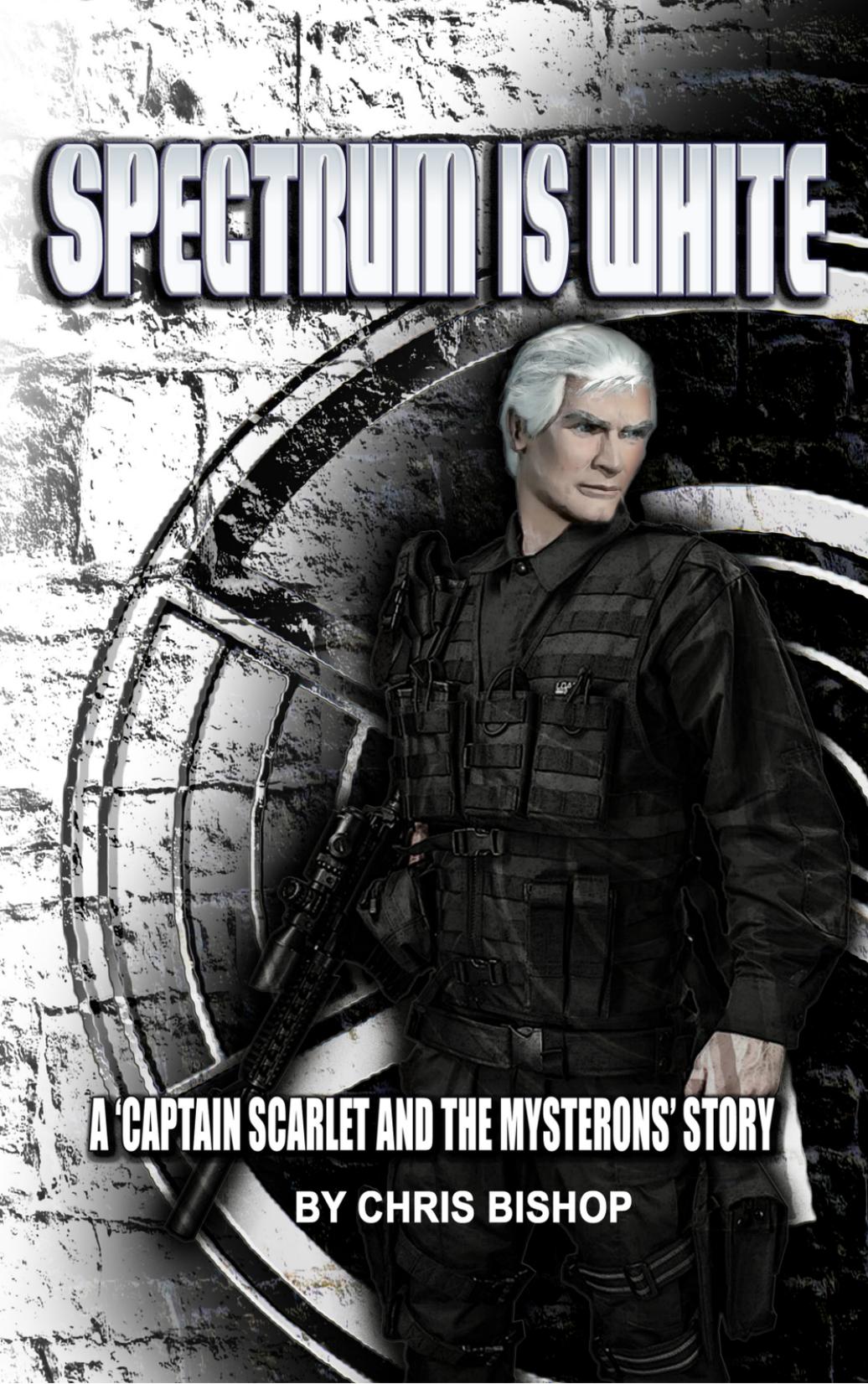


SPECTRUM IS WHITE

A man with short, white hair is the central figure. He is wearing a dark, tactical military uniform consisting of a long-sleeved shirt, a vest with multiple pockets and straps, and cargo pants. He is holding a black assault rifle in his right hand. The background is a dark, textured wall with a large, circular, metallic-looking opening behind him. The overall color palette is dark and monochromatic, with the white hair and text providing high contrast.

A 'CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE MYSTERONS' STORY

BY CHRIS BISHOP

SPECTRUM IS WHITE

A
"Captain Scarlet & the Mysterons"
story

by Chris Bishop

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SPECTRUM IS WHITE

Prologue

December 2048.

Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, Southeast of Bermuda.

“Captain! The 'copter's approaching!”

Charles Gray left the captain's cabin – his cabin for a few weeks now – in a hurry. *Mustn't keep the old man waiting*, he thought, coming up the ladder to the bridge. That wouldn't look too good from a brand-new ship's commander who had just received his commission... Especially when you are still considered a snout-nosed kid by the majority of your peers. It wasn't easy for Gray, age 29, to prove himself in the British Navy.

It was a time of difficult conflicts around the world and that certainly gave him the opportunity he needed. As officer on board different ships, he was involved with problems in South-East Asia, and with that dispute over territorial rights in Iceland. And then came that Panama thing, where the British Embassy had been taken over by the local rebels. One hundred and three British nationals had been taken hostage, including the ambassador himself, and the ship on which Gray served at the time had been sent to try to reach the coast, then to serve as an operations centre for the rescue team. But then, the Panamanian rebels engaged the ship, and the captain was killed during the battle. As first officer, Gray had taken command. He had held on long enough for the rescue team to come back with the hostages, had even destroyed two enemy ships in the process, and then was able to bring everybody back safely to England.

That daring escapade, along with many others that had followed, had contributed to his promotion to captain with command of his own ship. At the time, some had said that his promotion was simply an indication that the British Navy was in

dire need of new blood, and he was even considered too young for the job. He had let his deeds speak for themselves. Now the disrespectful remarks were few, and almost everybody considered him more than fit for command.

He was wondering now what Admiral Matheson wanted from him. The day before, he had received a coded message announcing that the admiral was coming to see him in person. That was odd, the young captain thought, and certainly not according to procedure. But then, there was so much turmoil in Britain. People were demanding that the Militarist Government step down and give up their political power. Many wanted Britain to finally join the World Government, as it should have done years earlier. These demands would not have been unreasonable, if it weren't for the way some people were making them: riots, protests marches, those were the more benign aspects; armed uprisings, bombings and terrorist attacks were much more serious.

It was no wonder some military people, like Admiral Matheson, took additional precautions, thought Gray as he watched the helicopter descending to its pad.

Standing by the captain's side, his first officer, Commander Jackson Bennett, was waiting as well. Bennett was a lot older than Gray, and the captain was always willing to listen to his wise advice.

"What do you make of this, Bennett?" Gray asked when the helicopter finally touched down. "What brings an admiral of the High Command to see us in the middle of the ocean?"

"Can't be anything good, Captain," Bennett murmured sombrely. "But it's bound to be something highly important..."

"I suppose we'll know soon enough."

Gray hurried toward the helicopter, from which an elderly man, wearing the insignia of a full admiral on his shoulders, and a very large cluster on his chest, was emerging. The young captain noticed that the helicopter pilot, after shutting down his craft completely, was also stepping out. Gray gave him just one glance before saluting the admiral.

"Welcome aboard the *Sir Francis Drake*, Admiral Matheson. It's an honour..."

Matheson shook hands with the younger man, grinning broadly. "The honour is mine, Captain Gray. The *Drake* already has a glorious history to its name... And you as well, I hear."

Gray had to make a supreme effort not to redden. Compliments from his elders always embarrassed him. Fortunately, Matheson had turned to beckon the pilot closer. As he approached, the pilot removed his helmet. "I believe you know my pilot, Captain?"

Gray stiffened in surprise on seeing the now uncovered face of the pilot; the older man glanced at him with a twinkle in his eyes, eyes as blue as the captain's, and, after having tucked his helmet under his left arm, gave him a smart salute. *What is HE doing here?* a perplexed Gray thought. *Serving as pilot to an admiral isn't his regular job...* It took a few seconds before Captain Gray actually came out of his surprise and returned the salute. "How are you, Flight Sergeant?"

"Very well, thank you, Captain," the pilot answered.

Gray smiled; forgetting protocol for an instant, he shook the hand of the man standing in front of him. "It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"Too long, I'm afraid," the pilot agreed. "But then again, I know how busy you are... Captain."

Gray shook his head. "Still, a man should never be too busy to at least write to his father."

"I believe my son would say the same."

Gray stared at the pilot, who gave him a faint, but rueful smile. Yes, it had been a while since he had seen him, his own father, the Air Force Flight Sergeant. The man who had brought him up almost single-handedly since the day he had been born. Charles' mother had died a couple of months after giving birth to her only son. Her husband, Alexander, didn't know much about childcare and education, but with some help from well-intentioned aunts – mostly in the beginning – he had done his best with what little he knew.

The rest looked a lot like day-to-day life and training on a military base. It was certainly not easy being the son of a notably harsh drill sergeant, who expected nothing less than perfection and total obedience. Still, it served to form Charles' character. He had the same volatile temper as his father, and living with him, putting up with him, had taught him to keep it in check. They often clashed, especially since the day Charles had reached the age of twelve and had decided to show his father that he also had a mind of his own, and that he was not about to let him decide what he should do with the rest of his life. Alexander wasn't totally displeased, in fact, that his son stood up to him. There weren't many men who would actually do that, even superior officers would often approach him with a certain caution.

As it was, Alexander actually expected his son to be able to face him without looking down. Just as he expected him to eventually join the military life. Not to become a simple sergeant, like his dad... He knew Charles had the stuff to be a high ranked officer. So he gave him the opportunities to aspire to that and sent him to receive the best education possible, in some of England's

most prestigious colleges and universities. Charles never disappointed the expectations of his father, always being the best in all academic fields... there was only one thing Alexander Gray hadn't counted on: when the time came for his son to enlist in the Military, he chose to join the Navy instead of the Air Force.

For some time, Alexander Gray did nothing to hide his dismay and disappointment over his son's choice of career. It didn't last long, however, and Alexander was now very proud of Charles' accomplishments, as he quickly climbed the ladder of success, gaining promotion after promotion, until he reached his present position. A highly renowned Navy man, commander of his own warship, which in turn had one of the most prestigious names in the British Fleet.

"My first officer, Commander Jackson Bennett," Charles presented suddenly, noticing the man who had just arrived next to him.

"My respects, Admiral," Bennett said, saluting Matheson.

"Jack, this is my father. Flight Sergeant Alexander Gray."

"Oh!" Bennett squeezed the pilot's hand. "I thought you were a drill sergeant for new recruits."

"I re-enlisted as a helicopter pilot, some months ago," the older Gray replied. "That was my first love, anyway... Well, not counting Charles' mother, I mean."

"Shall we go to your cabin, Captain?" Admiral Matheson then said. "We can discuss business there. Your father will join us. You will be able to catch up with him, then."

Charles kept himself from blinking. *Curiouser and curiouser.* Since when was a simple helicopter pilot allowed to attend official military meetings between superior officers? Or maybe there was nothing official about all this. However, it was noticeable how Matheson had casually left Bennett out of his invitation.

"Of course, Admiral. If you'd follow me... Commander Bennett, take the bridge. I'll call for you if necessary."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"This way, gentlemen, if you please..."

Charles guided his father and Admiral Matheson to his cabin where he offered them coffee. He noticed how uneasy his father seemed in his presence and tried to make him as comfortable as he could. Matheson joined in with some banter of his own. Before long, the three men were tackling different subjects, most noticeably reminiscing about their respective home towns. The three had not been in England for a long time, and missed their country a lot. Charles didn't even know that his father had re-enlisted as a helicopter pilot. They hadn't seen each other for months.

"I knew you wanted to see some more action," Charles said to his father, "but I didn't know you were back as a pilot."

Alexander scoffed. "Don't see much action flying superior officers around... Isn't that right, Admiral?"

"Oh, I don't know, Alex... I expect action to be on our doorstep pretty soon..."

Charles almost frowned. It was pretty obvious his father was something of a confidante to the admiral. Since when was he his pilot, anyway?

"Speaking of action," Matheson added, "I have something for you, Captain."

He searched in his jacket pocket and produced an envelope, closed with the seal of the Ministry of Defence. He handed it to Charles. "I believe these are your new orders..."

Charles conspicuously eyed the envelope before taking it, not without thanking Matheson with a nod. Seeing the younger man hesitate, the admiral gave him a nod of his own. "You can open it right away. I already know what's in it, anyway."

Matheson took a sip of his coffee and Alexander looked down at his own cup. What's going on here? Charles thought, glancing at his elders. He quickly broke the seal, took the letter from the envelope, and unfolded it. He began to read silently.

It took him a second quick reading to really understand the implications of the orders contained in the letter. He looked at Matheson and his father; both men were staring at him, apparently watching his reaction. He ignored his father and turned to the admiral. "Is this some kind of joke?" he asked bluntly.

Matheson shook his head. "No. No joke," he said quietly, taking another sip of coffee. "That comes directly from the Ministry of Defence."

"Yes, I saw that," Charles replied, more impatiently that he should have. "But I can't believe..." He stopped, looking back at Alexander, who was still staring at him, and hesitated.

Matheson cleared his throat. "You can talk in front of your father."

"You know what's in this letter?" Charles asked his father, frowning again.

"I know," Alexander replied calmly.

Charles looked at him in disbelief; he was troubled. His father was a simple pilot; what was in that letter was certainly far too important for him to know about. How could he have learned about it? Probably from Matheson, who had said that he knew all about it, which in his case was not really surprising. But why would he have told Alexander Gray?

"I take it you're not happy with your new assignment?" Matheson asked.

"Not happy?" Charles almost snapped, turning toward the admiral. "Sorry, Sir, and without meaning any disrespect, it can't be serious!"

"But it is, Captain Gray. Deadly serious!"

"So perhaps I don't understand the letter correctly." Charles raised the paper to show it to the admiral. "The Ministry orders me to sail to the Orkney Islands, where it is believed a base has been installed by 'rebels'. They ask me to join the search to seek out where those 'traitors to our country' are hidden... To seek them out, demand their immediate capitulation... and destroy them and their installations if they refuse... With extreme prejudice." Charles spat out the last words in disgust, and then looked straight into Matheson's eyes. "Who are these rebels, sir?"

The admiral's glance was very quiet. "Opponents of the Military regime," he answered. "Nothing more... nothing less."

"Are they the terrorists wreaking havoc in England?" Charles asked.

Matheson shrugged. "I know they're not from the same group..."

"So they may not be terrorists at all. Are they even armed?" Matheson did not respond. Charles continued: "Are they even posing a real threat to National Security?"

"Most probably," the admiral answered. "They have ideas that may be threatening enough. And even if they're not from the same party as those terrorists you were just talking about, what difference could it make? The Government considers all these groups as one and the same. All rebels. All traitors."

"There is a big difference between traitors and opponents. Some of these people have very valid points..."

"Be careful what you say, Charles," Alexander advised his son.

"YOU already know what I think about all this," Charles almost snapped at him. "I may not have been in England for quite some time, but I know what's going on there. I know the people have had quite enough of the Military regime. I know the majority of them want to join the World Government. Some of them have even left Britain. France and the United States have actually welcomed some of them. What's Britain going to do about that? Declare war on the rest of the world so our people don't try to escape?"

"Charles," Alexander tried to warn his son again.

"I don't know about these people in the Orkneys," Charles continued, not even hearing him. "And frankly, I don't much care if they are armed or not. 'With extreme prejudice'?" He angrily flourished the paper again. "These are British citizens, for Heaven's sake... Probably have innocents with them. Elders, women, children... and their alleged base is situated in British

territory, where there's bound to be civilians, not even aware of what's about to drop on their heads. We can't fight ideas with weapons. And certainly not reasonable ideas."

"Do you realize what you're saying, Captain?" Admiral Matheson asked him sternly. "Your words could be interpreted as treason."

Charles stiffened. He looked stonily at the two men staring at him. His father had grown very quiet.

"I'm not a traitor," Charles replied in a harsh tone. "I love England. But I hate what the Militarist Government is doing to it."

"You're military..."

"But I'm not without conscience, and that may be the difference between me and those in power. Admiral..." Charles hesitated one moment, looking straight at his superior. "...I would have thought the Government would listen to reason and heed the will of the people. Instead, it's trying to stifle anyone whose opinion differs from it. What impact is that going to have on our image to the world at large? These orders..." - he screwed the letter into a ball - "...are garbage."

He tossed the ball onto the table in front of the admiral. The older man looked at it quietly, then gave a thoughtful look at the young captain standing in front of him. There was still fire in his eyes.

"I take it you refuse to follow those orders?"

"Do what you wish with me," Charles declared. "I will not become a murderer to satisfy the ego of power-hungry despots."

"These are your last words on the matter?"

"They may not be my last words, Admiral... But I'll stand by them every step of the way."

Matheson looked a long time at the younger man who stood at ease in front of him, waiting for the consequences of his statement. The admiral blew out a sigh. "You were right about your boy, Alex. He has yet to learn to control his temper."

"I'm afraid he got that from me," Alexander replied, in a quiet tone that made Charles twitch. There was no emotion whatsoever apparent in his father's voice. *Doesn't he care that I just put myself in deep trouble right now? Doesn't he realize my career may well be finished and that I may be court-martialled? There is no way Matheson will overlook such blatant insubordination and disregard for direct orders...*

"All right, Captain," Matheson sighed again. "Since you feel so strongly about this... I have new orders for you. And I'm sure you realize that they might have a tremendous impact on the rest of your life."

"I'm listening, sir," Charles answered gloomily.

"You'll sail this ship to the Orkney Islands, as the Ministry ordered you to..."

Charles looked in dismay at the man. Hadn't he listened to a single word he had said? "Admiral..."

"Let me finish!" Matheson almost barked, drawing the younger man to immediate attention. "You WILL sail the *Drake* there, locate the rebel base... and do whatever you have to, to protect it from any attempt by the British Government to attack it."

Charles blinked in surprise at those last words. He looked in perplexity at Matheson who nodded quietly. "You're right. If the Militarists attack that base and kill those people, that will have tremendous impact with the World Government. It could even result in a war that nobody, with any sense at all, would want."

Another perplexed look; Charles frowned deeply. "What are you trying to say, Admiral?" he murmured.

"Charles," Alexander said gravely, making his son turn to him, "this whole situation has gone on long enough. Before it goes any further and becomes really bad, somebody must do something to stop it."

"Yes, this must be resolved," Matheson agreed. "Once and for all."

Charles stared at the two men, with a deeply puzzled look. Something was beginning to sink into his mind, but he wasn't sure if he should trust his instincts. "You know who those people hidden in the Orkneys are," he said, more as a statement than a question.

Matheson nodded. "Yes, we know. It's a coalition, formed of some very driven, but reasonable, people. They feel it is time for the Militarist regime to step down, and give the governing powers back to the people. So all these conflicts, all these tensions, in Britain will finally stop."

"How... do you know all that?" Charles asked.

"There are members of the military amongst these people," Matheson explained. "Civilians as well, and dignitaries of the British government."

"Military?" Charles repeated, troubled.

"Yes, quite a few. Some pretty high ranked: generals, air marshals... Admirals."

"Oh, my God..." Charles stared at Matheson and then at his father. "You're in this too, aren't you?"

Matheson nodded quietly. "Yes, we are. We're part of the Coalition."

"Oh, God!" Charles repeated, throwing his arms in the air. He looked down at Alexander, with disbelief in his eyes. "Father, how the Hell did you find yourself involved in this?"

"Not easily, I assure you," Alexander answered. "It took me a long time before actually joining the cause. I had to do a lot of thinking. Your arguments often came to my mind, you know. All those discussions we used to have about the validity of Military in politics... After taking a good look at what was really going on all around me, I realized you were right about a lot of things. The military has no business in politics. The government should belong to the people."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Charles sighed.

"Do you think I didn't want to?" His father's answer came rather harshly. "It wasn't just my secret, Charles. There were other people involved. All of us, especially the military, we have to live with the secret, keeping our convictions to ourselves, to escape whatever means of retaliation the Militarist regime might bring against us... and those close to us."

"You've known of my feelings about all this for a long time, Father," Charles retorted. "Why are you telling me now? You were afraid I would denounce you? My own father?"

"What was I supposed to think, Captain, when my own son has become the Navy's most celebrated and decorated hero of recent years? Wouldn't he be more inclined to side with his superiors in the Militarist regime, who had awarded him all these promotions and rewards, or with me, his father, who had decided to support the so-called rebels?"

"I..." Charles stopped suddenly. He sighed and sat down. "I don't know what to say, actually."

"Well, then," his father said with a faint smile. "That is something unusual, coming from you."

Charles frowned. "And I don't know what to do. What do you want from me?"

"Exactly what I have told you already," Matheson said. "Protect the rebel base in the Orkneys. At all costs."

"You said it is of tremendous importance. That if this base should be destroyed and its people killed, it could start a disastrous war... What do you mean?"

"Aside from the bad image of British government it would send to the rest of the world?"

"There is something else, isn't there, Admiral?"

A hesitant Matheson exchanged glances with Alexander. Seeing the pilot nodding confidently at him, he cleared his throat. "As I have told you, the Coalition in which your father and I are involved is composed of some very important people. Some of these people have officially made contact with the World Government to ask for its support against the Militarist Government... and eventually, bring Britain into the World Government."

Charles' eyes widened. "And has World President Bandranaik agreed to give his support?"

"He has, though not officially yet. He wants to make sure first that it is actually the will of the British people to overthrow the Militarists. He also wanted to know that the Coalition wasn't some terrorist group, like those so-called 'Freedom Fighters' who've been planting bombs all around England these last weeks."

"How did you convince him it was not the case?"

"The representatives we sent were pretty convincing. They were people whose reputations are beyond doubt. Air Marshal Weston was amongst them. Admiral McCarthy... And even some ex-Militarists, who've been brought into the cause, like old General Metcalfe."

"Samuel Metcalfe?" Charles scoffed. "That old goat must be over eighty, and stubborn as a mule. It must have been an exploit in itself to convince him to come out of retirement and actually join your Coalition."

"Old Sam Metcalfe has a son, Arthur, who in turn has three sons," Alexander said. "The four of them are strong supporters of the cause. Fortunately, the boys are as stubborn as their grandfather. They somehow convinced him." A smile crossed the elder Gray's features. "I think the eldest has your name, Charles... Must be about your age, too... married, with a young boy of his own."

Charles frowned. For a few years, his father had been bugging him about getting married and having children. The old man had grown fond of the idea of having a grandchild or two. Unfortunately for him, his son didn't share his feelings.

"When will President Bandranaik make his support official, Admiral?" Charles asked, quickly changing the subject.

"His representatives are presently at our base..." Matheson responded. He looked Charles squarely in the eyes. "...in the Orkneys."

"Good Lord," Charles murmured. "If there is a British attack on that base and the World Government officials are harmed in any way..."

"Now you understand," Matheson nodded slowly. "That's why you must go there, Captain. There are already other British ships on their way, and they will search for that base... And unlike you, their commanders may not hesitate before actually following orders and destroying it."

"I see why you seem so desperate for my help," Charles mused. "Do you know how many ships there are?"

"Three ships."

"Three ships, really," Charles muttered. "And naturally, you want me to oppose them if it comes to it."

"That's why we're asking you to go there, Captain."

"And who's in charge of the search operation?"

"Captain Renfro."

Charles, who was about to take a sip of coffee, stopped his cup halfway to his lips. He looked at Matheson in disbelief. "Renfro? You want me to engage the *Horatio Nelson*? PLUS two other ships?"

"Would that be a problem?" Matheson asked innocently.

"Sir, you know as well as I do that Renfro is the best commander in the Fleet. As for his ship..."

"I believe the *Drake* has nothing to envy the *Nelson*," Matheson interrupted quickly. "Nothing, Charles. Not even her captain..." He shook his head. "The only thing Renfro has more than you is years of experience. YOU are the best commander in the Fleet, Captain Gray, despite your young age. Only you can hope to engage Renfro and come out victorious."

"The *Nelson* and two other ships," Charles continued to muse. "Those odds are..."

"Not nearly as desperate as when Captain Francis Drake actually had to face the entire Spanish Armada," Matheson remarked, smiling.

"I wouldn't go that far in comparison. Beside, Drake had a storm on his side." Charles stared at Matheson. "Why me?" he asked, frowning deeply.

"Your convictions make you the only man for the job," Alexander remarked.

Charles sighed. "I'm still not sure... I have to think about this. And it's not the kind of decision I can take on my own. I'll have to consult my staff."

"Do whatever your conscience tells you," Matheson said, nodding. "But you shouldn't spend too much time thinking. We're running out of time, Captain. And... be careful with your first officer."

"Bennett?"

"He is well known to be a confirmed Militarist, with a loyalty to the Government bordering fanaticism."

"I'll keep that in mind, Admiral."

Matheson reached into his pocket and pulled out another letter he handed to the young ship's commander. "Here. You'll find in there the co-ordinates to contact General Weston. When you have reached your decision, and if it's the one we're hoping for, contact him. He'll give you the exact position of the rebel base."

Charles eyed the letter with a thoughtful look. "You take a great risk, Admiral, handing me this information. How do you know I won't use it against you and your cause?"

"I trust you not to betray our confidence in you, Charles. Even if you don't give us your support." Matheson got to his feet, promptly imitated by Alexander. "Weigh your options, but do it carefully and swiftly. I can't tell you how important it is to take quick action..." He hesitated a couple of seconds. "Captain, I must make you aware of something: if we are successful in this, we have much to gain. Britain will finally be free of the military despotism under which it's been kept for too long. She will probably join the World Government. If, however, we fail... the consequences on all our lives will be disastrous. We'll be considered traitors to our own country..."

"I've never been afraid to face the consequences of my acts, Admiral," Charles answered calmly. "If I do help you, it won't be any different."

"You are a wise young man, Captain Gray. If we are successful, and I have a strong feeling we will be, I'm quite sure you'll have a bright future under the new order."

Charles tilted his head to the side. "I assure you, sir, that if I give you my help, it won't be in exchange for any reward or promotion."

Matheson smiled and nodded his understanding. "We'll go now," he said. "I'm expected in London this evening, by the High Command. It wouldn't be safe to make them wait, would it, Alex?"

"Certainly not, Admiral," Alexander agreed quietly.

"You have a fine lad, here, my friend," Matheson continued, addressing his pilot. "I know a lot of men who would be proud to call him his son."

Charles felt a bit embarrassed over the compliment. He cleared his throat and gestured toward the door leading out of his cabin. "I'll escort you to your helicopter, gentlemen."

He preceded the two men through to the helicopter pad. Matheson shook his hand one last time before taking his place in the craft. Charles then turned to his father who was following behind.

"You really look great, Charles," the older man said, gazing at his son.

"You look great too, Father," Charles responded with a faint smile. "How do you find not having to bark at any more young recruits?"

"It's done my voice a lot of good!" Alexander laughed softly. "And it's a wonderful feeling to be back in action." He shook his head. "You know, the admiral is right. We often had a stressful relationship, you and me... Especially when you decided to join the Navy instead of the Air Force..."

"Father..."

"...But it's true, you know?" Alexander interrupted his son. "I'm really, really proud of you, and of your accomplishments."

Charles frowned mockingly. "Are you trying to make me blush in front of my entire crew, Flight Sergeant Gray?"

