into the

hospital's walls and ominous cracks appeared in the white-washed building. The walls began to lean and suddenly collapsed, the roof falling down onto the shattered supports in a cloud of brick dust.

Harmony looked away, her eyes closed against the horror of the scene.

A grim-looking Grey placed a call to Cloudbase to report the latest events, with a heavy heart. He listened to Colonel White's instructions, before putting a comforting hand on the young woman's thin shoulder. "It looks as if the Mysterons have won this round, Chan. There isn't much left of the installation and the power relays are coming down all along the valley. I think we ought to try to help down at the village - maybe we can find Captain Scarlet? We must get to him first - especially if he is 'hurt'. And, besides, there might be other survivors. Can you find somewhere to land the helijet?"

Harmony nodded and forced herself to survey the devastation below them. They flew over the scene until the avalanche had lost its momentum and the dust had cleared enough for them to identify a viable landing site. Harmony inched the machine down and slowly the great rotor blades came to a stop.

An unnatural silence fell over the area... a silence far more poignant than the peaceful stillness of only a few short moments ago.

Harmony sighed and disengaged her seat belt. Behind her, Captain Grey was rummaging for a first aid kit; although what good a few bandages and aspirins could do faced with the total obliteration of a hundred dwellings, neither he nor Harmony could imagine.

He wrenched open the door and jumped down onto the gravel-strewn ground, turning to help the Angel

down. She rested her hand on his shoulder and jumped lightly down to the ground. *Even in such a place and such a situation, she does everything with such grace,* Grey thought affectionately. A momentary jab of shame - that he should notice such things at such a time - made him turn a little brusquely and lead the way towards the hopeless task of searching the ruins.

In a few hours' time, the daylight would be fading. Tired, dirty and heartbroken at the evidence of death and destruction they were uncovering, Grey and Harmony stopped their fruitless search for a moment to report to Cloudbase on the progress of the still fledgling rescue efforts. The high altitude was taking a heavy toll on them both, and every movement was getting harder. Grey's shoulders ached with scrabbling to remove debris and he was panting heavily. Harmony sank wearily onto a boulder and ran a hand over her dirty face.

In so remote a place, the infra-structure was not good enough to allow easy access by any craft but planes, and without a standing army to respond to such disasters, the Tibetans were having to ask for help from neighbouring states and their earliest estimated time of arrival was the next morning - there were few pilots prepared to risk flying through the treacherous mountains in the dark. The only search team at work now consisted of the few surviving engineers and frantic villagers, who had been away from their homes when the avalanche struck - and they were too few to make much impact.

At the request of a harassed-looking engineer, whose broken English testified eloquently to his own distress, Grey went across to help rig a floodlight to a

portable generator. Over the other side of this particular area, one light was already flaring into the gathering gloom.

The men struggled to fix the lamp upright, and in driving it into the ground, struck something solid. They bent to clear the rubble and found a partially intact roof, still resting on a few courses of bricks.

"Harmony," Grey shouted excitedly, "bring the torch... there is someone under this... and they are still alive!"

The Angel scrambled towards them and held the powerful Spectrum flashlight so that the men could gently drag the injured child from the wreckage. A little girl, about nine-ten years old, Harmony estimated.

The child had broken limbs and was bleeding from a severe gash in her side.

"Bandages..." Grey snapped. Harmony handed over the contents of the first aid kit. "We need more... can you get across to the hospital, Harmony, and see if you can find anything that will help?"

"S.I.G., Captain," she replied, and, leaving them with the flashlight, scrambled away towards the ruins of the hospital.

She staggered through the only part of the building still standing - a roofless hall that had been an out-patients' clinic. There were a few posters on the wall, showing smiling women with jolly, round-faced babies. Harmony blinked away her tears and stumbled onwards.

Suddenly before her, emerging from the gloom, she saw a figure; a figure in a dirty, red tunic, kneeling in a corner.

"Captain Scarlet?" she called.

Scarlet turned awkwardly and waved her over. As she approached, she could see what he was doing. A young woman, obviously dying, lay in his arms. Clapsed to her heart was a baby, wrapped in the traditional bundle of brightly coloured clothes against the all-pervading cold. It had the full, round cheeks of a young infant and a pouting rosebud mouth, with dark eyes open wide and staring at the man with mixed emotions. The child was either in pain, or afraid, or apprehensive about the presence of this stranger holding his mother this way. One thing was certain, he was terribly upset.

Scarlet looked up at the Angel as she stood beside him. The child shifted its gaze towards the young woman, his eyes still displaying the same fear and uncertainty.

"There's nothing I can do... I think her back is broken, but I couldn't leave her... and the baby looks all right... battered and bruised, but I think he's all right."

"It is a boy?"

Scarlet shrugged. "I don't know. She won't let me take it from her."

Harmony crouched beside him and touched the woman's face. With enormous effort, two feverish eyes opened and looked at her.

"*We can save your baby,*" Harmony said in Chinese - praying the woman would understand - at least enough to know the child was safe.

Seeing the young pilot, her kind face suffused with pity, the mother gave a weak smile and nodded her head as if confirming a decision she had reached. She gasped something and feebly moved her arms to push the child towards them.

"You take him," Scarlet whispered urgently to Harmony.

She leant down and scooped the child up. It let out a thin wail. Its mother crooned to it with her dying breath and, grasping Scarlet's hand with her last strength, her dark eyes closed forever as her head fell back.

The baby started crying.

Blinking back his own tears, Scarlet gently laid the woman down on the rubble. He stood up, and with military correctness snapped off a salute. Glancing down at Harmony, rather shame-faced, he saw nothing but approval in her dark eyes as she watched him over the weeping baby's head.

"Sometimes," she said, her voice thick with emotion, "not every warrior in the fight wears a uniform."

Scarlet gave a self-conscious smile. "Not every warrior can even tell you his name, rank and serial number, either," he answered, and stroked the whimpering child's dark hair.

"We should find someone to care for the child," Harmony said, wrinkling her nose against the acrid scent arising from the wet cloth wrapped around the infant.

"How did you find me?" Scarlet asked.

"Captain Grey sent me to find bandages - there is a survivor."

"Well, you won't find them here, Harmony. This place is just so much rubble now." Scarlet ran his hand through his own dust-covered dark hair - his radio cap was long gone. "Let's find Grey and see what we can do... maybe someone knows who this little tyke is..."

He placed a hand on her arm to escort her over the rubble. "Captain Scarlet," she asked hesitantly,

"Would you carry the child? I am afraid that I am too out of breath... I might fall."

Scarlet's dark eyebrows rose. "Well, I guess so... I mean, I'm not very good with children." He accepted the damp bundle with a grimace and Harmony wiped her hands on her uniform before leading the way back towards Captain Grey.

They trudged across the devastation in the direction of the flickering floodlights. There were still only two of them and they would do little to banish the stygian darkness and numbing cold of the plateau at night. Suddenly, the encroaching blackness was shattered by a brilliant flash from the mountainside as another part of the power plant exploded like a huge orange and red flower. The noise rolled and echoed around the plateau, making Harmony and Scarlet grimace. He handed her the baby and advanced a few yards towards the power plant.

"What can you do, Captain?" Harmony called.

He half-turned. As he opened his mouth to speak, he saw a huge boulder that had been halted by a partially standing wall, crush the obstacle in its path and start to roll forward once more. The tremors from the second explosion had started many of the small boulders sliding forward again. Scarlet shouted, "Harmony! Watch out! Get out of its way...."

Startled, the Angel twisted and, seeing the danger she was in, she turned to run back towards the helijet. The unstable rubble beneath her feet slithered and she fell headlong into the path of the boulder - the baby in her arms preventing her from stopping her fall. Dazed, she could not move.

Scarlet sprang forward, and sliding his arms under her shoulders, hefted her to her feet; scooping the

baby up and thrusting it into her arms, he shoved her away from the danger zone. That forceful shove was enough to cause him to lose his footing and he too slipped to the ground. Desperately, he began to struggle to his feet - too late - as the boulder, bouncing off smaller rocks, crashed down onto his left foot, crushing the bones.

Screaming with the excruciating pain, Scarlet fell prone to the ground as the torrent of smaller rocks half buried him. Harmony yelled for Captain Grey. She laid the baby on the ground, at a safe distance from the stream of debris following the boulder's downward trail like the rats followed the Pied Piper, and rushed back to scabble at the pile that covered Scarlet.

Panting heavily, Grey arrived and together they dragged the unconscious captain from his stony grave. Harmony gave a horrified gasp as she surveyed, through the ruins of the red boot, the shapeless lump of flesh and bone that was all that remained of Scarlet's left foot from the toes to the ankle.

When Scarlet's blue eyes opened, he could not suppress the groan the pain brought to his lips. He cursed in fluent Anglo-Saxon... until he became aware of Harmony's startled eyes, glittering in the flashlight with unshed tears, and bit back the cathartic flow of obscenities. *At least, he thought ruefully, when something like this happens and I'm with Blue, he doesn't give a monkey's if I swear...*

"You saved my life," the Chinese girl said, placing her slight hand on Scarlet's arm. "Mine and the baby's."

"He's okay?" Scarlet gasped through clenched teeth.

Grey turned and saw the infant lying on a bank of rubble. The baby waved a chubby arm as its bottom lip

trembled and a protesting wail split the air. "Yep," he said. "Angry, if I'm any judge, but definitely okay."

"We must find someone to take care of it," Harmony said again, "and get you back to Cloudbase, Captain, as soon as we can."

Scarlet grimaced and glanced at the throbbing mass of skin and broken bone that was his foot. Grey could see the beads of sweat on his pallid face and he guessed that Scarlet was in tremendous pain. Retrometabolism could heal any wound, defeat any disease - up to and including death itself - but it did not relieve the patient of his suffering.

He activated his cap mic and quickly reported the recent events to Cloudbase.

Colonel White waited until he had finished before asking, *"Is there anything else you can do that will assist the rescue teams, Captain? Captain Blue informs me from Lhasa that the Tibetan authorities have sent out an appeal for urgent help, and the World Government is responding with all haste. Equipment is being airlifted from India and China - it should arrive tomorrow morning soon after first light."*

Grey glanced at the make-shift search teams and the ramshackle lights they had erected. "Well, sir, every pair of hands is useful..."

"Then have Harmony bring Captain Scarlet back to Cloudbase, whilst you stay there to co-ordinate matters..."

"S.I.G., Colonel." Grey smiled at his companions. "You heard? You guys are off home," he said.

"I can stay - I'll be fine soon," Scarlet began.

"And have everyone see just how quickly and how well you heal? I don't think so," Grey reasoned.

"We must find someone for the baby before we leave," Harmony insisted.

Grey nodded his approval, and she went to retrieve the child. As she bent towards it, the wailing stopped and the baby gabbled in pleasure. She smiled lightly, wondering if the little bandit wasn't somehow looking for attention...

As Grey helped Scarlet to the helijet, she went over to where the rescue team was stolidly shifting the rubble and debris. She spoke in English to the nearest man. "We have found this child, its mother is dead - but the baby is not badly hurt. Does anyone know who it belongs to - or where we might safely leave it?"

The man straightened up and stared at her with unfriendly eyes. "No," he replied in Chinese, without even glancing at the child.

"Where are the village survivors being sent?" she asked, slipping easily into her mother-tongue.

"Woman, there are no survivors... even those we find alive do not survive! You and your warlike friends have drawn the fire of these evil men onto our peaceful community... we pose no threat to anyone - why else would they attack us, except because you are here?"

Harmony stiffened, seeing other men stopping work and nodding agreement with the speaker. There was an undercurrent of hate in their muttered words. "Spectrum was here to try to prevent this from happening," she began - but her speech was cut off by a sharp rock, which whistled towards her and caught her cheek a glancing blow. She gasped and backed off as a second and third stone was hurled in her direction.

Staggering under the weight of the child, her tiredness and the pain of the impact, she was making slow progress to escape, until she felt a strong arm

surround her. She gasped and glanced up to see Captain Grey, his face stern under his cap.

"That's enough," he growled warningly at the advancing mob. "She was trying to help you - we all were..."

Another rock was lobbed towards them and without hesitation, Grey turned Harmony around and escorted her to the helijet. He strapped her and the baby in next to Scarlet, took the pilot's seat and flew the craft into the dark sky.

"Cloudbase, this is helijet 223. We are returning to Cloudbase - all of us." He went on to explain why.

"Very well, Captain. I will inform the authorities in Lhasa that Spectrum has left the area. We do not wish to exacerbate local feelings by remaining uninvited. I will alert Doctor Fawn to expect you," Colonel White said evenly. He hoped Captain Blue and Lieutenant Green were having more success in their negotiations with the authorities in Lhasa.



Excusing himself, Captain Blue moved across to the other side of the room and answered the insistent flashing of his epaulettes. He heard Colonel White's voice over his cap mic and listened in silence as his commanding officer explained what had happened to his colleagues at the disaster site.

"Captain Blue," the colonel concluded, *"I wish you to make it clear to the Minister that, whilst Spectrum appreciates the sensibilities of the Tibetan people, we must be allowed access to the area and granted*

permission to utilise whatever means we can to stop the Mysterons - even if that means force."

"S.I.G., sir," Blue replied warily. "I will do what I can - but I have to say, I wouldn't hold out much hope."

"Your best will have to do, Captain..."

The American grimaced as the conversation ended. He sighed deeply and returned to where Lieutenant Green was speaking to Dhargey Samdup, Tibet's First Minister.

"Not more bad news, Captain?" the small man asked, as Green's voice trailed into silence.

"It is not the best news there might be, sir," Blue admitted. He gave a sketchy outline of the events at the power plant.

The Minister frowned. "Are you telling me your colleagues were attacked, Captain, even as they strove to save the life of a Tibetan infant?"

"My commanding officer tells me that they were, sir. My colleagues have been forced to take the child with them to our Cloudbase headquarters, until such time as it can be returned safely."

"This is most regrettable. I know Spectrum means us well, and that no blame should attach to you or your colleagues for the wicked actions of anyone else. I offer you and your colleagues the deepest apologies of the Tibetan government, Captain... if there is anything I can do to compensate you..."

Blue hid his smile and said briskly, "Well, sir, Spectrum is concerned that the Mysterons may not have finished pursuing their threat against your people - they may yet try to hamper the reconstruction and repairs to the power plants and infrastructure. If you would grant us an office in Tibet, and permission to pursue the people who committed this crime - the

Mysterons - we would consider ourselves honoured and would endeavour to make sure no Mysteron activity hampers the recovery here."

The Minister raised an eyebrow. "Spectrum do not miss a trick, do they, Captain?"

"No, sir, not when the safety of a nation depends on it."

The First Minister sighed. The negotiations with Spectrum had been going on for some time and were getting nowhere. Personally, he deplored the use of any weapons - by anyone - and was whole-heartedly committed to the nation's policy of non-violence, but he could also see that the Mysterons posed a threat to his country and that their misdeeds would lead to great hardship for his people. He gazed reflectively at the two Spectrum officers waiting patiently for his decision. They were personable young men, obviously as dedicated to doing their jobs as he was to doing his. The news that villagers had attacked Spectrum agents was disturbing. He began to speak.

"The Tibetan people are a hardy race, long inured to life in this harsh land. We love our country and would do much to save it. Being as remote as we are, we are unused to a great influx of strangers, yet we are a hospitable people, Captain, and gladly welcome friends to our homes. This attack by the Mysterons on our nation is unwarranted and unexpected, and we are not equipped to deal with such warlike actions. The recent past has been catastrophic for us - the Dalai Lama, a most holy and erudite scholar - died so unexpectedly that all the nation still mourns. Without our spiritual leader, we are vulnerable. Alone, I have little authority and so I hesitate to grant your wish - but I can understand what makes you ask it of us." He paused and

looked solemnly at his companions. "I will endeavour to win the council's confirmation of this, Captain Blue; you may have your compound, here in Lhasa. But, until the Council has ruled otherwise, I must insist you use only peaceful means to do your job."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate how difficult this must be for you under the circumstances. We will comply with your restrictions for as long as we can, but, you are tying our hands, and if the Mysterons attack again, we shall be forced to use weapons..."

"We are a peaceful people..."

"But the Mysterons are not," Lieutenant Green interjected, with a grim look upon his face. "Look what they have done already, sir..."

"A terrible tragedy, Lieutenant, and coming, as it does, at such a time of uncertainty, its effect is even more profound."

"Understood, sir," Blue replied. "Believe me, we have no wish to upset or alarm your people. Spectrum's presence will be so discreet you will hardly know we are here. We will do all we can to keep a low profile."

The minister - a slight, dark-skinned man with the large, black-coloured eyes of his race - gazed up at the brightly-clad, 6ft 3inch, blond-haired, blue-eyed American, who could easily make two of him, and smiled. "Indeed, Captain - as you have so far - a very low profile indeed..." he acknowledged without a trace of irony on his mild-mannered face.



Chapter Two

"So, Doctor, is there anything wrong with him?"

Doctor Fawn shrugged, as he removed the stethoscope from his ears and straightened up. On the examination table, where he had been laid, the small infant that Harmony Angel had brought back from Tibet, now clean and tended to, was yelling to its heart's content. Harmony was standing before him; her cheek had been treated for the cut she had sustained from the rocks that had been thrown at them, and aside from that, she felt fine, but she was still looking pale. She studied the child with obvious concern in her eyes.

"He's a strong, healthy, baby boy," Fawn explained with a reassuring smile. "Nothing broken, no major bumps... only a few minor scratches. He has been very lucky."

"But he doesn't seem to want to stop crying," Harmony insisted. "He was rather... wet... earlier, but now he's clean and dry, so he should stop, no?" The dirty and damp clothes had indeed been removed earlier, and replaced by a makeshift cloth diaper.

"I can see you don't have expertise in child care, Harmony," Fawn noted. "There might be hundreds of reasons other than *that one*, why a child is crying. This baby for example..." He gently took the tiny arm in one hand and pointed with the other to a mark just over the elbow. "...See that? That's vaccination marks. He received his shots very recently... Possibly the reason

he was in that hospital, who knows? That must still sting..."

"That's the reason why he's crying?"

"Amongst other things. I'm no expert myself in baby care, Harmony, but it might also be because this baby has just lost his mother, and is amongst strangers. He doesn't recognise any faces. That's traumatic enough to warrant any amount of crying."

"I wish he would stop." The grumpy voice coming from behind made both Harmony and Doctor Fawn turn around. Captain Scarlet, dressed in pyjamas and leaning on a single crutch propped under his left arm, was standing in the doorway, Captain Ochre and Rhapsody Angel visible behind him. He hobbled heavily inside, grumbling under his breath, Ochre and Rhapsody following. Fawn gave him a reproachful glance.

"Shouldn't you be resting in your room, until that foot is completely healed?" he admonished Scarlet in a stern tone.

"We tried telling him that," Rhapsody noted, glaring at Scarlet with a look quite similar to Fawn's. "But he won't listen to us..."

"As always," Ochre piped up.

"Who could get any rest?" Scarlet retorted. He stopped right next to Harmony and stared meaningfully in the direction of the still-crying baby. "With Caruso here doing his voice exercises ..."

"That's not very kind," Harmony admonished.

"I came to see what was wrong with the little tyke," Scarlet quickly replied. "I could hear him crying, from my room, and I was... a little concerned."

He was obviously struggling to get his breath back, and he was still very pale. He must have exerted himself, walking all the way on that crutch from his

bed, on that still unhealed foot of his - which was probably hurting like hell. Harmony gave a bashful and apologetic smile. "Forgive me, Captain... I shouldn't have said..."

"Forget it," Scarlet answered, with a kind smile. "How is he, anyway? Why is he still crying like that? Was he hurt?"

"Not so far as I can tell," Fawn retorted. "As I was saying to Harmony, there might be many reasons why he would cry like this..."

"He might be hungry," suggested Rhapsody, looking down with empathy at the child.

"That's a possibility," agreed Fawn, "and I have already sent Nurse Barlow to the SpectraMart to find something we might give him... As you might expect, Cloudbase is rather... under-provided... with baby-related... er... 'rations'. No infant milk, soft cereal, puree..."

"No kidding!" Captain Ochre said. "And no diapers either, I guess... How did you manage to change it?"

"*Him*, Captain. Change *him*. It's a boy. We... that is, one of the nurses used a cotton cloth. That'll do just as well. Except, we'll have to change him more often, as it's not like disposable diapers and it will not... er... absorb odours."

"What a joy," Scarlet said, rolling his eyes. "How will you manage to feed him, Doc?"

"He must be old enough to take a nearly normal diet - provided it is cut up small enough. If not, we could always make puree out of whole vegetables and fruit," Fawn said with a sigh. "And I suppose cow's or goat's milk, properly boiled and prepared, will have to do for now. We found a drinking bottle wrapped up in the layers he was wearing and I have asked Nurse

Ingham to put it in the autoclave, so once it's thoroughly cleaned, we can use that, at least. I'm not familiar with Tibetan dietary preferences, but we'll cope until we're able to send him back to his people. That should be soon enough, once Colonel White has contacted the proper authorities in Tibet concerned with this kind of problem."

"A child this age - who loses his mother so dramatically... he'll probably end up in an orphanage, if they don't find any relative," murmured Harmony.

"They won't find one unless they find out his identity," Scarlet replied. "How old is he, anyway, doctor?"

"I'd guess he's about nine months old... give or take a month or two..."

"And you call yourself a doctor?" Ochre grinned.

Fawn rolled his eyes. "I'm not really in the mood for your joking, Captain Ochre," he warned. "As I said earlier to Harmony, I'm in no way a specialist in paediatrics. But if I refer to what I *do* know - bone structures, teeth, etc. - well, I'm probably not that far off."

"You mentioned teeth," Rhapsody noted. "Might that be the reason why he's crying, Doctor?"

"Yes," Harmony agreed, "he might be teething."

A beeping sound was heard from the comm. link embedded on the wall, and Doctor Fawn gave a deep sigh, before moving toward it. "That must be Colonel White, calling to inform me about what to do with the baby. He sure took his time contacting the Tibetan authorities."

"He might have encountered problems," Scarlet retorted. "It's not as if we've won any popularity contests with the Tibetans over the last few hours..."

Fawn pressed the intercom button and the image of Colonel White appeared on the video screen. As always, no emotions were apparent on the Spectrum commander's face - at least, none that anyone could read. *"Doctor Fawn...ah, Captain Scarlet... up and about already?"*

"More or less, sir," Scarlet answered grimly. The baby cried out at that moment, as if to emphasise the captain's comment.

Colonel White cleared his throat portentously and announced: *"I have recently heard from Captain Blue - who, as you know, has been negotiating with the Tibetan authorities for the right to create a Spectrum base in Tibet - which has become more urgent now, considering recent events. He has spoken to the Tibetan authorities about our ... guest. It seems that, for the moment at least, they are unwilling to take him back - the area surrounding the central power complex is now completely devastated and the whole country is in a state of emergency, and is experiencing general power failures. They're trying desperately to put a temporary power structure online, and to repair the damage that's been done... But it's not easy. So they insist they have far too much to deal with at the present time without worrying about the little baby we've rescued."*

All through his announcement, Colonel White seemed to fail to notice the worried glances that the officers standing in front of the video screen were all exchanging.

"They won't take him back?" Scarlet asked in an outraged tone.

"No, I'm afraid not."

"But... he's one of their own!" Harmony protested in turn. "What will be done for him?"

"We *could* always send him to a World Government medical facility?" Fawn suggested.

"Under the present circumstances, I don't think that would be the best idea, Doctor," White replied. *"After what happened at the Power Plant, the Tibetan people might consider that an insult... So I rather think we are obligated to keep him here for a period of time until they are capable of providing for him themselves. I shouldn't think that will take very long. I am sure you can arrange that, Doctor?"*

Fawn stared at the screen, slack-jawed. "You want *me* to keep him in sickbay?"

"Well - where else do you suggest we keep him, Doctor?"

"Colonel... I'm not a specialist in paediatrics. None of my personnel are... well, none that I can recall at the moment..." Fawn made a mental note to check his personnel's records, although he was sure he wasn't mistaken. He continued, without so much as a pause: "...and accordingly, there is *no* nursery in the medical centre."

The baby gave a loud wail at that moment and started to cry once more, which caused everyone to stare down at him.

Out of instinct, Rhapsody reached to take him in her arms, and tried to calm him down. It didn't stop him from crying. "Poor little thing," she said in a gentle voice. "He must feel he's unwanted..."

Fawn frowned with irritation at those words, hearing the reproach in Rhapsody's tone; but it didn't stop him continuing his diatribe in front of the video screen, where he could see the now scowling face of

Colonel White. "Do you hear *that*, sir? This is a sickbay - my personnel and I need peace and quiet. We can't work in these conditions... I have patients here, other than Scarlet... You can imagine the trauma that will cause them."

"Now, now..." Ochre was saying to the whimpering child. "Don't listen to the nasty doctor... He doesn't mean it..."

"Yes, he's a very nasty doctor," Scarlet added.

The Angels approved with energetic nods.

The irritation in Fawn was mounting; he addressed a brief, murderous glare at the four officers, before turning again to face the video screen.

Colonel White seemed a little embarrassed with the situation. "*I realise this is a difficult situation, Doctor,*" the Spectrum commander said. "*But if he can't stay in sickbay... what do you suggest we do with the child?*"

Fawn gave it some thought, very quickly. He gave another glance over his shoulder, and saw Rhapsody putting the baby down again on the examination table. "I may have a solution, Colonel," he then said, with a slow nod.

"*Well, do whatever you want,*" White said in an irate tone. "*I don't have time to take care of this problem myself. I'm leaving it in your hands, to decide what should be done. You have carte blanche, Doctor.*"

"Thank you, Colonel. Don't worry: *I'll take care of it.*"

The image on the screen went blank and, with an implacable expression on his face, Fawn turned around. The four officers standing in the examination room noticed the cold fire burning in his eyes. Suddenly, they

all felt very uncomfortable. Fawn was in one of his bad moods. That boded them no good.

The first to react was Captain Ochre, who cleared his throat and started edging toward the door. "Well... got to go back to work..."

"Me too," Rhapsody added. "Standby duty in the Amber Room..."

"Goodness, is that the time?" Harmony said quickly.

"Have to get back to my room," Scarlet said, hobbling away. "This foot isn't healed yet..."

"Hold it - don't think you are getting away so easily!" Fawn snapped. The officers and Angels stopped in their tracks, and turned around slowly, almost fearfully, to face him. He grinned. "*We* have a problem... and I think *we* ALL have to take care of it. I can't keep the baby here - As I just said, Scarlet isn't the only patient I have, and some of them need rest... Rest they can't have, while the baby is crying. *You* will have to look after him..."

"Us?" Ochre cried. "But we are all on duty... we could be called away at a moment's notice!"

"Not all of you - not all at once..." the doctor said implacably. "Besides, in an hour or two, Scarlet will be fit for light duties - and I call baby-sitting light duties..."

"Oh, you mean *Scarlet* can look after him?" Ochre grinned, relieved. "Yes, good idea, Doc, he found the baby after all..."

"Now wait a minute," Scarlet growled.

"I said, *all* of you!" Doctor Fawn snapped again, his tone not accepting any protest. Once he obtained silence, he smiled wickedly. "You heard Colonel White,

yes? He gave me *carte blanche*. You'll all share baby-sitting duty for this baby."

"That's not fair," Rhapsody mumbled. "You're taking outrageous advantage of your privileged rank, Doctor..."

"Without any scruples whatsoever," Fawn retorted. "Now, are you going to do it without any complaints, or should I refer the matter to the colonel?"



Ordered about by Doctor Fawn, Captain Scarlet returned to his room to finish his recovery, while Captain Ochre and the two Angel pilots left sickbay - with the baby. They were only slightly mollified by Fawn's assurance that he had already instructed his senior Nurse to inform the SpectraMart of all the supplies they would need to provide the child with a comfortable stay in Cloudbase. The order would go through to the supply base in London, to be included on the final pre-Christmas shuttle tomorrow.

"Until then," he told the anxious trio, "you will have to manage with these cotton cloths and you have the bottle - boil some water and give him that, if he's thirsty, along with a light meal - just cut the food into small chunks... I'm sure he'll manage, won't you, Sonny?" He fought the urge to smile as he glanced at the three bewildered faces staring at the gurgling child with apprehension. "He won't hurt you... he's only a little baby," he concluded. "You are fully trained, competent individuals... it'll be a piece of cake! Now - off you go - I have work to do."

The cavalcade of disgruntled 'baby-sitters' made its stately way to the Amber Room, Ochre leading the way, and attracting a lot of attention from the personnel they passed en route.

As Ochre pressed the button to open the door to the Amber Room, Harmony slipped inside with the baby in her arms - Rhapsody following close behind with a basket of 'baby essentials' the sickbay nurses had rustled up.

Melody looked up from her magazine and raised her eyebrows.

"Harmony, is that the baby you found in Tibet? Does Fawn know you have brought it here?" she asked.

"Yes, Melody," Harmony began.

Before she could continue, Ochre interrupted her to say heatedly, "Fawn's sent us away with him... we're down to do baby-sitting duty until the colonel sorts out where he's to go!"

"It's a boy, then?" Melody asked mildly, putting down her magazine and coming over to greet the baby, who was chewing on his hand and regarding his surroundings with wide eyes. "What's his name?"

"He hasn't got one - well, I mean, I expect he has, but we don't know what it is..." Ochre replied, throwing himself down on the sofa and crossing his booted leg over his knee in a lazy motion.

"We'll have to give him a name," Rhapsody said. "Poor little chap can't spend his time here known as just 'him' or 'the baby'."

"I'm not sure that is a good idea," Destiny said surprisingly, from her chair across the room. She, alone of the personnel present, showed no interest in meeting the child. "I mean if we give it a name we might get too attached to it."

"Him!" Rhapsody corrected, "he's a boy, not an it, Juliette!"

Harmony sat down next to Ochre and placed the baby on the sofa between them, so he couldn't tumble off. The child was wearing the smallest T-shirt they could find - one of Harmony's own - but even so, it swamped him. It was tied around the waist with a length of wide bandage, giving the impression of a plain, overlarge kimono.

Ochre edged away slightly as the damp hand reached out and grasped his sleeve. "Careful, sonny-boy, this is my clean uniform," he protested as the baby, intrigued by his shiny, golden epaulette, propped himself against his arm and rose as high as he could to try to pull it off his tunic.

"Aaah, he likes you, Captain Ochre." Harmony grinned.

"Too young to know any better, I guess," Rhapsody teased. Ochre pulled a face.

"Well," he said, gingerly moving away from the child, whose face was starting to crumple as another bright toy was removed from him, "I had better leave you ladies to it and get back to work."

"And where do you think you are going - and why do you imagine you are going to be allowed to go?" Rhapsody asked, blocking his pathway to the door.

"Well, I mean you are all here and you can take care of the baby so much better than I could..."

"Why?"

"Well..." Ochre squirmed, and then plunged into his argument. "You are ladies - I mean women... you know about babies - you have maternal instincts..."

"Maternal instincts?" Melody cried. She marched up to Captain Ochre and extended her left hand in

front of his face. "See this finger, Captain Ochre? I am sure a clever man like you can tell me which finger it is - and its significance."

"Er... it's your ring finger, Mag..."

"That's right... my ring finger... and have you noticed? There is NO ring on it. That means - I'm not married... That means, I DON'T have a family... and don't have ANY intention of having a family! And that means I don't have so-called *maternal instincts*! So, if you don't want me to show you ANOTHER FINGER, you will not mention that to me ever again!"

Ochre backed off, more than a little intimidated by her vehemence. "I only meant that... well, women are better at looking after babies - they have the... er... *natural equipment* for it..."

Rhapsody tutted. "That won't do, Captain." She smoothed her leather flying tunic down, so that it clung tightly to her figure. "I'm afraid," she said, with a twinkle in her blue eyes as she watched Ochre - whose gaze was riveted to the outline of her breasts - that these are just for decoration..."

Feeling heavily outnumbered, Ochre spread his hands and tried pleading. "Look, girls - you wouldn't want to trust the baby to me, would you? You know what a clumsy oaf I am..."

"*Mais oui*, you can only make intricate models of planes, and ships and cars... you can only construct costumes for us and props for our dramas... you are so clumsy we could not trust you with anything that needed care and precision," Destiny mocked from the safe distance of her chair. "*Alors*, I think you should take the baby and teach him to play poker... so you and *Capitaine* Magenta will have a project with which to while away your spare time, *non?*"

"No... I mean we are all to share the baby-sitting!" Ochre protested.

"Of course, and right now it is your turn," Rhapsody said reasonably. "Our shift is about to change - Destiny is in Angel One and I am on Angel Two duty... We can't baby-sit right now - and Symphony won't want to - she's been on duty for 8 hours."

They heard the rumble of the elevator chair as it descended from Angel One. Destiny sprang up and collected her helmet. As Symphony emerged from the amber coloured glass doors, she slid past and took her place.

Ochre was remonstrating once more, as Rhapsody gathered the baby-basket and tried to make him take it.

"Hi, everyone," Symphony called, confused at so much bickering. The others stopped and turned to welcome her.

The tall American's nose twitched. "What is that awful smell?" she asked.

"Oh no, it cannot be that time once again, already!" Harmony wailed.

Symphony's expression reflected her confusion. "What's going on?" she asked; and then she saw the baby bouncing contentedly on the sofa behind the wrangling group of Ochre, Melody and Rhapsody. "Hey - what's that kid doing on Cloudbase?"

"Harmony and Scarlet found it in Tibet and now *Rhapsody* is trying to make out that it's down to me to look after it," Ochre replied, backing away from the basket Rhapsody was thrusting at him.

"It is your turn - that's why," the red-head insisted. She managed to back her quarry into the bookcase and made him take the basket. "Seriously,

Rick, we are all busy and this is a Ready Room, not a nursery!"

"Huh, you're sounding *just* like the old man... I suppose you think we just lounge about in the Officers' Lounge?" he grumbled.

"By and large, yes, you do," Symphony replied. "Whenever I drop by there, you are all reading and playing cards, anyway..."

"But we have to be ready to leap into action at a moment's notice - we're all living on the edge..."

The Angels all chuckled at this outrageous assertion.

"And *we* are not?" Rhapsody asked with a mischievous smile.

Ochre sighed. He knew he stood no chance of changing their minds and he grimaced as he contemplated his immediate future. "Well, if I agree to take the boy with me - can't you at least clean him up first?" he pleaded.

Harmony appeared to be about to relent and comply with his request, but Melody was made of sterner stuff. "No, that happened on your watch, Captain - I'd say it's down to you to sort it out."

"But I don't know how to..." he wailed.

"How difficult can it be?" Rhapsody reasoned. "Millions of women do it dozens of times a day the world over. Surely you're not saying a big, strong, capable man like you can do any less?"

"You are the most unnatural women I have ever met," Ochre muttered, as Melody picked the child up at arm's length and thrust him into the reluctant arms of his new baby-sitter.

The Angels stood in a line and waved 'goodbye' as Captain Ochre walked to the door and with a forlorn

glance left the Amber Room. As the door slid closed behind him he heard them all break into gales of laughter.



It was with a sigh of relief that Captain Ochre stepped into the Officers' Lounge and heard the door slide closed behind him. He had endured an embarrassing walk the entire length of Cloudbase from the Amber Room, passing smirking technicians and giggling support staff. The baby had taken to thumping his hands on his new friend's shoulders when not trying to wrench off the epaulette, and he seemed to take particular pleasure from riding up the escalators to the Control Tower, his squeals of delight echoing around the enclosed stanchion as they ascended. Ochre had settled on the escalators instead of the lift, which he was rather reluctant to take - the smell pervading the makeshift diaper was too awful for even the toughest of men to take the risk of finding himself in a narrow space with it.

Across the room, Grey was reading a magazine and Magenta was dealing himself a hand of cards.

Both of them looked up at his entrance.

"Goodness, Rick, what's that you've got there?" Magenta asked. "I know it's almost Christmas, but you're going a bit far with making a crib scene if you plan to use a real baby..."

"Har-de-har-har," his friend responded. "It's the baby Scarlet and Harmony found. The Angels forced me into looking after it."

"How?" Magenta asked. "I mean, they must've used

some pretty dastardly torture to get you to agree to that."

"You couldn't begin to guess..." Ochre muttered darkly, his mind's eye conjuring up the images of the outraged Melody and the outline of Rhapsody's figure through her flying suit. He sighed and crossed to his friends. "Here, Pat, give me a hand, will you?"

He proffered the baby towards Magenta, but that fearless man backed off. Apparently, the smell was enough to make him draw away. "Hey, I don't do babies..."

"Nobody does!" Ochre raged. "But thanks to Doctor Fawn - and the soft hearts of Scarlet and Harmony - we all have to start!"

Captain Grey spoke up for the first time. "Ochre, if you had seen the devastation in that village and the angry mood of the people, you'd have done no less than we did and brought the baby to safety too," he reasoned.

Ochre flushed. "Sure, Brad, I know that and I agree that you couldn't have left the little guy there, but... well, to be frank - he's got a dirty diaper and I don't know where to start with cleaning them up... someone, please, give me a hand..."

"How complicated can it be?" Magenta said, relenting and accepting the smiling baby. "Hi there, little fella, you gonna be good for your Uncle Pat, eh?"

The next ten minutes were an education in itself for the three officers. The baby, relieved to be free of its soiled clothing, began to crawl away across the table and refused to lie down peacefully and be cleaned and re-clothed. It took the three of them some effort to manage the task and even as they completed it, they shared uneasy glances when the baby began to explore

his new play-room and the 'diaper' began to slip down.