"Now, that would be a really funny sight, Captain!"

Alexander came to attention and saluted his son; the latter brought his hand to his brow to respond and then hesitated; he reached for his father and hugged him in his arms, thumping his back. "It's been good to see you, Dad."

A bit surprised by Charles' gesture, for he had never been particularly demonstrative, Alexander squeezed him back against his heart. "Yes. It's been good for me too... Take good care of yourself, will you?"

"I will... And you be careful."

Alexander nodded quietly. He broke their embrace and strode toward the helicopter where Admiral Matheson was patiently waiting. He took his seat at the helm and started the engine. The rotor began to turn, gradually picking up speed. People on the helicopter pad stepped back, including Charles who was still looking in his father's direction. He snapped a military salute at the pilot who answered smartly. Then the helicopter lifted, and left the deck of the *Sir Francis Drake* warship.

Captain Charles Gray climbed up the ladder to the upper bridge surmounting the helicopter pad and then thoughtfully followed the craft as it pulled away from his ship. He was still pondering what he had just learned from the two men onboard when he noticed Bennett's absence from his side. He saw the man below, also watching as the aircraft departed.

"So, Captain, it's not every day we get to receive a full admiral on board, eh?"

Charles Gray glanced at the man who had approached him on his left, to address him with his very recognizable Irish brogue. Quartermaster Greg Dooley had served onboard warships far longer than Gray himself had been in the Navy. Even if there was a definite difference in age and rank between the two men, Charles had always felt friendly toward the other man, and thought of him as probably one of his most loyal crewmembers. He wondered now how deep his loyalty to the British Military regime really was. Irish people didn't have the reputation of being very fond of it, but Dooley's service record was flawless.

The helicopter was about three hundred metres from the ship and Captain Gray was about to turn away to go down to his cabin, when the aircraft violently exploded in a giant fireball. About everybody on deck instinctively ducked down, Charles amongst them. Petrified with horror, he could only look as the wreckage of what was once the helicopter plunged down into the sea.

Total confusion now reigned on the ship. There were shouts of surprise, and murmurs everywhere. Those who had not witnessed the blast came over to find out what had happened. Charles quickly strode across the bridge, his eyes riveted on the flames spreading on the water's surface, at the spot where the main piece of the helicopter had fallen.

"Dear sweet Mother of God!" he heard a man whispering near him. "Those two guys... They had no chance."

Shaking all over, Charles grabbed the railing. His father was gone. In a matter of seconds, he had disappeared in a fiery explosion, at the helm of his craft. Emotions washed over the young captain as he stared in disbelief at what was left of the scene. He felt desperate and useless, to have seen it all and been unable to do anything to prevent it.

Dad... What had happened? What went wrong? Frustration took hold of him. Standard procedure demanded that any helicopter touching down on a ship should be checked by the onboard team of aviation mechanics, to make sure it was in perfect order for its eventual departure. The regulations on the *Drake* were no different from any other ship. And Charles was one hundred percent certain the job had been done in this instance, like in any other. Something else had occurred.

Charles' trembling eyes then found one man, who, amidst all the confusion on the deck, was standing still in one place, looking up impassively at him. The young ship commander stared back at the man, and then understood almost instantly that the explosion was not an accident.

Captain Charles Gray had the deep conviction that Commander Jackson Bennett had somehow sabotaged the helicopter he knew was transporting two dedicated opponents of the British Militarist government.

How much does he actually know about the real reason for their presence here? Gray thought as he looked down with contained fury at his first officer. Quite a lot, by the way Bennett was staring at him, as if to challenge him.

No. Not to challenge him, Charles realized, but to warn him. It was so clear... Bennett was only the messenger. It was a message from the High Command. Not to go further. Not to get involved.

And to stop his involvement, the powers-that-be had murdered his father. Charles had tremendous difficulty keeping his turmoil, anger and pain in check as he stared back at the man. His hands squeezed tightly around the cold metal of the railing. So tightly that his knuckles turned white.

There was a time for justice and revenge, he thought, and a time for mourning. Soon, very soon. But not now.

Now was the time for duty. And if he had had doubts as to where his duty and loyalty lay before, Captain Charles Gray had no such hesitation anymore. Britain was in dire need of help and he intended bringing it to her.

Chapter 1

May 2070

Hampton Hill, South West of London.

Knelt before the hole he had freshly dug into his garden, retired quartermaster Gregory Dooley was carefully taking out of its pot the new gardenia plant he had just bought. Since he had received his discharge from the Navy, gardening had become his most cherished hobby. Nobody in the neighbourhood had a more beautiful house than his. The facade was covered with red climbing roses; the garden at the back was intimate, multi-coloured, with fountains, and drinking spots for birds. Dooley loved birds, and his flowers were selected so they would attract as many of them as possible.

Dooley put the rootball of the plant into the hole and covered it with soil which he then watered carefully. Doing so, he looked at his watch. The admiral would not be back for an hour or so, he mused. Enough time to continue his work in the garden. Then he would have time to wash and prepare some sandwiches and refreshments for the two of them.

Dooley knew the admiral's whereabouts today. It was the day he never missed, visiting someone still very important to him. That was something he had been doing for years. It was a kind of tradition. Once a year, every year. And always at the same time of year.

Another tradition, started four years ago, was for the admiral to come here, to stay at his old quartermaster's house for a few days. He had left the city, four years before, to take a new job, he'd told Dooley. He would say nothing more about it, but Dooley had figured out that the new job had to be important enough for him to leave everything behind and go away... But he needed a place to stay when he did come back to London, even if only for a short time, and Dooley was more than pleased to invite him into his home.

How could he refuse an old comrade in arms, especially when he was his Navy captain? They would talk of the old times together, although Dooley had the distinct feeling the admiral, far younger than he, was only reminiscing to please him.

Dooley heard footsteps approaching him and raised his head; he saw a black haired man, in his late thirties, walking down the path toward him. Dooley frowned. Except for occasional old friends and neighbours, he didn't receive many visitors.

"Hello," he said to the man. "Can I help you?"

The man looked around; *strange looking fellow*, Dooley thought. He was so pale, and his eyes seemed so cold... Maybe he was sick, or something.

"Nice garden," the man said in a flat, almost funereal voice. "We don't see much of it from the front."

"That's because I wanted it that way," Dooley replied. "It's much more private."

"So I see." The man stared back at Dooley. *This fella needs a shave*, thought the old quartermaster, instinctively on his guard. *God, those eyes... so cold.*

"Can I ask you why you're here, sir?" Dooley asked, frowning.

"I'm here to see your friend."

"My friend?"

The man nodded. "The admiral. I know he usually stays here when he comes to London."

"And how do you know that?"

"He told me himself."

Dooley relaxed a little. "You know him, then?"

"Of course. We worked together. We've been friends for years." He stared intently at Dooley. "Not as long as you have been friends, however... You were under his command on the *Drake*, he told me."

Dooley then relaxed completely. If the admiral had told him that, then he was surely on the level. He took his trowel to dig another hole.

"Yes, I was," he said. "What's the matter with your voice, young man? Had an accident?"

"Of a sort." The black-haired man took another long look around and eyed a shovel resting against a low brick wall nearby.

"So," Dooley continued, "how did you meet the admiral?"

"I saved his life, years ago."

"Is that so?" Dooley looked up at him and smiled, before returning his attention to his gardening. The man moved to the shovel and quietly took it, before coming closer to the unsuspecting quartermaster, who was getting another plant out of its pot.

"I know I shouldn't ask you this," Dooley continued, "with the admiral being so secretive about himself and all... but I'm curious, you see? What was it you worked with him on?"

"World security," was the calm answer.

"Really? I should have guessed! All that rubbish about him retiring years ago from active duty from the Navy... It was all a front, I knew it. What's your name, son? I don't think I caught it."

"It's Black. Captain Black."

Dooley didn't see the man raising the shovel high above him before bringing it down brutally over the old quartermaster's head. The single blow was strong enough to break the old man's neck instantly. Dooley fell face first into the dirt, blood dripping from an open wound on the back of his head. He expired without even knowing what had happened to him.

Captain Black stood coldly over the dead body. He watched in silence as two halos of green light, coming out of nowhere, trailed across the body. An instant later, footsteps attracted Black's attention and he raised his eyes to meet an exact copy of quartermaster Gregory Dooley, dressed in the same attire, coming towards him. The eyes of this new Dooley seemed as icy as those of Captain Black, who handed him the shovel.

"Get rid of the corpse," he told him. "Then get yourself ready. You know what you must do."

"Yes," came the quiet, even response. "I know what the Mysterons want from me..."

* * *

"Here I am, Elizabeth. Like every year, as I promised. I hope it didn't seem too long for you."

The tall, white-haired gentleman standing before the tombstone tilted his head slightly to the side, looking down at the lettering engraved on the surface of the stone. Even though he was casually dressed in city clothing, anybody passing by would have guessed that the man had something military in him, just by looking at the way he stood, rigidly and proudly. Clasped before him, in both hands, he held three beautiful white roses.

"It's been quite a year again, as you probably well know," the man continued in his distinguished English voice. "So many things happened. I didn't have much time for myself." He sighed, smiling faintly. "If you were still here, you'd probably say I'm not a young man any more and that I should not over-exert myself. You would probably be right, of course. But you know me: I have to try and keep up with my staff. Although with some of that gang, I must admit, it's not an easy task."

He stopped talking for a moment, disturbed by a rustling sound behind him. Looking back, he saw the rector of the church nearby, who had just come out to sweep his doorstep. Somewhat reassured, the man turned his attention back to his meditation.

"Not a day has gone by when I don't think of you," he continued. "It's been seventeen years and... well, I suppose, it has been such a long time without you." Words caught in his throat and the man actually felt a tear at the corner of his eye. He

swept it off with an annoyed gesture and cleared his throat. "I don't know what my staff would think, seeing me like this," he added with a faint smile. "During one of our too few informal meetings, Scarlet actually said that he thought nothing could touch me. He would probably be surprised if he was here now." He bowed his head and crouched in front of the tombstone. "The thing I want to say, my darling, is that I miss you... miss you so terribly. That's probably why I'm so engrossed in my job. It's the only purpose I have left, since you've gone."

He looked down at the roses, still in his hand. With a tender, almost ceremonious gesture, he put them on the grave. He cultivated these flowers all year long, in loving memory of the woman he had so cared about, so long ago. Every year, at the same time, he cut the prettiest of his roses to come here, to this little graveyard in London, where he put them on the woman's grave.

"Don't worry," he added, "I'm not ready to come and join you yet. I'm still the fighter I used to be, when we worked together at the U.S.S." He scratched his ear, musing. "I supposed that's why that World Committee chose me to run Spectrum, three years ago. Quite a challenge they offered me. The kind of challenge you would have loved, too." He smiled. "I often wonder how you'd fit in Spectrum... Remarkably, I suppose. And I'm certain everybody would have loved you on Cloudbase."

The man then gently stroked the words engraved in the stone, drawing the contours with the tips of his fingers. There was sadness in his features, and also everlasting tenderness as he stood up, his eyes still riveted on the name.

"Elizabeth Somners, 2019 – 2053. Beloved wife of Charles Gray. Remember my love forever."

The man kept silent for a few seconds before sighing and standing up. He looked down at his watch. "I must go, now. You see, I've got a date with a very charming young lady... Don't be jealous, though," he added with a broad smile. "We're only going to a show together. She was kind enough to accept my invitation. She's one of the Angel pilots I've told you about in some of my journal entries. You'd like her, Elizabeth. I think you would love all of the Angels. They've all got the same spirit as you... like our daughter would have inherited from you if she had been born." He stopped a second, before adding quickly, "Of course, she would also have inherited some of my traits... That would have been a volatile combination, don't you think?"

He smiled then, and touched the tombstone one last time. "So I'll say goodbye, my darling. Until next year. You know I wouldn't

miss that for a kingdom. And I'm quite certain you worry about me up there. Don't do that too much."

Quietly, as if he didn't want to disturb the sleeping, the man who was Charles Gray and who was known to some as Colonel White, commander-in-chief of Spectrum for three years now, stepped out of the graveyard, with a determined stride. He went to the elderly minister, who had stopped sweeping the doorstep of his church and was looking toward him, waiting.

"Another year, Admiral?" he asked Colonel White, as he approached.

"Yes, Reverend Lester. Another year," the other man responded. He produced a couple of banknotes which he put into the priest's hand. "Here. For your charities."

"You're really too generous, Charles," Reverend Benjamin Lester said with a smile. "With all the money you've been giving me all these years, I could start a fund in your name."

"No need for that, Reverend. I prefer to stay anonymous."

"Yes. I know." The priest narrowed his eyes. "How long have we known each other, Admiral?"

"I stopped counting. What I know is that I would never had believed you'd turn out to be a priest, when you were first class seaman on the *Drake*, all those years ago. And please stop calling me Admiral!"

"Only if you stop calling me Reverend," the other man replied, grinning. "You're staying with Dooley, as usual? How about a game of bridge with Carrington, for old times' sakes?"

"I'd like to. But I've got a date tonight."

"Oh!" Reverend Lester grinned broadly. "Now that's interesting. A lady, I bet?"

"Yes, a lady. But don't get too excited, Benjamin. While very charming, she's just a girl. I'm old enough to be her father. And then some."

"Who said age has anything to do with romance?"

White started laughing. "It's not romance, it's a working relationship. It just so happened we both had leave at the same time. Beside, I don't think she'd be interested in an old man like me."

"You're still young enough... Find somebody who would be interested."

"You make one devil of a vicar!" White replied, amused. "Seriously, Benjamin... I don't have the time."

"Ah!" Reverend Lester thought that over for a moment "Well, that's another problem entirely. Your job." He shook his head. "You know, I don't know what it is you're doing, exactly... The few times you actually permit yourself to talk about it, you're always vague... on purpose, I know."

“Can’t help it, Reverend. That’s a very restricted subject.”

“I don’t doubt it. And I don’t doubt it’s very important. But you can’t go on like that, living your life alone...” The vicar nodded toward the grave White had just left. “Elizabeth wouldn’t have wanted that.”

White permitted a faint smile to cross his craggy face. He would hardly call himself alone, living on an airborne base with some 700 people onboard. But he couldn’t very well tell that to Benjamin Lester. Firstly for reasons of world security, and secondly because the humour of it would have been lost on the man of the cloth. As for seeing women... Since his wife’s death, Charles Gray did try to get out of his shell, from time to time. The last time he actually let his eyes rove, it was when a certain Amanda Wainwright had received permission to come see her daughter Karen – Symphony Angel, one of the pilots of Cloudbase’s interceptor jets – just after she had been injured during a mission. But it was already a couple of years ago and at the time, Colonel White hadn’t deemed it decent to even consider a relationship with the woman. She was newly widowed, just a few weeks before, was still missing her husband terribly and had nearly lost her only daughter. White knew the feeling all too well. It had been seventeen years now, and he was still missing his beloved wife.

“I’m sorry, Reverend,” White said quietly. “But after Elizabeth, any other relationship I might have with a woman would seem rather... tedious.”

“I see what you mean,” the reverend replied, nodding his head. “She was quite a woman...” He smiled slightly. “However, that must not stop you being attentive toward this young lady you’re seeing tonight...”

“Benjamin...”

“All right, all right! I won’t say another word about it!”

“That reminds me, though,” White added, looking at his watch, “I’ll be late if I don’t get moving...”

“Then go, Admiral. You should not keep a lady waiting.” Lester smiled again. “I seem to recall that’s her privilege.”

White grinned back; he clasped the hand the reverend offered him. “Til next year, then, Benjamin.”

“Til next year, Charles.”

“Take good care of her, will you?” White added, gesturing toward the grave. Reverend Benjamin Lester nodded his understanding and watched as Colonel White went down the garden path in front of the church, toward his rented car parked on

the roadside. The vicar sighed as his old Navy commander took his place behind the wheel.

"Take care of yourself, Charles Gray... And may God guide your steps throughout your life."

* * *

Colonel White entered the house of quartermaster Gregory Dooley almost fifteen minutes after he had left the graveyard where his wife was buried. He looked down at his watch for the sixth time. *About six o'clock*, he noted. He would just have the time to take a quick shower, get dressed and find something in a store to give to his date over dinner. A gentleman never showed himself to a lady without a present of some sort, he thought, and even less so when the said lady worked under his command. Not that he was afraid that Rhapsody would gossip about him to the others... He didn't believe she was that kind of girl. Too much of a lady for that, he mused, even if she hadn't had the title to go with it... which she actually did. He was just eager to please her, to show her a side of him that was different from that tough, hard-shell image he projected on Cloudbase.

"Greg?" he called, closing the door behind him. "Are you in there, or still in that garden of yours?"

He moved to the back door but stopped in his tracks, when he heard a voice coming from the fireplace. "Over here, Charles."

White walked over to the fireplace and saw Dooley seated in his armchair, poking thoughtfully at the fire. Upon the table in front of him were a crystal carafe of cognac and two small glasses.

"Isn't it a little early in the day to start that thing?" White asked, pointing to the fire.

Dooley shrugged. "Felt a bit chilly out there, earlier," he replied.

"You're getting old, Greg."

"I'm a lot older than you, Charles. And anyway, none of us gets any younger." Dooley looked up at Colonel White. "How's Reverend Lester?"

"He seems fine. He mentioned a bridge game, between us three and Carrington as well."

"Tonight?" Dooley asked, almost worriedly.

"Of course not. I can't tonight."

"Oh yes... your date. At what time should you meet the lady?"

"In about an hour... I'll be late if I don't hurry. Er... Would you mind if I cut some flowers from your garden?"

"For your lady friend?"

"She's not my lady friend. She's... Well, yes, we're friends. Kind of."

"Of course I don't mind, Charles."

"Thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get ready."

He strode toward the staircase leading to the upper floor when Dooley called him back. "What about tradition, Admiral?"

White stopped at the foot of the stair, looking back at his friend curiously. Dooley shook his head and nodded toward the carafe of cognac on the table. "Will you not join me in a glass before leaving? We always take one before turning in..."

White hesitated a second. "I really don't have the time, Greg. Beside, I don't intend coming in late. Maybe then."

"Right," Dooley scoffed. "You're going to dinner, then the theatre, Charles. By the time you'll be back, I'll be long asleep. Come on... one glass before you go. That won't take long."

"Well, if you insist, Greg."

White came back to the table. Before Dooley's watchful eyes, he himself poured some cognac into the glasses and handed one to his old quartermaster. "What should we drink to?" the Spectrum commander asked.

Dooley thought for a moment. "How about 'to lost comrades-in-arms'?"

White nodded slowly. Too many of those had actually died over the last year, while he had been stationed on Cloudbase. For the majority, he wasn't even able to get to the funerals, as he would have wanted to. All he could do was send letters of condolence and flowers to the surviving family members.

"We're a little fewer every year, aren't we, Greg?" he asked Dooley.

"That's a fact, Charles," the quartermaster replied, raising his glass.

"Yes... you were right about that earlier: we're not getting any younger." White raised his glass too. "To lost friends, then."

"To lost friends," Dooley repeated quietly. He watched as White drained the contents of his glass in one gulp. He himself didn't touch his.

White put his empty glass back down on the table. He kept silent a moment, not noticing the still full glass in Dooley's hand. "Greg, as much as I want to stay and reminisce about the past and our late friends..."

"You must go, I know. Go, I won't hold it against you."

"Thank you. Now, if you'll forgive me..."

White turned and hurried back toward the stair. Slowly, Greg Dooley rose from his armchair and put his glass back on the table, his eyes following the colonel's progress, waiting.

The Spectrum commander had started climbing the stairs and was putting his foot on the third step when the dizziness suddenly hit him. He grabbed the handrail with both hands and stopped, staggering.

"Something wrong, Charles?" Dooley asked quietly.

Colonel White stepped back down the stairs, almost tripping on the last step. He just had time to reach the wall in order to stop himself from falling. "I don't know," he muttered, shaking his head. "Feel hot, all of a sudden... giddy..." Leaning against the wall, he looked toward Dooley, who was staring calmly at him. White saw him through a haze, which seemed to thicken by the second. He shook himself, rubbed his tired eyes, and looked again at Dooley.

It was then that he saw the glass, still full of cognac, standing next to the one he had emptied a few moments ago.

"You... didn't drink your glass, Greg," White noticed, with disbelief in his voice.

"Very perspicacious, Admiral," Dooley retorted quietly.

"My God," White murmured, bewildered. "You... poisoned me?"

"Drugged you, actually. With very powerful stuff. Mixed with the cognac, it should have had a nearly immediate effect on any normal man. You're a strong one, Colonel White."

"What... did you call me?" In an effort to stand up, White pushed himself off the wall. He staggered, catching hold of the handrail again, his eyes desperately trying to keep focus on Dooley. Being called by his colour codename had brought a disturbing, horrifying thought to his mind, as he knew that his friend didn't know anything about his connection with Spectrum. "You're not Greg Dooley," he rasped.

"I am... and I am not, *Earthman*."

"Dear Lord, no..." White stepped back from Dooley, who was approaching him. He stumbled against a chair behind him and fell heavily to the floor. His sight was very blurred now, and his breathing was becoming very laborious. He was feeling uncomfortably hot all over.

He managed to loosen his tie, so he could breathe more easily. It didn't help him much.

He saw Dooley standing over him, looking down at him calmly and without any expression. "You're a *Mysteron*..." White realized. He could not get back to his feet, nor could he move. He felt as if he had no strength left in him. Dooley crouched next to him.

White heard quiet footsteps approaching. First, a shadow appeared in his line of view; then he saw a tall, black-haired, man, dressed in black clothing. His very pale, stone-cold face peered down blankly at the drugged Spectrum commander who recognized him instantly and went cold inside.

"Captain Black," he croaked.

Despair then overwhelmed him, at about the same time as he mercifully lost consciousness.

Chapter 2

“Now this is a sight some would actually PAY to see.”

It was late at night and Captain Blue was entering the Control Room on Cloudbase when he saw his colleague and partner, Captain Scarlet, all alone in there. The two men, the best team of the international military task force known all over the world as Spectrum, had been assigned to joint command of the whole organization during the absence of their commander-in-chief, Colonel White. Everyone recognized in Scarlet and Blue their respective qualities of leadership, but Scarlet was also specifically known for his distaste for paperwork and desk jobs. That was why Captain Blue was teasing him now, seeing him seated in front of the huge central computer of the Control Room, which was the habitual station of Cloudbase’s own communications officer and computer expert, Lieutenant Green.

“Where’s the lieutenant?” Blue asked, coming over to Scarlet and looking all around in search of the young Trinidad-born officer.

“Did you actually notice the time, Adam?” Scarlet replied dryly. “I sent him to his quarters. He’s turned in for the night. That’s why I’m manning the computer right now.”

“All by yourself? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Oh, go on... I know the colonel often does it himself.”

“The colonel knows A LOT MORE about computers than you and me put together.”

“I’m not totally ignorant about these things, Captain Blue.”

“When was the last time YOU actually manned this station?”

“More than a year ago...”

“Almost TWO years ago.”

“Don’t worry. Green brought me up to date on the latest improvements. Now, what’s THIS function supposed to do, anyway?”

Scarlet was about to push a certain button when an ashen Captain Blue suddenly stopped him. “What are you doing? That’s the red alert siren! You’ll wake up all of Cloudbase for nothing with that...”

Blue stopped in the middle of his sentence when he saw the broad grin on his friend’s face.

“You were kidding me,” he realised.

“Relax, Adam. Everything’s under control,” Scarlet mockingly replied.

"I can't help it, you know?" Blue sighed and went over to the round computerized desk that was the domain of the Spectrum commander. He sat behind it and put his feet up. "I can cope with the job, it's all the waiting, and worrying about what's going to happen next that's getting to me."

"I suppose you're mostly talking about the Mysterons," Scarlet remarked.

Blue nodded. "For the better part of these last two years, they've taken up more of our time than any other terrorist group on Earth."

"Probably because that particular 'terrorist group' isn't actually from this Earth," Scarlet replied.

"If only we knew exactly what they want. I have a difficult time accepting that crack about 'total destruction of life on Earth'."

"They do seem to have the means to carry out the threat."

"My point exactly. So why don't they simply do it, instead of torturing us?"

Scarlet shrugged. "Must be their way of getting revenge for having their complex on Mars blown to pieces by 'Earthmen'. They want to break us before they actually annihilate us."

"That's something else that bothers me about them," Blue mused, frowning. "The destruction of their complex was a mistake. An awful mistake. But with their powers of retrometabolism, they reconstructed it without effort... At least, apparently. So why do they take that destruction so dramatically? Why can't they accept our apologies? The colonel did admit to them that the incident was wrong, last year. He offered a truce. They responded by ambushing you, when you went to meet their representative."

"Nearly blew up Cloudbase too," Scarlet added.

"Do you think the reason they're not willing to make peace with us is because they're actually afraid of us?"

"Sorry. But the Mysterons being afraid of us isn't something I envision easily." Scarlet looked at his friend. "Beside, if that really was the case, the Mysterons wouldn't give us ANY chances. Earth would already be a uninhabited ball travelling in space."

Blue shook his head gloomily. "So much for that theory," he mused. "It would be nice to know what really motivates the Mysterons, though..."

"You want a simple answer?" Scarlet replied. "They're pure evil."

Blue rolled his eyes. "Come on, Paul! I know you hate them for what they did to you, but..."

"You'd understand if you could feel them like I do, Adam," Scarlet replied.

"I... suppose, yes." Blue sighed. "I'm depressing you with all my questions, aren't I?"

"You're nervous every time the colonel takes time off," Scarlet said, smiling. "So I'm not really surprised to hear you talking like this."

"You know me too well, Paul. Yeah, I guess I AM nervous, every time the old man leaves base and goes down to the surface. Every time he puts me in command, something bad happens... Remember earlier this year, when we had to call him back from his vacation? The Mysterons had to rear their ugly heads again..."

"Well, I don't know if their 'heads' are ugly... I don't even know if they have 'heads', to begin with... But what I remember vividly about that time is the way the old man almost bit off YOUR HEAD when he found out that your carelessness actually endangered MY secret... to my own father, no less."

Blue saw the hard look his friend was giving him. He remembered that incident well, too. Because he had talked too much about the Mysterons to the WAAF Supreme Commander, Scarlet's father, General Charles Metcalfe, commander of the WAAF British Forces, had actually discovered one of Spectrum's most guarded secrets. And that secret concerned his only son.

Two years ago, during Spectrum's first mission against the Mysterons, Captain Scarlet had actually been killed and recreated as one of their first agents on Earth, totally intent on following his masters' instructions. Blue himself had succeeded in stopping the Mysteron agent whose mission was to kidnap the World President. In a showdown on top of the London Car-Vu, Blue had shot Scarlet through the heart, sending him spinning down 800 feet to a certain death. But somehow, miraculously, Scarlet had survived. The fall had broken the spell the Mysterons had over him and he came back to his old self, with no memory of what he had done under the aliens' control. There were some changes in him, though: his new body had kept the Mysteron power to recreate itself. Even if he were to 'die', by human standards, Captain Scarlet would heal from his wounds, totally, in a matter of hours. He could also sense the Mysterons' presence, or danger coming from them. These new attributes, combined with Scarlet's already impressive military skills, made him Spectrum's most effective weapon in its fight against the Mysterons. It was also a secret nobody outside of Spectrum knew about. Not even Captain Scarlet's parents, to whom it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to announce their son had died while he was still fighting the good fight.