"How soon do you think the SpectraMart could get in a supply of disposable diapers?" Ochre asked hopelessly.

"Going on their usual performance, he'll be shaving before they got the order right..." Magenta replied, with a rueful smirk.

Despite himself, Ochre chuckled. "Oh boy," he smiled, "I never thought being a Spectrum officer would include changing babies!"

"Hey, we are trained to survive any ordeal - remember?" Magenta winked. "And that was one ordeal, all right. Rick, you had better move that model off there, unless you want him to smash it up..."

"We ought to give him a name," Ochre said, moving his almost-completed model of a bi-plane out of harm's way.

"I can think of a few choice epithets," Magenta replied cheerfully.

"No, a proper name."

"John Doe?" Grey suggested.

"Nah... a nice name," Ochre chided him.

"I don't know any Tibetan names, except, maybe, Shangri-la," Magenta said thoughtfully.

Ochre gave him an exasperated glance. He watched the baby, his diaper now at a rakish angle around his hips, as the child chuckled cheerfully and tried to eat a playing card he had found on the floor. The tall American bent down and removed it from the damp grasp. It was the King of Hearts. He smiled. "Pat, isn't the King of Hearts meant to be a picture of Charlemagne?" he asked. Magenta nodded, surprised by the question. "Charles the Great," Ochre smiled. "The kid just named himself... guys - meet Charlie!"

Grey laughed. "Don't let the colonel hear you call him that," he warned.

"No - it has nothing to do with the colonel. Scarlet found him - and his father is General Charles Metcalfe - whilst Harmony's name is Chan Kwan - so it's only fair they get an acknowledgement of the part they played in his rescue - the kid's name is Charlie Chan!"

His companions laughed. "Well, you can explain it to everyone then," Magenta warned him. He smiled at the baby. "Hi there, Charlie... welcome to Cloudbase, Spectrum's youngest and newest recruit!"



After his jet had touched down on Cloudbase, and he had made his report to the colonel, Captain Blue strolled along to sickbay to see how Captain Scarlet was recovering. When he entered the main ward, he saw his partner back on his own two feet and marching up and down in front of a sceptical Doctor Fawn.

"Hi, Adam, you're just the man I need to see. Will you tell this saw-bones that I am perfectly fit and able to go back on duty? Please?"

Blue smiled. "I doubt he'd believe me anyway, Paul, but he sure looks fit to me, Doc."

Fawn grimaced and shook his head. "Well, I want to leave early tonight, and I already have enough to do today without having a fight on my hands to keep you here," he conceded. "You can go - but light duties - understood? Light duties only, at least until tomorrow..."

Scarlet tipped his hand to the doctor in a mock salute. "Light duties it is - I could do with some R&R.

Come on, Adam, I want to introduce you to the baby we found, Harmony and I. He's a nice little kid - if a bit... *damp* on occasions."

"I could hardly believe it was true when the colonel told me the baby had been brought here," Blue admitted as they left sickbay and made their way slowly towards the Officers' Lounge. "And it seems more unlikely than ever that he is still here. I thought he would have insisted the kid be shipped back to the ground as soon as possible."

"He would have - except the Tibetans wouldn't take him back. I guess, with all the devastation down there at the village and the general power breakdown in the country, they have too much to deal with without worrying about one little kiddie. So - he's here for the time being. I had an idea about that, whilst I was cooped up in sickbay. As it is almost Christmas, we ought to get the little chap some presents and make sure he has a real good time - what do you think?"

"I think it's a marvellous idea," Blue grinned. "You've really taken to the little guy, haven't you? Yet you always say you don't like kids."

Scarlet stopped suddenly and glanced at his friend. "Well, I feel responsible for this kid - his mother died in my arms, Adam, and she gave her son to Harmony and me to look after."

Blue placed a hand on his shoulder. "Well, I don't think she could have chosen a better guardian for him," he said seriously.

Scarlet flushed. "Don't get all soppy about it - he won't be here long..." He moved off at a quicker pace than before.

Blue shook his head and followed Scarlet along the corridor. Sometimes even he found Paul's moods

difficult to read.

He had caught up with Scarlet before they arrived at the door to the Officers' Lounge and from beyond the closed door came the muffled sound of excited voices. Scarlet punched in the code and the door slid back.

The room was occupied by Spectrum's elite colour captains and the two off-duty Angels - Symphony and Harmony. Symphony turned around to see the identity of the newcomers. She waved a welcome, but rather to Blue's surprise did not come to his side. She was watching the baby, who was sitting on the floor amidst a pile of cushions, laughing with delight as Captain Ochre played peek-a-boo from behind the sofa back.

"Well, it's easy to see who is having the most fun here," Scarlet said with heavy irony.

Blue grinned. "A true meeting of minds, I'd say."

Hearing Scarlet's voice, the baby turned and began to crawl towards him. On reaching the captain's feet, he raised his arms in a demand to be picked up. Without hesitation, Scarlet stooped and lifted him.

"Aaah," Harmony smiled. "He has missed his daddy..."

Magenta snorted with laughter and the somewhat embarrassed Ochre emerged from his hiding place with a cheesy grin.

"I think you just saved me from spending my future as a jack-in-the-box, Scarlet," he called, brushing dust from the knees of his uniform trousers.

"It was worth it, though," Symphony said. "Charlie stopped crying when you started playing with him, Rick."

"Charlie?" Blue's fair brows rose in surprised query.

"Yes," she replied, "that's the baby's name."

Blue sucked in an alarmed breath and grimaced. "Is that wise?" he asked, moving to her side. "If the colonel finds out, he'll go postal."

"The little guy chose it himself, didn't he, Pat?" Ochre said, throwing himself down on the sofa beside Magenta. "He chose the King of Hearts card - and we thought..."

"... Ochre thought," Magenta amended.

"... that as it represents Charlemagne, his name should be Charles. It has a nod in your direction, Paul - it's your father's name, if I remember rightly - and then in honour of his 'mommy' here, we added Chan - so the little guy's name is Charlie Chan!"

Harmony rolled her eyes and gave Scarlet a sympathetic smile. *Humour them*, was the message she seemed to be sending.

Scarlet glanced at the baby who was happily prattling away in what might have been Tibetan, but sounded more like some gibberish of his own devising, whilst he tried to pull the buttons off Scarlet's casual shirt. He gently brushed the baby's hand away, and shrugged. "Well, I guess it's as good a name as any, and if the boy doesn't mind..."

"He doesn't, do you, Charlie?" Symphony asked. She came to Scarlet's side, offering to take the child from him. Charlie smiled at the pretty lady and threw his arms around her neck. "He's a real sweetie, aren't you, darling? Would you like some more chocolate? Let's see what we can find, shall we?"

Scarlet sniggered and moved closer to Blue to whisper, "Well, now you know what Karen wants for Christmas..."

The look Blue gave him made him laugh aloud and

he stepped away to join the other men on the sofa.

Harmony watched Symphony feeding Charlie with a square of chocolate and said, "I am not sure it is a good idea to give him any more, Karen. He has to eat sensibly and it must be time for his dinner soon. We ought to try to keep him to a routine and he will have to go to sleep before it is too late."

"He's not tired, are you, Charlie? He's having too much fun with us to want to sleep."

"Sure he is," Blue said, as he stood beside the sofa and watched Charlie getting chocolate all over his face and hands. "But it won't last - he'll get tired and fractious and then he'll scream until the windows crack..."

"Oh, so *you* are an expert?" Ochre said brightly. And then he snapped his fingers. "But of course, you have younger brothers and sisters, don't you? It's a good job someone knows how to do things."

Blue frowned. "I'm not an expert; I just know that babies spend an awful lot of their time screaming."

Ochre clapped his hands together loudly, making everyone jump. "Well, I reckon that now big-brother Blue is here, we can leave it all to him."

"Leave what to me?" Blue asked suspiciously.

"When his diaper needs changing again," Magenta winked. "We all had a go last time and as you are an expert - you can take charge from now on."

"Diapers? I can't do diapers!" Blue was horrified.

"Oh, but you must've done them before this, Adam," Symphony reasoned. "Surely, you can remember how to do it?"

"No, why would I have done something like that? The nanny always did it... I kept well out of the way."

"The *nanny*?" Ochre stared at him with surprise.

"Well, bless my soul, it's Mary Poppins..." he muttered in what he imagined was a Cockney accent. Captain Scarlet grimaced.

"Sure, we had a nanny - she looked after us when my mother was busy," Blue's voice had taken on a defensive edge. Ochre could be merciless in his criticism of anything he considered elitist.

"Didn't she teach you anything useful?" Ochre persisted.

Blue drew himself up to his full height. "Not about babies - and certainly not about diapers!"

Symphony gave her boyfriend a disparaging glance. "Well, a fat lot of use you are going to be, then. Would it be too much to hope you even thought to bring some disposable diapers back with you? We won't get any until the next London shuttle arrives - and that's tomorrow - and we were hoping you might've bought some with you in the meantime..."

"Where would I get disposable diapers in Lhasa?" Blue asked, to cover the fact that the thought had not crossed his mind.

"A shop?" Harmony suggested.

"I never went near a shop - I was with the First Minister in his office all the time..."

Symphony shifted Charlie to the other side of her lap and sniffed. "Don't make excuses, Adam. You messed up - admit it. You knew we had the baby here and it doesn't take a genius to deduce we'd need all the paraphernalia that goes with a baby - nor that it wasn't likely to be readily available on Cloudbase. I would have thought you'd have had enough brain to work that out without being told. It wouldn't have hurt you to bring some on the off-chance - even if we had been able to get supplies from somewhere else, in the meantime.

Still, that's just typical of men, I suppose - if something isn't spelt out for them in easy words, they never bother to extrapolate and anticipate what's needed... " She swapped exasperated grimaces with Harmony, who had come to stand beside her, one hand resting lightly on Charlie's dark head. The baby looked from one Angel to the other and then up at Captain Blue, before blowing a raspberry and giggling at his own cleverness.

Astounded, Blue looked to Scarlet for help, but his friend was too busy trying to hide his amusement to be of any assistance.

Irritated at this unexpected condemnation, Blue turned to leave the room and as he walked away he said over his shoulder, "I was busy, okay? It never occurred to me that you would be keeping the baby here for so long that he'd need diapers and ... stuff. If that is my fault, then I apologise for not being psychic - okay?"

They watched him leave and once the door had closed behind him, Symphony sighed. "Damn, I tend to forget he can be so touchy at times..."

"Well, it wasn't really his fault, was it?" Scarlet remarked. "And you did rather lay it on with a trowel, Symphony."

She shrugged. "I'd better go and make up... or he'll sulk for days." She handed the baby to Harmony. "Bye-bye for now, Charlie - be a good boy for your mommy..." She glanced at Harmony. "How long are you off duty for, Chan?"

"Only for the rest of the day, Karen. Doctor Fawn wanted to make sure I did not have a concussion before I flew again."

"Okay, well, I guess that means I'll have an extra duty... I'd better check. See you guys later - I think

you'll have to organise a rota, Paul - so that Charlie gets properly looked after."

"Not a bad idea, Karen," he agreed. He glanced at Harmony, who was still looking rather pale. "Maybe you had better get some rest, Chan - or Fawn won't sign you fit for duty in a hurry."

The Chinese girl glanced at the baby on her knee and then up at Scarlet in uncertainty.

He answered her unspoken question. "Leave Charlie with us - what harm could possibly come to him with four big, strong Spectrum agents to look after him?"

"You really want me to answer that?" She smiled, handing him the baby and saying her goodbyes.



After consulting Doctor Fawn about the baby's wellbeing and whereabouts, Colonel White thought it prudent to pay a visit to the Officers' Lounge. Keeping the child on Cloudbase was a far from satisfactory solution to the problem, but he had been unable to convince the Tibetan authorities of the necessity of their taking immediate responsibility for the infant. They had pleaded for more time - explaining that, given the extent of the devastation caused by the explosions and subsequent landslides in the locality, there would be small chance of finding any of the baby's relatives and there were no facilities there that could take him temporarily. To move him out of the area, risked the possibility his family might never be traced.

Lieutenant Green, busy rigging up a basic communications network to allow Spectrum's Tibetan agents contact with the outside world, confirmed that

the situation was still critical.

"There is no reliable power supply, sir, and although outside help is starting to arrive in the country, things are still desperate in the hinterland."

Colonel White was a humane and generous man, and he had no intention of abandoning the child his agents had saved. As he strolled from the Control Room to the Officers' Lounge, he admitted to himself that, in fact, he was rather looking forward to seeing just how well his elite officers coped with the situation. He knew all their personal histories and was well aware that many of them had little or no experience in caring for young children within their own families - and as such, could not be expected to know much about the subject. He was also aware - although he took care not to reveal the extent of his knowledge - that several of his officers were involved in established personal relationships, either with Angel pilots or other staff members. The prospect of seeing how those couples would deal with the situation made him smile with a certain wry amusement.

He did not intend his approach to be secretive, but the door slid back silently and no-one seemed aware of his arrival.

The remains of a meal stood discarded on a canteen tray on a low coffee table. He assumed that proved the child was being fed a suitable diet, which no doubt Doctor Fawn had prescribed. He was pleased to see that the child had not been paraded around the open areas of the base. He didn't want a wave of baby-fever sweeping Cloudbase and - given the rapidly-approaching Christmas Day - his personnel were in a susceptible state for anything with even a modicum of 'cute' about it. An orphaned baby would have had the

whole place in an uproar....

Across the room four of his five elite officers were crowded around an armchair. From inside the circle of bodies, he could hear Captain Scarlet's voice chanting:

*Ride a cockhorse to Banbury Cross,
To see a fine lady ride on a white horse,
With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
She shall have music - wherever she goes!*

As the captain's voice rose in crescendo, the colonel heard the delighted chuckle of the baby boy, and saw him riding high on Captain Scarlet's leg as he was launched skywards and into the waiting arms of the other captains. Captain Magenta caught the child and shook him aloft over his head like a trophy, before clasping him to his chest and allowing the child's excited laughter to die down.

"That's it," Scarlet said. "I've had enough... even my muscles get tired, you know."

Ochre moved away and White could see that Scarlet was in the armchair, one leg crossed over his other knee to provide a see-saw for the child. With a grimace, the captain straightened his crossed leg and winced slightly. "Besides, Fawn said I had to do light duties only... and that kid gets heavier by the minute!"

"You can't spoil the fun," Magenta protested. "He wants another go..." The child was straining to get back to Scarlet's lap.

"You do it then," Scarlet said.

"Gentlemen..." The colonel's voice made them all gasp in surprise. Scarlet scrambled out of his chair. "I am sure that if Captain Scarlet has had enough, then

the child must have had more than enough as well. He seems to be getting over-excited." As White spoke, he moved towards the child.

The latter, unhappy that the fun had stopped, and frightened because he sensed that his new friends were uneasy at the appearance of this stranger with the deep voice, pushed out a trembling lower lip. When White's hand reached his head to give it a friendly pat, the child let out a mournful wail, squirming away as two large tears rolled down from his dark eyes. He wriggled in Magenta's arms and reached out his arms towards Captain Scarlet, who reluctantly took delivery of him.

"It seems he trusts you most of all, Scarlet," the colonel said brusquely to hide his disappointment.

"He's met a lot of new people today, sir," Ochre chipped in, hoping to mitigate the child's behaviour. "I guess you may be right and he's over-excited and getting tired. Ain't that the case, Charlie-boy?" He smiled at the baby who was peering cautiously at the others from the safety of Scarlet's shoulder.

"I beg your pardon?" The colonel's tone would have frozen molten rock.

"Er... it's the baby's name, sir," Magenta replied, almost stammering. "We christened him Charlie Chan... we couldn't call him 'baby' all the time. And it was Harmony and Scarlet who found him and we thought that...."

White's frown deepened and every man there felt that they were in for a roasting. Then, to their astonishment, the frown softened and White's mouth straightened in a rueful 'smile'.

"Well, it will have to do until we know his real name." He cleared his throat and turned to his officers. "I am sure that most of you have other things

to do, apart from 'playing see-saw' with our guest. Captain Ochre, I am expecting that report from you tomorrow. I trust you have it in hand?"

"Sure do, sir... nearly finished."

"Very well... carry on, gentlemen. But I would suggest you find somewhere for... young Charlie... to get some sleep in the near future. This remains an operational base, it is not a playgroup."

"S.I.G., sir," the three on-duty officers chorused, visibly relaxing.

White gave a nod and was about to leave when Charlie, reassured by the lifting tension, stretched out his arms to him. Hesitantly, the colonel accepted the child and stood for a moment, smiling at the baby in his arms. The child gave a toothy smile and chattered in his private language, yanking at the colonel's bright epaulettes.

"Hello to you too... Charlie," the colonel said. He cleared his throat again and returned the child to Captain Scarlet; he then nodded farewell and walked out of the room.

"He'll go ape..." Magenta said.

"Maybe we should have mentioned it..." Grey suggested.

"Not on your life - let someone else get the ear-bashing," Scarlet replied. "I thought we had got all the chocolate off Charlie's hands..." he mused, examining one chubby hand.

Ochre chortled. "They were very precise hand prints... right in the middle of the colonel's white tunic..."

The men all dissolved into laughter.

"This kid's going to cause chaos on Cloudbase before he's finished!" Magenta guffawed.

"Maybe we should find Charlie a suitable bed to sleep in?" Grey suggested, seeing the little boy rub his dark eyes and noticing how his head was drooping down towards Scarlet's shoulder.

"Slip him in your bed, Paul," Ochre suggested. "He'll be happiest there."

"I don't want to have to spend all night there watching over him... nor do I want a wet bed come morning..." Scarlet grimaced.

"Well, what can we do instead?"

"A drawer?" Magenta suggested. He went on to explain as his friends looked curiously at him: "Use an empty drawer - lined with blankets for Charlie. That can be taken anywhere there is someone to look after him too."

He had hardly finished speaking before Ochre was on the move. "Brad, nip down to sickbay and rustle up some bedding... I think I know where I can find some plastic sheeting to line a drawer with. Pat, go empty one of the long drawers from your quarters and bring it back here. Scarlet - don't move... I think Charlie's dropped off."

Scarlet pulled a face. "I know he has... he's wet again..."

The 'bed' was ready in a remarkably short space of time. Ochre had lined the drawer from Magenta's room with heavy-duty plastic and then they had padded it out with sheets and blankets from sickbay. They managed to change the dozy baby without too much effort and tucked him carefully in the makeshift cot. Whimpering slightly, Charlie turned over onto his back, one hand thrown back on the pillow and almost immediately went back to sleep.

"Ain't he wonderful when he's quiet?" Magenta smiled.

Grey nodded. "I have to get something to eat. I am on duty in the Control Room tonight when the colonel goes off duty. Anyone else want to come?"

"Yeah," Ochre said. "I'm going to be up all night writing that report."

"What'll we do with Charlie? It's too noisy in the canteen, he'll wake up..." Scarlet reminded them.

"Let's drop him down the Amber Room - there's always someone in there and it's about time those girls did their share of the baby-sitting duty."



Symphony had finally caught up with Captain Blue on the Promenade Deck and after he had failed to respond to her conciliatory opening remarks, she had sat in silence beside him, waiting for his good temper to reassert itself.

It wasn't often that Blue got moody - that was usually her response to imagined slights or setbacks - but she knew he could be incredibly sensitive at times, especially about the circumstances of his upbringing. He came from a wealthy family and had taken a great many things for granted which experience had only gradually shown him were not the norm for most people. When the officers had first met, Ochre, in particular, had delighted in teasing him about his casual references to yachts and polo ponies, exotic holidays and fast cars - so that now Blue had become very wary about revealing any details of his home life.

Symphony thought his embarrassment at having

been born rich was quite endearing really, and she realised that he was now not only annoyed at having been so publicly given a dressing-down for something he did not consider his fault, but was also feeling guilty for not having assisted his mother with his younger siblings - as everyone assumed he would have done. No doubt, the thought that he could expect a whole new series of jokes at his expense, from the irrepressible Captain Ochre, was also playing its part in making him depressed.

After the chilly silence had lasted almost ten minutes, Symphony decided she was getting nowhere and that she had better just ignore his 'hissy-fit' altogether. Her next duty was due to start in somewhat under fifteen minutes. Destiny in Angel One would be out on patrol and Rhapsody in Angel Two would be manning the flight deck - so she was going to be all alone for a time on stand-by duty in the Amber Room. With a sudden flash of inspiration, she invited him to help her decorate the Amber Room Christmas tree, which had arrived from Rhapsody's family estate that morning, and had now been set up by the support crew.

With a bashful grimace, he nodded agreement and, as they walked all the way through Cloudbase together, his mood gradually improved, so by the time they arrived, they were hand in hand.

"Pass me that bauble... the green glass one. Thanks."

"Are you okay up there? Maybe I should do it?"

"I can stand on a kick-stool without risking life and limb, Big Blue. Now, what about some of the red and gold bows - on this level of branches... how would that look?"

Symphony leant back to gauge the effect of her suggestion and toppled off the kick-stool into the waiting arms of Captain Blue.

"What was that about life and limb?" he asked, as she regained her balance.

She turned in his embrace and smiled up at him. "A controlled descent," she smiled, "in the confident expectation of a comfortable landing."

"Like I'm going to believe that..."

"I don't care if you believe me or not, it's true. Oh, and while I'm here like this..." She reached up to draw his head down to hers. She kissed him. His arms tightened around her.

It was several minutes before they parted.

"I wish Rhapsody's people had sent the mistletoe as well, but she said that would come later..."

"Surely we don't need the excuse of a parasitic plant to share a kiss now and again?"

"You have no romance in your soul, Svenson. Now, let's get back to work... this tree needs to be decorated."

"Yes, ma'am," he said smartly - although, instead of turning to the task in hand, he bent his head and kissed her again.

They sprang apart at the sound of the opening door and stared in amazement as Scarlet backed in.

Magenta was at the other end of the drawer they were carrying. "The very people..." he called. "We're off to get some food, and Charlie's catching forty winks, so we need some new baby-sitters... if you two have nothing better to do, you can keep an eye on him."

"Sure," Blue said, eager to make amends for his previous behaviour. "We're decorating the tree, but you can leave the drawer on the floor there and we'll watch

him."

"Make sure you do," Scarlet warned. "No getting so wrapped up in... doing the decorating that you forget him."

"Hey, you can trust us!" Symphony protested.

"We can trust you, Karen." Scarlet winked and moved closer to whisper, "but Adam's likely to get carried away again if you don't watch him..." She frowned in confusion. He smiled. "He has lipstick on his cheek... Wait till we've gone before you mention it - or he'll get even more embarrassed..."

She grinned and punched his shoulder playfully. As soon as the two men had left, she demanded Blue's handkerchief and cleaned her lipstick stain from his face, laughing at his horrified expression.

They carried on with their job, getting very involved with the rigging up of the fairy lights, which Blue insisted on testing before he would allow her to string them up. Sitting near the electrical socket, with the baby hidden by the tree, they didn't notice Charlie wake, and, not seeing anyone about to stop his fun, clamber out of his 'cot' in a determined effort to reach the shiny pretty things on the floor and table nearby.

"They're okay, Adam." Symphony's patience was wearing thin. "It's going to be perfectly safe to plug them in... just let me wrap them through the branches first..."

"Wait a minute: I'm not sure the flex will be long enough, Karen. Lay it out on the floor, first."

"It reached last year!"

"The tree was further back last year - I'm sure it was."

"Oh - Adam..."

There was the tinkling noise of broken glass and,

startled, Symphony leapt across to peer round the tree.

"Charlie! You're a naughty boy!" she gasped. He was reaching up to tug a strand of tinsel from the table, and several glass baubles were rolling towards, or already teetering on, the edge. A few had already smashed.

She ran to the child, picking him up from the nest of tinsel he had made and checking to make sure the fallen glass baubles had not hurt him.

Blue joined her. She was standing kissing the baby's hand and trying to tell him off at the same time. The boy had strands of silver 'angel hair' tinsel in his hair and a thicker golden strand was twisted around his ankle and trailing on the floor. He was laughing cheerfully.

"I don't think he believes you," Blue said.

"He might've hurt himself, Adam - while we were in charge of him! I'd have never forgiven myself if he had done!"

"He's fine - aren't you, Charlie?" He took the baby from her and they sat on the sofa, side by side. Charlie amused himself by clambering over them and playing with the various pockets and zips on their uniforms - which seemed to have a never-ending fascination for him.

"He's a nice kid," Symphony said, smiling as Charlie yanked at her uniform zip and managed to pull it down a few inches. He squealed with excitement at his achievement, turning his delighted face to the two adults, both watching him with amusement.

"He's very advanced for his age..." Blue remarked. "I've been itching to undo that zip for hours..."

"Behave!"

Charlie was beginning to droop again, and he curled up in the crook of Symphony's arm, his thumb finding his mouth. Sucking contentedly, he closed his eyes.

The adults exchanged affectionate smiles as the baby dozed off.

"You may have to sit there... if we put him down again, he might wake up."

"It's okay - as long as there isn't a red alert..." She smiled and stroked the soft cheek resting against her breast. "You've never told me if you ever wanted a family..." she mused, glancing at her lover under her lashes.

"I guess so... I never really thought about it."

"I bet you'd make a good father... kids like you."

He gave an embarrassed gasp. "Must be because I know how it shouldn't be done."

"Maybe - maybe it's just because you *are* kinda cute..."

This time he laughed. "And how about you, Karen, what do you want? I mean, looking at you there, it would seem you've been doing this all your life. It looks entirely natural."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I guess one day I would like a baby. But not just any baby..." She turned to him and smiled. "I kind of like the idea that one day I'll have your baby..."

Blue swallowed and she saw a flush starting in his cheeks. "Yeah," he whispered. "I kind of like that idea too." He reached across and kissed her.

"I don't mean right now!" she teased.

"Well... we could always practice..." he replied, with a grin of his own.

"Didn't I tell you to behave?" Symphony lowered her tone to a barely audible whisper. "Charlie's gone

back to sleep. You'll wake him up again."

She rose from the sofa and went to put the baby down in his makeshift bed. From where he was sitting, Blue watched her as she gently tucked Charlie in - and then planted a delicate kiss on the tiny dark head. When Symphony turned around, it was to see an affectionate smile tugging at her lover's lips. She gave him an inquiring frown.

"What?"

"I was just thinking... you know - you would make a wonderful mother ... one day."

She snorted playfully, a radiant smile on her lips. "Come on," she replied, gesturing toward the tree. "We still have work to do..."

Blue rose up and joined her to finish decorating the tree, this time keeping a wary eye out for Charlie, to make sure he didn't leave his bed again.



It was only a couple of hours later that the other Angels came back; according to schedule, Melody swapped places with Destiny to do Angel One duty for the night, and Rhapsody and Destiny were due for Amber Room duty. The arriving Angels were amazed at the work already done on the Christmas tree in the middle of the room, and agreed that once all the decorations were finished, it would probably be more beautiful than the previous year. Symphony and Blue were rightly congratulated before they left, Blue accompanying Symphony whilst she got changed before they went to eat. The others assured them that Baby

Charlie was in good hands - after all, what could happen during the night, now that he was sound asleep?

They came back barely an hour later, in company with Harmony, whom they had met in the corridor. It seemed that none of them were able to stay away long from Charlie.

They fully expected to find Destiny and Rhapsody working on the tree, as the two of them had intended to, but were unpleasantly surprised to discover that it wasn't the case...

As soon as the door leading into the room opened, they were welcomed by the most awful wailing they had ever heard, and that rooted them to the spot, right in the doorway. Rhapsody was pacing quickly around, Charlie in her arms, shushing him and trying to comfort him. None of it had any effect. The baby was yelling as loud as his lungs would allow.

"What's going on here?" a frowning Symphony asked, just as she and Harmony cleared the door to let it slide closed. She hurried down the steps towards Rhapsody. The latter stopped in her tracks to stare at them with a concerned expression on her face.

"I don't know, he woke up crying a little while ago - and doesn't seem to want to stop... I'm terribly worried!"

"He probably feels you're concerned," Symphony suggested, hearing the anxiety in Rhapsody's shaky voice. "Babies know those kinds of things... Here, let me have him..."

She took Charlie out of a grateful Rhapsody's arms. That didn't do any good; Charlie's cries seemed to grow even more in intensity when Blue tried to comfort him in turn.

"Can I try?" Harmony said, stepping forward, her

arms open to take the baby.

"Yeah, maybe he will calm down if he feels his mommy is holding him," Blue approved.

Delicately, Harmony took Charlie into her arms. For a fraction of a second, it seemed that he would calm down and stop, but it didn't last very long - once he was comfortably settled into the crook of the Chinese Angel's arm, Charlie started wailing again, making everyone around cringe.

"Told you it wouldn't work," Destiny noted from where she was standing, right next to the half-decorated Christmas tree.

"I don't see you making any effort to stop him crying!" Rhapsody shot back immediately. Presumably, it was an argument the two of them had been having since the beginning of the episode.

"Come on, let's stay calm, now," Captain Blue said evenly. "Fighting amongst ourselves won't solve the problem. Now... let's work out why he's crying. Is he wet?"

"No," was the combined answer from Destiny and Rhapsody. "We checked that," the red-head added scornfully.

"Is he hungry?" Blue persisted.

"He refused the bottle of milk we offered him," Rhapsody answered.

"So, what is it, Little Charlie?" Blue asked the baby, peering into his tear-streaked face. "What is wrong with you?"

"What if he's sick?" suggested Rhapsody.

"Could be..."

"We should show him to Doctor Fawn..." Symphony suggested.

"Fawn left early tonight," Blue replied

thoughtfully. "He won't be in sickbay if we go there. But one of his assistants..."

"I want Fawn," Harmony interrupted suddenly.

Blue opened wide eyes. It wasn't often that the quiet Harmony spoke so assertively. "You want Doctor Fawn to make a *house call* in the Amber Room?"

"Why not?" Symphony snapped, backing up her friend. "He's a doctor and the child is ill..."

"He might not like it," Blue retorted reasonably.

"Do we have a choice?" Rhapsody had reached for the comm.link. Slowly, Blue sat back on the sofa, shaking his head. Surely, they were in for a good ear-bashing, once Fawn came over...



"Okay... Let me ask you a few questions before giving my diagnosis."

Dragged from his bed by Rhapsody's urgent 'emergency' call, Doctor Fawn had not taken long to come from his quarters to the Amber Room... making a genuine 'house call' to examine Baby Charlie - who, in the meantime, had still not stopped crying. Doctor Fawn was in an irate mood - that much was obvious to the Angels and the captain present. Yet as grumpy as he appeared, he was still the professional doctor they all knew so well and he didn't hesitate one second before starting to check what could be wrong with the child. It was after only a few short minutes, that he addressed the group waiting nervously around him.

"What has he had to eat?" Fawn asked in concern as he gently felt the child's stomach.

"For dinner he had some mashed potatoes and

shredded roast chicken with broccoli, followed by jelly and custard," Blue recited.

"And later I gave him some chocolate digestives with some of my cup of tea," Rhapsody admitted.

"And I gave him some banana," Harmony added.

"And I shared some of my chocolate truffles with him," Destiny confessed.

The others widened their eyes and stared at her.

"When did you do that?" Rhapsody asked, astounded.

"After he woke up... and you went to fetch him some milk, Rhapsody. Not... long before he started crying?" Destiny offered, with a bashful expression.

They exchanged glances; so, contrary to all appearances, the French Angel *had* let herself be charmed by Charlie...

"Greater love hath no Pontoin than to share her chocolate truffles..." Blue whispered in Symphony's ear. She dug her elbow into his ribs and tried not to laugh.

"Anything else?" Fawn asked sarcastically. "Didn't anyone think to give him caviar and champagne - or pâté de fois gras and Napoleon brandy? Of course he's ill - you morons! - he has stomach ache! He has probably eaten more in the past twenty-four hours than he has in his entire life to date!"

"But he was hungry," Symphony protested. She was wisely keeping the details of the chocolate bars she had shared with Charlie to herself.

"No, he wasn't - he was greedy, and probably he's never tasted anything like these foods before and he liked them."

"Actually, he spat the broccoli out," Blue remarked.

"Well now, there's a surprise!" Fawn shook his dark

head. "I thought you had more sense. I thought you could be trusted to care for this child - and not ruin his digestion! Honestly, if you cannot be trusted to do something this simple correctly - what chance does the rest of the world have with you as its guardians?"

They stood in a line before the irate doctor, like shame-faced schoolchildren. Symphony reached out to take Blue's hand for moral support. He squeezed her fingers.

On the sofa, Charlie's wails subsided to hiccupping whimpers.

"So, he will be all right?" Rhapsody asked.

"Sure, when all the junk you shoved into his gut has had a chance to come out... He must have nothing to eat for the next six hours and then only a little milk and one plain biscuit - a PLAIN biscuit - understood? And I don't care how much he wails or how hungry he looks..."

"S.I.G.," they chorused.

"You can boil some water and cool it - so he can have plenty to drink - he mustn't dehydrate due to diarrhoea or vomiting. Now - I am going back to my bed and I don't want to be disturbed again. Try to make up for your silliness by looking after him properly."

Harmony swept Charlie into her arms, cradling his cheek against hers as he started wailing again.

Doctor Fawn roughly took his bag from the table and left the Amber Room, muttering. "Maybe I'll use the Room of Sleep - after all, even I need to get some rest sometime - and I have a sinking feeling that it could be a long night..."

Catching those last words, everyone exchanged glances of astonishment, as the door slid closed behind the physician. "Fawn... using the Room of Sleep?!" Blue

declared. "Boy, he's *really* in one of his moods..."

"Chocolate truffles?!" Rhapsody said, turning to Destiny with an accusing expression.

"Well, yes... He wanted some..." the French girl defended herself.

"Great, so now we're in it real deep with Fawn - he thinks we are all incompetents," Symphony moaned.

As if on cue, a strange noise erupted from Charlie, who suddenly stopped his wailing. An awful smell pervaded Harmony and the baby's immediate surroundings and it was almost by instinct that everyone stepped away, making disgusted sounds. An appalled Harmony, presenting an heroic and dignified façade, looked around with reproachful eyes.

"So much for Spectrum's bravest," she commented, before looking down toward Charlie's diaper with a grimace.

Captain Blue backed off slightly, heading towards the door. "I... I have to go," he muttered.

"Oh, no you don't!" Symphony yelped. "If your nanny never taught you to change a diaper - you can learn now... *Uncle Adam...*"

"But I'll be useless..." he protested.

"We all are!" the four Angels retorted in unison.

"Teamwork..." Rhapsody added. "The colonel always places great emphasis on teamwork - and lucky you, Adam - you just got appointed team-leader..."

"Me? Why me?" a horrified Blue answered.

"Privileges of the rank, my dear *capitaine*," Destiny said, with an enticing smile.

"Yeah, just imagine that you're dealing with a bio-hazard..." Symphony continued encouragingly.

"I *will* be dealing with a bio-hazard!" he responded ruefully. Sensing that there was no escape, he sighed

and moved towards the table and knelt in front of the baby. "Okay - let's get it over with... you girls can be so merciless, sometimes..."

If the first diaper change had been a learning experience for their Spectrum colleagues earlier, this one proved a harrowing one for the Angels - and especially for Captain Blue, who was in the front line and suffered the worst of it. As for Charlie, for once, he kept quiet, sniffing and sighing at the same time, probably in too much pain or too tired to try to escape. The soiled - and smelly - diaper was quickly thrown into a bag, along with all the toilet paper and disposable napkins used to clean up the baby, and then promptly disposed of in the incineration unit.

Blue was holding his breath as much as possible, and his face was in danger of turning the same hue as his tunic. The Angels surrounding him weren't faring any better. A fight almost broke out when Destiny, waving a hand before her nose, brought a bottle of perfume across and suggested using it on the baby. The others argued that it might prove an irritant for Charlie's delicate skin, not to mention his sensitive nostrils... at which Destiny showed herself most insulted that anyone would insinuate that her expensive perfume would be too powerful. To emphasise her point, she sprayed a few short bursts of perfume towards them, managing to douse Captain Blue - whose sense of smell was already under considerable attack.

He complained angrily. "Do you mind, Destiny? I do not want to spend the rest of the day smelling like a French broth..." He stopped himself in time, as a well-developed sense of self-preservation made him swallow what he was going to say. But Destiny had heard enough and, highly offended, she flounced away.

The situation got worse when Symphony asked, with exaggerated innocence, just *how* he knew what a French brothel smelt like anyway...

It was Harmony who finally attached the last safety pin to Charlie's diaper, with such skill that the others could only look in awe and admire her expertise.

The baby had kept extremely quiet, not uttering so much as a single peep.

"Right," Captain Blue said finally, his face displaying a broad smile, similar to those of the women surrounding him. "All nice and clean, Charlie..." He took the boy in his arms, holding him up, very satisfied that the baby had let himself be taken care of without so much of the fuss the others had told him about. Probably, he thought, they were exaggerating... "That's a good boy..."

And suddenly, everything went wrong.

Charlie's lips parted at a lopsided angle, as if he was dissatisfied with the way he was being handled right now. He didn't seem to really be paying any attention to what Blue was saying to him. He hiccoughed violently... and a shower of brownish, very repulsive, semi-liquid matter emerged from his mouth and right onto Blue's neck and tunic, missing his face by a quarter of an inch. The smile on the American captain's face disappeared instantly, and the nice words he was about to pronounce died on his lips. He looked with horror-widened eyes into the face of Charlie, who was now gnawing on his fist and looking much happier, if a little sheepish.

As the initial shock wore off, the Angels creased up with laughter.