"Are you ever going to forgive me for that indiscretion?" Blue muttered.

"That... 'indiscretion' almost meant the end of my relationship with my father," Scarlet retorted rather dryly. He paused a few seconds before adding, with a smile: "But it turned out all right in the end. It didn't take long before he stopped considering me an impostor and started talking to me again. And that settled the problem I'd had with him since this whole situation started. Namely, telling him the truth about me."

"All things considered... you should thank me?" Blue asked his friend.

"I wouldn't go THAT far," Scarlet grinned mischievously.

Blue rolled his eyes and sighed. "Why do I have to put up with you?"

"Because I'm your best friend and I do my best to keep you out of trouble."

"Push me deeper down into it, you mean."

"For example, you're so unpopular as commander that the colonel has to ask ME to team up with you so you don't end up with a mutiny on your hands."

"Who says I'm unpopular?" Blue frowned.

"Come on, Adam! Every time you sit down in that chair, a wind of panic blows all over Cloudbase!" Scarlet smiled. "And don't tell me you don't know why... It started a little more than a year ago... You remember that little incident?"

"It was all your fault."

"MY fault? I didn't send the Angels for target practice over and over again! I tell you, pal, I had trouble keeping even Symphony's temper down, when the girls told me about it. And all those awful lectures! What was the most 'interesting' one Rhapsody told me about? Oh yes... monkeys... I'm glad I was off-base at the time!"

"THAT'S exactly why I did it. Or don't you recall? You asked me to arrange a distraction so nobody would even notice you were gone, looking for the colonel after that Mysteron threat against his life."

"And that was the best you could do?"

"Oh, right! Like YOU have nothing to reproach yourself for during that particular case! Who had the brilliant idea of knocking the colonel out? Who tied him up, gagged him, and locked him up in a cabinet?"

"I did it to save his life," Scarlet defended himself.

"You're lucky you actually DID save his life, buddy! He sure was furious with you." Blue shook his head quietly. "And grateful, as well," he added, smiling. "I hope he's enjoying his furlough right now... Do you know where he went?"

"London," Scarlet answered quickly. "There's not much more I can tell you. You know he's very private, he doesn't talk about himself much."

"Yes, I know."

"Which reminds me, I saw the schedule. You're due for leave next... and at the same time as Symphony, you lucky devil!"

"Oh yes!" A large smile crossed Blue's handsome face. "It's been a long time since we had the chance to go away together."

"I'm sure you'll make the most of it, then," Scarlet said. He knew about the special relationship between his partner and his beautiful compatriot, Symphony Angel, one of the five female pilots of the Spectrum Angel Interceptor flight team. It was the same relationship that existed between Scarlet himself and Rhapsody, the British Angel, to whom he was secretly engaged. Sadly, Scarlet would not be as fortunate as his colleague to have his next furlough coincide with Rhapsody's: she had been on vacation in England for the past week, and he himself wasn't due for leave for a while yet.

"Do you have any plans, you and Karen?" Scarlet asked his friend.

"Can't say we really do," Blue replied, scratching his ear. "We thought of going to her mother's place..."

"A charming lady..."

"...But then again, maybe not."

Scarlet shot a puzzled stare at his partner. "You HAVE something in mind," he remarked.

"Nothing concrete, Paul, I assure you," Blue answered with a rueful smile. "But you'll be the first to know about it, I promise you."

"Blue..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Captain Blue started laughing. "Now, then! We can both sleep in peace!"

A beeping sound coming from the computer centre in front of Scarlet caught his attention.

Blue put down his feet. "Who could that be at this hour?" he mused, looking down the indicators on the computerized desk.

"Don't fret, brother," Scarlet told him. "I've got it." He pushed a button. "Spectrum Cloudbase Control Room."

"Rhapsody Angel here, Cloudbase."

A big smile crossed Scarlet's face, upon hearing the voice of his beloved Angel.

"Hi there, Angel... this is a pleasant surprise."

"Hi yourself, Captain... You must be alone if you're talking to me in such a familiar way?"

"Well, Captain Blue's with me, but he doesn't really count."

"Hello, Rhapsody," Blue called from his desk.

"Hi, Captain Blue. I take it all is calm on base."

"I didn't expect a call from you tonight, sweetheart," Scarlet said. "Weren't you supposed to be out on a date?"

"You let her go on dates with others?" Blue murmured with a puzzled frown.

"I would be if my date had actually shown up," Rhapsody replied to Scarlet, apparently not hearing Blue's remark.

"He didn't show up?" Scarlet repeated, perplexed.

"WHO didn't show up?" a curious Blue asked, standing up.

"Colonel White," Scarlet told him.

It was Blue's turn to appear perplexed. "Colonel White had a date with you, Rhapsody?" he said, coming closer to Scarlet's station.

"We have a common passion for musicals. So we were supposed to have dinner at six-thirty, then go to see the latest production of Les Misérables. And, well..."

"He stood you up?" Blue finished for her.

"That doesn't sound like him," Scarlet remarked, thoughtfully.

"That's exactly what I thought," Rhapsody agreed. *"So I thought maybe some emergency had called him back to Cloudbase..."*

"Sorry, love, he's not here," Scarlet answered. "And if he'd been called on other Spectrum business, we would have known about it."

"I was afraid of that," Rhapsody sighed.

"Could he have simply forgotten?" Blue asked.

"The colonel, actually FORGETTING something?" a sceptical Scarlet retorted. "That's DEFINITELY not him!"

"Quite right," Rhapsody agreed again. *"And he called me this morning. He was looking forward to this evening."*

"So," Blue grinned broadly, "the old man still has it in him, huh?"

"Quiet," Scarlet warned him, annoyed. "Did you try phoning him back, Dianne?"

"I would have if I knew where to reach him. Maybe you chaps can help me on that one..."

"Mmm... The only thing I know for sure is that he usually stays at an old friend's house, when he goes to London," Scarlet mused, rubbing his chin. "But that's about all... Did you try to reach him on his personal communicator?"

"As a last resort, yes. He didn't answer."

"Well, that's odd..." Blue said, frowning.

"Certainly," Scarlet nodded. "What time is it down there, Rhapsody?"

"Almost eleven... I know it's late, but all of this seems so unlike the colonel. I'm actually beginning to worry, Paul."

"Worry?" Scarlet replied reassuringly. "Come on now, love... The old man's a tough one and he certainly knows how to take care of himself."

"We'll try to reach him from our end, Rhapsody," Blue added. "I don't think there's anything to worry about either. The colonel probably got together with a pack of old buddies, had a few beers with them, and got totally engrossed in reminiscing about glories from the past..."

"I hope it's only that... but the image you just put in my mind doesn't really fit with what we know of Colonel White."

"Go and get some sleep, Dianne," Scarlet continued. "We'll call you back tomorrow morning to inform you of the colonel's whereabouts."

"Please do. Good night then."

"Good night. I love you."

"Love you back. Rhapsody out."

Captain Scarlet cut the communication and leaned back on his seat, his fingers crossed on his chin, looking thoughtful. He noticed the bemused way Captain Blue was staring at him.

"What?" the British captain asked, frowning.

"You're cute, Scarlet. You know that?"

Scarlet snorted. "Cute? I don't think even my mother ever called me 'cute!'"

"I'm referring to you and Dianne," Blue explained. "You're good for each other."

"I know SHE'S good for me," Scarlet said with a fond smile. "I can't believe I didn't see it sooner..."

Blue nodded. "Sometimes, we're too thick for our own good in these matters..." He tapped his friend's shoulder and gestured toward the communication system. "What do you make of it?"

Scarlet shook his head. "About the colonel missing his date with Dianne? I'm not sure... Maybe it's nothing. We'll find out soon enough, anyway. And I really don't think we have cause for concern."

"I can't imagine him actually standing Dianne up... That seems out of character."

"I know. That's something you'd expect an American to do."

Blue opened his mouth with the intention of answering back, but stopped right away. He couldn't think of a quick enough retort. He looked morosely at his grinning friend.

"Really CUTE, Metcalfe."

"Yes... You said that already."

The first thing Colonel White felt upon regaining consciousness was a chill crossing his upper body. His head felt a bit light, but it was not really a disagreeable sensation. He was lying on his back and could hear buzzing and murmuring all around him. He opened his eyes to stare up at a high, white ceiling. *Too much light*, he thought, narrowing his eyes against the irritating, almost blinding, brightness bathing him. *Where I am, what I am doing here? This isn't my room at Dooley's...*

Dooley was dead. That realisation brought back the memories of what had happened before White passed out. That was then that he felt movement nearby. He wasn't alone.

White lifted his head and looked around. There were many people surrounding him, all dressed in white, looking an awful lot like hospital personnel. They were all busy with different tools, some were checking on monitors, and taking notes on pads. The Spectrum commander tried to sit up, in vain. He was strapped down on some sort of padded operating table, surrounded by electronic devices. The reason he felt cold was because his shoes and socks had been removed and he had been stripped to the waist.

Colonel White looked in dismay and anger as a silent young woman dutifully applied a series of electrodes to his chest.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

The woman didn't even acknowledge him, but helped a man, standing on the other side of the table, to secure a leather strap over White's chest. Other people were doing the same, with all of his limbs, tightening them so he would not be able to move at all. That did nothing to reassure the colonel, but it did stoke his bad temper.

"Who are you people? What am I doing here? What do you want from me?"

"All these questions, Colonel White..."

A shiver ran down White's spine when he heard that ominous, monotonous voice. He looked to his left and saw a man approaching quietly. Dressed all in black, with an unnaturally pale complexion and a bad shave. The colonel blanched. "Captain Black!" he rasped.

"It has been a long time, Colonel."

The voice... it wasn't Captain Black's real voice White was hearing. It was the voice of the Mysterons. Over the last two years, he had often heard it, over the radio. But to actually hear it addressing him directly... It was rather unsettling and certainly frightening. Especially since it was coming out of the mouth of an old friend.

Colonel White had not seen Captain Black since he had left for his mission to Mars, just before he was taken over by the Mysterons. Those who had been in contact with him, like Captain Scarlet and Symphony Angel, had told their commander of the changes – physical and otherwise – they had seen in him. His complexion, peaked features, and five o'clock shadow were some of those things; the coldness in his eyes was another. Even before the Mysterons had taken control of him, the man who was once Conrad Turner was a reserved, private man, and had already seemed like an unfeeling fellow at times. But now there was something alien, even evil, reflected in his icy gaze.

"It has been a long time indeed, Captain," White remarked, trying to keep his voice even.

Black stared at him blankly and then directed his attention to a man of about forty, who had approached the table from the other side. "How soon, doctor?" he simply asked.

"Now that he's awake, in a few minutes," the man responded quietly. "We just have a few adjustments to make before we start." White looked at the man and watched as he wrote some notes on his pad. "You're really a fit specimen, Colonel. For your age, I'd say you have the perfect physical condition of a man in his early forties..."

Upon hearing his remark, spoken in such a matter-of-fact tone, White stared at him in disbelief. He turned his attention back to Captain Black.

"What do you want from me?" he snapped.

"The Mysterons have need of you, Colonel White," was Black's monotonous reply.

"You're going to Mysteronise me?"

"If that had been our intention, you would already be dead by now."

White turned pale. The threat in itself was disturbing, but it was one of his friends who had actually pronounced it. Conrad Turner had saved Charles Gray's life, long before the two of them were contacted to help form, and then to join, Spectrum. They had remained friends ever since, even with the reserve imposed by the military rules of Spectrum. Now Black was looking down on his former friend and commander as if he wasn't even a living, breathing human being.

"Black, what do you have in mind?"

"You're going to undertake a mission for us."

"Never. You'd better kill me right now, because there's not a chance in Hell I'm going to help you."

"But you will, Colonel White. And quite willingly, I might add."

White turned to the 'doctor' who had just said those words. By now, he was so tightly restrained that he could hardly move a

muscle from the neck down. Electrodes were applied all over his body, and the colonel could see the young woman he had admonished earlier as she put some kind of an electronic peg on his left big toe. His attempt to evade her by moving his foot did not discourage her and she carried out her duty, before going to a trolley that she then positioned next to his head. On it was a set of syringes. "Who are all these people?" White asked, watching uneasily as the woman was preparing the injections.

"Names are not important, Colonel," the 'doctor' replied, always matter-of-factly. "Let's just say we're people acting in our own best interests."

"That doesn't sound like what a Mysteron agent would say," White remarked coldly.

"That's probably because we are human agents, Colonel." The doctor gestured casually to himself and the others. White's face hardened. The doctor nodded. "Yes, I see you understand... We're collaborators of the Mysterons."

"Collaborators?" White spat with anger, struggling against his restraints. "Traitors!" He nodded toward Black. "HIM, I can understand his position. But you..."

"WE are probably the best chance the human race has to survive, Colonel. Survive and thrive; when this war is over, the Mysterons will reward those who stood by their side and helped them. And that will be us."

"I suppose every war has its handful of scum ready to tread on their own kind and take advantage of the situation, for their own profit."

"A handful?" the doctor repeated, lifting an eyebrow. "But we're far more than a handful, my dear Colonel. In fact, we're a whole... network. That's the name you can use for us: the Network. You just have no idea of many of us there are, all around the world, in different areas, in so many countries... working in secret, so our target – and the Mysterons' – will eventually be reached."

"Do you have any idea what that target is?" White replied dryly. "They want to annihilate us!"

"They want to annihilate those who attacked their complex on Mars," the doctor retorted. "And you know as well as I do WHO is responsible for that dreadful thing."

"Spectrum will find your kind and stop you!"

The doctor scoffed at the threat. "Spectrum isn't even aware that we exist! YOU'RE the first to learn about it. Oh yes... I can tell you that. It's not as if you're going to report it back to anybody." He smiled lightly. "You know, it's really an honour to have you amongst us, Colonel. To actually work on the Spectrum commander himself..."

"Why you..." Fury took hold of White. He tried to lash out once more against his restraints, but couldn't move so much as an inch. He then turned to Black, who was standing still at the same spot as before, looking unemotionally at his former commander.

"Damn it, Conrad!" White called out to him. "Why can't you shake that hold the Mysterons have on you? Give me a hand, here!"

"Conrad Turner is dead, Colonel White."

The answer sank deep into White's heart. "It's not true!" he replied sharply. "Come on, Conrad! Snap out of it! Help me!"

"I'm sorry, Colonel."

Black nodded toward the doctor, who in turn gave a command to two of his assistants and to the young woman still nearby. She took one of the syringes and injected something into White's right forearm. He felt the sting of the puncture and the drug entering his bloodstream.

"What will you do to me with this stuff and this... contraption?" the colonel growled.

"This device?" the doctor said very calmly. "That's something we borrowed from our recent past history, Colonel. Maybe you heard of it, in your days with the Secret Service. It was called the *Dream Spinner*."

The name immediately rang a bell in White's memory. Yes, he had heard of it... and of what it was capable of doing. "No," he muttered, struggling again. "No, I won't let you..."

"That's not an option for you, Colonel," the doctor said coldly.

"Conrad!" White called out desperately. "For the love of Mercy, don't let them do this!"

"I am truly sorry, my old friend." White heard the monotonous tone of Captain Black. "I regret having to cause you pain."

The Mysteron agent then turned away with the obvious intention of leaving the room through a door behind him. Colonel White could have sworn he had heard some concern in Black's voice and he tried to call to him again. But somebody forced some kind of mouthpiece between his teeth and secured it tightly so he would not spit it out. The thing acted as a sort of gag and the Spectrum commander wasn't able to utter anything more than a furious groan. One of the doctor's assistants took White's head firmly between his hands and held it still against the padded surface, while the other proceeded to strap his neck into a kind of collar attached to the table. Resistance was quite futile, but White was not giving up.

"Make sure he is unable to move at all," the doctor instructed his assistants. "We wouldn't want him to seriously injure himself while we proceed."

Another length of leather strap was secured under White's chin, keeping the mouthpiece well in place, while a last one was pressed over his forehead, securing his head against the table. Now he was totally still. About the only things he could actually move were his fingers and eyes.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Captain Black was gone, leaving him to his fate. White had no illusions about what was going to happen to him. He had heard enough of the *Dream Spinner* to know he wouldn't have much chance of resisting it. That didn't mean he wouldn't try with all his strength, however.

The doctor applied two electrodes over his temples. One of his assistants took a small bottle and fixed it somewhere under the table. Connections to the multiple electrodes were made. Some small earphones were put into White's ears and a transparent mask was placed over his mouth and nose. *Gas*, White thought grimly. *They're going to use a combination of gas, drugs, sounds, and whatever else they have in store for me...*

The colonel saw the doctor addressing a nod to his assistants. Monitors were opened and buttons pushed... And a distraught White, his heartbeat rising, was now anticipating what was about to begin.

A hissing sound came to his ears. The gas was coming... He could feel it filling the mask, entering his nostrils. *No sense in trying not to breathe it*, he thought. *There is simply no way to avoid this.*

He heard a faint hydraulic murmur coming from under the table; it was barely audible, but it seemed to come from directly under his head. *What is this? What in God's name will they do to me?* Waiting and not knowing what this sound could presage was driving White crazy.

He felt it then. The burning sting of something piercing his skin, just under the nape of his neck. It felt like a long, narrow needle, which made its way under his skull and into his brain. White bit hard into the mouthpiece, closing his eyes against the pain. He could feel the new, slow injection of the drug and went stiff.

This is going to hurt, was his last coherent thought, just before a strident, piercing sound filled his ears, and made him wince. At about the same time, a horrible headache, like the impression that his brain was on fire, overwhelmed him. Within seconds, it became totally unbearable and Colonel White would have cried out and writhed in pain, if not for the mouthpiece and the straps restraining him.

Until that time, he realised, he had never learned the limits of his own pain threshold.

From the next room, Captain Black watched the experiment in progress throughout a large bay window. His attention was totally focused on the patient secured to the *Dream Spinner* device, hooked up to the equipment which surrounded him. The screams, though half-muffled by the mouthpiece, were still quite audible and Black could see White's pain-contorted face, his chest heaving from his rapid breathing, his hand frantically trying to hold on to something, anything... That was a sight Black could not detach his eyes from, and it was almost painful to watch.

The doctor, who had left his 'patient', entered the room, and for a brief moment, Black was able to hear more clearly the muffled screams of his former commander throughout the open door. "Close it," he ordered quickly, but without apparent feeling.

The doctor obeyed and came closer to Captain Black. "How long?" the Mysteron agent asked quietly.

The doctor shrugged. "We're forcing the process, here. If he's a stubborn subject, it could take all night."

"Colonel White has a will of iron," Black retorted. "It will take all night. And then I suppose he will be completely ours?"

"He will believe everything the *Dream Spinner* puts into his mind. The treatment will rearrange his thoughts and memories so we will be able to use him for our own ends. Act carefully, and he will be totally dedicated to the mission you'll give him."

"Good."

"You realise, however, that because it is forced on him, there are some downsides to the treatment. He will become totally unstable and unpredictable, with violent mood changes, and equally violent behaviour. If you tell him to do something that disturbs or confuses him, he may turn against you."

"Given his temper, it may prove volatile." Black turned to face the doctor. "What about his old associates? What could happen if he were to encounter Spectrum agents?"

The doctor scoffed. "If they alarm him in any way, he's liable to shoot at them. And shoot to kill."

"Interesting concept."

Black looked at the Spectrum commander on the other side of the window.

"Is all that suffering really necessary?" he asked, as he listened to the screams.

The doctor seemed puzzled. "Oh, yes. The pain..." He, too, glanced at the prisoner with a look almost colder than Captain Black's himself. "His will must be broken," he replied. "The more he resists, the more he suffers. On the other hand, the more the *Dream Spinner* treatment takes hold of his mind." He quickly

glanced back at Black. "I realise that may be unsettling for you. I read the report about him. He was one of your best friends."

"I already killed one friend," Black noted coldly. "You do not understand. Colonel White is not a young man anymore. Though he is strong, I have heard that in the past, the *Dream Spinner* killed its subjects... If he were to die, that would jeopardize the entire operation."

"Don't worry about that. The first injection we gave him was to make sure his heart would last out under the treatment. And my assistants keep all his vitals in check. Nothing will go wrong."

Another scream came from the other room, yet somehow fainter, and then followed by low groans.

Coming through another door, a man entered the room where Black and the doctor were. The former Spectrum agent did not turn to acknowledge his presence. His eyes were still riveted on Colonel White. "This is Mister Shelby," he announced quietly. "He will supervise the mission we're preparing Colonel White for."

The doctor eyed the man. The latter stared back at him, imperturbably, a cold glint in his eyes. "A Mysteron agent?" the doctor asked, a bit alarmed.

"Do you have a problem with that, doctor?" Black asked calmly.

"Of course, not!" the doctor replied, obviously nervous. "It will be an honour to be working with you, sir... But I thought Captain Black was in charge of the mission."

"Barring any problem, I shouldn't get myself involved," Black replied. "But my presence will be felt. As for you, doctor, as soon as the treatment is completed, you will disappear with your medical staff. There will be no need for your expertise after that. No need to expose you to discovery. You could be far more valuable later to the Mysterons if you keep away from this mission." He looked blankly at the doctor. "As it is, you have already said too much to Colonel White about your Network."

"The information could be of no use to him," the doctor replied, "since he will be under your total control before the night is over... And I suppose you don't intend letting him live after the mission?"

"You suppose too much. As you talk too much. WE will decide Colonel White's fate in due time. And you, doctor, will bring back this message to the Network: continue to serve the Mysterons well, and you will be rewarded accordingly." Black looked back toward the operating room where White had suddenly gone quiet. It was difficult to see if he was even conscious, as his eyes were closed. One of the doctor's assistants was presently preparing a new injection.

"I think that you'd better see to your patient, doctor," Black said evenly. "The treatment seems to have reached its next phase."

The doctor took a look into the other room and hesitated a second; he then understood that Captain Black had just asked him to leave. He cleared his throat and excused himself before going back inside the operating room.

Black followed him with his eyes through the window, addressing Shelby who stood a few feet behind him:

"Is everything ready?"

"Everything is ready. As soon as Colonel White is set, we will be on our way."

"Will the henchmen provided by the Network know how to behave toward him?"

"They know their role perfectly. They are surprisingly efficient. And they are eager to take on the mission."

"*Earthmen* fools," Black muttered under his breath. "Let there be no mistake: The Network and its men are nothing but tools. If it should prove necessary, sacrifice them."

"I will obey," Shelby answered without emotion.

"Nothing must stand in the way of the Mysterons' revenge," Black continued ominously. "In the end, we will prevail, and the human race will bow to us."

He watched as the doctor adjusted another bottle on a device under the operating table, situated just under the patient's head. The device was surmounted by a long needle pointed upward at a precise angle. As soon as the doctor stood up to lean over White, one of his assistants activated the needle and it went up. Black saw the point slowly disappearing as it entered a precise point on the table. Further away, another assistant, standing in front of an electronic panel, was turning large dials, apparently controlling the sound through the speakers fixed to the patient's ears. Black saw his former commander's body flinch as the treatment continued.

"You may leave, now," Black told Shelby, his eyes riveted on the scene. "I'll contact you as soon as you are needed."

Shelby went quietly out the door. Black drew nearer to the window, staring bleakly as he witnessed the pain inflicted on the man he had so long called his friend. The strain was apparent by the grimace that contorted his face, and by the way his hands were frantically moving, fighting desperately against the restraints. The ex-Spectrum agent could easily visualize the frighteningly long needle as it forced its way under the skull, conveying the drug it contained directly into the nerve centre of the brain.

Another muffled scream escaped the patient. Inexplicably, the pupils in Black's usually cold eyes began to tremble, and he put his hand against the surface of the window, in a gesture of despair.

"Charles," he whispered, with a quiver in his voice.

The Mysterons were cruel masters; Captain Black had learned this the hard way over the past two years. They had used his body as the vessel for their powers to reach Earth, and as their principal agent of destruction. They had kept a tight hold over him, transforming him into a cold and calculating machine, intent only on following their orders. But the true identity of the man was still there, kept captive far down in the recesses of his mind, dimly aware of what he was forced to do. The Mysterons had chosen to release their hold on him, if just for a brief instant, to take further revenge on him by taunting and torturing his already tormented soul.

"Look upon the face of your friend's suffering, Conrad Turner, and learn what it costs to arouse the wrath of the Mysterons..."

They're destroying his mind, Black realized, trying to break his spirit... They're going to make a mindless puppet out of him... Like they did with me. A wave of nausea caught him in the stomach and he felt the strength leaving his already staggering legs. He slid against the window and reached the floor; he stayed there, shrivelled up, desperately keeping himself from sobbing.

"You have made me commit so many acts of abomination. I have so much blood on my hands," he said hoarsely. "I killed Paul... Karen nearly died because of me. And now, you're torturing HIM... Haven't my people PAID enough already for MY mistakes?"

Muffled cries of pain were still coming to Black's ears. Distraught, he closed his eyes and shamefully hid his face under his arm. "I am so sorry, Charles..." he whispered, tears choking his voice and filling his eyes. Then, he lifted his head, his stare cold and unfeeling again, emotions totally drawn from him. As suddenly as it had been lifted, the Mysterons' control had now taken hold of him again. "... But the Mysterons' orders must be carried out," he continued icily, once again with the monotonous tone of the aliens.

He got slowly but decidedly to his feet and glanced one last time at the man strapped to the operating table. His resistance was obviously wearing down, as he had stopped struggling so hard against his restrains. A smile of satisfaction crossed Black's features.

"Soon, you will be ours, Colonel White," he said quietly. "And you will do the bidding of the Mysterons." He turned away from the

window and walked toward the door Shelby had used some minutes earlier. “And then, when we have done with you... you will die.”

Chapter 3

“This is the voice of the Mysterons... We know that you can hear us, Earthmen...”

Captain Scarlet, seated at the round desk of Cloudbase’s command control room, suddenly jumped to his feet, hearing on the speaker the first part of the all-too-well known usual alien threat. In front of the large computer wall, Captain Blue, who was leaning over Lieutenant Green’s shoulder, looking at some information the young communication officer had drawn his attention to, raised his head and stared at the speaker with anticipation and dread.

“We have watched with how much arrogant respect you look upon your so-called ‘honoured heroes’ of the Past... This time, we will strike a blow at your arrogance. In the next seventy-two hours, we will use two such outlawed heroes to cut down one crowned head... This is the voice of the Mysterons... We will be avenged!”

The speaker fell silent. For a brief moment, the three officers in the Control Room looked at each other. Scarlet shook his head and sat back.

“We’re on yellow alert, Lieutenant,” he said to Green. “Tell all personnel to stand ready for action.”

“S.I.G., sir.” Lieutenant Green made the announcement over all of Cloudbase’s speakers.

Thoughtfully, Scarlet rested his chin on his joined hands; Captain Blue stared at his friend’s concerned look.

“Two outlawed heroes to cut down one crowned head...” the American captain mused. He shook his blond head. “I HATE it when the Mysterons make cryptic threats like that!”

“Still no news from Colonel White, Lieutenant?” Scarlet asked, still deep in thought.

“No, Captain,” the young Black officer replied. “I tried to reach him several times already, on his personal communicator. The signal doesn’t seem to reach it.”

“Could it be defective?”

“More like it’s simply turned off.”

“Maybe he’ll hear of the Mysterons’ threat and communicate with us,” Blue suggested.

“Unlikely, Captain,” Green replied. “Another thing: you know how the colonel is pretty strict about the twenty-four hour check-in call to Cloudbase during furloughs? Well, HIS deadline was four hours ago. He didn’t call.”