"That's it!" Blue declared violently. He pushed Charlie into Harmony's arms, probably more brusquely

than he intended. She didn't pay that much attention; like the others, she was also too busy laughing at his expense. He shot to his feet, looking at himself with disgust. "I did my part, and look what that... that... that *ungrateful brat* did to me!"

"Oh, Adam... it's hardly his fault," Symphony said between sniggers. "He's sick..." Her laugh died in a loud snort that made Blue frown angrily at her. He had turned livid, and he was trying, unsuccessfully, to regain his dignity. He was barely able to restrain himself from exploding.

It was enough that Charlie had been sick on him, but to have the Angels treating him as a laughing stock was more than he could take.

"Now I'll have to change into a clean uniform!" he said, turning on his heel and stomping towards the exit. "He's all yours, girls. It's about time you faced up to the consequences of feeding a baby with chocolate truffles... Next time you want a volunteer to deal with a... *bio-hazard* - don't call me, I'll call you!"

And he disappeared through the sliding door amidst the Angels' continuous laughter.

It was only when the door slid closed again, that they finally realised what had just happened and as the laughter died, they exchanged concerned glances.

Their fearless leader had abandoned them...



Hard on the heels of Captain Blue's departure, the Angels decided to follow Doctor Fawn's instructions so that Charlie's... 'discomfort' would ease quickly and he would get better soon. He was still crying a little, and

he was passed from hand to hand in their attempts to comfort him the best they could.

Destiny - who really felt guilty over giving the baby chocolate truffles - no matter how often she repeatedly protested she had only given him '*a very little amount*' - boiled some water and it was an almost nightmarish wait until it had cooled off enough so they could give it to Charlie.

It was Rhapsody who had the child in her arms, pacing around the Christmas tree, trying to distract him with the 'beautiful shiny things' when Destiny came back with the bottle - and immediately moved to give it to the baby.

The English pilot made a step back.

"Hold it!" she stated in a suspicious tone. "Is it cool enough?"

"Of course, it's cool enough!" scoffed her French counterpart. "Do you think me that incompetent?"

The stare Rhapsody gave her spoke volumes. Destiny looked around in direction of both Harmony and Symphony, seated tiredly on the sofa. Both had the same expression as Rhapsody on their faces.

"Really, girls, this is ridiculous..."

"*Did* you test it?" Symphony asked in turn, glowering at the French Angel.

"Of course, I did..."

"... On your wrist?" insisted Harmony.

"You *are* getting ridiculous," Destiny sighed. "*Très bien*, if this is what you want..." She put her arm forward and turned the bottle upside down over it.

The cap fell off, spilling all the contents of the bottle onto Destiny's wrist and her uniform cuff, before dripping to the floor. A shocked and dreadful silence followed, during which Destiny felt for sure one

of the others would tell her off. As it was, only a deep sigh from Harmony broke the silence, and she tiredly rose from her seat.

"Hopefully, there's still enough boiled water left," she said, taking the bottle from Destiny's limp hand. "By the way, was it cool enough?"

She ignored the murderous glare from the French girl, who, defeated, went to flop down onto the sofa, next to Symphony.

Harmony came back with the new bottle of water; she took Charlie and went to sit down to give him the bottle. The little baby sucked thirstily, heaving deep, shaky sighs as he did so, and the pain in his belly slowly eased. The Angels watched, mesmerised by the rhythm of the water lowering in the bottle.

An hour later, Symphony was more than happy to trade places with Melody, who came back from her stint in Angel One to find a relatively quiet Charlie sucking on his second bottle of boiled water. The others informed her of the recent events - including what had happened with Captain Blue. Not having been there to see it all, Melody's first reaction was to be disappointed at missing Blue's misadventure. At that, the other Angels rolled their eyes.

"Actually, it *was* quite funny," Destiny acknowledged finally, probably not as reluctantly as she would have wanted. "Although, he was very cross... for Captain Blue, that is."

"I just hope it won't force Blue to reconsider his views on parenting," Rhapsody said, with a faint smile tugging at her lips. "That wouldn't be fair on poor Karen - if she ever wants to have children."

"Maybe that has forced *her* to reconsider her views about children," Destiny replied in turn.

"I somehow doubt it," Harmony noted. "Haven't you seen how protective she is of Charlie?"

"He seems better now," Melody remarked thoughtfully, checking on the small baby who, now on Rhapsody's lap, was still drinking from his bottle.

"He is quiet, yes," Rhapsody acknowledged. "Oh... I wonder if it's a good sign... Remember, he was just as quiet *just* before what happened to Captain Blue..."

The door slid open at that moment and the girls raised their heads to see who was coming over; they saw Colonel White stride into the room; he gestured to the three women who didn't have a baby on their hands and who were starting to rise from their seats.

"As you were, ladies... I just came to see our small guest." He gave a smile as he approached Rhapsody and looked down at the baby on her lap. "I heard he was sick earlier this evening?"

"I'm afraid it was our fault, sir," Harmony confessed. "All of us. We indulged him with too much junk food - much more than his stomach could handle."

"He seems to have quietened down, now," Rhapsody announced. "Maybe he'll be able to get some sleep from now on."

"So I see." White sat down next to Rhapsody and looked at the tired and somehow dejected young faces surrounding him. "Ah, don't feel so guilty about what happened to the baby, Angels. Even if you indulged him with too many good things to eat... none of you has experience with children, so it was odds on that was going to happen. If anything, it proves you all have his welfare at heart..."

The colonel's little pep talk didn't seem to have the desired effect, as he could see that the Angels didn't look very convinced by his words. Charlie gave a short

whimper at this moment and, pushing the bottle away from his lips, struggled to escape from Rhapsody's hands. He succeeded in rolling onto his front and started crawling in the direction of White. The latter extended his arms and gently picked up the child to bring him to his chest. The child gazed at him with what looked like a shy but genuine smile.

"Now then," White continued, smiling in turn, and helping Charlie struggle to his feet and climb onto him to reach for one of his epaulettes, "this child looks happy in your company - and in rather good health, all things considered. You are doing a fine job, all of you, Angels and captains alike... In the circumstances, I don't think anyone could have done much better. And there aren't any safer hands to which young... Charlie could have been entrusted." Charlie leaned over the colonel's shoulder and gave a slight hiccup, followed by a contented cooing sound nearly into White's ear. The latter's smile widened on his lips. "You see? Even he agrees with that..."

The Angels smiled, finally accepting their commanding officer's words. Satisfied that he had made his point, White pulled Charlie from his person, and gave him back into Rhapsody's waiting hands, before standing up again. He failed to notice the horror suddenly widening Melody and Destiny's eyes, as he turned his back to them. He was too preoccupied, glancing down at the child who was now moaning faintly, rubbing his eyes and face with his tiny fists.

"That said, however, I don't think the Amber Room is a good place to keep a child at night, considering the constant activity down here. Especially with the distraction provided by that shiny Christmas tree. Maybe he would be far more comfortable if he were

able to rest in a more quiet place... a bedroom, perhaps. That would be more suitable for him."

That might well have been an order, but the colonel had the good taste not to make it sound as if it was one. The Angels exchanged approving nods.

"S.I.G., sir," Rhapsody said, with a faint, almost bashful smile. Why none of them had thought of it before was beyond her!

"Good, and I think the two of you who are not on duty should get some rest as well. You have done far more today than was expected of you. No matter what you may think." He made his good-nights to the Angel pilots and turned around, satisfied to have achieved his goal. Harmony and Rhapsody then saw, like Melody and Destiny before them, that their commander had a small, but still disgusting stain of dark, regurgitated chocolate, just between two very clear, dark imprints of baby hands, on the back of his otherwise snow-white uniform. None of the Angels dared say a word, until the door slid closed on Colonel White.

"Why do I have the impression that this wasn't the first time the colonel took Charlie in his arms?" Melody finally said after a short moment.

There was another silence; then the Angels started bursting into laughter again.



The room was dark and silent when the visitor quietly entered, after punching into the security lock the numeric code that he knew so very well. Only the faint light coming from the fish tank separating the bedroom area from the living area was illuminating the

place, but it was enough for the newcomer to find his way easily. Harmony was sleeping, curled up on the sofa; she didn't look particularly comfortable, but that didn't seem to bother her. She was enjoying a long awaited moment of rest. The newcomer carefully made a large detour around her, so not to disturb her - he certainly wouldn't want to face a suddenly awakening and disoriented Harmony - and tiptoed to the sleeping area.

Rhapsody was sound asleep on top of her bed, still wearing her day clothes, with Charlie resting in the crook of her arm. The baby wasn't asleep - but was rather very quiet, making contented gurgling sounds and playing with a lock of the young woman's long hair. Captain Scarlet approached silently and smiled fondly upon the scene. He knelt beside the bed and Charlie's eyes widened upon seeing him; he moved hands and feet excitedly, and cooed a little louder, but not enough to bring Rhapsody out of her dreams.

"Sshhh..." Scarlet enjoined him, putting a finger to his own lips. "Easy now, Charlie... you don't want to wake the pretty lady..." He carefully untangled the small baby from his position, taking great care himself not to awaken Rhapsody Angel, and gently lifted him up into his arms, shushing him as he did, and whispering, to calm his meagre protests: "How nice and cosy you are there, Charlie-Boy... You know I envy you? Come on, now... Come to Daddy... That's a nice baby..."

Rhapsody didn't utter so much as a moan as Scarlet stood up with the baby in his arms; he looked down as she changed into a more comfortable position, a broad, fond smile on his lips. She must be very tired if she had not reacted more to the fact that he had taken the baby from her. He looked down at the child

in his arms, and asked him anew: "Doesn't she look adorable when she sleeps so peacefully, Charlie? Isn't she just the prettiest Angel?" The faint cooing emerging from Charlie's lips seemed to give approval to Scarlet's whispered remark. He chuckled in a low tone. "Well, don't you go and repeat to her that I told you that, Charlie... I don't think she would approve of my saying she was adorable..."

He silently walked out of the sleeping area, rounded the fish tank and came to sit in the armchair in the living area; from there, he could see Harmony who had not moved position on the sofa since his arrival.

"Hey, look..." he whispered to Charlie. "Mummy is sleeping too... Do you think Mummy will have a sore neck when she wakes up?" The child blew bubbles on his lips, and Scarlet shushed him quietly. "... Of course, she needs her rest... she's done so much for you, since your real Mummy gave you to us..." He shifted the child in his arms and installed him more comfortably on his lap, staring into empty space, lost in his thoughts. "How you must miss her - your real Mummy, I mean... And then, you're torn from your familiar environment, and taken to an unknown place... with... strangers, unfamiliar faces, watching over you... People who don't have the slightest idea how to properly take care of a baby." He smothered a chuckle. "...How lost you must feel. But... we're not doing too badly, are we, Charlie? We're not doing too badly at all, it seems to me... although I think you were a little harsh in your judgement of your Uncle Adam's efforts, earlier..." Scarlet grinned. He had spent some time calming the usually easy-going Captain Blue down, when the American - scrubbed and dressed in a clean uniform - had found him in the Officers'

Lounge. Mind you, Blue's bad temper had been fuelled by Ochre's repeated questions about 'his new aftershave'... Destiny's distinctive perfume certainly lingered...

Scarlet looked down at the baby on his knee, who yawned widely, before rubbing his tired eyes again. The English captain smiled broadly.

"Now, that's a tired boy... It has been a long day for you too, I know. You've already seen a lot, and experienced more than any child should experience." He sighed deeply. "You lost your Mummy... And you're all that's left of that village. You survived, where everyone else died. I guess it's true when they say that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. You're certainly a strong and healthy kid... And after what you've survived, whatever life throws at you - you'll be ready to face it."

Charlie yawned once more; his eyelids were drooping, although it was obvious he was fighting hard not to fall asleep. Scarlet realised he was about to cry, as he saw his lower lip tremble, and heard him give a faint moan. He shushed him instantly and patted him comfortably.

"Sshhh... Hush now, don't you cry, Charlie-boy... You don't want to wake up those two pretty ladies who need their rest, do you? That's a good boy... I know you're tired... You would probably prefer hearing a song to listening to my boring talk, now wouldn't you?" The cooing he heard from Charlie was almost an answer to his question. Scarlet chuckled again. "Oh you are so lucky it's not Uncle Adam holding you right now, Charlie..."



Rhapsody Angel woke up with a sense of sudden loss. Her still drowsy mind registered the absence of Charlie by her side and, unnerved at the thought that he might have rolled and fallen out of bed, she found herself crawling to the side of the bed and leaning to look down to the floor. In the semi-darkness, she couldn't see anything, but before she could command the voice-operated lighting to turn on, her ear picked up an unfamiliar, faint sound that made her stop. It took her only a few seconds to recognise singing, coming from a very recognisable male voice. She silently slithered off the bed and crept in the direction of the living area, where the singing was coming from.

She first saw Harmony Angel sleeping on the sofa, with her head in an odd and apparently uncomfortable angle, then, the top of Captain Scarlet's dark head, emerging just over the backrest of the armchair; he was singing a lullaby to the baby he was obviously holding in his arms.

*"Goodnight, time to call it a day
Sleep tight, dream your troubles away
Goodnight, in spite of any sorrow
There's a brand new day on its way tomorrow..."*

Not wanting to spoil the singer's song - and certainly not wanting to disturb the child who so clearly was enjoying it, Rhapsody approached, quietly, but so Scarlet would see her and would not be startled by her presence. The young woman stole a glance at Charlie, whose eyelids were drooping heavily to the sound of

Scarlet's melodious singing, oblivious to a few off-key notes, simply letting himself be rocked by the soothing rhythms.

*"... Someday, all your dreams will come true
Someway, for me and you
So close your eyes and dream of it, my darling
Till then goodnight, goodnight, sleep tight..."*

Charlie's eyes were now closed and as Scarlet's song died out, both he and Rhapsody were able to hear the baby's regular deep breathing, as he was now sound asleep. Scarlet grinned widely, looking up at the young woman now standing in front of him.

"I didn't know you had such a beautiful singing voice," she noted in a whisper, a probing frown on her brows. "You kept that a secret..."

"Ah... not really..." Scarlet retorted, with a bashful expression. "But at least, it's better than Adam's..."

"I'd be worried if it wasn't - better than Adam's, I mean - but you're selling yourself short, Paul," she replied with a smile of her own. "And... you got the baby to sleep."

"Another mission accomplished," he agreed, as Rhapsody was lowering herself down to sit on the rug, right next to him. He looked down thoughtfully at her, as she rested her head on his lap, sighing contentedly. "You look shattered."

"I'm a little tired, that's true, but..." Rhapsody smiled again. "But I wouldn't have traded those hours with Charlie for anything..."

Scarlet's brow rose. "Really?" Carefully, so not to disturb the sleeping baby, he leaned down towards her, as she raised her head to him, her blue eyes bright and

her smile radiant, although obviously still drowsy. "When I came in earlier, and found you, sleeping with Charlie by your side... It gave me... a strange impression..."

"A bad... or a good impression?" she asked with curiosity.

He shrugged. "A very good one... You looked so lovely... and it seemed so natural..."

"You looked like a natural too," she answered pleasantly. "You have a way with babies."

"Oh, only with Charlie, I'm sure."

Rhapsody shook her head. "Again, you're selling yourself short, my love... Maybe one day... you'll come to realise that, who knows? With a child of your own..."

He smiled back, leaning closer to her, so his breath would brush her proffered cheek. "We can only hope, can't we?" he whispered.

"We certainly can... Daddy..." She stretched her neck to receive the kiss Scarlet was about to give her, when Charlie emitted a faint whimper; they both looked down, but realised he was still very much asleep. He grew quiet.

"He's dreaming," Rhapsody suggested.

"Probably about the very pretty lady he was sleeping next to earlier. I can't say I blame him..."

"Babies are like men," Rhapsody grinned. "Only they take up less space in the bed."

"How would *you* know that, My Lady?" Scarlet asked with fake outrage.

"As if I have to tell you..."

Rhapsody leaned again to kiss him, and Scarlet's lips had barely touched and tasted hers when a new sound forced them to part; this time, it was Harmony who was stirring on the sofa. As she slowly came to,

both Scarlet and Rhapsody reluctantly left each other. They were apart and very quietly watching, as Harmony slowly opened her eyes and straightened up into a seated position, grunting from her stiff neck and back. She blinked a few times, and looked around before realising where she was and who she was with. She didn't seem surprised to see Scarlet in the armchair, with the baby in his arms and Rhapsody comfortably seated on the floor right in front of him. She yawned.

"Did Charlie behave himself?" the Chinese Angel asked.

"He's sleeping like a log," Scarlet answered. "I'm giving him a few more minutes, and then I'll put him back into the bed we made for him."

"It's over there, right next to the table," Harmony said, stifling another yawn. She rubbed her neck. "Oh... That hurts..."

"You look sore, Chan," Rhapsody remarked. "You can't have slept all that well on that sofa. Maybe you should get some proper rest..."

"I don't want to leave Charlie," Harmony retorted. And she seemed adamant enough about it. "I can't... leave you to take care of him all by yourself."

"Hey, I'm here," Scarlet said with a soothing smile. "And I don't intend to leave... I know you feel honour-bound to this child, Chan, but you've got to get some rest."

"I don't know..." Harmony murmured, hesitantly. "I'm sure I won't sleep at all in my quarters if I'm away from the baby..."

"Take my bed, then," Rhapsody offered. "You'll be close to the kid - and it certainly beats sleeping on that cramped sofa."

"What about you...?"

"I can manage - you'll be back on duty before me in the morning, so I'll be able to catch up."

Harmony nodded, almost reluctantly, then rose from the sofa, sighing. "Okay, I'll take your offer. But if you need any help..."

"We *will* manage," Scarlet interrupted her. "But we will call you, if it becomes absolutely necessary."

Harmony thanked him with the briefest of nods and disappeared behind him, into the sleeping area. Scarlet looked on as Rhapsody left her place on the floor and went to get the small makeshift bed lying right next to the low table. When she put it down on the table, she raised her eyes to catch sight of her fiancé looking straight at her with an amused smile. With his free hand, he caught her by the arm and forced her to lean toward him.

"Very generous of you to give her your bed..."

She smiled ruefully. "More than you can imagine..."

"I was kind of hoping she would go to hers..."

She raised her brows. "I was hoping the same," she admitted, almost blushing. "But dear Harmony... she wouldn't let a small thing like fatigue get in the way of what she considers her duty. So I couldn't let her down."

"She is a wonderful person. And you are too." Scarlet planted a quick kiss on her lips. "And that's why I love you so much."

"The same here." She grinned. "We'd better be careful... But keep that thought of yours in mind for next time," she enjoined him. "I might want to continue this... *conversation*... very soon. And I'll be sure to remind you of it."

"You won't have to tax my memory that much," he answered, with a smirk of his own. "It won't take too much of an effort to remember, believe me..."



Chapter Three

The arrival of the final shuttle from London on Christmas Eve was widely anticipated across the base. Last minute shopping, Christmas presents and treats were eagerly awaited, but none of this was as keenly awaited as the emergency baby-supplies Doctor Fawn had organised.