"I don't like this," Scarlet murmured. "It's definitely not like the colonel to act like that. And now, this threat..."

"Think there may be a connection?" Blue asked, frowning.

Scarlet shrugged. "Something's nagging at me. Nothing really conclusive... If only we knew where the colonel's gone..."

"Well, for that, the lieutenant and I may have come up with a clue. Even if it's still vague."

Scarlet stood up and came to Green's station to look at the computer screen the young Black man and Blue had previously consulted. The lieutenant showed him a list of dates.

"Just before the Mysterons made their threat, I was doing some checking out to see if we could learn something of the colonel's whereabouts," Green explained. "You know he rarely takes long vacations, right?"

"Only a couple of days at a time," Scarlet nodded. "And he always has kept himself available. Not like this time."

"Look at those dates, sir. They represent all the leave the colonel has taken since the start of Spectrum, three years ago. Do you notice anything?"

Scarlet scanned the dates. "Some of them recur," he mused.

"Yes," Blue nodded. "We saw that just before the threat. Once a year, for the last three years."

"May the thirteenth and fourteenth..." Scarlet read. He pointed out a word, written repeatedly next to the date. "Always in London, on those dates..."

"Yesterday was May fourteenth," Blue noted. "And the colonel's been in London too, for the past three days."

"Yes, but where in London?" Scarlet said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Where does he go and what does he do on the thirteenth and fourteenth of May?"

"Maybe one of those dates represents some kind of an anniversary for him?" Blue remarked.

Scarlet stared at his friend for a second. "Have a look at Colonel White's private files, Lieutenant," he said. "See if there's any match in there for these dates."

Green gave him a disbelieving look as Captain Scarlet went back to the control desk in order to pick up his cap. The communications officer exchanged a quick, concerned glance with Captain Blue.

"The colonel's private files, Captain?" Green asked with uncertainty.

"Isn't that a violation of privacy?" Blue added.

"We have two priorities right now," Scarlet replied, turning back to face the two men. "Stopping this Mysteron threat and finding what happened to our missing commander-in-chief. Do it,

Lieutenant. If you have any problem, just say I pulled rank on you."

"S.I.G., sir," Green said, sighing. "But it could take a few minutes to get to it. Those files are password-protected..."

"I trust you'll be able to hack your way through?" Scarlet replied, smiling.

Green grinned back. "No problem there, Captain."

"I understand that the situation calls for unorthodox methods," Blue remarked, "but still, searching into the colonel's private files... That's got me worried."

"Captain," Lieutenant Green then said, as another matter came to his mind, "since we're on yellow alert, should I recall Rhapsody Angel from her leave in London?"

Scarlet gave it some thought, before answering. "She'd better stay in London, but tell her to report to Spectrum Headquarters there. We may need her, eventually... Oh, and is Captain Ochre still in London?"

"Yes, Captain."

"He stays there, too." Scarlet put his cap on. "Would you care to follow me, Captain Blue?"

"And where are we going?" the American captain asked, frowning with curiosity.

"To try to get some more clues to where we can find the colonel," Scarlet answered, going to the door leading out of the Control Room. "Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"Would you unlock the personal access code of Colonel White's living quarters, so we can get in?"

For the second time, Lieutenant Green and Captain Blue exchanged glances of perplexity and concern. Blue cleared his throat. "Now you're really worrying me, Scarlet." He sighed, putting his cap on, too. "All right, it's your call. Better do as he says, Lieutenant. I'll follow that bandit to make sure he doesn't ransack the colonel's quarters... or help himself to any of his personal stuff."

"Really cute, Captain Blue," Scarlet murmured dryly, shooting his friend an old-fashioned look.

"Don't mention it."

* * *

As far as the man who was known as Colonel White was concerned, nothing coherent existed anymore.

Sounds and images darted into his mind. The fiery explosion of an aircraft blown out of the sky... A helicopter that exploded in a giant fireball, with a deafening sound, before plunging into the

sea. Two men onboard, burning alive, screaming as death claimed them. Other men, standing on the bridge of a Naval ship – a destroyer type – running around and shouting...

...A tall young man, in a British Navy captain's uniform, standing on the upper bridge, looking with horror as what was left of the aircraft disappeared into the sea.

He was that young man.

Lord. Father.

Another man, staring at him from the lower bridge. A defiant glitter in his eyes. A warning the young captain understood all too well.

Murderer. You killed my father. Just to make a point. Just to make sure I wouldn't get involved...

You were wrong, Bennett.

Then the scene changed. A peaceful cottage, with white walls; a rustic background; a beautiful garden with blossoming flowers. The face of a beautiful, black-haired young lady with singing blue eyes.

"If you think you're going back to London alone, you are mistaken, Charles Gray! I'm coming with you."

"Now come on, Elizabeth! There's no need for you to be there. It will be just another of those long, boring meetings the Service often calls me for..."

"JUST another long, boring meeting? Who do you think you're kidding, here? I know what you're up to, Charles. So I'm coming too."

"To keep me out of trouble?"

"Who better than your former partner to do that?"

"Forget it. You're staying at home. Think of the baby. The trip can be long and bumpy."

"The baby is well protected where it is... But I'm not sure the same can be said for its father."

"There's no reason to alarm yourself, Liz."

"Yeah, right. I know you, Charles. I know when you're lying to me. And I know you're too stubborn for your own good. Fortunately for you, I can be as stubborn as you are."

The argument was sealed with a kiss. Strong, passionate. And painful too, as Colonel White couldn't reach out to the memories that were to follow that fleeting moment. *Why can't I remember anything else? What's happening to me? Something is wrong... Why are those memories so painful to me?*

As painful as the aching in his whole strained body, the churning in the pit of his stomach and the throbbing in his head. All was pain, and the rest, memories and all, was confusingly lost behind a thick haze of his mind.

Although nothing prevented it now, he could not move, nor could he speak. He could not even think straight.

Father... Why did you have to die that way?

Where are you, Elizabeth? I need you...

Each breath he drew sent pain throughout his body. His vision was a blur of mixed and fogged colours and a bright glow of light almost blinding him. *That explosion, again and again... Still haunting me...*

No. Not this time, he realized. It was the bright white light of a powerful projector focused on him. He could feel the heat of the light on his bare skin. Faces were looking down at him and he could hear faraway voices calling to him.

"Sir, can you hear me? You're safe, now..."

White moaned and turned away from those faces. He was exhausted. All he wanted right now was to let himself be washed away by all that pain and sleep through it. Maybe then, he would feel better when he woke up.

If only the nagging voices would stop...

"Come on, sir! Don't sleep. It's finished."

White's eyes fluttered. He tried to find the will to fight his need and desire to sleep. *Come on, old man! Snap out of it!*

"Can you hear me, sir?" the same voice continued. "We drew the enemy out. The place is ours... You're safe."

Although the voice seemed to come from the far end of a large room, it was actually becoming clearer by the second. *What's wrong with my ears? White thought. Feels like one of them is blocked, or something...*

His vision became clearer too. He WAS in a large room, all right. Brightly lit, with a high ceiling and grey walls. About a half dozen men were spread all around the place, all dressed in black commando uniforms, armed with automatic weapons. There were two of them crouched by his side, looking at him expectantly. He himself was sitting directly on the concrete floor, his bare back leaning against a wall. All he was wearing was his trousers. He felt cold, even with that light washing down on him, and his entire body was bathed in sweat.

He addressed a questioning look to the man nearest to him.

"Where... Where am I?"

White hardly recognized his voice. It sounded coarse, raspy. His throat was hurting him. Realizing that, the man he had spoken to held a water bottle to White's lips. The older man was thirsty

enough and drank greedily. Too greedily. The contact of the cool water on his stomach had an almost immediate reaction. He suddenly bent to the side and coughed it all out, along with what was left of his last meal.

"My head..." he moaned, feeling the pain reverberating inside his skull. "What happened to me?"

"Here, sir, take some more water," the other man told him. "Slowly, now..."

Still trying to get his composure back, White took the water bottle in his shaking hand and slowly drank. This time, it did him some good, cooling his aching throat, and invigorating him from the inside. He let out a sigh of relief when he handed the bottle back to its owner.

He then saw the operating table, some feet in front of him, with all the electronic devices surrounding it. Panic overwhelmed White's mind and he instinctively drew back, his eyes riveted with horror on the thing. The men crouched next to him held him firmly and the one who had already talked to him tried to reassure him. "Take it easy, now... You're not in danger. Nobody here is going to hurt you anymore."

"That... contraption," a still uneasy White said, nodding nervously toward the table.

"Yes." The commando glanced at it and shook his head. "When we finally found you, you were strapped to it. I don't know what they tried to do to you, but... I think we arrived in time before they did too much damage. How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure..." White frowned, staring at the man. "I... was in the enemy's hands?"

"Yes, sir. You disappeared yesterday, without a trace. We had a hell of a time finding this place where they had brought you."

"I remember people... dressed in white. A doctor..."

"They've all gone, now."

"You... drew them out?"

"They abandoned the place, without a fight. They left you behind, at the same time. Must have been too afraid they would get caught."

"Any prisoners?" White asked tiredly.

"No, sir, I regret to say."

"And did you... did you suffer any casualties?"

"No, everybody is all right." The man frowned, seeing White shivering. He motioned to a man standing nearby who had a folded blanket in his arms. He came over and draped it around the colonel's shoulders. The older man nodded his thanks.

"You don't feel too good, do you, sir?" the first man noted to White.

"No... No, I don't." White took a long look at the man. "Who are you people?"

"Don't you remember us?"

"Sorry, I can't say I do," White said, shaking his head. "There seems to be... so many missing pieces in my head... I can't recall..."

The man nodded. "Maybe that thing did more damage than we first thought," he realized gloomily. "I hope it will be temporary. We can't have a commander who can't function at his best..."

"I'm your commander?" White repeated, frowning.

"Yes, sir. Try to remember."

"I..." White made an effort to force his mind around this concept. "Yes, I think I am... That feels right..."

"Do you remember WHO you are?"

White hesitated. The man insisted. "Sir, it's important that you snap out of this. The situation is far too critical to..."

"I do remember who I am," White interrupted him. "My name..." He hesitated anew. There was something there, which seemed to block his efforts to tell his own identity to the young commando. Why was it so difficult just to say who he was?

"What is your name?" the man asked hurriedly.

"Gray... Charles Gray. That's my name, yes."

"Then you do remember it. Good, sir. Now try again. What is your rank?"

Another hesitation. White's mind was in complete turmoil. The information was there, deep inside it, yet somehow out of reach. And it was so confusing to sort out his memories of what he was and what he had been. The word 'colonel' popped up somewhere, but it seemed so impossible...

"I'm in the Navy," he murmured. "But... there is... There is no..."

There was no rank of colonel in the Navy, of that much he was certain. Then why the Hell...

"Yes, sir. You were in the British Navy," the commando told him.

"Were?" White repeated, confused by the use of the past tense. "I'm not any more?" He frowned, trying to remember. Conflicting memories were fighting inside his mind. "I was captain of a destroyer, in the British Navy... I do remember turning against the Militarist Government... I refused to follow orders..."

"You're getting to it, sir."

"They had my father killed," White continued, his tone taking a painful edge, his stare becoming distant and gloomy.

"What did you do, then?"

"I... God, Bennett..." A flashback came to White's mind. He saw a man, in the uniform of a British Navy commander, falling

down just after the sound of a firing pistol. The smoke coming out of the barrel of that weapon danced in front of his eyes. He was the man who held that gun.

He had fired the fatal shot.

"I killed him," he said in a hoarse voice. "I killed the dirty bastard who had murdered my father..."

"So you did," the man said coldly. It was easy to see that White was distraught at that sudden realization, but he chose to ignore it and continued implacably, "And for that, you were wanted for murder by the British Government... What happened after that?"

"I... I turned my ship against the British Fleet... Joined the Rebels in their cause... My father's... Mine, now." White hesitated again, still confused. "The World Government was supporting the Rebels at the time... They gave me the rank of admiral..."

The commando nodded slowly. "And ever since then... what have you been doing?"

"I've been fighting the Militarist Government..." The answer came rather mechanically, without the slightest hesitation.

A smile spread across the other man's face. White failed to notice the evil satisfaction apparent in it. He was still trying to sort out the confusion in which his mind was fogged.

"They did this to me, didn't they?" he asked the man. "Government agents, right? They captured me and... hooked me to that thing." A shiver crawled down his spine as he glanced toward the operating table. He quickly averted his eyes, a sickening feeling on the brink of overcoming him.

"They were Government agents, all right," the commando said. "Maybe they wanted to extract some information from you..."

"Most likely." White nervously put his hand on the nape of his neck. Under his sweaty hair, he could feel several painful swellings. He kept himself from wincing. "How did they do that? How did they capture me? I wish I could remember... All I recall is... I was getting myself ready for a date and..."

He stopped in the middle of his sentence, suddenly remembering something. Eyes wide open, he grabbed the surprised commando by the collar of his vest. "My wife!"

"Sir?"

"My wife, where is she? What happened to her?" The Spectrum commander was worried sick and acting like a desperate man. The commando tried his best to comfort him.

"Take it easy, Admiral. She wasn't with you."

"She wasn't?" White asked hoarsely, filled with concern. He frowned in disbelief. "You're sure?"

"Positive. She didn't follow you on this mission to London. Last I heard, she was still at your home, in Wales, waiting for you. Communications have been erratic, but I'm quite sure she's fine."

"Thank God for that!" White whispered, closing his eyes and sighting in relief. "Does she know about my capture?"

"She doesn't know about it. She doesn't know anything about your entire ordeal. As I said, sir, communications have been bad..."

"It's better this way, then. Better that she learns none of this yet. She worries too much about me already..."

The man nodded, as if understanding the older man's concern. He cleared his throat. "Sir, do you think you can undertake your next mission?"

"I... Yes, I'm ready, whatever it is," White said nodding. "But you'll have to give me a rundown on it... I don't seem to have any memory of it."

"Don't worry, Admiral. I'll tell you all about it."

"I don't seem to recall your name either, son."

"Shelby, sir. Lieutenant-Commander Jason Shelby." The Mysteron agent gave another evilly satisfied grin. "And it will be an honour to undertake this mission with you. I'm looking forward to it."

* * *

Colonel White's personal quarters were next door to Captain Scarlet's own, yet the young British officer had only entered it twice, in all the time he had been in Spectrum. White was a very private man, and he considered his quarters something of a sanctuary. If sometimes he'd go there to get some moments of peace and quiet – rare and precious during the last couple of years – he had a difficult time actually letting go of his work. He often brought important files to work over on his personal computer.

Captain Blue had never set foot in his commander's quarters before, and it turned out to be not at all what he would have expected. It was very neat, comfortable, with beautiful furniture, and it was tastefully decorated with paraphernalia, a testimony to Colonel White's full life. The place, Blue noted, reminded him a lot of Scarlet's quarters. It was obvious the two of them shared much more than nationality: they had their respective British military backgrounds and upbringing as well. Like the walls of Scarlet's quarters, White's sported framed certificates and photos, decorated with medals. The more important ones, Blue thought, were probably kept safely in cases, just like Scarlet did with his.

While Captain Scarlet was seated at Colonel White's desk, using their commander's computer to browse over his souvenirs and photo albums stored on disks, Captain Blue was looking

around the place, with a kind of juvenile curiosity. He stopped in front of every picture hanging on the wall.

On top of a low cabinet, below a large oil portrait of a pirate of days of old – an object which seemed oddly out-of-place – was a plastic replica of a British destroyer, just like the one Colonel White had commanded during his years in the Navy. Captain Ochre, who was well known throughout Cloudbase for his craftsmanship in building model planes, had given the model to the Spectrum commander as a birthday gift two years ago... A habit that sometimes annoyed his commander, when the captain did it in public places, like the officers' rest lounge. Yet, White had been pleasantly surprised when Ochre had departed from his usual plane building to make this ship especially for him... and he had thoughtfully named his construction after White's own ship, the *Sir Francis Drake*. Very touched, Colonel White had immediately noted that the model was an exact replica of it, down to the last detail, and that Ochre must have made a remarkable effort of research to achieve such results.

After taking a long admiring look at the model ship, Blue turned his attention toward a picture set just beside it.

"Did you know the colonel had chestnut hair when he was younger?" he asked Scarlet. He looked closely at the photograph, representing his commander at a young age, wearing a British Navy officer's uniform. He was all smiles and seemed very happy, his hand on the shoulder of an older, rugged face gentleman, with a moustache and wearing the uniform of a British Air Force flight sergeant. The older man had a striking resemblance to the present day Colonel White.

"So his father was in the Air Force, eh?" Blue noted. "I would have thought he was a Navy man, just like his son."

"He was a helicopter pilot," Scarlet replied, still looking at the many photos and news articles appearing on the screen before him. "And before that, a rough, tough drill sergeant for the British Air Force."

"A drill sergeant?" Blue said, coming toward Scarlet.

"...who brought his son up on his own."

"You're kidding, right? Well, that explains certain things about the old man... How come you know that?"

"If you'd join us for tea on Sundays a little more often, you'd know too."

"We Bostonians prefer our tea at the bottom of Boston Harbor. As an Englishman and a student of American military history, you should know that."

Scarlet did not reply to the last remark. Instead, he grinned at his friend. "The colonel once told me he had something in common with you, concerning his dad."

"Let me guess... Daddy blew a fuse when sonny joined the Navy instead of the Air Force?"

Scarlet nodded. "The way your father did when you decided not to follow in his footsteps as a financier, and became a test pilot instead."

"The friction isn't obvious, looking at that picture," Blue said, nodding to the framed photo. "His father came around, I take it."

While talking with Blue, Scarlet had keyed the name of White's father into the computer. The screen was now displaying the same photograph Blue was presently looking at. There was a short caption along the side of it. Scarlet nodded quietly. "I suppose Gray senior found it hard to fight against the obvious successes of his son. That picture was taken when the colonel received his promotion to lieutenant-commander. His father must have been bursting with pride. He himself never got higher than flight sergeant."

"I still have difficulty having a simple coherent discussion with MY dad, concerning my choice of career," Blue muttered. "And if it were only him: my brother Peter is also on my case about that!"

"Doesn't that make you wonder if you didn't make a bad move after all?"

"Are you kidding? Me, actually working in finance with my father and brother? There'd be a murder, for sure!" Blue noticed another framed picture, standing on the desk, right next to the computer. Eager to divert the subject to anything else but himself, he picked it up to examine it closely. "Who's this?"

"The colonel's wife," Scarlet responded.

"His wife?" Blue repeated. As his friend nodded silently, he took a long admiring look at the young raven-haired woman with bright blue eyes who was smiling broadly at the camera. "She sure was a looker," the American murmured. He stared even more closely at the picture and frowned, before glancing at Scarlet. "Hey, she looks a bit like Rhapsody..."

Scarlet frowned in turn. "What?" He gave just a glance at the photograph. "No," he said, dismissing the suggestion with a shrug. "Dianne's a redhead..."

"Yeah, but aside from that," Blue replied insistently. "Take a closer look: same blue eyes, same facial structure... I tell you, that woman could pass for Rhapsody's sister... or mother, more precisely."

"Don't be ridiculous, Adam!" Scarlet's tone was rather annoyed.

Blue stared at him curiously. "What is it with you, anyway?" he asked. "You don't like the fact that the colonel might like the same kind of women as you?"

"That's preposterous!" Scarlet mumbled.

"You know, looking at it, it's not really surprising: you two have more in common that you care to admit..."

"And I suppose you think that's funny!"

"Okay, okay!" Blue said. "Just kidding. I won't say another word on the subject." He put down the picture and leaned over his friend's shoulder to look at the screen he was scanning. "What are you searching for, exactly?" he asked.

"Some leads," Scarlet said, shrugging. "Anything that can tell us where to find Colonel White."

"And what is it you're looking at, right now?"

Scarlet nodded toward the screen. "This is his personal scrapbook... It seems the old man is rather nostalgic. He's put his whole personal life and career in here. Pictures, newspaper cuttings, articles, personal annotations, even certificates..."

"I see," Blue mused, rubbing his chin. "Doesn't it make you feel uncomfortable searching through his stuff like that?"

"Of course it makes me feel uncomfortable, Adam," Scarlet sighed. "But we have to know..."

"We have to know WHAT?" Blue stared closer at his friend. "What is it that's bugging you, Paul?"

"I told you it was nothing conclusive," Scarlet retorted.

"Maybe, but it's still bothering you... and big time. Come on now, what is it?"

Seeing Captain Scarlet still hesitant to answer, Blue eyed him closely, narrowing his eyes. "It's got something to do with this Mysteron threat, hasn't it?"

Scarlet gave him an imperturbable look before tapping some keys on the board. A newspaper article appeared on the monitor with a full-screen title 'Orkney's rebel hero to be knighted'. There was a black and white photograph of a forty-something, grim-looking Colonel White, wearing a World Navy Admiral's uniform.

Blue frowned. "Refresh my memory: at what age did the colonel retire from the Navy?"

"Thirty-one... with the rank of admiral."

"Makes you wonder what that fuss about you being the youngest colonel in the WAAF at twenty-nine was all about..." Blue said with a faint smile.

"That was the WAAF," Scarlet replied with a grin. "The colonel was in the Navy. They're two different things."

"Yeah. An Army guy would say that," Blue sighed, shrugging. He turned his attention back to the article. "He looks older in this picture..."

"It was taken some ten years after he retired."

"Why is he wearing the uniform?"

"He's receiving honours for his military service. Current or retired military personnel are usually in uniform for such an investiture, just as you saw my father in uniform when he received his last year."

"So, Colonel White was knighted, huh? And I suppose YOU knew about that?"

"Yes, I know about it. I'm probably not the only one at that: Rhapsody knows too... and probably Symphony as well."

"KAREN knows about this?"

"Well, she knew the colonel when they worked in the Universal Secret Service... And even if it was not in the same department, I'm pretty sure she found out about him having being knighted. The fact that some members of the U.S.S. sometimes referred to him as 'Sir Charles' was a real giveaway..."

"Yeah, but the rest of us in Spectrum don't know..."

Scarlet saw the frustrated look upon Blue's face and smiled faintly. "Don't pout, Adam. You know how private Colonel White is. Although it wasn't really a state secret, he didn't want it spread around, so he simply kept it to himself."

"So that's why he went along with it a few months ago when YOU were knighted as well, and YOU didn't want any of us to find out, either."

Scarlet nodded quietly. Blue sighed.

"What was he knighted for, anyway?"

"For outstanding services to the Nation, throughout his career," Scarlet answered. "Notably, during the Civil War of Winter 46-47, when his actions saved a lot of lives... and may have turned the tide of the war in favour of the Rebels."

"Hold it! Slow down and run that by me again."

"In December 2046, Captain Charles Gray refused to obey a direct order from the Ministry of Defence, ordering him to attack and destroy a rebel base somewhere in the Orkney Islands. Instead, he turned his destroyer against the ships already preparing to attack, and saved the rebels. There were a number of very important British officials on that base, military and civilian alike, who had banded together to oppose the Militarist Government of the time. There were also representatives from the World Government, which was planning to support the rebels' cause. Can you imagine what would have happened, if all these people had been killed in an attack by British Navy ships?"

"So the colonel's decision prevented a full-scale war between Britain and the rest of the world..."

"It helped a great deal, anyway. His move must certainly have taken the Militarist Government by surprise, though. He was

already considered as some kind of hero. They had just given him command of his own ship... They certainly didn't expect him to turn against them, since they thought he was a loyal officer." Scarlet sighed. "I suppose he WAS. He must have felt his duty and loyalty was to the people of Britain instead of its Government... So many other military people felt the same way, in those days."

"Wait a minute... Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I probably am." Scarlet stared at his friend, who was giving him a dumbfounded look. "At some point in his life, Charles Gray, Colonel White, could have been called an 'outlawed hero'. And certainly was 'honoured' for his actions..." He gestured at the screen as proof. Blue shook his head doubtfully.

"Now I see what's eating you. But you can't be serious, Paul! The Mysterons wouldn't actually use the colonel..."

"Why not?" Scarlet cut in suddenly. "It wouldn't be the first time. They've been using Captain Black since the beginning of the War of Nerves. They certainly used Captain Brown and ME. They did the same to Captain Indigo... And at one point, indirectly, they used YOU and Ochre to bomb Atlantica."

"Don't remind me," Blue grumbled. "Never had a hang-over like that in all my life..."

"That's what you get when you drink Mysteronised wine, Blue."

"Seriously, Scarlet: the colonel, a Mysteron agent?"

"I don't like the idea any more than you do. But he's gone AWOL. That's never happened before. And now this threat..."

"Then who would be the other 'outlawed hero'? And which 'crowned head' are they going to attack?"

"I don't know. Look, I may be wrong. I HOPE I'm wrong. There may be a simple, straightforward explanation why Colonel White has disappeared and doesn't respond to our calls, or even call us. I just think this is an option we have to keep open."

"And meanwhile, we may be far off the mark, you realize that?"

"Yes, I know. That's why we must study other possibilities that might present themselves. And in that light, we have to put every available agent on this... with a team to continue the search for Colonel White."

"What about those dates Green found?" Blue said suddenly. "If they can provide a clue to his whereabouts, don't you think they may appear in that file you're actually searching?"

Scarlet stared at his American colleague for a second and then began to tap the keys, entering the first date – 13 May– into the computer. The note 'No match found' spread across the screen. Blue shook his head.

"Well, there's still another one left."

Scarlet typed '14 May'. To both captains' relief, the computer displayed some information. The British captain grinned at his partner. "You're a genius, Blue!"

"Yeah, I know," Blue smiled back. "But nobody ever seems to notice it. So, what have we got?"

He looked at the information with his friend. It was a short news article, entitled "War hero involved in plane accident. Wife dies." There was a photograph of the young woman whose picture stood on the colonel's desk. The two men looked at it grimly.

"The anniversary of his wife's death," Blue said, nodding.

"Yes," Scarlet sighed in turn. "We should have thought of that sort of thing." He rubbed his chin, reading the article. "Doesn't say much about it..." he mused. "A private plane crash in the Scottish Highlands. The colonel was at the helm, when the craft experienced mechanical trouble... He survived, she didn't."

"Elizabeth Somners, thirty-three," Blue added, reading too. "So young... Such a tragedy." He stumbled on part of the article that stopped him dead. "Oh, dear God... that can't be possible! Did you notice the name of the person who saved the old man?"

"Yes, I saw it," Scarlet replied, nodding. "Radar lost track of the craft shortly before it crashed, the search went on for three days... and Lieutenant Conrad Turner, because he refused to abandon the search, was the one who actually found the plane... with its only survivor trapped in it, and in pretty bad condition..."

"He saved the colonel's life," Blue said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Did you know about this, Paul?"

"Well... I knew that Captain Black had saved Colonel White's life, years ago, yes... In fact, I believe that's how they met. But I didn't know in what circumstances." Scarlet rubbed his chin again. "Now I really feel like I'm intruding on the old man's privacy..."

"I guess we found more than we need, don't you think so?"

Scarlet nodded. He flipped down his cap microphone. "Lieutenant Green?"

The lieutenant's voice immediately came booming from the quarters' speaker. It sounded rather eager. *"I think I found something, Captain!"*

"Yes, me too. The death of the colonel's wife?"

"How did you find that out, sir?" Green's tone was obviously disappointed. Scarlet permitted himself a faint smile.

"Never mind that now, Lieutenant. I'm missing some information, however. Maybe you have it to hand. Do you know if she was buried in London?"

"Close on the target, sir. More precisely Hampton Hill. In the graveyard of St. James' Church. I have the address in front of me right now."

"I'm betting my life Colonel White visited the grave yesterday," Scarlet said.

Blue snorted. "Not much chance of losing that bet." Scarlet gave him a murderous look. Blue shrugged. "I mean, the colonel must visit the grave every year... Who would have thought our hard-as-nails commander was such a soft-hearted guy?"

"He's human too, you know, Captain Blue," Scarlet remarked rather curtly.

Blue refrained from answering. Sometimes, he wondered about that. Thinking of Colonel White actually being involved with a woman – even being married to her – was somehow an odd concept. The American captain kept his own relationship with Symphony Angel a secret, for fear that their commander would not approve of it – and even oppose it. And Blue also knew that Captain Scarlet, who was involved with Rhapsody, was doing the same thing for the exact same reason.

"So, what do we do now?" Blue asked, clearing his throat. "Do we send a team to the grave to see if there is some clue where to find the colonel? I know he's probably long gone by now, but at least, it's a start..."

Scarlet nodded his agreement. "And I have a good idea who to send..." He used his cap microphone again. "Lieutenant, send all the information you've found to Colonel White's computer in his living quarters... including the address of that church... And put me through to Captain Ochre and Rhapsody Angel at London Headquarters."

"S.I.G., Captain."

Green cut the communication and Scarlet turned to Blue. The blond American was nodding thoughtfully. "Captain Ochre and Rhapsody. Good choice. They're amongst the best detectives in the world... If anybody can find the old man, it'll be them."

"And I'd much prefer to send people from Spectrum senior staff to search for him," Scarlet added. "No sense in letting too many people know our commander is missing..."

"...And may be in danger of being taken over by the Mysterons. You better tell those two to be extra-careful out there."

"I will, don't worry. In the meantime, we'd better call a meeting for the remainder of the staff. And begin to look into different options about that Mysteron threat."

"I do hope you're wrong about that feeling concerning Colonel White, Scarlet," Blue said gloomily.

"I hope so too, Captain Blue," the British captain replied. "I sincerely hope so too."

Chapter 4

“So, what do you say, honey? Is this exciting or what?”

The civilian car issued to them at London Headquarters, about a half hour earlier, had just left the A308 to enter the village of Hampton Hill. A casually dressed Captain Ochre grinned broadly at the young red-haired woman seated beside him. Also dressed in fashionable civilian clothing, Rhapsody Angel turned a cool gaze on her companion.

“I really fail to see the excitement in this mission, Captain Ochre,” she replied dryly.

“I don’t mean about the colonel being absent,” Ochre quickly stated. “I mean, you and me... on a secret mission... together.”

“Yes, right. Exciting.” Rhapsody shifted uncomfortably in her seat and sighed. “Forgive me, Captain. You must think I’m not being very good company right now.”

“Hey, no sweat. I suppose you are preoccupied. I am too.” Ochre smiled slightly. “All that banter is only a façade, hon. It helps me get through, from time to time.”

Rhapsody smiled in turn. “Then I suppose you’re a more subtle person than I gave you credit for, Captain.”

“Rick, please. Call me Rick. You remember what Scarlet said when he handed us this mission? Dress civilian, act civilian...”

“...So we won’t give Colonel White’s identity away when we encounter people who probably know him,” Rhapsody nodded. “All right, then... Rick.”

“So... what should our cover be, Dianne?”

“Cover?”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t we pose as a young married couple? Or fiancés, perhaps?”

“Does the simple concept of ‘friends’ have any meaning for you?”

“Nobody would believe that good looking people like us could just be friends!”

“Nobody as dense as you are, you mean.”

Ochre scoffed at the so-delicately put insult. “See? We’re already acting like a real couple!” When Rhapsody didn’t answer his sardonic remark, he gave her a quick look. “What is it, anyway?” You’re keeping your goo-goo eyes for someone English?”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Rhapsody twitch on hearing his words. *Well, that sure got a reaction out of her*, he mused pleasantly.

"Whatever do you mean?" the young British pilot asked, uneasily.

Ochre shrugged. "Didn't you tell me you were supposed to go out on a date with the colonel, last night?" he retorted innocently.

"Oh!" Just in time, Rhapsody suppressed a sigh of relief. Which Captain Ochre didn't fail to notice. He also noted the mocking tone she then took to hide her present awkwardness. "Now, don't go getting the wrong idea, Rick! He just knows I love the kind of show we were going to see last night, and since we were both off duty, he was kind enough to invite me."

"I would have loved to see *Les Misérables* too," Ochre replied with a grin. "He didn't invite ME." He looked at the girl and persisted. "You're sure there was nothing else to it?"

"Really, Rick!" Rhapsody said with a faint smile. "What about the age difference? I'm half his age..."

"I'm sure he still notices women... And, let's face it, you're a very charming one."

"That's really sweet of you, Rick," Rhapsody thanked him. "But I don't think the colonel had that in mind when he invited me... You know he's a gentleman of the old school."

"Guess you're probably right," Ochre said with a nod. "So... that makes you a free woman?" he quickly added with a grin. "I still have a chance, then?"

"In your dreams, Fraser," Rhapsody responded harshly. Captain Ochre had been bugging her for months now, about the possibility of the two of them going out together. Taking into account Ochre's reputation as a prankster, it was difficult to know if he was actually serious about this or not. He had always done so half-jokingly, and even sometimes in front of Captain Scarlet. Rhapsody often asked herself how her fiancé could find the patience to listen to his fellow officer and friend's advances to her, without clobbering him. At times, Rhapsody had seen the annoyance crossing Paul's features... It was in those moments that Adam was a big help and always managed to find a way to divert everybody's attention to something – anything – else. One false move, the young woman realized, could jeopardize the secret she and Paul had kept so carefully these last months.

Unbeknown to her, however, Captain Ochre had a pretty good idea of what was going on between Rhapsody Angel and Captain Scarlet. Ochre wasn't a fool, and neither was he blind. And on top of this, he had one of the best detective minds in the world. For the last three years, he had lived almost twenty-four hours a day with the same people, so it was inevitable he would come to know them fairly well. In the case of Scarlet and Rhapsody, he had

begun to notice some changes in their habits over the past few months. They had stopped their usual friendly quarrels to share a more affectionate complicity. They were often seen together, in various places all over Cloudbase. It was so obvious these two were in love, and that they were desperately trying to keep it to themselves. To their credit, a bemused Ochre had to admit, they were making a better job of it than Captain Blue and Symphony Angel...

Having guessed their relationship, Ochre had taken some personal and mischievous pleasure in teasing both Scarlet and Rhapsody... notably by asking the young woman out on numerous occasions. He was wondering when and how one of them would eventually blurt out the news, probably out of exasperation. Ochre was betting on Scarlet. The man had much less patience than his lady friend.

"Here's the church," Rhapsody suddenly announced.

"What? Where?" Ochre asked, emerging from his thoughts.

"There, to the right." Rhapsody pointed to the building, behind which was a graveyard covered with green grass and early flowers. She stared at her companion. "Where were you, anyway?"

"Far away, I'm afraid, darling," Ochre said, shaking his head.

"You can daydream all you want, Captain, as long as you still remember we drive on the left in this country."

"And don't YOU forget to call me Rick," Ochre replied with a faint smile.

He found a free spot on the street, right in front of the church, and parked the car there. Stepping out, he came round to the other side of the vehicle to open the door for Rhapsody and help her out. She showed herself pleasantly surprised.

"My, aren't we the gentleman!" she noted.

He grinned. "We Americans are not all total boors, you know, m'lady. We can be as gallant as the next Englishman..."

"...Who are not all as gallant as you think. That's quite a misconception, you know?"

They walked around the church to reach the graveyard and then, going their separate ways, began to look for the particular grave they were there to investigate. It took them a few minutes to discover it. It was Rhapsody who stumbled upon it, at the far side of the graveyard. She called Captain Ochre to join her. The polished white tombstone marking the grave had nothing to distinguish it from the others, except for the words engraved in it: *'Elizabeth Somners, 2019 – 2053. Beloved wife of Charles Gray. Remember my love forever.'* Three white roses had recently been put on the grave, right at the foot of the stone.

Captain Ochre crouched in front of the grave and carefully took one of the roses to look at it more closely; he turned a thoughtful gaze to a silent Rhapsody, standing beside him. "Remind you of something?" he asked her, showing her the rose.

Rhapsody nodded slowly. "Looks like the same variety up on Cloudbase," she murmured.

"I bet they ARE the same variety," Ochre replied. "And I'm also betting that rose tree on Cloudbase has been trimmed recently."

"It usually is, this time of year."

Both agents knew very well that one of Colonel White's few pastimes on Cloudbase was to cultivate a tree of white roses, just as beautiful as those ones must have been when freshly cut. That tree was his pride and joy, and he didn't want anybody to touch it. Rhapsody remembered how upset he had been about two years earlier, when Captain Scarlet accidentally damaged the tree. The colonel roamed the entire base in search of the culprit. Fortunately, Rhapsody herself saved the tree, which lost only a few flowers and branches in the misadventure. That, however, didn't save Scarlet from being assigned to radar duty for two straight weeks...

"Now we know why he cares so much for that rose tree on the Promenade Deck," Rhapsody noted. "And why some flowers are always cut from it at this time of year."

"Yeah," Ochre nodded. "These roses definitely came from it. I bet the colonel grows them especially for his wife... to put them on her grave." He shook his head. "That's love for you."

"Put that down, Rick," Rhapsody said uneasily. "We shouldn't touch it."

"You're right." Ochre put the rose in its rightful place, with utmost respect. He then got to his feet. "Well, at least we know he was here recently," he told Rhapsody. "Yesterday, at least. The roses are still fairly fresh."

"Yesterday was the anniversary of his wife's death, according to Captain Scarlet," Rhapsody nodded.

"Right. So now all that's left is to find out where he might be now."

They heard pebbles crunching beneath approaching footsteps behind them and turned around. They saw a fifty-something minister, with greying hair and small glasses, eagerly coming in their direction. He gave them a broad smile.

"May I be of service to you?" he asked. He seemed a bit uneasy. He's probably wondering about these two suspicious strangers standing in his graveyard, looking rather too closely at one of the tombstones, Rhapsody thought.

"Er... Yes, Father..." Ochre started, before being discreetly elbowed by Rhapsody.

"...Reverend," she corrected him.

"...Excuse me, Reverend. Maybe you can help us locate somebody..."

"You're not from around here," the vicar said, noticing Ochre's American accent. "Has that person you're looking for something to do with that grave you've been looking at?"

"Actually, Reverend... It's the husband we're searching for," Ochre answered.

"The husband..." the minister repeated carefully.

"Yes, Charles Gray," Ochre amplified.

"Distinguished-looking English gentleman, mid-fifties, over six feet tall, with silver hair and blue eyes." Rhapsody added, addressing a most reassuring smile to the vicar. She had the feeling he was a little bit too cautious... Perhaps a good indication that he actually knew Colonel White. Following the young woman's precise description, he looked thoughtfully at her.

"I take it you know the admiral?" he asked.

"The admiral?" Ochre quizzed.

"Yes, Richard," Rhapsody said quickly. "He was an Admiral when he retired from the Navy, about twenty-five years ago. Some people still call him that to this day. Especially those who served with him... Isn't that right, Reverend?"

"How did you know I was in the Navy?" the vicar asked, smiling.

"A lucky guess. You have the walk."

"That still betrays me, now and then." The minister held out his hand. "Benjamin Lester. I was first class seaman under the admiral on the *Sir Francis Drake*, from 2047 to 49... Well, in the beginning, he was captain..."

"Dianne Simms," Rhapsody presented herself. "My friend, Richard Fraser."

"Friends?" Reverend Lester asked.

"Friends," the young woman insisted before Ochre had the chance to utter an answer.

"How do you know the admiral?" Reverend Lester asked again.

"We work with him," Ochre answered. "That's why we're trying to reach him, but we don't know where he is. Can you help us locate him?"

"Why, it's possible..."

Ochre and Rhapsody almost blew out a sigh of relief on hearing that.

"Please, Reverend," Ochre insisted. "It is imperative that we find him as quickly as possible."

"We're a little worried about him," Rhapsody continued. "I was supposed to meet him last night and he didn't show up."

The minister stared closely at Rhapsody and then smiled again. "So you would be the young lady he was to take out on a date? Well, he said you were charming..."

Rhapsody blushed slightly. "He talked to you about me?"

"Only briefly. And he was eager to meet you on that date. You say he missed it? How odd... Maybe he was recalled to work..."

"We would have known about it, Reverend," Ochre replied, shaking his head.

"Oh, yes... You work together." Reverend Lester nodded. "Well, in that case, perhaps Dooley can help you..."

"Dooley?"

"Greg Dooley. He was quartermaster onboard the *Drake* twenty-five years ago. He has lived in my parish for at least ten years. When the admiral comes to visit his wife, he always stays at Dooley's... At least, he has done so for the past four or five years... Since he left London, I think."

"He always comes to visit his wife's grave on the anniversary of her death?" Ochre asked with curiosity.

"Never missed once in seventeen years. And he comes on other occasions, sporadically... I suppose it's whenever his job gives him the chance."

"Must have been quite a woman," Ochre mused, almost to himself.

"A most extraordinary woman," Reverend Lester agreed. "She had a lot to give. But that plane crash... That took her too soon... and the child too."

"The child?" Rhapsody repeated.

"Why, yes... She was expecting a child, when she died. Their first-born, to her and Charles... He was devastated." Seeing the uneasy looks the two younger people were exchanging, the vicar seemed perplexed. "Didn't you know about that?"

"Well... The fact is that Mister Gray doesn't talk much about himself," Ochre explained. "He's rather a private person."

"He always has been," Reverend Lester agreed. "I suppose he hasn't changed much in that respect."

Ochre nodded thoughtfully. That was more detail than he had expected to learn about his commander's personal life. No need to go into further detail, and better get to the business at hand. One glance at Rhapsody told him that she felt the same way.

"Reverend, this Dooley you were talking about... Can you tell us how we can reach him?"

"Why, of course!" A warm smile crossed Reverend Lester's face. He gestured toward a little house, just next to his church.

"Come to the vicarage with me. I'll give you his phone number and his address. Maybe you'll find the admiral is still there, who knows?"

"Who knows, indeed," Ochre agreed, giving his arm to Rhapsody before following the minister through the graveyard.

* * *

"That must be the house."

Captain Ochre parked the car in front of the address given to him by Reverend Lester. Before coming here with Rhapsody, he had made a phone call from the vicarage, hoping to reach retired quartermaster Greg Dooley. Nobody answered his call, and Reverend Lester explained to him that Dooley often didn't answer the phone, being always too engrossed in tending to his garden.

Ochre and Rhapsody walked up the path toward the front door and rang the bell. Nobody came to open it. The two Spectrum agents looked at each other.

"Seems there's nobody home," Ochre noted grimly.

"Maybe Mister Dooley's in the back garden," Rhapsody replied. "Remember what Reverend Lester said about his gardening?"

Ochre nodded. He took the young woman by the arm and the two of them walked around the house to reach the garden. Rhapsody marvelled at the beautiful sight of it, while Ochre whistled with obvious admiration.

"Not bad," he said, pushing open a gate in the fence and inviting Rhapsody to step into the garden before him. "Not bad at all..."

"Not bad?" Rhapsody protested. "The man is a real artist, no less!" She looked admiringly at some rose bushes planted alongside the fence. Early flowers were already budding all over them.

"Hello?" Ochre called out. "Is there anyone around?"

No response. He and Rhapsody walked around the garden, looking about. No trace of anyone.

Rhapsody's attention was drawn to a spot of the garden where holes had been dug, obviously intended for some plants that were lying around still in their pots. As Ochre continued to walk toward the house, she went out to investigate her discovery, and crouched in front of one of the holes. Her companion checked on the back door of the house. It opened when he turned the handle.

"Curious," he said out loud. "It's not locked. Think we should go in, Dianne?"

"Rick, come over here a minute."

Leaving the door open, Ochre went back to the girl. She showed him the holes and handed him one of the pots. "These plants are dying," she said.

"So?" Ochre replied, shrugging.

"They're still in their pots, and weren't planted, as the others were." Rhapsody pointed to a couple of other plants, of the same kind, planted right next to the holes she had spotted. "Obviously, they're the kind that must be planted right away in fresh soil, or they'll die because their roots won't have enough room..." She looked up at Ochre. "Why weren't they planted like the others?"

"Judging by those holes, Mister Dooley is probably about to do it..."

"These holes aren't fresh, Rick. And where's Mister Dooley?"

"The door's not locked. He must be nearby."

The Spectrum captain looked around again, fully expecting to see an elderly man coming out of the house or around some bushes to ask them who they were. He saw a shovel, all covered with dirt, resting against a low stone wall. From where he was standing, he could see dark reddish stains on the handle. *Strange... That looks like...* Thinking he must be wrong, Ochre walked toward the shovel and knelt in front of it to examine it more closely.

The stains, mingled with damp soil, definitely looked like blood.

Ochre frowned. A shiver ran down his spine. Something was wrong here. He could feel it in his bones. And he was afraid... very afraid something terrible had happened to Colonel White.

He grimly stood up and moved to join Rhapsody, while rubbing the dirt from his shin, wondering how to tell her about his assumption. He stopped suddenly and looked down at his feet. There was something peculiar about the ground he was standing on. He moved it a bit with his foot. Rhapsody noticed what he was doing and stood up.

"What is it?"

"The ground," Ochre said, nodding his head. "It's recently been disturbed, look."

"For gardening, maybe?"

Ochre didn't answer. He dug his toe into the ground and felt it come into contact with something. He pushed the dirt aside with his foot and revealed dirtied clothing.

The two Spectrum agents suddenly turned pale. The same, sudden suspicion had come to their minds at the exact same moment.

"Oh, God..." Rhapsody gasped. "Don't tell me..."

She looked around, noticed the shovel, and moved toward it with the obvious intention of using it to dig. Ochre stopped her with a shout that startled her. "Leave that shovel alone..." He

glanced about and gestured toward a trowel lying not far from the girl. "Give me that, instead."

He was trying to keep himself as calm as possible, but his alarmed shout had betrayed the worry within him. He got to his knees and began clearing the dirt around the cloth he had discovered.

Rhapsody fetched the trowel and handed it to him. She uneasily offered to help him, but he pushed her aside.

"No!" he said more harshly than he would have wanted to. "Let me do this. Step aside, Rhapsody!"

Nervousness was getting to him, the British pilot noticed, as she watched him frantically but carefully digging around the clothing. She watched as he uncovered what appeared to be an elbow and the upper part of an arm.

The suspicions of both Spectrum agents were becoming dreadful reality. There was somebody buried in that disturbed ground!

Rhapsody couldn't help herself as a shiver crawled down her spine; she felt her throat tightening, and closed her coat around her. *Please, God, let it not be him... Not him, please...* She stared as Ochre continued to dig more quickly, breathing hard under the stress and muttering words of despair: "No... Not again. This is not happening again..." Rhapsody realized instantly that he was remembering two years earlier, when in similar circumstances, he had uncovered the buried body of Captain Scarlet, his friend and colleague, who had just been killed by the Mysterons. She knew the discovery had left a deep mark on Ochre, who, after that, had a difficult time adjusting to the fact that the duplicate created by the Mysterons had actually retained the real Scarlet's personality, and had shaken off the control of his alien masters. After a time, Scarlet had proved himself, and Ochre had accepted him as the friend he thought he had lost. But the memory of his dreadful discovery had never left Captain Ochre, and now he was pleading for it not to happen again.

He uncovered the back of the head; it had white hair. He stiffened for a second, his heart pounding more rapidly inside his chest. He could hear Rhapsody's stifled sob behind him.

"No, no, no," he kept muttering. "Please, Lord... It can't be him..." Ochre took the body by the arm he had uncovered, and desperately pulled it towards him. He pulled harder a second time. The body came up out of the ground, like a tooth out of a gum. The face of the dead man, unrecognisable with all that moist soil covering it, appeared, eyes closed. Ochre cleaned it up roughly and gazed down at it.

He did not even try to hide his relief, when he finally put the body down on its back and crawled away from it, breathing hard, a sickening feeling deep inside his stomach. Rhapsody crouched next to the American captain, who was sitting on the ground, his clothes filthy with dirt, trying to catch his breath and to slow down his fast-beating heart. She gently touched him. He was shivering, the same as she was. Both stared at the dead man.

"It's not him," Ochre sighed with relief. "Thank you, God, it's not him... I was so afraid..."

He stopped. He noticed Rhapsody's hand trembling on his shoulder. He took her arm and kept it close against him, in a reassuring way.

"You were afraid too, weren't you?" he murmured.

"That poor man," the young woman replied unsteady. "It must be Mister Dooley."

"Must be," Ochre agreed, still trying to regain his composure and staring at the dead man. He gestured toward the shovel. "There're blood stains on that shovel. His murderer must have killed him with it... and then used it to bury him."

"I'm terribly worried, Rick."

"Me too. Why kill that old guy... And where's the colonel?"

Sounds then came from the house. Sounds like hurried footsteps. Ochre quickly scrambled to his feet. "There's somebody inside!" he said in an eager tone. He rapidly strode toward the open door, aware of Rhapsody's presence close behind him.

They stopped in front of the door. Ochre took his pistol from under his jacket and carefully pushed the door inward. He glanced over Rhapsody.

"Stay here," he whispered.

"Out of the question," the young woman replied in the same tone. "If the murderer is inside the house, you'll need back-up. I'm trained for this kind of situation, remember?"

Ochre shook his head. "Point taken." He didn't know if it was the murderer they had heard, for the man he had dug up appeared to have been dead for quite some time... Maybe since the day before, the captain thought. "I take it you're armed?"

She nodded. From her purse, she produced a little pistol. Ochre grinned slightly, shaking his head with approval. "Go to the front door, then. Wait for my signal to enter the house. Carefully. Don't go barging in there!"

"Who do you think I am? Captain Scarlet?" The girl grimly took her personal communicator and showed it to the American captain. "Be careful yourself." She then swiftly disappeared round the corner of the house.

Less than two minutes later, Ochre received the call on his own communicator; Rhapsody had picked the lock of the front door

with no problem and was ready to enter. "Okay, then," Ochre whispered. "Let's go."

He carefully pushed the door inward and entered the house. Right now, there seemed to be no sound at all... He slowly and silently moved through the small kitchen he had accessed, and then into the living room. That's where he got a peek at Rhapsody, at the other side of the room, cautiously taking cover behind a wall. Still nobody in sight.

Wooden boards creaked, upstairs. Ochre gestured to Rhapsody to move with him toward the staircase. The American captain reminded himself that whoever was inside had to know they were there... He himself had called out for somebody earlier, thus announcing their presence.

They stopped at the foot of the stairs; Ochre looked up. Still no apparent sign of anybody. He swallowed hard. *Maybe we should have called for back-up*, he thought. It was a bit late for that, now. He started climbing the stairs, placing his feet carefully on each tread.

All of a sudden, a large wooden object appeared in his line of vision, apparently thrown from the top of the stairs. He didn't want to move out of the way, afraid that the projectile would hit Rhapsody, close behind him. He braced himself and caught the object – a small table, he noticed – right in his arms. The shock drove him down, pushing the young woman with him. She fell on her back, but he managed to stay upright, though his feet were unsteady. He instantly threw the table away from him.

He then saw a white-haired man standing at the top of the stairway, aiming a gun at him. Ochre just had time to push Rhapsody aside, and crouch down before a bullet whistled past his ear. He responded automatically, firing three consecutive shots. Each bullet reached its target and the man tumbled head-first down the stairway.

Still unsure, Ochre got up, his gun still aimed at the man sprawled at the foot of the staircase, a few feet from him. He approached carefully. With his foot, he pushed the other man's gun aside and knelt beside him to check for a pulse in his neck. Nothing. The guy was dead. The Spectrum officer let out a sigh.

"All right, Rhapsody," he called, "it's safe."

The young woman got to her feet too and cautiously came closer. After putting his gun back in its holster, Captain Ochre turned their attacker onto his back. He wasn't really sure, but he thought he saw...

He was looking down at the face of the dead body he had dug up in the garden, some minutes ago.

"Oh, God!" Rhapsody gasped in complete horror. "Don't tell me..."

"Mysteron!" Ochre muttered grimly.

As if this word had been a signal, the half-opened back door was suddenly pushed wide and two men, armed with automatic rifles and dressed in black commando gear, entered suddenly, firing high. Ochre pulled Rhapsody down, keeping her cautiously below the line of fire, and took cover with her behind the sofa. A hail of bullets shattered a bookcase just over their heads. Ochre drew his weapon, intent on defending both their lives.

Behind them, he heard the shattering of a window, and glanced back to see another commando, taking aim at them. Ochre fired at him, compelling him to take cover before firing himself. *We're in trouble... But maybe we've still got a chance, if we can only reach the front door...*

"Rhapsody!" She looked at him and he gestured with his free hand toward the front door. She took a look at it. Only a few feet separated them from it; trying to get there would be risky, but in any case, they could not stay there. She nodded her acknowledgement.

Ochre fired a couple of shots at the two men at the back door, while Rhapsody used her own pistol to force the third man at the window to stay under cover. They then took their chance and broke into a run toward the front door.

They did not have time to reach it. It suddenly opened, and another tall man, dressed as a commando, complete with a cap, appeared in the doorway, cutting off their way out. Instead of an automatic weapon, he was aiming a simple pistol at the two Spectrum agents. Captain Ochre raised his gun, ready to fire. And then hesitated.

Beyond the barrel of the gun aimed toward him, he saw two piercing blue eyes, in the middle of a craggy, stern-looking face he knew very well.

"Colonel White?" he muttered, frowning in disbelief.

His hesitation cost him more than he would have imagined. The man in front of him implacably pulled the trigger.

Hit in the right shoulder, Ochre was driven back and lost hold of his weapon. A distressed Rhapsody saw him falling to the floor, knocking over an armchair in his fall.

"Oh God, no! Captain!"

She hurriedly knelt by the side of her wounded and now defenceless companion, oblivious to the fact that their attackers were stepping closer to them. She could not fire at them, knowing that they would shoot her down without mercy. She forced herself to forget her weapon and quickly took her communicator from her purse to try to make one last, desperate call for help:

"S.I.R.! This is Rhapsody Angel! Officer down! Request immediate assistance! Officer down!"

The communicator was swiftly kicked from her hand and she saw it being crushed under the booted foot of one of the commandos. She felt a strong hand grabbing at her gun and tearing it from her grasp. She turned furiously against the man and was brutally pushed to the floor.

Seeing her in distress, Captain Ochre made a supreme attempt to come to her help. "Leave her alone!"

The barrel of a pistol was shoved right under his nose, stopping him from trying to get up. He raised his eyes and found himself staring right into the blue eyes of Colonel White.

"Don't make a move... 'Captain'."

Ochre swallowed hard, not knowing what to do. One of the other men had roughly dragged Rhapsody to her feet and was holding her tightly. Seeing her manhandled that way, Ochre forgot any sense of self-preservation he might have for himself and tried to rush to her.

"Get your hands off her!"

The butt of a rifle violently came into contact with his head and sent him sprawling again on the floor.

Alarmed, Rhapsody saw the man who had knocked down her companion aiming his weapon at him.