Captain Grey had been deputised to go and collect the parcels and he queued patiently at the mail office. They loaded him with various bundles and packages until his arms were full. A helpful technician found him a mail trolley and the captain pushed his booty back to the Amber Room where the Angels and the off-duty captains had congregated to await the supplies. Charlie was being entertained by Rhapsody, who was playing tickling games with him.

*"Round and round the garden,
Like a teddy-bear...
One step, two steps,
Tickle you everywhere!"*

The games stopped as Grey started to unload the trolley. As he distributed the various parcels, a frown started between Captain Scarlet's dark brows. There were personal gifts for almost everyone and one parcel of jars of baby food - most of which wasn't really needed.

As Grey handed Destiny the last parcel Scarlet asked, "Is that all, Captain?"

Grey nodded. "I wasn't sure whose name would be on it, so I said I'd take the lot."

Scarlet nodded. "So, where's the nappies?"

"The nappies?"

"Diapers.... Where are the diapers?"

Everyone looked at each other in alarm, and a general hubbub broke out as they checked and rechecked every parcel - to no avail.

"Maybe they were in Fawn's name?" Blue suggested. He strode to the intercom. After a protracted conversation, in which the medical staff checked and rechecked their own delivery, he had to announce that there were no nappies in sickbay either.

"What are we going to do?" wailed Destiny. "*Le pauvre petit*, he cannot be without some garments...."

They argued and discussed what was best to do, until Scarlet had had enough. He marched out of the Amber Room, announcing he was going to speak to the colonel. Captain Blue followed.

"Ah," Destiny sighed, "now we shall have a solution. The colonel will make it all right for us. You will see..."

But against all expectations, the colonel did not 'make it all right'. He listened patiently to Scarlet's impassioned complaint and Blue's reasoned arguments for ordering an emergency flight from London packed with diapers, until his two senior officers had talked themselves into silence.

"Absolutely not," he then said categorically. "It is Christmas Eve, the ground staff will be winding down to a skeleton crew over the holiday, and I am not prepared to authorise the expense of an emergency flight just for a box of nappies. This is a military base - and - contrary to appearances - not a nursery, gentlemen. Use your initiative!"

"It isn't a case of initiative, Colonel," Scarlet spluttered. "It's a case of just how many cotton cloths

we can beg, steal or cadge from sickbay or the kitchens! The laundry room isn't happy at the sudden influx of soggy washing either," he added for good measure.

"Colonel, I could fly down and fetch some myself," Blue suggested, anxious to make up for his perceived mistake of the day before. "I don't mind."

"But I do... you are on duty soon, Captain. You will stay on this base. Do I make myself clear - gentlemen?" Colonel White said, including Captain Scarlet in his order.

"Then... maybe I could ask my mother to arrange for one of the SvenCorp planes to deliver..."

"Now you are just being fanciful," Colonel White snapped. "I repeat: Cloudbase is a secure, military facility - not a branch of 'Mothercare'. Deal with it yourselves, Captains... Dismiss!"

The two friends slouched dejectedly back to the Amber Room.



They managed somehow. Every officer, every Angel, the medical staff and the kitchen staff, scoured the base for suitable cotton cloths. Captain Blue sweet-talked the laundry room into putting an extra load through... agreeing to meet the cost himself, and donating a healthy tip to the department's Christmas fund... which, he thought, was worth what it cost him to know they'd have some clean cloths for tomorrow, if necessary.

Charlie behaved impeccably - the effects of his 'banquet' the day before being over - he was sweet-tempered and compliant. He got very excited as he

watched Scarlet and Blue, with the help of Rhapsody and Symphony Angels, putting the finishing decorating touches to the Christmas tree they had put up in the Officers' Lounge, and he frequently got himself entangled with the tinsel and bunting as he tried to help, much to the amusement of his new friends. Scarlet lifted him up so he could throw tinsel at the upper branches of the tree and Symphony held him as he stood on his chubby legs and 'helped' Rhapsody wind tinsel around the lower branches.

As the final decorations were put in place and Blue - as the tallest - slipped the star onto the top branches they all stood back to admire their handiwork. Charlie clapped his hands together as if he too approved of the tree.

Symphony sidled up to Captain Blue and nudged him with her shoulder.

"Hey, guess what arrived in the last delivery?" she asked him out of the side of her mouth. Blue shook his head blankly. With a beaming smile, she produced a bunch of mistletoe, liberally covered in white berries. "Just in time, eh?"

"Just in time for what?" he asked, his eyes pleading with her to be more circumspect.

"Christmas kisses, of course... didn't they teach you anything at that University, you poor, dumb Harvard guy? Come here..."

"Whatever for?" he asked in mock outrage.

"Guess... I'm going to show what a real kiss is..." She stood on tiptoe and reached to hold the mistletoe over Blue's head, her eyes closed and her lips in an exaggerated pucker for his kiss.

Unfortunately, the effect was not what she had intended and he gave a guffaw of laughter, moving away

so that she toppled forward slightly.

"Hey...come back," she protested.

Scarlet, watching this play-acting with some amusement, stepped forward. "Never mind, pretty lady... what you need is a passionate *English* kiss..."

He caught her round the waist and, taking the mistletoe from her hand, kissed her on the lips. He could feel the laughter bubbling up in her as she wrapped her arms around him, and gave an exaggerated sigh as they parted.

"Huh," Rhapsody snorted, "how come I never get one of those...?"

Scarlet spun round, catching her off guard. "Your wish is my command," he leered and planted a kiss on her laughing lips. He glanced over at Blue. "This mistletoe is powerful stuff... you should try it." He tossed the sprig to his friend, who gave Symphony an appraising glance.

"I think, maybe you'd better show me how it's done..." he suggested.

Grinning, she threw herself into his arms and surrendered to his kisses.

"Oy," Scarlet admonished as the pair seemed likely to be locked together for some time. "Remember that there are other people who might benefit from the efficacious enchantment of that mistletoe - if you two haven't used it all up... It's only good for one kiss for every berry on the sprig, you know?"

Blue opened one eye and peered disbelievingly at his friend. Reluctantly, he straightened up and tossed the sprig over. With his arms still wrapped around her, Symphony turned and winked at their friends.

Laughing, Rhapsody took the mistletoe from her boyfriend. "I'll have to tell Dad to make sure he puts a

special mark on the tree this came from... we'll have some more of this one next year! Now... I wonder who'll want to be next.... "



The evening found them all gathered in the Officers' Lounge for the party, except for Harmony who had to return to the Amber Room, where she relieved Rhapsody Angel from Angel One duty, so that her English colleague could join in the festivities. Charlie was there too, in a brightly coloured T-shirt, held in place not with medical bandage, but with a broad, red silk ribbon that one of the Angels had produced.

"Should he be here?" Melody asked. "I thought he'd be going to sleep." She brought her hands from behind her back to reveal a large, soft, teddy bear. "I brought him this - to cuddle... I thought he might like it." She blushed.

"Where did you get that from?" Scarlet cried in delight, as Charlie spotted the teddy and stretched out eager arms to receive it.

"Oh," the Angel said airily, "it was knocking about in my wardrobe..."

"You have a teddy bear on Cloudbase?" Ochre crowed. "Mag, my dear girl, if you want something to cuddle at night - you only have to ask..."

Melody gave him a look that stopped him mid-flow. Ochre coughed nervously and grinned in as debonair a way as he could manage.

"In your dreams, Fraser," she said. "I'd rather cuddle a Mysteron...."

His colleagues all laughed - Blue maybe more heartily than the others. Amidst the laughter, Scarlet leaned towards Rhapsody, to whisper in her ear, "Toss Rick that mistletoe... I think it would be put to good use." Snorting, she elbowed him in the side.

"Charlie's only here until he goes to sleep... only it didn't seem fair to exclude him from the party," Scarlet said out loud as the laughter died down.

"That kid'll never get tired - he's having too much fun." Magenta smiled.

"Must take after his 'Daddy', then," Rhapsody said, with a sly smile at Captain Scarlet. "He certainly doesn't need much sleep..."

"And how would you know that?" Symphony asked brightly.

"Well, how do you know that Captain Blue snores...?" her friend replied, with a wink.

Blue opened his mouth to dispute that - then thought the better of it. He glanced at Scarlet to see his friend was blushing as violently as he felt himself to be. As both men looked uncomfortable, Rhapsody compassionately changed the subject...

Since they had entered the lounge, the four Angels had been very curious about some particular decorations they had noticed adorning the Christmas tree. The captains had added five beautiful Christmas Angels, and on each of them they had pinned one of the female pilots' names. To each of the figures was attached a small, brightly decorated box, which obviously contained gifts intended for their namesakes. There had been some questions asked about the small boxes, of course, but the captains were adamant about them - saying they were only additional decorations. The Angels weren't fooled by this clumsy explanation,

but decided not to insist. They were sure they would know all the details later on during the evening.

The party went on. There was eating, drinking, dancing and singing around the Christmas tree. Things got a little complicated for Captain Scarlet when Rhapsody insisted that he had a really beautiful singing voice, when he put his mind to it, and the others insisted he sing a solo. He instantly turned the same colour as his uniform, but finally complied, after long minutes of persistent demands by Angels and captains alike - Ochre, not surprisingly, was the most insistent of the lot, but he was also the first one to join in with Scarlet when the latter struck up the second verse of "Silent Night", his own pleasing voice harmonising well with the Englishman's. By the end of the carol, every one of them was singing - even Blue, whose voice, thankfully, got drowned out in the middle of all the others.

Charlie seemed to want to join in the joyful celebrations, his cooing resonating through the room, making all of them laugh with delight. There wasn't a pair of arms around that didn't want to pick up the baby at one time or the other.

It was a wonderful Christmas evening - the party lasted longer than anyone really intended and went way past midnight. Charlie had gone quiet, and it was obvious that he would soon fall asleep. However, he had a fit of temper when Symphony tried to gently tuck him into his makeshift bed, so she kept him on her lap and went to sit on the sofa. The group of officers gathered around then, sitting down quietly on the various seats and sofas, and simply talked quietly - obviously too tired themselves to do anything else - and also mindful to give the baby time to get to sleep.

After a few minutes, and since Charlie didn't seem to be ready to doze off just yet, the captains got up all together, almost in perfect concert, and went to stand before the tree. Captain Grey, as the eldest - although he admitted that only with reluctance - was delegated to address the Angels, who were sitting there, watching with curiosity. He took one of the Christmas Angels hanging on the tree, and started explaining about the gifts attached to them. This was, he stated, the captains' way of showing their appreciation of the Angels' efforts - especially in view of the latest events with Charlie.

"I think we can safely say that we had it easy, compared to you," Grey confessed, a little bashfully. "We didn't have to face a night of bellyache and... other more dreadful crises... You took the brunt of it..."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Rhapsody said, her eyebrow twitching with amusement. "I think *Captain Blue* might be the one who actually had that doubtful honour... What do you think, Charlie?"

The baby seemed to give his approval by emitting a series of gurgled sounds, and waving his arms wildly. There was chuckling all around, and Blue visibly reddened; he didn't say a word, however, and simply smiled diffidently. Grey grinned, turned and advanced, to give Rhapsody her Christmas Angel, while the other captains were taking the rest of them off the tree and did the same for the other girls.

"It's only a small token, Angels - and we wish we had been able to do more... Oh... and the regular gifts, under the tree, are yet to come," Grey added, with a wink.

The Angels didn't lose any time in opening their small boxes, and were amazed at the efforts the

captains had put into choosing for each of them a gift according to their personal taste and need; a box of very expensive Belgian chocolates for Symphony, a poetry book for Rhapsody, the latest novel by her favourite author for Melody, and a bottle of perfume for Destiny - the latter having been chosen by Captain Blue himself, who offered it with a kind smile to the French pilot. She smiled back in answer, almost shyly, remembering how she had showered him the evening before.

"No hard feelings, then?" she asked timidly.

"Of course not!" he said, laughing. "Have you ever known me to hold a grudge?"

She acknowledged that, and sprang to her feet to embrace him. All of the Angels were absolutely touched by the captains' thoughtful initiative and thanked them accordingly. Harmony would receive her own Angel later on, after her shift in Angel One had finished. All the Angels had volunteered to take her place when it was time, but it was Melody who finally had the last word in the matter - after all, *she* was the one officially scheduled for the next duty stint in Angel One.

Then, it was time to exchange the regular presents, which were still waiting under the tree. There was gasping and laughing around as everyone received and unwrapped their much-anticipated gifts. Far from wanting to go to sleep - despite the late hour - Charlie was now crawling on all fours, amongst the confusion of discarded wrapping paper and boxes covering the floor, obviously enjoying himself with these new toys. Scarlet found him messing about in the largest empty box he could find, playing with creased paper. When Scarlet extricated him from the box, the child made a face as if he was going to start crying, but

it quickly turned into a definite squeal of delight when Scarlet swung him up high in the sky.

"If I were you, I would put that kid down," came a voice from the door. "If anyone of you has given him anything like the amount of stuff you gave him yesterday, he might well be sick again... besides, you wouldn't like it, Scarlet, if someone did that to you..."

Everybody had recognised the voice, before they all turned to see Doctor Fawn who, carrying a small, brightly-coloured bag, had entered the Officers' Lounge, in the company of Harmony, whom he had encountered on his way up to the Lounge, where she was going having been released from Angel One by Melody. Fawn gave a smile and approached with the Chinese Angel, who sat down on the now vacant sofa.

"You don't have to worry about that, Doctor," Symphony quickly answered. "Nothing except his normal diet has entered this kid's stomach today. No tea, no custard, no roast chicken..."

"... No chocolate truffle," Destiny added quickly.

Scarlet lowered Charlie onto the sofa, right next to Harmony, who took hold of him. The child's lower lip started to tremble again, and he whimpered, raising his arms to Scarlet in a demanding way.

"Awww... He wants Daddy to make him fly again," Rhapsody said, beaming a broad smile in Scarlet's direction. "I reckon Charlie's going to be a natural pilot, when he grows up..."

"Daddy is beginning to think that it is about time that 'Sonny' should get a good night's sleep," Scarlet replied, with a falsely stern frown. "Between last night and tonight, this kid's hardly had any rest at all..."

"I have to agree with that," Fawn concurred.

"What, you would send him to bed before it's time

to give him his present?" Ochre complained. "Shame on you two! Don't you know the meaning of the Christmas spirit?"

The American captain knelt in front of the small child, to put himself at the same level; Charlie automatically turned his attention to him. Grinning, Ochre undid the zipper of his tunic pocket and fished a small, golden cylinder from it.

"Here, Charlie-Boy. Have a merry Christmas." Ochre handed the object to the child who closed his small, chubby hand greedily on it, cooing as he did. He shook the object excitedly and then proceeded to start chewing it, gurgling contentedly. Scarlet sat down on the other side of Charlie and examined the gift.

"That's a uniform epaulette," he said.

"A disused epaulette," Ochre clarified, with a shrug. "I figured that, considering how Charlie's fascinated by our epaulettes, he might as well enjoy one all of his own..."

"That's... very thoughtful of you, Captain Ochre," Harmony said, unsure, however, if it was such a great gift after all.

"Couldn't you just give him one of your toy models?" Magenta objected.

Ochre flashed him an annoyed look. "They're not 'toys', Patrick. And what would he do with that, can you tell me?"

"I don't know..." Blue continued. "Small planes, small ships... That's very attractive for a child, somehow, don't you think?"

"*War* planes, *war* ships... Considering this *Tibetan child's* upbringing, that would not have been a good idea." Ochre shrugged again. "Besides, all of those models come with very small pieces that might fall off.

We don't want Charlie to choke on one of them, now, do we?"

"I totally agree," Scarlet admitted, looking down with interest at Charlie, who was still chewing his new golden toy. "There's no risk of that with this epaulette. It's too big, and we all know how sturdy it is. He can't break it, and hurt himself with it."

"And I smoothed off any sharp edges, before anyone complains about that. I may not know much about babies, but I do know about 'toys'," Ochre remarked, with a wry grin at Magenta just to show there was no hard feelings. Magenta winked back.

"And he does seem to appreciate it," Harmony added.

"He does indeed," Fawn declared, approaching in turn. "I too, have a small gift for Charlie." He crouched in front of Charlie and from his small bag he produced a little clear plastic bottle that he presented to the baby, smiling broadly. "Merry Christmas, Charlie."

Scarlet took the bottle from the doctor's hand; it was one of those numerous small phials the physician kept in his laboratory, and on which was fixed a label identifying its contents. Scarlet read and frowned. "Baby lotion?" he asked, giving a curious stare at Fawn. "How did you get hold of that, Edward?"

"Yeah," Blue added, raising his brows in surprise. "We thought there wasn't any baby stuff on board Cloudbase..."

"Not that we can get our hands on, anyway," Grey agreed.

"I *made it*, you nitwits," Fawn replied good-naturedly. "Why, all I needed was to know the ingredients, and a bit of research brought that up

rather easily. I had all that was needed in the laboratory... So I had the auto-analyser fabricate the stuff. And I added my own 'special touch' to it. Who knows, I might still decide to branch out and make a fortune selling that lotion..."

"You took the time to make this," Scarlet said, with a thoughtful nod. "Why, Edward... That's very *kind* of you..."

"Very kind indeed," Symphony declared, with a large smile, leaning behind Fawn, to take him by the shoulders and hug him affectionately. "Who knew you could be such a softy, Doctor?"

Fawn reddened violently. "Awww... don't think too much of it, people," he protested in a mumble. "It's only *baby lotion*, after all..."

They all laughed of the apparent uneasiness of Fawn - which was so unlike him. Blue, arms crossed, standing right next to Magenta, was watching the scene with some amusement. A peculiar thought crossed his mind, and he shook his head, with a wry glance. Magenta caught his expression and, with a whisper inquired what might be going on.

"It's strange," Blue confided in a low tone to his Irish colleague, his remark going unnoticed by the others who were chattering happily. "I have the impression of looking at a Nativity Scene... Mary, Joseph... and Infant Jesus receiving gifts from the Wise Men..."

Magenta chuckled. "With Ed and *Rick* playing the part of the Wise Men? Now that's funny... But I'll admit I see what you mean. That epaulette and the baby lotion could be considered as 'gold' and 'frankincense'... But we're missing *the third* Wise Man, - the one with the myrrh..."

"HO, HO, HO! MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

Suddenly interrupting the chattering in the Officers' Room, the booming voice made everyone turn around. Standing in front of the door, which was sliding closed behind him, stood a man with a big red bag on his back and a red Santa hat and a long, curly white beard that almost concealed his features. The dark skin was obvious enough, however, but even without it, it would have been very difficult not to recognise the new arrival, considering he was still wearing his Spectrum uniform.

"*Green!*" Half of the assembly uttered in the same delighted voice.

"What are you doing here, dressed like that?" Grey added, with raised brows.

"Shhh..." Green requested in his normal, tilting voice, and giving the group a wink as he approached, half-dragging his obviously heavy sack. "I'm Santa, remember?"

"Not from where I'm standing," Blue retorted. "You look rather like an elf who has stolen Santa's costume..."

"Well... Santa is *very* occupied... This is Christmas Eve night, after all, and he has his *tour* to do..." Green's smile broadened as he put the sack in front of Charlie and knelt next to it to open it. "... So he deputised me to make sure all these goodies come to a very special child, here on Cloudbase." He looked levelly at Charlie, who was now staring at him with a quiet fascination, before reaching for the beard. Green took the small chubby hand into his dark one. "Hi, Charlie. Pleased to finally make your acquaintance. You know, I heard a lot about you already... Is it true you've been driving all these nice people crazy?"

"You know, it actually figures," Symphony declared suddenly. "It's like Murphy's law - the *one* person amongst us who has experience with small children is absent, leaving *us* stuck with the baby! We're really glad you're back, Seymour."

"Yeah, with you around, we'll now know which end needs to be fed, and which end needs to be cleaned," Ochre added mockingly.

"It wasn't so bad," Scarlet retorted, with a shrug, amidst his colleagues' laughs. "I think we actually managed rather well, all things considered. Except for the desperate lack of baby stuff that would have been very useful to properly take care of our small visitor..."

"Ah, I have it covered, now!" Santa-Green declared in a joyful voice, opening his bag, and producing various items, under the other officers' marvelling eyes. "Here. Cereals... baby food... baby clothes - Tibetan style... Baby powder - for all those important little places... Nappies..."

"Nappies?! You mean, diapers?!" Symphony squealed suddenly, making a step forward. She literally grabbed the big packet that Green had just taken out of his bag, and held it against her heart. "You wonderful man, you! That's *exactly* what I wanted for Christmas this year!"

The room rang with laughter as Blue said ruefully, "Damn, could've saved myself a lot of money if only I'd known that..."

"That's what we *all* wanted," Rhapsody corrected, amid the dying laughter. "You are a life saver, Seymour."

"Hey, I just know what babies need, that's all," Green replied, with a humble smile.

"Don't we know it," Destiny said, with a sigh, rolling her eyes.

While everyone was marvelling at the 'gifts' brought by Green, Magenta nudged Blue with his elbow, pointing as the young lieutenant. "Well, there's your third Wise Man," he said, with a broad smile. "Who would have thought it would be Santa Claus?"

"And here I thought all that time his name was Balthazar," Blue murmured. "And he brought myrrh..."

"Any idea what myrrh is, actually?" Magenta asked, with a frown.

Blue shook his head, a faint smile playing on his lips. "It is something to do with incense, a resin used in the production, I think. But for all we know, it might well be a kind of *perfumed* diaper from the era..." Magenta gave an amused nod, seemingly agreeing with Blue's comments. "Which would explain why it was considered so precious..." Blue concluded, with a grin.



Colonel White went to meet the plane at the hangar, watching through the pressurised windows as it descended from the runway to the internal hangar of Cloudbase. He was still unsure why the second most important religious leader of the Tibetan people had announced his intention to come to Cloudbase. Lieutenant Green and earlier, Captain Blue, had both referred to the First Minister's profound shock and deeply-expressed regrets at the treatment the Spectrum agents had received at the disaster site, but it seemed rather excessive to the colonel to expect the Panchen Lama himself to deliver an apology. *Either way, White mused, I hope I can convince him to take the baby back with his party - nice little chap though*

the child is - he cannot stay here for much longer or my entire elite staff will turn into highly paid baby-sitters by choice... and there are distinct signs that several of the Angels are getting broody...

He glanced around at the security team deployed around the hangar. He had been reluctant to grant permission to allow the visit, on receiving the announcement earlier, especially when the First Minister had reminded him that on no account were there to be weapons deployed in the Panchen's presence - nor those 'Mysteron detectors' the Spectrum officers had spoken of. The Panchen did not wish to reinforce any notion that the government of Tibet approved of weapons or violence in any circumstances, against any individuals.

Despite the colonel's reassurance that the Mysteron detectors were a harmless and non-violent way of securing the safety of his base and personnel, the Minister had been adamant in his opposition to their use.

Wondering if he should have insisted on Captain Scarlet being present - in the hope that his sixth sense would warn them of any Mysterons present - White stepped forward as the alarms ceased ringing and went to meet the deputation as the aircraft steps opened to allow disembarkation.

The Panchen Lama was quite a surprise. He was a handsome, dark-eyed man, far younger than expected and with a lively expression. He grinned good-naturedly at Colonel White and returned his greeting in near-perfect English.

"It is so kind of you to receive me aboard your base, Colonel White. I have to say I have seen many marvels in my time, but Cloudbase must rank among the

most impressive sights. I hope it might be permissible to see around and learn something of the skills that make such a place possible?"

"Indeed, sir, I am sure we can arrange a tour, if you wish it."

The man's eye's twinkled with pleasure, but then he said, "You wonder what I am doing here? I see that our visit is a surprise to you. Colonel, if I might have a quiet speech with you, alone, I will endeavour to explain."

"Of course, sir... if you would accompany me to the conference room...?"

White turned to lead the way from the hangar, aware of the half dozen, saffron robed monks that had disembarked and were lining up behind the Panchen. The small man at his side turned to them and said something - presumably ordering them to wait - and they murmured obedience to his wishes.

"Lieutenant Carmine, please escort His Holiness's retinue to the VIP lounge and give them such refreshment as they may require," White said to the young woman in charge of the security guards.

"S.I.G, Colonel," Carmine said, with a smart salute.

"You have ladies in charge of male officers?" the Panchen said, watching Carmine, a Ghanaian, whose jet-black skin set off her pinkish-red tunic most effectively. "This is most noteworthy... I had, of course, heard of the Angel pilots - the ladies who fly your jets and one of whom I believe was subjected to unpardonable outrage by some of my people..."

"There was no great harm done," the colonel hastened to reassure him.

"Nevertheless, it will be my pleasure to offer my apologies to the young lady concerned," the Panchen

insisted.

"I am sure Harmony Angel will be the first to say there is nothing to alarm you, sir."

"Harmony - a most fitting name... most fitting indeed..."



In the secure environment of the conference room, the Panchen Lama took one of the seats and the colonel sat a few stools away from him. The young man was obviously impressed with all he had seen and was asking intelligent, probing questions. Suddenly he paused and grinned at the older man.

"Forgive me, Colonel, I am disconcerting you... monks shouldn't ask about computer hardware and technical matters, you think?"

"Not at all, Your Holiness," replied the colonel suavely, but in truth the Panchen had hit the mark - he did find this man disconcerting.

"You wish to know why I am here. It is, in part, to offer my apologies to your agents for the actions of my fellow countrymen - I am sure you can understand that they were under much stress, but even so, to insult a young lady... is unpardonable." He paused and studied the colonel's face intently for a moment. "How much, may I ask, do you understand about Tibetan culture, colonel?"

"Well... I... eh..."

The Panchen ignored this hesitation. "We are a proud and ancient people, with our own unique culture. Part of that culture is the theocracy - and the leader of the theocrats is the Dalai Lama. Traditionally, the

Dalai and the Panchen Lamas are the tutors and guardians of each other, the elder caring for the younger, until he is grown to wisdom. I am not an elderly man, Colonel, but I am the senior theocrat... and will be for many years to come, since our much lamented Dalai Lama passed away suddenly, less than one year ago. It will be my task to train our new Dalai Lama until he can lead his people.

"In the custom of my people, we have been searching for the latest incarnation of his spirit. Much prayer is offered, contemplation and visions sought in the search. When a candidate is found, many tests are made, before that child can be proclaimed Dalai Lama. I, myself have had two visions concerning the whereabouts of our Dalai Lama. The first, when it was interpreted, filled me with much dread... for it seemed that the child was in great danger and surrounded by flames and destruction...but yesterday, I had a second vision. I saw the Dalai Lama walking amongst clouds between two guardians - their names were *Dorje Wangdak* and *Kandro* - perhaps as you would say, Lord Protector and ... Angel?"

Colonel White stiffened in his seat, his lips parting as the frown on his face deepened. "Are you saying..." he began.

"Oh, I am saying nothing is certain, but when the First Minister told me of this child brought to Cloudbase - it was my duty to investigate." The Panchen Lama gave his sudden, quick smile. "And besides, I was curious to see just what kind of organisation Spectrum is. I have no political power, you must understand, Colonel, but my voice is heard by those who do. Spectrum has been lobbying for a presence in Tibet, and one, small office has recently been granted - but

already there is opposition to that base remaining. The time will come when I will be asked about my feelings towards Spectrum's presence on Tibetan soil. I wish to have an informed opinion to give, Colonel."

"I understand, sir. Whatever the outcome of your assessment of this child, may I assume that you will take him back with you?"

"Most assuredly. Perhaps we should go and see him?"

"Of course, I... know it's late, but I think he is in the Officer's Lounge. A few of my officers are holding a Christmas Party... I believe. That being the case, I doubt the child will be asleep..."

"Ah, Christmas - a joyous time..."

"Quite. If you would please, follow me, sir?"

"Of course, but I would ask that my retinue be allowed to accompany us - such meetings should be done with many witnesses..."

"Of course, I understand."



Lieutenant Green was tucking into some of the buffet and listening with amusement to the story of Charlie's stay on Cloudbase - as told by his friends - laughing outright at the mental image of Captain Ochre playing peek-a-boo and Captain Scarlet giving 'pony-rides' to the child. Charlie was sitting happily beside his latest friend, playing with his new epaulette and some gaily coloured ribbon. He had taken to Green at once; perhaps, Ochre suggested, realising he was the one person not at a loss with how to care for him.

The young man shook his head and cast baleful

glances at Destiny as he heard about Charlie's rich and varied diet of the day before, and deliberately moved his plate of crisps and sausage rolls out of the inquisitive child's reach.

"By the way," he said, "I don't think we'll have Charlie with us for much longer. The First Minister told me before I left Lhasa that a 'high-level' deputation was planning to come to Cloudbase very soon. They want to speak to the colonel and my guess is that he'll ask them to take Charlie away with them." He grinned and volunteered a piece of information, "The colonel told me - when I reported back before coming here -that the child made an awful mess of one of his uniform tunics... I told him that I don't suppose the child meant anything personal by it," Green chuckled. "He can't help himself, can you, Charlie?"

Blue was thinking along other lines. "I wouldn't be surprised if this 'high level deputation' was to apologise for what happened to Harmony, Grey and Scarlet at the power plant. The minister was extremely shocked when he heard that Harmony had been attacked, and he offered his most sincere apologies. The Tibetans are a problem - with their refusal to allow us to use weapons - but they are a friendly bunch - I like them." He gave a crooked smile and continued, "I bet we'll all miss Charlie when he goes - even those of us who have been ... on the receiving end."

Green smiled. "Yeah," he said, "little kids have a way of worming themselves into your heart before you know it. I guess it's a survival trait: don't hurt me, potentially-threatening adult, see how cute and appealing I am." He blushed as the officers stared at him in some surprise. "There have been times, mind you, when I could have cheerfully throttled every one of my

younger brothers and sisters... cute and appealing only lasts so long..."

Blue grinned. "Oh, I agree with that. My brothers and sister were right pains in the ... neck, most of the time."

"Well, I guess you two are the experts... I'm the youngest in my family; I was usually the one getting blamed for everything," Ochre confessed.

"Probably with good reason," Magenta remarked.

"Oh no - the eldest gets blamed for everything," Blue asserted. Green nodded in vigorous agreement.

"Like heck - it was always me that got told off..."

"No," Blue argued, "it was always: you should know better; why didn't you stop him/her from doing that? - like I had eyes in the back of my head!"

"Hey - imagine that times eight!" Green complained. The two men smiled in mutual understanding of what each had suffered.

Ochre shrugged. "Well, my brother was always saying 'Richard did it'... And he was always believed!"

Green rolled his eyes. "Brothers are nothing... Let me tell you about *sisters!* They'll dump you in it every time!"

Blue demurred. "Well, my sister was about the best of the bunch - my younger brother, he was the sneak. The youngest, David, he's not too bad... but then he is considerably younger than me... I guess I didn't have that much to do with him growing up. He was only eight when I joined the WAS..."

"And you claim you can't change a diaper..." Ochre protested.

Blue grinned. "Hey, wouldn't you have done - if it seemed likely you'd get lumbered with doing it every time?"

Grey nodded. "You're not as stupid as you look," he teased.

Before the Angels could pursue the idea that Blue had actually known what to do, the door opened and they all rose to their feet as Colonel White led a deputation of men dressed in robes of rich saffron and orange cloth.

"Sir, may I present to you Spectrum's senior officers? Ladies and gentlemen, His Holiness, the Panchen Lama..." White said, casting a warning eye over his exuberant officers.

The young man at his side greeted them with a traditional gesture, his hands clasped together at chest height, as he inclined forward.

The Spectrum officers returned the greeting with smart salutes.

The Panchen studied the officers before him; tall, strong men, each wearing a different coloured tunic over a dark uniform, and women, dressed in impeccable white flying suits. He finally found what he was looking for amongst the group. One man, tall, with dark hair and bright blue eyes, wearing a vivid red tunic, was standing slightly more awkwardly than the others - this was because clinging to his leg was a young child. The child was Tibetan, and dressed in a gaudy T-shirt, tied around his waist with ribbon. He was a happy child, smiling and carefree as he clung to his mentor with great determination.

Captain Scarlet, seeing the VIP's gaze slip down to Charlie, shifted slightly, uncomfortably. He gave Blue an appealing glance and his friend's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly - asking what he was expected to do about it...

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure..."

the Panchen began, but his words were halted when Charlie suddenly let go of Scarlet's leg and with a delighted chuckle, took several unsteady steps towards the newcomers, a beaming smile on his face, his arms outstretched.

There was a murmur of proud surprise from the Spectrum officers as everyone's attention was concentrated on Charlie's unexpected new ability. Such was their distraction, that they barely noticed the commotion amongst the retinue gathered behind the Panchen. The monks were crowding the doorway and keeping the Spectrum security detail out, but one man, an elderly, narrow-shouldered individual, sprang forward.

In his hand, the astonished Spectrum officers could see a knife.

"The Mysterons' orders will be obeyed!" he shouted, as he moved forward.

"Blue!" Scarlet shouted. Almost in slow motion, he saw his partner start forward towards the Panchen - because to everyone present, it was obvious that the young man was the assassin's target. Beyond Blue, he saw Ochre and Grey begin to move to the man's defence.

Frightened by the shouting and sensing the sudden tension, Charlie let out a wail and flopping down onto his bottom, he rolled over and crawled rapidly back to the safety of Captain Scarlet's protection. He grabbed onto the red boot and hauled himself upright, whimpering to be picked up.

Hampered by Charlie clinging to his leg, Scarlet was unable to respond to the emergency and could only watch, as he murmured comfortingly to the baby.

The assassin continued to press forward; he was

closing on the Panchen, when Destiny stepped into his path, only to be swept aside by an almost inhuman strength. The astonished Frenchwoman fell into the path of Captain Blue, who had to side-step to avoid treading on her and in so doing crashed into the rapidly advancing Captain Grey.

The assassin gave the Panchen a sideways blow as, to everyone's astonishment, he raced past him, causing the young man to stagger into Colonel White, who was moving from the other side to his defence.

Charlie, startled by the movements and sudden confusion surrounding him, let out another ear-piercing wail and clung even tighter to Scarlet's leg. The latter instinctively bent down to lift the terrified child... and from the corner of his eye caught the flash of the assassin's dagger as it stabbed downwards toward him. In an automatic gesture, he brought the child closer to him, in a protective embrace. He felt the blade bury itself in his shoulder. He gasped with the pain and was unable to lift the child. His hand went to his empty holster... like everyone else he had not thought to wear a gun to the office party...

He fended off another blow from the monk, who was hissing, "We will be revenged..."

Suddenly the man's eyes went blank and the frail body crumpled to the floor at Scarlet's feet.

Harmony Angel stood over him, a look of pure fury on her normally gentle face.

"No-one - man or Mysteron - hurts MY baby!" she snarled. She reached her arms out to Charlie, who willingly went to her, weeping against her bosom, with hiccupping sobs. "Ssshh, Charlie, Mummy's here..." she crooned. Scarlet grimacing in pain, rubbed ineffectually at his injured shoulder.

The Panchen, who had regained his feet, stared at the young Chinese woman with admiration. "*Kandro...*" he murmured.

"Well, done, Harmony Angel - a most effective karate blow," Colonel White said, as he desperately sought to regain his dignity.

To the experienced officers around the room, it was obvious that Harmony's blow had been intended to kill - and it had served its purpose - the assassin was dead. Doctor Fawn barely glanced at the man as he went to begin examining Scarlet's wound.

"You are obviously an expert," the Panchen smiled at Harmony, impressed and - a little unnerved - by what he had just witnessed. The slight Chinese girl hardly looked strong enough to floor a man with her bare hands.

"Black belt, fourth dan, Your Holiness," Harmony replied, before modestly lowering her eyes from the smiling priest.

"When my secretary comes round from his faint, we must question him closely as to why he feels he must act for these *Mysterons*, Colonel..." the Panchen said, staring with a frown at the body of the would-be assassin.

"Your Holiness, I do not think he will be waking from any faint. I believe he is dead," White answered. He was reluctant to offend the Panchen's non-violent principles, but the Tibetan leader would have to face the facts sooner or later - and all his people with him.

"Nonsense, Colonel. Look, even now he revives..."

The *Mysteron* was indeed scrambling to his feet, his hand grasping the dagger once more. Harmony was still too close to him, her arms wrapped tightly around Charlie. He caught her by one arm, and dragged himself

upright. The majority of Spectrum's agents were all surrounding the Panchen Lama. They desperately moved forward, even though they realised they were too far away to intervene in time, and watched with growing horror, as Harmony, her hands full with the child, closed her eyes and turned her shoulder towards her attacker, to shield Charlie, who was wailing once more at being held so tightly.

"Now - die, Earthman..."

Captain Scarlet who was closer to the incident, roughly moved Fawn aside and, despite his wound, jumped with astonishing speed towards the Mysteron agent. He delivered a second killing karate strike to his neck, with all the strength he could muster. There was an audible crack, as the man crumpled to the floor a second time.

Scarlet stared down with disgust at the Mysteron at his feet. "Get that carrion out of here... before it happens again - we don't want any more *explosive* entertainment..."

"S.I.G., Captain Scarlet," Grey responded, beckoning Ochre to assist him.

Colonel White turned to the security officers he could see beyond the door. "Lieutenant Carmine, get a Mysteron detector, take all His Holiness' men with you and test them at once. I am sorry, Your Holiness, but every man here must be tested - we cannot risk another such attack by a Mysteron agent." He addressed the Panchen with an authority it would have taken a brave man to defy.