"No, please! Don't kill him!" she pleaded desperately. The man holding her had a devilish time doing so, and put a gun to her head.

"You want to die first?" was the ominous question he muttered into her ear.

"Stop this!"

The voice of Colonel White thundered above the confusion, putting a stop to it all. Everybody stared at him with perplexity, while a half-stunned Ochre was trying not to lose consciousness.

White looked straight at Rhapsody and motioned to the man holding her to put his gun down. "Don't kill them. It won't be necessary."

"Sir?" the man said in surprised. "They didn't hesitate in killing Dooley!"

"I know. I can see that." White took a look at the body of the older man, sprawled at the foot of the staircase. "My order stands. Don't kill them."

"But, sir!"

"I won't repeat myself!" White raised his pistol toward the reluctant commando. There was anger and annoyance in his tone. The three other men, it seemed, didn't dare question his decision

further. Under the threat of the pistol, the one holding Rhapsody put down his gun. The colonel did the same.

He then turned his attention to the body of Greg Dooley. He walked toward it and knelt by the side of the dead man, to check his vitals, just like Captain Ochre had done earlier. He heaved a long sigh and shook his head. Rhapsody could not see his face, but she could have sworn he seemed somehow distressed at the death of the other *Mysteron* agent. That seemed so strange to her.

He then stood up and came closer to Rhapsody to stare at her; she looked back at him, in complete despair. She could see no recognition in his blazing eyes, no pity whatsoever. He was coldly contemplating an enemy he would eventually have to crush. *Dear Lord*, the girl realized, a shiver crawling down her spine. *He had become a Mysteron...*

"We'll take the girl with us," she then heard him say sharply. "She may be useful as a hostage."

Worry took hold of Rhapsody. It went even deeper when she saw her commander turning toward Captain Ochre, lying flat on his back, his shoulder bleeding. White stood over him, looking at him without the slightest trace of emotion on his face.

"Who killed Greg Dooley?" he asked roughly.

Ochre blinked at him, dumbfounded, wondering what he was driving at. He made a move, trying to heave himself up, but White's foot held him back, pushing on his wounded shoulder. Ochre winced. With alarm, he saw his commander levelling his gun right at his head.

"I don't have much patience," White snapped, "so you'd better answer me quickly if you know what's good for you! Who killed Greg Dooley?"

"I did," Ochre answered between clenched teeth. "He was shooting at us... Not that it could make any difference to you... *Mysteron*."

He failed to notice the puzzlement in Colonel White's face as he was staring down at him. But he did see the finger trembling on the trigger; for a moment, Ochre felt for certain that he would pull it and kill him. At the last possible second, White raised the weapon.

"You're lucky, Captain," the *Spectrum* commander said icily. "I won't stoop to your level and become a murderer."

Ochre stared back at him in disbelief. Again, he tried to rise, but White's foot pushed him back; the pressure on Ochre's shoulder made him cry out in pain.

Outraged, Rhapsody protested vehemently. "Stop that! You're hurting him!"

White gave her a quick glance; almost as if he'd just realized the pain he was inflicting on the injured man, he released him. Then he crouched down next to him. Ochre was on the brink of losing his senses, but the worry he felt for Rhapsody's safety was keeping him from giving in to the pain.

"Don't... don't hurt the girl," he pleaded to White. "Please..."

"Don't worry," Ochre heard the implacable voice of his commander reply. "I won't hurt her. I promise you she will be safe... That is, as long as your kind doesn't come after us. Tell that to your superiors, 'Captain'. And report to them that I am not a man who makes idle threats!"

Those dreadful words were the last thing Captain Ochre was aware of, before completely falling into the dark.

Chapter 5

Lieutenant William Lannigan, stationed at the gate in front of the British Naval Depot, just outside of Bristol, took a long look at the requisition form he had just been handed. "Everything seems in order," he noted in a quizzical tone. "Well, you have all the authorisations you need, sir."

He handed back the form to the high ranked World Navy officer who had stepped out of his Land Rover to stand patiently in front of him. He was a tall, white-haired man, with piercing blue eyes and a rough face. He wore the insignia of a full admiral on his sleeves and carried an impressive clutch of honours on his chest.

"Have you have been away from active duty for a long time, sir?" the young lieutenant asked with curiosity, trying to sound as polite as possible. It wasn't every day an Admiral came, asking to come in.

"A while, yes," was the quiet English accented answer. "Thought it was time I saw some action again. Been feeling restless, lately."

Lannigan glanced at the driver of the Land Rover. The admiral was waiting in quiet patience. Behind, a transporter was standing in line; it had accompanied the admiral, and the two men Lannigan saw onboard were waiting for the gate to be opened and they be allowed to enter the depot.

The admiral was staring at the interior of the gatehouse, where a man, dressed in a black and white uniform, complete with a cap with a transparent visor carrying a stylised 'S' symbol, was aiming a strange-looking device straight at him. Seeing how unsettled the high-ranked officer suddenly looked, Lannigan glanced over his shoulder. The man in the cabin waved a reassuring gesture and the lieutenant turned back to the admiral, smiling broadly.

"No need to be alarmed, sir. That's only Spectrum."

"Spectrum?" the admiral repeated quizzically.

"Yes sir. It seems there's another Mysteron threat on at the moment. Spectrum has sent teams of agents to provide greater security at all hot spots... How they could consider THIS place a hot spot is beyond me, though! Nothing ever happens here." He shook his head. "Your visit will be the talk of the month, sir."

"That's an odd-looking weapon that man's aiming at me," the admiral retorted, a bit dryly.

"Oh, it's not a weapon, sir. I'm told it's some sort of detector device... It seems that it can spot a Mysteron right away."

Lannigan gave a broad smile. "That man in there has just notified me that you and your men are clean, sir."

"Very happy to know that. How does it work?"

"Don't ask me, sir. Only Spectrum knows. Maybe Captain Forest would be able to tell you, but it would surprise me greatly if he's willing to. It's very hush hush..."

"Captain Forest?"

"He's somewhere on the premises, checking things out. Maybe you'll meet him on your way in. He's not hard to spot: he's one of those colour-coded Spectrum officers. He wears a dark green tunic."

"So, you're letting me in, finally?" the admiral asked, with a faint smile of his own.

"Oh, of course, Admiral. You're in." Lannigan looked down at his hand-held computer. "Some of these authorisations are a wee bit old, but they're still active. In fact, if I was to keep YOU out of these premises, I'd have to keep everyone else out, too."

The admiral nodded quietly and sat back next to his driver. They both listened carefully to Lannigan's last directions to get to their objective. Then the gate opened in front of them and Lannigan gave the admiral a smart salute, welcoming him inside. "Have a good day, Admiral Gray."

The Land Rover entered, the transporter following close behind.

The driver of the first vehicle shot a brief look toward the silent officer by his side. He was seated straight, staring right ahead; obviously unsettled, he was wiping his sweaty palms on his lap.

"No need to be so nervous, sir," the driver said, clearing his throat.

"I am not nervous, Mister Brighton!" came the harsh response.

The man called Brighton scowled. *Got to be careful*, he thought gloomily. *Remember how unstable that guy is now. Don't want to set him off. He's so unpredictable there's no telling what he might do... For God's sake, he even shot one of his own men...*

"I'm... sorry, Mister Brighton," Admiral Charles Gray then said, more calmly, "It's true I'm nervous... I can't believe we got in so easily. Those passes and authorisations... they looked so authentic. As if they were the real thing."

Brighton had trouble concealing a smile. "Mister Shelby told you they would do the job perfectly, sir."

"I would feel better if Mister Shelby had come with us..." The admiral looked at his driver. "Why didn't he?"

Because that Mysteron detector would have spotted him, you fool... "Somebody had to stay at base to keep an eye on things, sir," Brighton answered quietly.

"Well, maybe... I would have to rely on him for that, I suppose," Admiral Gray muttered. "There is so much I don't quite remember."

"Your memory will come back, Admiral," Brighton noted. Soon enough. "But right now, you should not concern yourself with that. You must concentrate on the mission. It is far too important."

"That's just the point." Gray looked back straight ahead, his trembling eye betraying his troubled thoughts. "I don't know if I can function at my best in these conditions. Maybe I should not be here. I could jeopardize this mission."

"Your presence is required for it, sir. Nobody else could take it on, you know that. Besides, up until now, you have functioned perfectly. Whatever they did to your memories, it doesn't appear to have affected your capabilities."

"I'm not so sure about that," the confused man retorted. "There is so much I feel I SHOULD remember... That 'Spectrum', for example..."

Brighton stiffened a little. "What about it?"

"WHAT is it? I should know that..."

Straight ahead, a group of three men were walking around the base, and were coming in their direction. Two were wearing the same uniform as the one who had scanned the newcomers with that strange-looking device. The third man was clad in a different uniform, with black trousers and shirt, and a dark green tunic and high boots. As they passed the Land Rover, they respectfully saluted the high ranked officer on board. Admiral Gray returned the salute without a flaw and looked back as the vehicle sped away from them. He noticed that the green-jacketed man had stopped walking to look with curiosity in their direction. The admiral had the distinct impression of having seen that uniform before, only of a somewhat lighter shade...

The flash of another face, that of a younger, Black man, with a broad shining smile, came to his mind... But it was only a flash, and it disappeared as quickly as it came, bringing more confusion into the mind of Admiral Charles Gray.

"Must be that Captain Forest the lieutenant at the gate talked about," Brighton noted. "Hope he won't be trouble."

The Spectrum officer had started walking again, apparently paying no more attention to them. Gray sighed and again looked straight ahead. "I don't think so," he said in answer to Brighton's remark. "How much further do we have to go?"

"Should be around that warehouse. Soon, you'll meet an old friend, Admiral."

The older man scowled grimly. "I hope this one will be in better shape than the last one I've seen," he whispered, giving a last fond thought to quartermaster Gregory Dooley.

* * *

"That's about all I can tell you, Captains... I'm truly sorry."

In the sickbay of Spectrum Headquarters London, Captains Scarlet and Blue looked gloomily at their colleague, Captain Ochre, who was lying in bed in one of the recovery rooms. Some hours ago, a Spectrum task team had discovered him, unconscious and bleeding from a gunshot wound, but very much alive. Just before losing his senses, the wounded officer had just found the strength to activate his own Personal Tracker, and the rescue team had homed on its signal to find him. He was then taken to Headquarters, where his wound had received immediate care, and from where the two acting commanders of Spectrum were alerted.

Scarlet and Blue had left Cloudbase without delay, and had come to personally debrief Ochre. Now conscious, with a heavy bandage on his injured shoulder, the American was more than eager to relate his story to them.

As Ochre's report unfolded, feelings of uneasiness had quickly mounted inside the small recovery room, where Scarlet had insisted that the three of them should meet alone. Blue had found himself frequently glancing toward Scarlet, wondering how he was reacting. Always the professional, even under these circumstances, his British counterpart listened in silence, his eyes focused on Ochre. About the only indications for Blue that his friend and partner was on edge were the tightening muscles around his lower jaw and the whitening knuckles of his hands, which gripped his cap in front of him.

"I wish I could tell you more," Ochre said tiredly, his report finished. He looked exhausted. The loss of blood had taken a lot out of him. Not to mention his apparent feelings of worry and guilt. "I woke up here, about an hour ago. I found out the colonel had taken off with the others. The Myseron I shot had also disappeared... and they had taken Rhapsody with them."

Scarlet twitched at those last words. He must be worried sick about Dianne, Blue mused, casting one last quick glance toward him. *I know I felt the same when Karen was kidnapped by Captain Black, two years ago...*

"You're lucky to be alive, Ochre," Scarlet said evenly to his injured colleague.

"I know. I really thought I'd had it when I saw the colonel pulling the trigger on me. And I felt for certain he would finish me

afterward..." He shook his head, looking absolutely distraught. "Can't believe they made a Mysteron out of him..."

Scarlet didn't reply. He went to the window to look thoughtfully outside.

"A team is still searching Quartermaster Dooley's home," Blue said to Ochre. "They dug up the garden, turned the house inside out... They haven't found his body... yet."

"He must have been killed there," Ochre retorted. "It's where he was the most vulnerable. He would not have expected a Mysteron attack there."

"That's probably why they took over his friend," Blue nodded. "Yes, you're right. The body must be hidden somewhere around there."

"Then it must be found," Scarlet added, turning around to face his two colleagues. "But we better keep the search team in the dark about WHO they're looking for exactly."

"I agree," Blue said. "We can't let out the news that the commander-in-chief of Spectrum has been killed and replaced by a Mysteron reconstruct. At least, not without real proof of it, like the finding of an actual body. Fortunately, the members of the search team wouldn't recognize the colonel if they found him."

"Not without his uniform, anyway," Ochre mumbled gloomily.

Scarlet came back to the bed. "Then we agree on that one: we keep it a secret amongst the higher staff, until we're really sure of what exactly happened. There would be panic if the other military services, and even the presidential authority, found out that Colonel White has been taken over by the Mysterons and is now field commander of an entire team of Mysteronised commandos..." He addressed Captain Ochre, "Do you think you can travel back to Cloudbase, soon? I would prefer you to be as far away from here as possible... If you stay in London, word might get out."

"And there's Spectrum Intelligence," Blue noted.

"What about Spectrum Intelligence?" Ochre asked, puzzled. "They're on our side, aren't they?"

"Yes... But they have a tendency to police Spectrum from within," Blue retorted. "AND they have direct access to the Presidential cabinet..."

"Since the colonel is not there," Scarlet added, "and if they find out what happened, they might not even respect our assignment as acting commanders... and do things their way. If you stay here, Ochre, it would be easier for them to interrogate you about what happened at Dooley's house... It would be more difficult for them to get to you on Cloudbase."

"At least, with you up there, we can pretend that you are far too weak to answer their questions," Blue continued. "And we'll not have them snooping around the place."

"At least for a time," Ochre sighed. "How long do you intend on keeping this thing a secret?"

"Long enough for us to decide what to do, and decipher the Mysteron threat," Scarlet said.

"Any idea who their actual target is, this time?"

"We're still working on it. But now, we'll concentrate on what's happened to the colonel. The Mysterons intend using him. 'An honoured outlawed hero'... There should be another one."

"Maybe one of his old associates?" Blue suggested.

"We'll check that. And then, there's that 'crowned head'..."

"What about the King of England?" Ochre remarked. "He would be an ideal choice, since Colonel White is a British subject."

Scarlet nodded slowly. "We'll put some Spectrum bodyguards on him," he agreed, "with a Mysteron detector to check on every person to approach him. And we better check any formal event His Majesty might be attending in the near future. The Mysterons may use one of those to get to him..."

"...With two outlawed heroes," Blue added.

"Hopefully, that clue may help us narrow the field." Scarlet looked again at Ochre. "When do you think you'll be ready to go?"

"Right away, if you want. And I may be off the hook as a field agent right now, but back on Cloudbase, I may be of some use behind a computer, doing some research."

"No, my friend. You need your rest."

"Try and stop me."

"We're acting commanders of Spectrum right now, Captain Ochre," Blue replied roughly. "Are you questioning orders?"

"Won't you need all available higher staff officers to help you out on that one, Captain Blue?" Ochre retorted. "I won't overexert myself, I promise. Just let me help. Please."

Scarlet and Blue exchanged glances a moment. Then, the British captain put his hand on Ochre's uninjured shoulder. "We'll give orders for your immediate departure," he told him. "If you want to help, do it. Without tiring yourself. And that's an order, Captain."

"Thank you, Captain Scarlet," Ochre smiled faintly.

Scarlet squeezed his friend's shoulder then strode to the door with Blue. Ochre watched them go, still feeling uneasy inside. His two colleagues opened the door and Blue went out.

"Scarlet?"

Hearing Ochre's call, Captain Scarlet, who was almost out, stopped, and glanced over his shoulder. He could see the American officer staring at him, with a distraught look. Ochre

swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry... to have messed things up this way, you know..."

Scarlet gave him a questioning look. Ochre seemed embarrassed.

"About Rhapsody... I feel so terrible."

Scarlet nodded his understanding. "Don't blame yourself, Rick," he said his unsettled friend. "It couldn't be helped."

"I hope she will be all right," Ochre murmured.

"I'm... sure she will be," Scarlet replied. He went out without adding anything else and closed the door behind him.

Blue was standing next to the door, and cast him a puzzled look.

"What was that about?" the blond American asked. "Does Ochre know anything about you and Rhapsody?"

Scarlet shook his head. "I honestly don't know. I..." It was about as much as he could take right now. Suddenly, he lashed out and sent his fist smashing into a wall, making a dent in it. Blue jumped in surprise at his reaction; he quickly approached his partner, looking around to make sure nobody had witnessed his outburst. Fortunately, the corridor was empty at that moment.

"Hey, Paul! Calm down! This isn't the time to lose it!"

"I was a fool, Adam!" Scarlet replied, not even looking at his friend. "I should have trusted my instincts better!"

"Come on, now! You know we couldn't act only on that assumption!"

"It was so obvious. Instead, I chose to believe I could be wrong. I sent Rick and Dianne right into a trap!"

"You didn't make that decision alone. If you want to blame yourself, blame me as well." Scarlet looked at his friend who shook his head. "We took the right decision. We couldn't do anything else, and you know it. We couldn't send a normal Spectrum investigative team. Remember the reason why we sent Rhapsody and Ochre. We had to keep our suspicions concerning the colonel restricted to the higher staff. And now that those suspicions seem to be founded, we have to be even more careful, if we don't want the word to spread like wildfire."

"You're right, of course," Scarlet sighed heavily. He looked around, like Blue himself had done a few seconds ago. A nurse passing by them gave them a smile. Blue noticed that his partner was rubbing the fist he had driven into the wall.

"Sorry about that little outburst, just then," Scarlet said, more calmly.

"Don't sweat it. Believe me, I can relate to your situation, right now."

“Right.” The memories of what happened to Symphony two years earlier, and the circumstances surrounding it, came to Scarlet’s mind. “You must have thought me an insensitive boor, when Black took Karen as a hostage at the Culver Atomic Centre that time...”

“Because you stopped me from barging in there?” Blue shook his head. “I admit, at first, I was angry at you. But if you had let me do that, Black would have killed her. You weren’t insensitive. You actually saved her life.”

Scarlet nodded quietly. Maybe he did save Symphony’s life, by acting like he did that time, but he did also want to catch Captain Black so badly... Now was not the moment to remind Blue of that, however.

“Did you actually break that hand?” the American asked, pointing to the said limb, which Scarlet was still rubbing.

“Eh?” Scarlet looked down at his hand. He shook his head. “Maybe bruised the knuckles and cracked some phalanges... But it seems okay right now.” He flexed his fingers in front of Blue’s eyes. “See? As good as new. The beauty of being indestructible is that I can recover from minor injuries almost instantly.”

“Right,” Blue said simply, not wanting to comment on the incident much further. He squeezed his friend’s shoulder in a reassuring gesture. “Will you be okay?”

“I keep wondering WHY Colonel White and those other Mysteron agents have taken her,” Scarlet answered sombrely, thinking of Rhapsody’s situation. “If they were to... Mysteronise her...”

“No,” Blue interrupted softly. “No, they would have killed her on the spot. You know how they work. There must be nothing more to it than what the colonel said to Ochre: she’s to be used as a hostage.”

“A hostage they’ll execute if we go after them,” Scarlet added, his throat tightening.

“That mustn’t stop us.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. We can’t let them carry out their threat anymore than we can leave her in their hands... We must find them, Blue. As soon as possible.”

“We will, buddy. Don’t worry. In the meantime, you’ve got to believe Rhapsody will be all right. Remember: she’s a tough girl and she can take care of herself.”

Scarlet nodded slowly. Before being recruited by Spectrum to become one of the pilots for the Angel fighters, Rhapsody, as Dianne Simms, had already proved herself as a security agent in one important flying company. And before that, she had been one of the most successful agents of the Federal Agents Bureau, a worldwide private investigation firm. There, she had received the

best training in the field. She had learned to survive, and take care of herself in the face of danger.

"You're right, Captain Blue," Scarlet said to his American counterpart. "I have to believe she will be all right... But if we had a clue to where she actually may be, it would make me feel a lot better."

"Then we're going to work on this, Captain," Blue replied. "We'll try to find out what these Mysterons are up to and where they've taken her."

"We better work fast, then," Scarlet said gloomily. "Time is always against us when it comes to the Mysterons."

"I know. But I'm confident we will find them. And then, your precious Angel will be safely back in your arms."

"I'll keep on praying for that. And pray too that her abductors don't hurt her..." A glitter of fiery anger suddenly appeared in Captain Scarlet's clear blue eyes. "Because I assure you, Adam, that when we find them, if they've done her any harm, there'd better be nobody between me and them... because I am not sure I would be able to control myself."

* * *

Rhapsody Angel couldn't remember ever being in a more frustrating situation.

Playing the part of a defenceless victim was new to her. She had always been in perfect control of every situation, be it in her personal life, in her career, or even at the helm of a fighter jet. Now she had absolutely no control... She was a prisoner, with no knowledge of what would happen to her.

As far as she knew, the Mysterons didn't burden themselves with prisoners. Not for too long, anyway, she grimly added to herself. And the few, rare, occasions that actually happened, they always had a precise purpose in mind.

What do they have in store for me? Rhapsody worriedly asked herself. Nothing good, assuredly. If she had any doubt about this, the young woman had only to think about Colonel White to be certain of it.

That was an alarming thought. Colonel White had become a Mysteron agent; cold, ruthless, totally devoted to his masters, and absolutely lethal to anyone who approached him. A shiver ran down Rhapsody's spine at the memory of him remorselessly shooting Captain Ochre and then standing over him, ready to finish him off. She could not explain to herself why he had actually left the Spectrum officer alive. It could not possibly have been her plea; that would have been totally out of character for a Mysteron.

She remembered quite vividly the awfully emotionless way he had looked into her eyes, as if he didn't even remember her, and the uneasy, uncomfortable emotions that cold look had stirred deep inside her. He had ordered the other men with him to abandon the place, leaving the now unconscious Ochre behind, but to take her with them. "*Don't harm her,*" he had told them, but his tone had no compassion in it. She was dragged into a small black van where all she could remember was that rag with an awful smell that was put over her face. *Chloroform*, she had realized just before losing her senses.

She had woken up inside that small dark room, with four walls made of concrete blocks, and a thick wooden door. No windows, only a small spyhole in the door, and that was the only opening that allowed light to come in from the other side. No furniture, but a low camp bed, with a blanket, where she had awakened. That was all.

Her hands had carefully been cuffed in front of her and her watch had been taken from her, so she had absolutely no idea how long she had slept. Could have been only minutes, or hours... no more than that, however. She didn't feel hungry enough for a longer time to have passed.

She didn't know if she was still in the vicinity of London, or even in England for that matter. Obviously, her abductors didn't want her to learn anything about this place. And she hadn't seen any of them since she had come to her senses. But she was sure they could not be far away. They would not dare leave her without any surveillance, whatever their plans might be for her.

Rhapsody was still evaluating her situation and contemplating the possibility of getting rid of the restraints when she heard heavy footsteps coming from the other side of the door. She raised her head and listened closely; when she then heard a key turning in the lock, she instinctively drew back to the far side of her cell.

The door opened inward and the outlines of a powerfully built man appeared in the entrance. "You finished your beauty sleep, doll?"

Oh, great! Rhapsody thought gloomily. *Just what I needed.* She unsuccessfully tried to blend into the shadows of the room, but the big man noticed her and stepped in.

"Don't try to hide. I can see you. Come out of there, I want a closer look..."

Really, really great, a woeful Rhapsody almost mumbled out loud. By the tone of his voice, she was pretty sure what that guy had in mind for her. And, somehow, that seemed strange to her...

"You're not a Mysteron," she stated, with a tone as quiet as it was cold.

"Who said I was?" the man replied with an evil grin. Leaving the door open, he took a few more steps inside the room, toward the young woman. "I'm just a normal, regular, earthly guy who just finds you very attractive."

No doubt about his intentions now... The Angel pilot, her coolness not leaving her, watched the approaching man with an icy and dangerous blaze in her blue eyes. "Don't come any closer," she warned him with a very sinister edge to her voice.

The man answered with a mocking laugh. "Now, is that a promise, sweetie? What can you do to me with those 'cuffs, anyway?"

That said, he came closer to the girl, who, with a more than determined look upon her features, was standing ready for him...

* * *

With his team of commandos, retired Admiral Charles Gray had come back to what was called the 'complex' only a few minutes ago. He was very satisfied with the job he had just accomplished, but was also so very tired, as only a man long deprived of hours of sleep could be. He was also ragingly frustrated by these missing memories of his, some of which he felt could be very important. Anyway, he figured, this condition he was presently in didn't seem to have impaired his capacity to do his work properly; he still was able to function quite well, apparently. Good thing. The cause was in too much need of every available person to let himself be deterred by such personal considerations. If he should not be able to regain his complete memory, so be it... That would not stop him performing his duty.

At least, I still have the memory of my beloved Elizabeth to help me get by, he recalled, with a satisfied grin.

He had taken off the admiral's uniform he had worn for the preceding operation and was now clad in the same black commando outfit he had been given when he had rejoined his men, this very morning. Now, after having taken the stairs down to the first sublevel of the complex, he was striding down the corridors toward the room that had been assigned to him, with the intention of getting a few hours' sleep. He heard a commotion coming from straight ahead. He stopped one second and pricked up his ears.

Up front, to his left, he could see a door open. Sounds of a fight were coming from there. *Oh, no!* he suddenly realized. *That's where the girl we took prisoner has been locked up! Could she be trying to make a break for it?*

Gray rushed to the door and stopped right in the doorway, ready for anything. The girl was still there. She had her back

against the wall facing the door, in a defensive position, and was staring down in anger at a man crumpled up at her feet. The guy was moaning in pain, holding both his groin and nose. Gray frowned in puzzlement at the curious sight.

"What happened here?" he thundered.

The sound of his voice startled the young woman; she looked up briefly to him, before pointing her restrained hands toward the man sprawled on the floor. "Ask this perverted pig!" she spat angrily.

Admiral Gray noticed the girl's dishevelled red hair, and her messed up clothes. Her shirt had been ripped, revealing a bare tanned shoulder. The scene was eloquent enough. A sinister glow appeared in his eyes as he stepped over the man still on the floor, trying to get his bearings.

"On your feet, Dempsey!" he growled in a low tone.

"The bitch," the man mumbled, nearly inaudible. "I think she broke my nose..."

Undoubtedly, Gray mused, seeing all the blood that was dripping from between the commando's fingers. He found the man too slow to obey his order, and took him by his clothes to force him to stand.

"I'll break far more than your nose, you miserable, dirty scum... On your feet, I said!"

Dempsey only had the time to straighten up before Gray violently hit him in the stomach, sending him to his knees. Gray then brutally hauled him up again and roughly shoved him against the concrete wall. The commando let out a moan of pain and stared in disbelief into the blue eyes of the furious man, before a fist hit him violently on the jaw.

"Up, you despicable coward! You're not facing a tied up girl half your size, now! I'll show you how to treat women! Defend yourself, by God, or I'll kill you where you stand!"

A bewildered Rhapsody stepped back at the sight of her commander's uncharacteristically violent outburst. She watched, almost in shock, as he kept pounding into the man who had attacked her. There seemed to be no way to stop him, she realized, totally confused by the situation. What was going on here? Why in God's name would a Mysteron agent suddenly turn raving mad over the fact that this man had tried to assault her? The way the colonel was hammering Dempsey, with such blind fury, he was not even behaving like the composed man she had come to know. There were times, she remembered, when he had lost his temper, and those times were quite memorable. But this... this was different. And frightening.

Dempsey had fallen to the floor; half stunned by the beating he was receiving, he was unable to defend himself against Colonel White's righteous anger. Rhapsody heard hurried footsteps coming from the passageway. Four men entered the cell, two of whom she had seen at Dooley's home. One look was enough for them to evaluate the situation. While one of them kept the Angel pilot in check, making sure she wouldn't take advantage of the situation to get away from them, the other three tried to interpose themselves between White and a nearly unconscious Dempsey.

"Sir! Stop this!" Through something akin to a haze, Charles Gray recognized the voice of Brighton, but kept on hitting blindly.

Completely frozen, Rhapsody watched as the three men were nearly not enough to restrain her commander and pull him away from his victim, whose face was now all covered with blood.

"Come on, now! Snap out of it, sir! He can't defend himself, now!"

"Let go of me!" Gray hissed, struggling against the arms trying to stop him. "That scum deserves everything he gets!"

"Calm yourself, you're going to kill him!"

Shelby then appeared at the doorway. He looked at the confused scene with perplexity and cold anger in his eyes. "What is the matter here?" he shouted suddenly.

"He's gone crazy!" Brighton tried to explain.

"I have not gone crazy!" Gray retorted. He stopped struggling and sighed. "Will you PLEASE let go of me?"

"Do as he says!" Shelby barked. "He's your commander! Are you forgetting that?"

Brighton and the other two men obeyed, with obvious unwillingness. Gray roughly shrugged them off; there was still some rage within him, but he was trying to keep it in check, and this with great difficulty. He pointed an accusing finger in the direction of the unconscious and wounded Dempsey. "I want that man confined to quarters!" he declared with fury.

"Whatever for?" Shelby asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Gray nodded toward Rhapsody who was standing quietly against the wall. "He tried to assault the girl... If she hadn't been able to fight him off..."

"SHE did this to him?" Shelby asked, creasing his brow in puzzlement.

"Only broke his nose... I did the rest!" Gray replied dryly. "He's lucky the others came by, I would have killed him!"

"Frankly sir," Shelby retorted, sighing, "I don't see why you should react that way over such a trivial thing..."

Gray stared in disbelief upon Shelby's quiet declaration. The realization that the man couldn't care less about the prisoner's welfare dawned on him. A quick glance around served to convince him, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the others shared his point of view... or worse yet, they were considering Dempsey's.

"Mister Brighton," Gray then said icily, his eyes focused on Shelby, "bring the prisoner to my private quarters, please."

"Sir?" Brighton asked with perplexity.

"You heard me."

Brighton cast a quick look toward Rhapsody. She seemed as puzzled as he was. "Sir, if I may say so, she's a real wild cat, and..."

"Wild cats I can manage," Gray replied coldly. "It's swine I can't stand. Do as I say."

Brighton hesitated a short instant. An almost imperceptible signal from Shelby finally decided him to obey. He took Rhapsody by the arm and guided her through the door. She followed without any resistance, still not quite sure of what was in store for her.

Charles Gray was still staring Jason Shelby straight in the eyes; he waited until the girl was safely out of earshot, before speaking his mind to the man who was supposed to be his right arm.

"Now, listen to me, Mister Shelby: what Dempsey just attempted is a crime. And in war, it's a crime of WAR, sometimes punishable by death. That girl may be from the other camp, but she's our prisoner, and prisoners of war are to be treated with respect. At least, that's how I intend it to be."

"Yes, I see your point," Shelby coldly said. "That was your point of view when you executed Jackson Bennett, was it?"

Gray flinched at the ironic remark. He did not let it deter him. "That's a crime that will haunt me for the rest of my days," he muttered. "I'll thank you not to mention it in front of anybody, least of all in front of my men!"

"Of course, sir... I'm sorry I DID mention it."

"And it will be the ONLY crime on my conscience, Mister Shelby. I'm quite determined there will not be another one. We're not common thugs. We're soldiers. And I will not tolerate any of my men behaving the way that swine over there did! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Admiral," Shelby declared, still very calm.

"Dempsey will have to answer for his actions, be sure of that. He will have to be punished." Shelby did not reply. Gray looked

around and stared at the three remaining men in the cell, with the same contemptuous expression in his eyes as the one he had cast down at Dempsey. "And so the rest of you don't get the same idea as your friend here, the girl will stay in my quarters, safely away from you... If anyone tries anything against her there, I will shoot him down like the dog he is."

That said, he addressed a last look at Shelby and strode toward the door.

The Mysteron agent coldly followed him with his eyes.

"You look bad, Admiral... Did you take your medication?"

Gray stopped in the doorway. *Those damned pills*, he thought... Shortly after he had been freed from that nightmarish device the enemy had strapped him to, Shelby had given them to him. One of the disastrous side effects of the experiment he had just been put through was for him to totally lose his self-control from time to time. Adrenaline mounted dangerously high, and he let his temper get the better of him, having then tremendous difficulty regaining control. The pills, he had found, helped him keep his anger, his nerves, his emotions in check.

Not always, though.

"I... think I can manage without it for now, Mister Shelby," Gray said, without turning around. "I will be all right. Just make sure nothing like what just occurred happens again."

"Be assured it will be the case, Admiral," Shelby said quietly, "And I'll make sure that Dempsey receives his punishment..."

The retired admiral nodded his acknowledgement and disappeared through the door. His steps faded away in the corridor.

"The old goat's going to keep the girl all for himself," one of the men mumbled under his breath.

"Quiet." There was annoyance in Shelby's tone as he spoke up. "All of you, out. Leave me alone with that idiot."

The three men didn't dare reply and swiftly went out. Shelby closed the door behind them, quietly, and then turned his attention to Dempsey. The latter was slowly regaining his senses and, moaning in pain, was attempting to raise himself from the floor. The Mysteron walked to him and stood over him, casting an icy stare at him.

"You fool," he said with a sinister edge in his voice. "You bloody fool... You had to do this, didn't you? Aren't you *Earthmen* able to keep your lusts in check?" With his foot, he pushed the kneeling man back on the floor, where he sprawled again. "When we sent Colonel White to Dooley's house today, we knew that

Spectrum would have dispatched some of its own to try to find him. We had to know how he would react facing them. In any case, he passed the test, but he remains quite difficult to control... Or didn't you notice?"

"Mister Shelby..." the man tried to defend himself.

"...He is confused enough as it is," Shelby continued, without hearing him out. "His violent mood changes make him unpredictable enough, without having the likes of you adding complications. We did not need for you to pull the kind of stunt you did! What just happened, and any conversation he might have with the Spectrum woman could render the treatment your doctor gave him totally ineffective. It could make us lose any further control over him. We'll have to be even more careful, now! Because YOU, *Earthman*, lost control over yourself!"

"It was a mistake, sir..." Dempsey pleaded. "It won't happen again."

"No, it certainly won't." Shelby took his pistol and implacably aimed it at a distraught Dempsey. "For you know, Mister Dempsey, Mysterons don't make mistakes. So you won't do that anymore."

That said, he coldly pulled the trigger on the defenceless and surprised man, who didn't even have time to call for help.

Chapter 6

The man called Brighton had brought Rhapsody to a room almost smaller than the cell she had just left. The walls were made from the same blocks of concrete, and also had no windows. It had, however, sufficient light and some furniture; a camp bed, with an uncomfortable-looking mattress on it, and some blankets, a small wooden table, with two stools, and a cabinet. There was something of a Spartan feel in this room, Rhapsody mused, and somehow, it fitted perfectly what she would have expected the quarters of a Mysteron field commander to look like during an undercover mission.

Brighton made the young woman sit on one of the stools and then stood guard over her; she looked up at his face; to her amazement, he grinned at her. But it was rather an evil smile.

"Looks like the old man's got the hots for you, doesn't it, sweetheart?" His fingers grazed her hair and cheek, but she drew back, an expression of disgust on her face. She managed to look no more than puzzled when she sternly stared at him.

"You are not a Mysteron either, are you?" she said with the driest tone.

"Now, aren't we clever..." Brighton whistled. "What makes you say that?"

"Your friend Dempsey made it pretty clear... in words as well as in actions. I don't think Mysteron-controlled agents have any lubricious interests whatsoever."

"That's quite a theory you've got there, little lady."

"Who are you anyway... Mister Brighton?"

"You know our names... which is already too much." Brighton bent down next to Rhapsody's head, so he could whisper sinisterly in her ear, "You shouldn't ask questions like that, you know? That could be fatal..."

"Mister Brighton."

The stern, very recognizable voice coming from behind made Brighton jump; he spun around and Rhapsody looked over her shoulder. Colonel White was standing in the doorway, staring severely at the man.

"Don't you have something else to do instead of trying to scare that young woman?"

"Well, sir, I..." Brighton stammered. It was pretty obvious from Rhapsody's viewpoint that the commando was afraid – deadly afraid – of the man who was supposed to be his commander. It took him some few seconds to regain his composure; he uneasily cleared his throat. "Mister Shelby has informed me that there still is the rest of the equipment to load onto the lorry, sir."

"Then get on with it," White harshly retorted.

"Yes, sir."

The older man pointed to the exit with his thumb. "Get out. Now."

Brighton disappeared quickly and Charles Gray slammed the door behind him. Now alone with Rhapsody, he stared at her in silent curiosity. Under the intensity of his gaze, the young woman suddenly felt uneasy and averted her eyes. Gray almost sighed. *What am I going to do with her?* he thought, rubbing his chin. He was concerned to protect her from the likes of the others, but he was also aware she was an enemy, with whom he must be very careful. She had already proved she was resourceful enough by breaking Dempsey's nose. He wondered what might have happened next, if he hadn't come by at that exact moment.

He came closer to Rhapsody, who didn't move from her chair. She somehow even found the strength not to shiver as he approached her. "You'll have to excuse Mister Brighton," he said, after clearing his throat. "I hope he didn't frighten you too much."

"There are things far more frightening than the ramblings of a jerk," Rhapsody replied dully.

Gray was now standing next to the young woman, who didn't even look up at him. He figured she was referring to Dempsey's attempted assault, and nodded thoughtfully. "Dempsey's actions against you were inexcusable," he replied. "Let me assure you, he will be dealt with accordingly."

She looked at him with surprise and defiance in her eyes; was that a touch of sympathy she heard in his voice?

"Why would YOU care that he tried to rape me?" she asked dryly.

He seemed surprised at her question. "Perhaps because I like to think of myself as a decent man," he said. He saw by her look that she didn't believe him. He shrugged negligently. "How did you manage to break his nose, anyway?" By his standards, it seemed unthinkable that so apparently delicate a girl should be able to accomplish such a feat.

"He wanted to know what I could do with these handcuffs."

There was an ominous tone to the young woman's voice. The answer amused Gray, although he did his best not to show it. He took a key out of his vest pocket and crouched in front of her.

"Then perhaps it would be best if I remove them," he noted. "Can I trust you not to take advantage of that?"

"Do you REALLY think I can make you a promise like that?"

"That's fair enough. But let there be no mistake: if you ever try on me the same trick you used with Mister Dempsey, I will not hesitate to break one of your arms." There was a warning flash in the colonel's blue eyes; it wasn't a bluff at all. "Am I making myself clear?"

Rhapsody nodded, swallowing hard under the threat. White unlocked the shackles and, standing up, threw them onto the wooden table. The young woman rubbed her freed wrists, looking at the 'Mysteron' who had been her commander.

"Your Mister Dempsey deserved everything he got," she then said under her breath.

"I would agree," Charles Gray replied. "The man is despicable."

He kept staring at her and saw how confused she seemed. Confused and afraid, although she was desperately trying to appear courageous. He also noticed how she was shivering. *It IS damp in here*, he had to admit himself. And that shirt of hers had been ripped by that swine Dempsey... He removed his vest and, standing in front of her with only a khaki T-shirt on his upper body, he handed the vest to her. "Here, you're cold. Take this."

She was still staring at him with that same confused puzzlement in her clear blue eyes. Grumbling with impatience, Gray put the vest over her shoulders. Through the rip in her shirt, he then noticed the delicate chain necklace she was wearing round her neck, and the two bright objects hanging from it. There was a small, discreet, gold pendant, with a design of a pair of wings and halo engraved on it. The other object somehow attracted more of Gray's attention: it was a gold ring, surmounted by a beautiful red ruby, itself surrounded by small, shining diamonds.

"Nice-looking piece of jewellery," he noted, matter-of-factly.

Rhapsody looked down to see the two objects in full view and hid them again, trying not to look too inconspicuous, by drawing the vest around her. A curious Colonel White was still staring at her.

"Wouldn't that ring look better on your finger?" he asked her.

"Not too practical in my line of work," she retorted, lowering her gaze.

That was true, of course, but that wasn't the real reason she kept the ring on a chain. It was the engagement ring given to her by Paul, some months ago. They didn't want anybody to know yet that they were engaged, so, in order for it to stay secret, she had to hide the ring, no matter how badly she wanted to show it to the rest of the world.

"Maybe you were right to keep the ring there," Gray said, nodding, turning to the cabinet. "Some of my men have already demonstrated they aren't very scrupulous. Seeing that ring would probably have put ideas into their heads."

"Your men," Rhapsody sighed, shaking her head. "They all seem to be a sorry bunch." The thought that the Mysterons were using human mercenaries as agents was a puzzling and creepy one. It was also something of an innovation. She darted a curious look at White's back. "And how did you end up with people like them?"

He shrugged again. "I admit I've had far more refined men under my command," he replied, opening the cabinet.

Rhapsody scoffed dryly, hearing that. "They're a far cry from Cloudbase senior staff," she mumbled.

Gray pricked up his ears, but didn't catch her words. From the cabinet, he took a bottle and two glasses.

"You'll have to speak louder, young lady," he said before turning around. He came back to the table where he put down the glasses and began filling them from the bottle. He scratched his left ear. "I... had a small accident recently and one of my eardrums seems to have been damaged. I'm not hearing very well with that ear right now."

Rhapsody stared at him, trying to absorb what he had just said. A Mysteron reconstruct with a hearing problem? Now that was odd. In fact, it seemed even impossible. Retrometabolism, inherent in all Mysteron agents, would have healed that in no time. And if it were present before a victim had been Mysteronised, the problem would have been instantly corrected in the reconstructed clone.

That was one of the rare flaws in the otherwise perfect creation of Mysteron agents, who were to be exact copies of their originals: they were TOO perfect.

Rhapsody didn't exactly know what to make of what she had just learned... and IF that had anything at all to do with what was presently known about the Mysterons.

Colonel White presented her with one of the glasses, filled with some alcoholic beverage. "Drink that," he told her. "It will make you feel better."

"No, thanks," the young woman responded, shaking her head.

He frowned deeply and slammed the glass down on the table in front of her. The sound startled her. "DRINK this NOW!" he ordered, stressing each word.

Having just seen what he did to that man in her cell, because he had lost his temper, she did not dare disobey and took the glass. She drank the contents in one big gulp. The strong, stiff brandy burned her throat, and brought tears to her eyes. She gagged two or three times, as White looked on, obviously very satisfied.

"Apparently, you don't have the habit of strong drink," he remarked.

"Lost the habit," Rhapsody replied, gasping for air. "I'm not allowed to..."

"Medical reasons?" There was some concern in the colonel's voice. Rhapsody stared at him curiously. *What an odd question. She should know the reason...*

"Drinking on duty is a most serious offence," she replied, narrowing her eyes at White as she used one of his own favourite expressions.

The colonel nodded thoughtfully, but did not reply. He kept staring at the young woman, who was growing more and more uneasy. *This is creepy*, she thought, bowing her head. A few minutes ago, he was tearing into that man like a wild animal. Now he was behaving like a gentleman – sort of – by handing her his own vest so she could cover herself and by offering her a comforting drink – even if he had forced her to take it. What was he up to? Rhapsody couldn't take any more of this.

"Why did you take me with you?" she suddenly asked him. "What do you want from me?"

White seemed somehow perplexed by her outburst. He shook his head, and poured some more brandy into the two glasses on the table. "Don't worry," he quietly told her. "While I find you very attractive, I'm not interested in the same thing as that pig Dempsey."

"That much I suspected," she replied in a very cold tone. "So what is it you want?"

He took a sip from his own glass.

"Information," he said, pushing her glass in front of her.

She eyed the brandy, then ignored it, turning her eyes away. "I don't see what I can tell you that you wouldn't know already," she scoffed.

"I can think of a few things," Gray retorted icily, wondering about that odd reply. "For starters... what were you and your companion doing at the house of Greg Dooley?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Rhapsody replied. "We were looking for our missing commander."

Gray took another sip. "Did you find him?"

She turned to him, with a fierce look. What was this game of sarcasm about? "Yes and no," she replied, almost whispering. "You killed him, you miserable..."

"I killed him?" Admiral Gray raised an eyebrow. Whoever it was she thought he might have killed, he had no idea. Maybe it was part of his missing memories. But he was not about to let her know that. "Is that why your friend killed Greg Dooley?"

"He was a *Mysteron*," the girl answered flatly. "He tried to kill us. We only defended ourselves."

"Really, now?" Gray asked, his voice still very cold. *Mysteron*... He had heard that word before, that day, when he went to the Naval Depot. Ever since that moment, he had wondered about that word, but didn't ask any of his men – not even Shelby – what it meant. And he didn't know why he was feeling so unsettled about it... why it felt so familiar to him.

As familiar as that other word he also heard today.

Spectrum...

Charles Gray reached into one of the numerous pockets of his trousers and drew out two folded cardholders. He threw them on the table in front of Rhapsody. She instantly recognized *Spectrum* identity wallets. Probably hers and Captain Ochre's. Opening one and seeing the picture of the American officer told her she was right.

"What does *Spectrum* know about our plans?" Gray asked her roughly.

The young woman's eyes glared with a fiery glow. "Enough to stop you," she answered with utmost assurance.

Gray looked at her squarely in the eyes. "You're lying," he observed after a moment.

"What makes you say that?" Rhapsody retorted. "*Spectrum* has always stopped your kind before. Now won't be any different... Especially since YOU'RE involved. Now it's personal."

"Is that so?" Gray noted quietly. "Why? Because you wish to avenge your commander's death?"

"Do I have to answer that question?"

"Don't play games with me," Gray growled, frowning deeply. "I'm not in the mood for this! And what patience I may have left is quickly fading away!"

"I don't have any illusions about what's going to happen to me, anyway," Rhapsody replied. "Mysterons usually don't take prisoners. They make victims."

"Why would you call me..."

At that exact moment, a knock on the door interrupted Gray right in the middle of his sentence. Obviously annoyed, and keeping his eyes on the girl, he strode to the door and opened it wide. Brighton was on the other side; he saluted his field commander sharply.

"Excuse me, sir. Mister Shelby has sent me to inform you... The equipment has been loaded into the lorry. We're just waiting for the word to go."

Rhapsody pricked up her ears. *Equipment?* she mused with curiosity. Maybe she could get some more information about the Mysteron threat that was hanging over their heads... which was obviously the reason why the Spectrum commander had been Mysteronised.

But how she would be able to pass that information to Spectrum was another matter...

Gray glanced over his shoulder toward the young woman. He was aware that she could hear every word. *Better be careful how I phrase my answer here, if I don't want to give away vital information*, he mused.

"Tell Mister Shelby to go ahead with the equipment, Mister Brighton. Leave a couple of men on guard with me with a vehicle. We'll join you shortly."

"You're not coming with us, Admiral?"

Rhapsody gave the two men a puzzled look. Admiral? Why on Earth would that man call Colonel White 'Admiral'?

"No. I'm not finished here, yet..."

The colonel let the rest of the answer hang in the air. He's talking about me, Rhapsody realized, not really reassured about her safety. And obviously, Brighton had understood the same, by the way he was looking over her.

"I see, sir... When should I tell Mister Shelby you'll be back?"

"I don't know exactly when, it will depend. Tomorrow morning, at the latest. But be sure I'll be there in time for the operation."

"But, sir... Mister Shelby won't like it if we leave you..."

"I don't CARE if Mister Shelby likes it or not," came the harsh response. "Those are my orders, Mister Brighton. I don't like it when people question my orders."

Brighton looked at the stern face staring straight at him. He didn't like what he saw in those sharp blue eyes. He had been told not to push Colonel White and to be careful not to say anything that might contradict him and raise his temper. One false move could even prove fatal. Brighton just had to think about his friend Dempsey, and what that man had done to him to remind himself how dangerous he could be.

"All right then, sir," Brighton said, trying to render his voice as steady as he could. "We'll see you tomorrow at the ship, then."

Charles Gray gave Brighton a murderous look. *The fool, mentioning the ship...* It was too late now to repair the mistake. "Yes, Mister Brighton. You'll see me tomorrow."

Brighton nodded and went his way. Gray closed the door behind him and turned to Rhapsody. The girl was staring quizzically at him. There was no doubt she had heard Brighton's statement about the ship and that she was now wondering what it was all about. Gray had no intention of giving her the opportunity to learn more about it.

Lord, that imbecile has made my job even less easy... What am I going to do with her, now?

He cleared his throat, coming back to the girl. "Now, shall we continue our little conversation?" he said matter-of-factly.

"Why did that man call you 'Admiral'?" Rhapsody asked carefully.

He shook his silver head, standing over her. "It's me who asks the questions," he replied dryly. "Not the other way around."

"Then allow me to ask just one."

Gray sighed. "Make it quick, then."

"When you're finished with your interrogation... What are you going to do with me?"

The faintest of smile crossed upon Gray's face. "You are concerned about your safety. Good. Maybe we can progress from there."

"You didn't answer my question," the girl noted.

"What should I tell you that would make you give me the information I want?"

A shiver crawled down Rhapsody's spine. Seeing how uncomfortable she suddenly seemed, Gray shook his head again. "Just be cooperative. Everything will be fine, then." The tone was somehow softer, resembling that of the man Rhapsody knew. She wasn't sure if it was a comforting or an alarming indication.

"And if I'm not cooperative enough?" she asked again.

"That's another question, young lady," Gray told her.

"You're going to kill me, no matter what," she replied, trying to keep her voice even.

"Now, you shouldn't trouble yourself with such ugly thoughts." Gray sighed, somehow uncomfortable. He looked down at the young woman and she dared not look away, as she was trying to decipher what could be going on in his mind. She had never been able to read Colonel White's feelings by looking at his face. Now was no different.

And then, unexpectedly, he reached out his hand and lightly stroked her cheek. The gesture surprised her so much that she froze and didn't react to it.

"You're very beautiful," she heard him say softly. "Strange. I never realized how much you look like..."

Gray stopped. *Why did I have to say that?* he thought, confused. Something was missing in his mind. He could not think what it could be, but it was troubling him deeply.

"Damn," he mumbled in frustration.

He turned away from Rhapsody and went to the cabinet, followed by the mystified gaze of the girl. *What was that all about?* she wondered. *And why does he seem so lost, right now?*

Gray was removing his gun, along with his belt, to put them on the upper shelf of the cabinet. He was still trying to reach the fleeting memories and feelings hidden deep inside his mind. He wanted so much to know why he had said what he had just said to that girl...

So hard he tried to remember, that it suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks. Not a specific memory, but a succession of many of them, coming so violently to him, all at once, that it made him stagger and sent him sprawling against the shelves of the open cabinet, his head hurting like crazy. Massive images were flashing inside his mind, threatening to overwhelm him. Rapidly, like a breaking, brutal wave, they followed one after the other, relentlessly.

A large room with blinding light... The echo of a man's muffled screams. HIS screams. HIS vain attempts as he struggled against leather straps restraining him to a padded table. Deafening sound in his ears, with voices he could not make out... The pain, awful pain submerging his whole body and mind.

And then, those recent memories were replaced, by others, far older...

An explosion, high in the sky, above the seas... A young man on the bridge of a ship, a look of horror on his face.

The same young man with now an expression of hate, and a smoking gun in his hand...

Another man falling to the ground, a bullet wound in his chest...

Rhapsody had witnessed the sudden apparent dizziness that had struck Colonel White and had risen to her feet, puzzled. She then saw him turning quickly around to face her, keeping himself steady against the cabinet.

"Stay where you are!" he shouted at her.

She froze; his face was awfully pale and sweaty, and was wearing an unaccustomed expression of troubled distress.

Looking at the young woman, Charles Gray suddenly had another vision in his mind, far different from those of death and destruction he was having. It was the soothing image of a stunningly beautiful raven-haired woman, with bright eyes, as blue as the sea, who was smiling at him...

Elizabeth...

And then the image of his dearly beloved wife was replaced by that of the red-haired girl.

"Who are you?" he asked her with a croak in his voice.

She frowned with perplexity. "Excuse me?"

Gray couldn't answer. Another flash had broken into his mind. It was fairly recent, of that he was certain, but it was still confusing him.

It was him, wearing civilian clothing, talking into a phone receiver, in his friend Gregory Dooley's lounge. He was having a casual conversation with his correspondent. "Yes, I have a visit to make before seeing you," he was saying. "I'll pick you up at six thirty, for the restaurant... We'll have plenty of time to eat before the show."

"Don't be late, now. You know I'm looking forward to this meeting," a female voice responded to him.

"I'm looking forward to it too," Gray answered. "I'll do my best not to disappoint you. I realize my reputation is at risk here."

"Your reputation has nothing to fear. I'm not too worried about it. You've always been a consummate gentleman."

That VOICE, on the phone... It was HER voice.

Trying to regain his composure, Charles Gray took a couple of uneasy steps toward Rhapsody. "It was YOU..." he muttered under his breath.

"What are you talking about?" The young woman didn't like the ominous glow in White's eyes and the threatening way he was

walking toward her. The thought of the way he had torn into that man in the cell came to her mind. She took a step back, suddenly afraid for herself.

"I... had a date with you," Gray continued in a stern voice. "I remember that... When was that?"

Rhapsody hesitated and took too long to answer for his taste.

"When WAS that?!" he barked furiously.

"Yesterday evening..." Rhapsody instinctively responded. She moved to get away, but was too slow. He sprang toward her, with a speed she would not have suspected in him. Stepping back, she bumped into the table and almost sprawled on it. He was only a few inches from her, looking down into her face with a furious, almost murderous fire in his eyes. That frightened her more than she would have freely admitted.

"Then you are responsible!" he shouted angrily.

"Responsible for what?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"You served as bait so the enemy could capture me!" Gray accused her.

"W-what?" a confused Rhapsody replied, not knowing what he was implying. "You never showed up, I..."

"It's because of you I found myself strapped to that hellish contraption!"

"What in Heaven's name are you talking about?"

"How much did you get for that dirty job, woman?"

"You're not making any sense... I don't know what you're..."

"Don't lie to me!" Gray bellowed.

"I'm not!" Rhapsody shouted back. "You're raving like a lunatic!"

He slapped her so violently that he knocked her across the table. The gesture stunned him almost as much as her. Eyes wide open with horror and confusion at what he had just done, he looked down at the girl, slumped on the wooden table, groaning in pain, and trying to regain her composure.

His anger dropped instantly. "Lord, what have I done?" he whispered in despair, first looking down at his hand, then at Rhapsody. His memory might be bad, but he was sure he had never hit a woman before... and he could not explain to himself how on Earth he could have sunk to such depths right now.

That damned thing they've put me through... That's making me do things I would never, ever dare do in my normal state.