"I don't understand, Colonel," the Panchen was complaining. "Lundhup was one of my most trusted monks - my secretary... why would he want to work for those... Mysterons?"

"It is rather complicated to explain, Your Holiness..."

Colonel White and the Panchen Lama watched as Captains Ochre and Grey dragged the corpse out of the lounge. The Panchen seemed upset and was shaking his head in confusion. "A lost life is always a tragedy for my people, Colonel... I cannot help thinking that it should never have come to this..."

White simply nodded slowly. Ochre and Grey delivered the dead Mysteron to the security guards outside. They would no doubt dispose of him properly, with an electron gun to make sure he was truly dead this time and would not cause any more surprises. There was no reason to tell all this to the Panchen Lama, however. There was no need to cause him further alarm. And of course, there were still some secrets that had to be kept from public's knowledge.

Thinking of secrets...

"Doctor Fawn... I suggest Captain Scarlet be taken to sickbay at once," White said, turning once more toward the room.

"I'll be all right," Scarlet grunted, while awkwardly sitting down on the sofa behind him, still rubbing his shoulder.

"No, you will not be," Fawn quickly retorted. "We have to take care of that wounded shoulder, Captain, and quickly..." The doctor glanced at their visitors with a significant raise of his eyebrow. Scarlet nodded, understanding what he meant.

"How's Charlie?" he asked, raising his head in Harmony's direction. The baby had stopped crying, but had his head buried against her shoulder - almost afraid to look around him.

"Charlie?" the Panchen said, diverted from his

questioning by his interest in the child.

"That is what we've called this child, Your Holiness," Harmony explained. "We did not know his real name."

The Panchen nodded an understanding and approached closer to both Harmony and the child she was holding. He examined Charlie closely, before reaching a hand to place it on his head. Harmony nearly drew back, still remembering of the attack of which the baby had nearly been victim, but something in the Panchen's tranquil stance made her stop. All around them the officers tensed, equally apprehensive, but a brief nod from Colonel White indicated that everything was all right.

The Panchen spoke quietly in Tibetan to the child, who gradually raised his head from Harmony's shoulder and turned to look at him, to stare almost solemnly, as if he was considering the man's words.

Everyone in the room held their breath, when slowly, Charlie turned in Harmony's arms and reached across to the Panchen. With a short pause, during which time she looked searchingly into the eyes of the Tibetan leader confirming her belief that it was safe to do so, Harmony handed the baby over to him. Smiling broadly, the Panchen continued to speak to the attentive child he was now holding in his arms. Then, noticing the uneasiness surrounding him, he gave him back to Harmony Angel, just as she was exchanging an inquiring glance with Scarlet, seated right next to her.

As everyone standing in front of the door made way for medics with a gurney to enter the room, following Fawn's call a few minutes earlier, the Panchen Lama turned to Colonel White, and addressed him yet again in a very quiet tone, that was in marked contrast

with the obvious unease of the Spectrum agents surrounding him.

"I believe, Colonel White, that you wanted to... 'test' my retinue. I see now why you would deem it necessary." His smile broadened as he bowed slightly. "Please, proceed. And I insist to be the first to take that test."



Not so long afterward, in sickbay, Doctor Fawn was putting Captain Scarlet's left arm in a sling, when the door slid open to reveal Colonel White and the Panchen Lama. Both men had been advised of the Tibetan official's visit to sickbay, and, accordingly, were prepared to receive him, so the secret surrounding Scarlet's healing abilities would not be discovered. Almost instantly upon seeing the two men enter, the English officer straightened up and moved to jump from the examination table on which he was seated. Getting ahead of the colonel, the Panchen Lama begged the captain to stay where he was.

"Please, Captain, don't stand up on my account... You must mind this wound you have received."

"His Holiness is right, Captain," Colonel White concurred, "as you were."

"Sir..." Scarlet turned to the Panchen Lama and nodded courteously to him. "Your Holiness..."

"Does this shoulder of yours make you suffer?" the Panchen asked, with a concerned frown.

"No... I'll be okay in a few... days..."

The Panchen addressed an inquiring look towards Doctor Fawn, obviously unsure if Scarlet wasn't

minimising the seriousness of his wound. The physician shrugged. "Hardly more than a scratch, by Scarlet's standards..." he confirmed, with a reassuring smile. "As he said... A few... days of rest and he'll be as good as new."

"I am glad." The Panchen beamed with an approving nod. "I wanted to come see you, Captain Scarlet - in order to thank you properly, for having saved that child's life more than once... and for having taken so good care of him."

"Your Holiness," Scarlet said hesitantly, "I must inquire... Is Charlie...?"

"The child is in good hands, Captain," the Tibetan said, with a broad smile. "His charge has been entrusted to my suite... That is, after that check we all have been subjected to with that 'Mysteron detector', proved we were... the word one of your fellow officers used was, 'clean', I believe." He acknowledged the colonel's decision with a slight bow in his direction, to which the Spectrum commander answered in kind. "None of us wish to see the child harmed in any way."

"We appreciate your understanding in co-operating with our security measures, Your Holiness," White thanked him. "Thankfully now, the danger is over. The Mysterons don't make more than two attempts against a declared target."

"That would mean the child is safe, then," the Panchen asked, with obvious relief.

"Why was that Mysteron agent trying to kill Charlie?" Scarlet asked, with a faint frown.

"Because obviously, 'Charlie' was the Mysterons target all along," White suggested.

"Charlie?" Scarlet said, opening eyes wide with surprise. "But he's only a baby... And the Mysterons'

attack was against the Power Central... The wording of the Mysterons' threat..."

"The roof of the world will collapse and darkness will fall all over the entire high country," the Panchen Lama recited. He shook his head, having attracted Scarlet's attention. "Your colonel told me about this threat, and the meaning Spectrum gave to it. Granted, it would seem obvious that our precious power resources would be the target - if you take the threat literally. But... your commander explained to me that often, the Mysterons will issue cryptic threats."

"They do indeed, Your Holiness..." Scarlet agreed, still failing to understand.

"That must be the case here, Captain," the Panchen continued. "You see, Tibetans are a hardy people. Being 'plunged in darkness' because of an energy failure - or even because of economical reasons - might be a trial, but it is one we will survive - and with the help of our friends from the Asian Republic, and the World at large - we will be able to thrive, once more. There are... far worst fates for us, you see."

"It would appear," Colonel White said, "that the attack on the Power Central was, at worst, a decoy, to attract our attention elsewhere while the Mysterons were carrying out their threat elsewhere - or at best, a means to destroy their intended target."

"The child you came to know as Charlie," the Panchen explained, "who was at the health care centre in the village, when the explosion at the Central occurred. The child whose mother, Colonel White told me, had been taken hostage by that Mysteron agent you were pursuing... The child you saved, Captain, and who, if we are to believe all the clues, was supposed to die by the Mysterons' hands."

Scarlet was still sceptical; he exchanged a curious glance with Fawn, very briefly, before pursuing, "But... why destroy the entire infrastructure - if all they wanted was to kill a mere child? That doesn't make sense..." Scarlet's voice trailed away as he remembered the way the huge boulder had suddenly lurched towards Harmony and the baby in her arms... the boulder that had crushed his foot. *Fanciful?* he wondered. *The Mysterons will use anything they can to achieve their goals...*

"They wanted to make sure that he wouldn't survive... Because that 'mere child' is more important to the Tibetan people than you can imagine, Captain Scarlet," the Panchen announced, still very patiently. "This child is the sixteenth reincarnation of our beloved Dalai Lama. Our spiritual leader, without whom the Tibetans are lost." There was a shocked silence from both Scarlet and Fawn, who exchanged another disbelieving glance.

"The Dalai Lama," Scarlet stammered. "Your Holiness... are you *sure...*?"

"I am positive. I followed the visions I've been having these last months. I was to find the Dalai Lama amongst the clouds. I have seen him walk between his two saviours and guardians, *Kandro*, the Angel, and *Dorje Wangdak*, the Lord Protector, whom nothing would make yield..." The Panchen shook his head, his smile not leaving his lips. "Nothing indeed... as you took a blow intended to kill the child, and yet, didn't even surrender to the pain - you kept on protecting him. The signs are all there, and they cannot lie. I have found His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, in this most unusual setting..." As silence followed, the Panchen Lama bowed to a silence-struck Scarlet - with a very solemn

and traditional Tibetan salutation. "My people are forever indebted to you... and to all of Spectrum - for having saved our most precious of treasures..."



With the assurance that no threat would come to harm their precious charge anymore, the Panchen Lama and his Tibetan retinue expressed their desire to leave Cloudbase as soon as possible. Since they had all been cleared by the Mysteron detector test, Colonel White didn't see any objection to their departure. Acutely aware, however, of the strong bonds that had grown between his senior staff officers and the small child whose startling identity they had just learned from the mouth of the Panchen Lama himself, the colonel made only one request on their behalf: that 'Charlie' be allowed to stay and join into the dinner they had prepared for Christmas Day.

Not only did the Panchen Lama grant that request, but he asked - rather shyly - if he and his suite could be authorised to participate as well. This request actually managed to surprise Colonel White, but he couldn't really refuse - and he had to admit, he was a little curious to see the quiet and poised Tibetans, so protective of their own culture, actually sharing Christmas dinner with them. He had the impression that it was also curiosity that was driving the Panchen Lama to make such a request. He was probably interested to know what kind of people had taken care of the precious child, over the last few days.

More surprisingly than ever, during the Christmas dinner, the Panchen Lama *and* his retinue, once they

had let go of their all-too-official stance and ascetic ways, proved to be very agreeable company. They exchanged animated discussions with the Spectrum personnel, laughed and indulged themselves with good stuff to eat and to drink - within the limits of what their religious customs would allow.

The dinner passed by a little too quickly for the Spectrum officers' taste and soon came the time they'd all grown to dread. Charlie was going to be leaving - going back to Tibet with his people - to be raised by the monks, to be prepared for the future that was awaiting him.

Destiny was the first to make her goodbyes to the small child, soon after the dinner. She had to go take the place of Rhapsody in Angel One, so the English pilot would be able to be present when Charlie left. To everyone's surprise, there were tears in the Frenchwoman's eyes as she kissed the boy goodbye. He even whimpered himself, when she left, waving at him as she went... and finally turned around to walk away very quickly.

"And here I thought she wasn't that fond of Charlie," Blue confided in a low tone to Scarlet, while both were watching Destiny disappear from view.

Scarlet nodded very slowly. "There are a few things you might not know about Juliette," he explained in a hushed tone. "She might be French... and a very extrovert person... But she's also able to keep her emotions well-hidden when she decides to - and I mean by that the deepest feelings she might have for someone."

Blue simply shook his head, concurring that if someone would know that concerning Destiny, it would certainly be Scarlet who had shared a passionate

relationship with her some years before they joined Spectrum.



Standing in line in front of the last airlock leading to the hangar bay, Cloudbase's senior staff were waiting almost impatiently for their visitors and Colonel White to appear through the first airlock. When it opened finally, to let the colonel and the Tibetan party in, they automatically stood to attention. White called them to ease, as he walked towards them, the Panchen Lama by his side.

The Tibetan retinue was following behind, in silence, the first of the monks carrying Charlie, who was now wearing similar garments to them, an impeccable saffron robe, with a proper satin belt, a bright red cap of state - which looked for all the world like a pixie-hood above the cheerful little face they had all grown to love - and sandals.

When he found himself in front of the assembled officers, the Panchen Lama saluted them with a low bow, and then gestured to the monk carrying the child to step forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Spectrum, on behalf of the Tibetan people, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kindness and for the *love* and protection you have given to our precious Dalai Lama. As far as it is within my power to advise the ministers of State, I will have no hesitation in recommending that they allow Spectrum full and open access to our country, and I will publish the remarkable story of your devotion towards His Holiness. Rest assured, when you next visit Tibet -

as I hope you will all do in time - you will find nothing but a grateful welcome amongst our people."

Charlie gurgled excitedly as this speech concluded, as if he was adding his own thanks and commendations to them all. He squealed and squirmed in the arms of his attendant.

Blue whispered to Scarlet, "That kid *never* keeps still..."

The Panchen caught the words and exchanged a conspiratorial grin with the two officers. "I am sure, His Holiness would like to say goodbye to you all..." He extended a hand towards Ochre and Magenta who came forward to make their goodbyes.

"So long, Charlie-boy... you behave, d'y'hear?" Ochre said, although those who knew him well detected a rather forced jollity in his voice.

Charlie leant forward and tugged at Ochre's epaulette. "Excuse me, Your Holiness," Ochre said to the Panchen, "Will he get to keep his toys... I mean the little things we gave him?"

"But of course, Captain," The Panchen stood aside slightly to reveal a sombre faced monk with the teddy-bear and the golden epaulette on a silken cushion. When his eyes met Ochre's, the men exchanged similar grins, each a mixture of mischief and delight. "However great his destiny, we will not forget that His Holiness is also just a little boy..." the Panchen said.

Captain Grey and Melody took their leave, Melody kissing the chubby fingers as she shook the tiny hand.

Symphony and Blue went next. He watched with delight as Charlie threw his arms around the young woman's neck, chuckling as he hugged her. For once, the brash American Angel was speechless and she kissed the child's cheek, stroking his face before allowing her

lover to steer her away.

Rhapsody got another hug and Charlie grabbed a handful of her hair as if he wanted to take it away with him. Gently, she disentangled his fingers.

"Be a good boy, Charlie." She kissed his cheek and gave the Panchen a warm glance. "Take care of him, Your Holiness... he's a very special little boy - even if he wasn't who he is..." She frowned as her sentence tangled itself in knots.

The Panchen placed a hand on her arm. "We will, Rhapsody Angel, and we will tell His Holiness all he owes the men and women of Spectrum..."

Captain Scarlet and Harmony came last.

Charlie reached out his arms and leant so far forward he was in danger of falling. The attendant glanced at the Panchen who gave a slight nod. The boy was handed over into Harmony's arms.

"Well, here's where we say bye-bye, Charlie..." Scarlet said, gently punching the child's torso, so the little boy laughed. "You certainly made our Christmas special. Don't forget us, will you?"

Harmony buried her face against the baby's soft cheek and murmured in Chinese into his ear.

He threw his arms around her and gave her a sloppy kiss on her cheek... "Ma-ma..." he murmured contentedly.

Harmony hugged him, her face ablaze with delight.

Colonel White cleared his throat and suddenly they were back on duty and holding things up.

"It is time to go, I fear," The Panchen said gently.

"Your Holiness, before you leave - does anyone know what his name is?" Scarlet asked a little hesitantly. "I mean, to us he will always be *Charlie*, but it would be nice to know what his real name is..."

"In my vision he was called, *Ngawang*... in English that might be called... Powerful Speech." The man smirked. "Surely we have all heard him make enough noise to testify to the correctness of that?"

"Oh, he's capable of much worse," Symphony said ruefully. As the Panchen turned to smile interrogatively at her, she blushed and stammered, "He had a tummy ache, Your Holiness, and he screamed for hours and hours..."

The Panchen gave a sympathetic 'tut' and reached a hand to place it on the baby's head. He spoke quietly to the child, who with some reluctance relinquished his hold on Harmony's neck and allowed himself to be lifted from her arms.

"In honour of his stay amongst you," the Panchen pursued solemnly, "his name will now be *Ngawang Namkha*... The last name forever reminiscent of his living amidst the clouds of the spacious sky..."

"This is truly an honour, your Holiness," Colonel White started.

"This is only a small expression of our thanks, Colonel," the Panchen answered. "There is no measure to the gratitude the people of Tibet now owe you all."

The airlock opened, and the party moved towards the waiting plane, but as he reached the foot of the steps, the Panchen turned once more.

From the Panchen's arms, Charlie smiled once more at all his new friends. His gaze came to Symphony and he gave her a cheeky grin before he finally turned back to Harmony, whose face was a picture of controlled misery. With a look of intense concentration, he extended an arm and clenched and unclenched his hand, spreading chubby fingers in what so obviously was meant to be a wave. The watching officers melted at

the charm of it, but then the child placed his hand next to his lips and made a smacking sound, before he spread his palm wide and blew in Harmony's direction.

Harmony's eyes filled with tears as she blew him a kiss back. He shrieked with delighted laughter and buried his face in the Panchen's robes, peeking out mischievously over the man's shoulder as they mounted into the plane.

The air was filled by the murmured sound of affectionate sighs, as the airlock closed.

"Well..." Scarlet said, clearing his throat and trying to regain his composure. "There he goes... I knew that kid would go far..."

Rhapsody chuckled nervously, mostly to hide the fact that her own emotions were threatening to burst into the open. "Yes, but we never imagined he would go *that* far, did we..." She tilted her head to one side, looking straight at him. "...What was it the Panchen Lama called you? *Dorje*?"

"*Dorje Wangdak*, the Lord Protector, whom nothing would make yield..." Scarlet recited, with a faint, awkward smile. "That sounds a little grand, don't you think?"

"I looked that name up," Melody piped up from behind, attracting their attention. She was smiling mischievously as she approached the couple. "*Wangdak* does mean 'Lord Protector' - but apparently, His Holiness, the Panchen Lama was very liberal with the '*Dorje*' name. Mind you, it's rather vague ..."

"What does it mean?" Scarlet asked with curiosity.

Melody's smile broadened. "It refers to something indestructible... which can cut through anything... And I, for one, think it is most fitting."

Scarlet answered her smile with a grin of his own, before turning around slowly; he went to stand right next to Harmony, who was staring through the porthole of the hangar access door.

"That's two firsts today," Symphony said tenderly, standing a little behind, right next to Blue. "He took his first steps and he blew his first kiss! He's a clever boy; I knew he'd get the hang of it - I was trying to teach him, Adam - as a Christmas surprise for Harmony..."

Blue smiled and glanced at Harmony. Scarlet had his arm around her slender shoulder as they watched the party leave. Harmony's eyes sparkled with a suspicious brightness and Scarlet's expression was one of rigid military correctness - a sure sign he was feeling emotional.

Blue glanced down at Symphony to see her eyes were also full of unshed tears. He placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently and said softly, "Make it three firsts...I think he's broken his first hearts too..."

Her hand gripped his fingers as a tear stole down her cheek.



AUTHORS' NOTES:

The previous story is a combined effort of the authors - with thanks to everyone who might recognise snippets they contributed to the idea - those contributors are numerous, and we'd like to acknowledge them.

This story has been written in a spirit of respect for the Tibetan culture and religion - and no disrespect is intended in any way. We are not experts, but have attempted to keep within the traditions of that culture, as we understand it.

The idea of the 'combined power system' - sun energy and wind power electricity - was our own and has not been inspired by anything already in existence. If it does exist, we apologise - if it doesn't - we're waiting for a note from the Patent Office proving that we retain the rights to that invention...

As always, we'd like to acknowledge and thank Hazel Kohler for her invaluable work as a beta-reader on this story. She has made a wonderful job, but if there should be mistakes and omissions, they are ours alone.

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