Confused, he leaned over Rhapsody, who had her back half-turned to him, and was only beginning to slightly raise herself from where she had fallen.

"I'm... so sorry, young lady. I don't know what came over me..."

He put his hand on her shoulder, with every intention of helping her up. And then things happened very quickly.

Rhapsody's right hand, hidden from view, had gotten hold of the neck of the bottle on the table. With one swift move, she whirled around and brutally slammed the bottle against Colonel White's head. The glass smashed, sending brandy spraying all over the room. White winced under the blow and let out a cry of pain, as he fell to the floor.

Breathing hard, Rhapsody stared down as the man made a supreme effort to gather his strength and stand up. *Why won't he stay down? Lord, don't let him stand up!*

He fell back on the floor, with a loud groan, and laid there motionless, on his back, arms outflung.

For a moment, Rhapsody did not dare move. When she realized he was indeed unconscious, she blew out a sigh of relief. She then looked toward the door, hoping that nobody, hearing all that ruckus in here, would come to investigate.

Nobody did.

The men who were to remain behind with Colonel White must not be nearby, she mused.

She got off the table and cautiously approached the man lying on the floor. Not a move from him.

"Right," she said to herself. "I hit him pretty hard."

She crouched beside him and looked at his face. He had some deep, bleeding cuts on the left side of his head, where she had hit him with the bottle. A wave of sadness came upon the young woman as she thought of her commander, who had to be killed to create this clone.

Carefully, she searched the pockets of his trousers, hoping to find something that would help her get out of this mess she was in. *He had my Spectrum identity card; maybe he also has my personal communicator on him...*

She examined the contents of his pockets, which she put next to her on the floor. A small bottle of headache pills... A set of keys...

A cardholder containing one card... an old I.D. issued to Admiral Charles Gray, World Navy... How strange that he should have that on him. Recalling how that man Brighton had called him 'Admiral' earlier on, the young woman thought it might be related to the present Mysteron threat.

No communicators, aside from his own. Using it would be a terrible mistake, Rhapsody noted. The enemy would automatically hear the message and rush to their commander's assistance.

And then she found something that brought her hope and relief.

A Spectrum Personal Tracker. And with the white button protruding from the middle of it, it was obvious whose it was...

Colonel White's.

She stared again at the still unconscious 'Mysteron's' face, wondering why he had kept that on him. Was he planning to use it in some way, in the course of the mission his masters had bestowed upon him?

Something suddenly caught her eye. Something that made her heart skip a beat.

On the man's left forearm, just there in front of her eyes, there were red marks. Many of them, which looked like puncture wounds, like something inflicted by a number of bees... But she realized instantly those were not bee stings...

...but needle marks.

"Oh, my Lord!" Understanding dawned on Rhapsody Angel as she stared in disbelief and horror at the marks, before turning her eyes to Colonel White's face. "Oh, God, no..." With concern, she quickly checked the pulse in his neck, then his breathing. He was alive, no doubt about that, but there was no telling how long he would stay unconscious.

"You're no more a Mysteron than those others," Rhapsody murmured, shaking her head, with some relief. "You were not Mysteronised... You have been drugged... Dear Lord in Heaven, they didn't kill you..." With care, she took a look at the severity of his head wound; some cuts were deep enough, but there didn't seem to be any serious damage... and no signs of it starting to heal. From her experiences with Captain Scarlet, she knew how rapidly his superficial wounds healed. She sighed, filled with remorse to have hit him the way she did. "But I nearly DID kill you," she mumbled. "What in God's name have they done to you, for you to act like that? It must have been terrible..."

She suddenly remembered the bottle of pills. Why hadn't she realized sooner that Mysterons DIDN'T need headache pills? She quickly took the bottle and opened it to examine the contents.

They didn't look like headache pills... not like any that she knew about. No markings on the plastic bottle, nor on the pills... What was the medicine for, and why did Colonel White need it?

The Angel pilot stared again at the unconscious man. She wondered how he would react when he woke up. Badly, undoubtedly, if she was to take into account the state he was in before she knocked him out. Whatever was done to him seemed to have affected his natural behaviour. The brutal violence he had demonstrated until now was quite disturbing. And yet... she saw enough of the Colonel White she had come to know over the past few years to believe he was not completely gone.

The handcuffs were on the floor, knocked from the table when she had sprawled on it, some minutes ago. She didn't like the idea, but she was aware she had to restrain Colonel White before he could regain his senses. She took the cuffs and then looked down at the Personal Tracker in her hand, before looking again at her still unconscious commander.

"Don't worry, sir," she told him in a soothing voice. "Everything will be all right soon. Spectrum will get you out of this mess."

She determinedly pressed down the white button on the SPT, hoping that personnel at all Spectrum communication centres had their eyes peeled on their instruments...

* * *

At Spectrum Headquarters London, Captains Scarlet and Blue had seen that Captain Ochre was sent to Cloudbase, using a medical helicopter, while they themselves stayed behind to check on different possible leads to the whereabouts of Colonel White and his gang of Mysteron commandos.

The search of Dooley's house and garden didn't turn out as conclusive as they had hoped. Colonel White's body wasn't found there, as they had expected. So they ordered the search to be widened to any incident that may have occurred in London – or in the surrounding area – that the Mysterons could have taken advantage of. Road accidents, muggings, even falls into the Thames – if any – were to be considered.

Curiously, a body WAS found in the Thames, but it wasn't Colonel White's. It was that of a British Navy officer, killed by a shot through the head. While it didn't concern White directly, Blue considered it worthy of some more research and assigned Captain Grey, on Cloudbase, to it. Meanwhile, he and Scarlet concentrated on the few findings the investigation around Dooley's house had brought up.

"According to Ochre's last report," Blue said, consulting a long sheet of paper that had come out of the communication printer in the control room, "Colonel White left St. James' Church graveyard at approximately five forty-five... It would have taken him less than fifteen minutes to get back to Dooley's house..."

"If he ever made it there," Scarlet dully noted. He was signing a report that a young female lieutenant had brought to him a few minutes ago. She was waiting for it nearby, out of earshot; he beckoned to her after closing the folder, gave it back to her and turned back to Blue as she went away. "That was the autopsy report on Greg Dooley's body. He died of a broken neck, following

a violent blow to the back of the head. Death was instantaneous. He didn't suffer."

"Small consolation," Blue mumbled.

"Who could be so cruel and cowardly to kill a defenceless pensioner?" Scarlet said gloomily.

"A Mysteron agent?" Blue stated. As his partner stared at him, he showed him the long sheet he was still holding. "Here. The neighbours have been interrogated. There was a strange guy lurking around Dooley's place yesterday. We have a corroborative description: tall, white male in his late thirties, dressed in black, with dark hair, dark eyes, a bad shave and a pale complexion... Remind you of someone?"

"Captain Black," Scarlet whistled between his teeth. He shook his head. "I can't believe he's the one who trapped the colonel," he murmured. "They were good friends..."

"He was your friend too," Blue noted dryly. He put the paper down on a console behind him. "That doesn't stop him attacking you."

"Did the neighbours see anything else?" Scarlet asked. "Did any of them notice anything concerning Ochre's shooting and Rhapsody's abduction?"

"A small black van was seen parked in front of Dooley's house... Not long after they heard shooting, some neighbours saw a group of men, dressed as commandos, rushing out of the house and entering the van. It drove away at speed, but nobody had the time to see the licence plate."

"No mention of Rhapsody being with them?"

There was an undertone of pain in Scarlet's voice. Blue slowly shook his head. "No. But surely, she was with them... Maybe surrounded by them, and so no-one saw her."

Scarlet's expression became morose; Blue was about to offer him some comforting words, when his attention was drawn to a tall man, dressed in civilian clothing and sporting a Spectrum security card on the outside of his vest pocket, who had just entered the control room. The American captain tapped his partner's shoulder to draw his attention to the newcomer. "Bandit at eight o'clock," he muttered under his breath.

Scarlet looked in the direction given by his friend and saw the man, coming straight at them. He muttered something Blue couldn't make out. The man stopped in front of them.

"Agent Conners, how nice to see you," Scarlet welcomed him with a half-mocking, half-serious tone.

"Captain Scarlet, Captain Blue..." the man answered. "I've come straight from the infirmary. Why was Captain Ochre sent to Cloudbase so soon?"

"He's gone already?" Blue asked, feigning surprise.

"About an hour ago, I was told... You gave the order, Captain Blue."

"Oh... I thought he wouldn't leave 'til the morning. Well... my mistake. Guess the medical helicopter service is quicker than I imagined."

Agent Conners, of Spectrum Intelligence, scowled at the remark. He turned to Scarlet.

"Why was Ochre sent to Cloudbase, Captain?" he asked again. "I wanted to talk to him about what happened at Quartermaster Dooley's house..."

"We didn't know you were planning on seeing him," Scarlet lied, with deadpan aplomb. "Besides, he would have been unable to answer your questions..."

"Last time we looked," Blue added quickly, "his doctor had given him a sedative. He must have been asleep when he was taken to the 'copter."

"You talked to him, earlier," Conners noted. "What did he tell you?"

Scarlet shrugged. "You read our reports?"

"Yes..."

"Then you have all the answers you need. We'll make sure a copy of Captain Ochre's report is sent to you... That is, when he feels well enough to write it down."

"He was hurt so badly?"

"Lost a lot of blood. That took a lot out of him."

Conners narrowed his eyes at Captain Scarlet. It was obvious there was no love lost between them. When the British officer had revived, two years ago, from his initial encounter with the Mysterons – in which they took control of his body and mind – Conners was in the Spectrum Intelligence team that had been assigned to investigate the case and interrogate him, under the direct orders of Senior Agent Thomas Wade, who was in charge of the investigation. The team had to make sure that Scarlet truly was who he claimed to be – the real Captain Scarlet, Paul Metcalfe – and that he was now really free from the Mysterons' influence. While Agent Wade proved civil enough toward Scarlet, it wasn't exactly the case with Conners. Although Scarlet had passed the interrogation and subsequent tests with flying colours, thus proving his claims, he couldn't forget how the man from Spectrum Intelligence had been so ruthless toward him, using all the tricks permitted by the book to try to demonstrate he wasn't on the level. Scarlet didn't especially appreciate being pumped full of truth serum, during Conners' last session of interrogation. Since it was discovered during the course of the experiment that Captain Scarlet's new Mysteronised body had a very strong resistance to

drugs, Conners had insisted that Doctor Fawn gave him more and more of the serum, bringing the patient well beyond human capacity to survive it without any after-effects. Sure, Scarlet had agreed that the serum be used on him, as did Doctor Fawn, Colonel White and even Agent Wade... But none of them had imagined that Conners would be so obsessed with proving Scarlet was concealing something from them, to the point of endangering his health.

"You don't like me much, do you, Captain Scarlet?"

Scarlet sighed. "Agent Conners, I'm crushed," he said quietly. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"What happened between us two years ago was necessary, you know?"

"You nearly killed him," Blue replied dryly.

"Come on, Captain Blue!" Conners snorted. "You know as well as I do that Captain Scarlet would not have died from that drug."

"Yes, NOW we know, but at the time, we didn't," Blue retorted. "And that's just the point... Or hasn't your superior, Senior Agent Wade, pointed that out to you?"

Conners cleared his throat, unsettled. "Well, in any case, that experiment served to prove Scarlet was on the level," he said with a faint smile. "My report afterwards was quite clear on that fact."

"You mean Wade's report," Scarlet told him pointedly. "But thanks for the vote of confidence anyway, Mister Conners."

Scarlet turned his back on him and was about to leave with Captain Blue when Conners called him back: "That incident at Mister Dooley's house... does it have anything to do with Colonel White?"

Scarlet stopped in his tracks, as did Blue. The two of them turned to face Conners.

"And what makes you say that?" the British captain asked sharply.

"I checked on Mister Dooley. He was on the *Sir Francis Drake*, twenty-five years ago, under the command of a certain Captain Charles Gray... who later became Admiral Charles Gray... And you and I both know who Charles Gray is."

"Oh, you think you know, do you?" Scarlet replied in a rather cold tone. "Where did you get this information, Agent Conners? Real identities of colour-coded officers are Rainbow Priority One information."

"Captain..."

"To my knowledge, there aren't many in your section who have access to those files. Senior Agent Wade, for example..."

"Captain, I've got Rainbow Priority One clearance too."

"Then we're in trouble," Blue mumbled under his breath.

"I HEARD that, Captain Blue," Conners replied.

"I MEANT for you to hear it, Agent Conners."

"Is your superior aware of your presence here, Mister Conners?" Scarlet asked.

"Yeah, does he know you're bugging us with trivialities?" Blue added. "We don't have time for this, we're on red alert."

"You're not very cooperative, Captains... Of course Agent Wade knows about my investigation. He assigned me to it, in fact."

"What exactly is your question, Mister Conners?" Scarlet sighed heavily.

"Colonel White was supposed to be on holiday in London, these last few days, leaving you two as acting commanders of Spectrum, right?" Conners said. "Has he been recalled?"

"Like Captain Blue said: we're on red alert," Scarlet replied. "Which means everybody has been recalled to duty."

"Yeah, well... In that case, do you know where the colonel has been during his holiday?"

"Why do you ask that?" Scarlet frowned. "And why not ask HIM, anyway?"

"He doesn't tell us of his private whereabouts," Blue added.

"I tried to contact him on Cloudbase," Conners said patiently. "The communications officer told me Colonel White was too busy to answer any calls at the moment and that he would contact me eventually. In the meantime, I have to rely on you..."

"I STILL fail to see your point, Mister Conners," Scarlet said carefully.

Conners gave a faint smile. "Why were both Captain Ochre and Rhapsody Angel sent to Greg Dooley's home, in civilian clothes?" he said, rather than answering Scarlet's remark. "Was it to do with the present situation? Just call me curious, but..."

"Actually, I prefer to call you a bloody nuisance," Scarlet interrupted sharply. Conners glared at him but did not respond. "Now, if I may ask YOU a question..."

"Go ahead, Captain Scarlet."

"What's this got to do with your section, anyway? I still don't see why Spectrum Intelligence has any interest in one of our officers being shot."

"The point is that TWO of Spectrum's senior staff have apparently fallen victim to an ambush, in what appears to be the course of some investigation. I find odd that Rhapsody Angel has been sent on such a mission, since her usual work calls for her to be at the helm of an interceptor jet..."

"Well, if you DO in fact have Rainbow Priority One clearance," Scarlet snapped, "you would ALSO know her background... AND how it would make her a PERFECT choice for this mission!"

Conners flinched at Scarlet's tone but continued. "...And now, she has been captured, probably by Mysterons... And, well, we have to assume the worst has happened to her. And we all know that, when it comes to the Mysterons, the worst transcends death itself."

Blue gave a quick glance toward Scarlet, wondering if he would pop a nerve hearing that. As it was, the British captain was keeping as calm as he could, and was addressing an icy stare at Agent Conners. There was murder in that look and Blue worried that his partner would suddenly jump at the Intelligence man's throat.

"Stick to Intelligence, Conners," Blue said. "Let us handle the field action. In case you still haven't noticed, we're quite busy with a Myseron situation right now, and we really don't have time for your questions."

Conners shook his head. "All right, then. I guess I'll wait to talk to Colonel White. I suppose he will be more amenable than you two are."

"Don't bet on it," Scarlet muttered, before quickly adding, "He's got about as much time for you as we have."

Conners smiled sarcastically at the two men. "Keep up the good work, Captains." He then turned around and left the Control Room, under the icy stare they both gave him. Blue let out a sigh.

"How long will we be able to keep this up, before somebody finds out something is wrong?" he whispered, addressing his colleague.

"If we have to put up with the likes of Conners... not long, I'm afraid," Scarlet responded in the same tone.

"I hate that guy..." Blue mumbled under his breath. He cleared his throat. "The next time we see Lieutenant Green, remind me to THANK him for sending Conners to us."

"Right after I congratulate him for his initiative in covering the colonel's absence," Scarlet replied with a smile.

"So, what do we do now?" Blue asked. "Do we return to Cloudbase, and wait there for the next development? Symphony's still here with the helicopter, ready to take us back. Magenta can cover things here..."

Scarlet opened his mouth to answer, but right that moment, the voice of Second Lieutenant Gail Lennox, London HQ communications officer, seated at her console not far from them, called to them, with a tone of urgency:

"Captain Scarlet! Captain Blue! I'm picking up a signal!"

The two officers rushed to either side of the young woman. She was tapping on her digital keyboard, obviously trying to get a trace

on a beeping sound that was coming out of her computer's speakers.

"Is that a radio signal, lieutenant?" Captain Blue asked.

"No, Captain..." was the answer. "But it's definitely a distress signal... from a SPT."

"A Spectrum Personal Tracker?" Scarlet repeated, frowning. "Whose...?"

Lieutenant Lennox looked over her shoulder at him. "Colonel White's, sir."

Scarlet and Blue shivered, almost imperceptibly. They exchanged perplexed stares. Why would a Mysteronised White activate his Tracker? Why would he have kept it, in the first place?

Then it dawned upon them that it might not be White who was actually using the device.

"Rhapsody," they both said at the same time.

"Affirmative," Lieutenant Lennox nodded, her attention back on her computer screen. "It is Colonel White's Tracker, but it is Rhapsody Angel using it right now." She looked again at Scarlet. "Those beeps are Morse code, Captain. And she just spelled out the first part of her name."

The British captain had already found that out, and was now concentrating on deciphering the rest of the message. In the meantime, Blue was feverishly checking out the tracking instruments with Lennox, in order to locate the position of the signal.

"She says she's all right..." Scarlet whispered, almost only to himself. "Thank God for that..." He frowned. "Escaped surveillance... Trapped inside enemy building..."

"In Bristol!" Blue exclaimed triumphantly. "We got the position!"

"Oh, Lord..." Scarlet had just heard the last part of Rhapsody's message. Judging by the expression Lieutenant Lennox turned to him, he could see she had heard it too. Not a problem here, he mused. As communications officer at London Headquarters, Gail Lennox had been sworn to secrecy about the situation... There was no other way but to take her into their confidence, since she was manning such a critical station.

"Be sure to keep that information away from that weasel, Conners, Lieutenant," Scarlet whispered to her in confidence.

"S.I.G., sir. I'll be as quiet as the grave."

"Like your choice of words." Scarlet flipped down his cap microphone. "Captain Magenta, do you read me?"

"*Loud and clear, Captain Scarlet,*" came the swift reply in an accented Irish brogue.

"Assemble a task team of hand-picked field commandos, quickly. About half a dozen, heavily armed. We'll have a helicopter

ready for you in five minutes with coordinates for a target somewhere in Bristol..."

"Five minutes, Scarlet?"

"Spectrum is White, Magenta," was Scarlet's answer. That was the signal he and the other members of the higher staff had agreed upon should Colonel White be discovered.

"S.I.G., Captain," Magenta answered swiftly.

"Helicopter A12 is already ready for takeoff, Captain Magenta," Lennox informed the Irish captain over her own microphone. "The pilot is security Blue... I'm transferring the coordinates you should follow onto the onboard computer."

"Send them to Helicopter A04 as well," Scarlet ordered her. "Tell Symphony Angel to be ready to take off as soon as we join her."

"S.I.G., sir."

As Lieutenant Lennox busied herself following his orders, Scarlet took Blue by the arm and quickly moved with him toward the exit. "Come on, Captain Blue, we'll take that helicopter now. But not to Cloudbase, as you suggested."

"Give me some credit, I already guessed that." Blue frowned. "Spectrum is White?" he said uncertainly. "So not only has Rhapsody got the colonel's Tracker..."

"... She's got HIM as well," Scarlet nodded. He strode quickly out of the control room and into the corridor toward the nearest elevator, which would take them up to the helicopter pad, situated on the roof of the building. Blue had to quicken his pace to keep up with him.

"What do you mean 'she's got him as well'?" he asked.

"That was the last part of her message," Scarlet explained, stepping into the elevator with his partner. "She's captured him."

The elevator door slid closed as Blue gave Scarlet a dumbfounded look.

"What? How in Heaven did she manage to do that?"

"I don't know, but I'm worried..." Scarlet was impatiently staring at the level indicator, hoping the high-speed elevator would be somehow even faster today. "Keeping a Mysteron prisoner is like keeping a tiger in check. And since this Mysteron happens to be Colonel White..."

"...He's as dangerous to handle as they come," Blue murmured. "Maybe as dangerous as Captain Black."

"Right. Remember what Black did to Symphony?"

"I still get the shivers thinking about that."

"And to make matters worse, she's trapped in the tiger's den," Scarlet added sombrely.

"We'll get her out of there, Paul."

“Let us pray.” The door opened in front of them, and the two captains rushed outside and onto the roof of the Spectrum HQ London building. In front of them, Helicopter A04, with Symphony at the helm, was waiting for them, its engine and rotor already running. Next to it, another helicopter, also ready for take off, was being boarded by a handful of heavily armed commandos. Scarlet saw Captain Magenta, standing by the hatch, and answered the salute his Irish counterpart made.

Hang on, Angel, Scarlet thought, as he and Blue broke into a run toward the aircraft. Help is on its way... Just hang on!

And be very careful.

Chapter 7

Coming back to consciousness this time around wasn't nearly as traumatic as the last, thought Charles Gray as he came to his senses. But the situation, he realised instantly, was now quite different, and had evolved in a way not at all to his advantage.

This time again, he was seated on the floor, but now he could feel the cold bite of the handcuffs secured around his wrists, behind his back. His head felt heavy, and damp; the left side of it was hurting. A strange smell of alcohol pervaded his clothes.

He saw the barrel of a gun aimed at his face.

"I suggest you keep quiet." That was the red-haired girl, warning him from behind the gun. Her voice had a stern edge, as had the watchful stare she was keeping on him. She was seated right in front of him, on one of the stools, just out of reach.

"Don't move, or call out," she continued, ever so quietly. "I don't want to, but I'll use this weapon if I have to."

He stared coldly at her; he didn't have any reason to believe she wouldn't carry out her threat. Carefully, he shifted his position to get more comfortable. Her eyes didn't leave him for one instant. She saw him wince under the effort.

"How's your head?" she asked.

"What do you expect?" Gray replied roughly. He looked toward the debris of the broken bottle, lying on the floor, not far from him. "Pity. That was a bottle of perfectly fine brandy you hit me with, young lady."

"Sorry," Rhapsody answered. "I'll replace it, eventually."

White grumbled. "Wonderful. I smell like a damned drunk." He stared again at the young woman. "So, it seems you have the upper hand," he continued evenly. "What do we do now?"

"We wait."

"Wait for what?"

Rhapsody did not answer. Gray looked at her sharply. "You can't have called your friends in Spectrum, now, can you? Not with my communicator..."

She glared at him. "You mean that?" On the table next to her, she indicated the radio transmitter she had found earlier when she searched him. "Now, if I had used that, your men would have instantly picked up the communication and barged in here the second after. Is that the idea you had in mind by... 'suggesting' I use it?"

"So you didn't call your people."

"I never said that. I had... another means at my disposal." Rhapsody showed him the tracker. "I used this."

He nodded. "That was in my pocket," he noted. "What is it?"

"You mean you don't know?"

He shook his head of white hair.

"A Personal Tracker, issued by Spectrum," she explained. "It's... my commander's."

Again, he nodded. "So you may have been right, about me having killed him, eh?" She didn't answer, but made note of that odd remark. Her prisoner gave the faintest of smiles. "You saw right through me, didn't you? About the communicator..."

"I may be young, by your standards, but I've still had plenty of training and experience," Rhapsody replied. She leaned toward him. "Don't you remember who I am?"

He didn't reply. Obviously, he didn't recall anything about her. The young woman straightened up, sighing. "Right. How can I expect you to remember who I am, when you don't even seem to know who YOU are?"

"I know perfectly well who I am, thank you very much," Gray snapped at her.

"Are you sure about that... Admiral?"

Gray scoffed loudly, but didn't say anything. The girl shook her head. She wasn't giving up yet. "Obviously, this man Brighton knows about your past in the Navy. This is not common knowledge. Admiral Charles Gray disappeared from public view some twenty-five years ago, at the same time he retired from the Navy. People my age would not recognize you, or even know who you are if your name came up in a conversation."

"But YOU know, right?" Gray noted, looking up at her. "As well you should. You should know all about your prey, shouldn't you? You must have prepared this scam carefully to get to me..."

"I didn't prepare anything."

"What's in it for you, anyway? The price on my head is that good?"

"You think I'm some sort of bounty hunter?" Rhapsody asked, frowning. "I work for Spectrum..."

"Yes, that much I know. What is Spectrum? Some special Government service?"

"To which 'Government' are you referring?"

"Don't play the innocent with me! I'm talking about the British Militarist Government, that's had this beautiful country in its clutches for years!"

"What?" Rhapsody opened her eyes wide with incredulity and confusion. "That's crazy... There's been no Militarist Government in Britain since..."

"Don't tell me I'm crazy!" Gray growled angrily, leaning toward her. "I don't know what game you're trying to play, but I know EXACTLY what is going on in this country! I've been fighting for too many years not to know!"

"Oh, dear God..." Rhapsody looked in dismay at her commander-in-chief. "What have the Mysterons done to you?"

"That word again," Gray mumbled. "First, you accuse me of being one, and now..." he sighed. "What is a Mysteron?"

"You've been drugged," Rhapsody continued. "They did this to you."

"Oh, really?" Gray scoffed. "Yes, I've been drugged. Do you think I'm unaware of that? But it was not done to me by your 'Mysterons'. You should know that Government agents tried to extract information from me, after you turned me over to them."

"I didn't turn you over to anybody," Rhapsody replied with insistence.

Gray wasn't listening. His eyes suddenly filled with uneasiness and pain. "They hooked me to that thing..."

"What thing?" Rhapsody suddenly cut in. "You already mentioned a 'contraption'." She remembered that from his mad ravings, just before she knocked him out. Knowing now that he wasn't a Mysteron, she thought it could contain information about what had happened to him.

Gray shrugged. "Still you pretend you don't know what I'm talking about," he said with an edge of disgust in his voice. "You can't be THAT innocent... You certainly know about the device they call a '*Dream Spinner*'... and the things they did to me with it!"

Dream Spinner? Rhapsody shook her head. "I... don't know anything about that, sir. I swear I was not involved in what happened to you. Why can't you believe me?" He didn't answer. The bitterness in his eyes was difficult for the young woman to bear. "What did they do to you with that device? Tell me!"

"What does it matter to you?" he grumbled. "Whatever they wanted of me, it failed..."

"Are you so sure it failed?" Rhapsody murmured carefully.

He looked at her angrily. She understood that she had touched a nerve. "Stop toying with me! If not for Shelby and the others, I don't even know what would have happened. I'd probably be dead!"

"They've planted lies in your mind!" Rhapsody protested. "Please, try to remember!"

"What should I try to remember?" Gray snarled. "What are you trying to do, girl?"

"Remember me... Remember Cloudbase, all the people on it... Spectrum. Remember who you are, Colonel White."

He scowled. "My name is Gray. Charles Gray. I was a captain of the British Navy before receiving the rank of admiral from the World Navy. I've never been a colonel. There is no colonel in the Navy."

That sounded too much like some kind of a fully prepared response planted in his mind.... Rhapsody realized it upon hearing it.

He stared daggers at her. "I don't know what your objective is, young woman, but I'm telling you, you won't deceive me again the way you already have."

"When and how did I deceive you?" Rhapsody asked in surprise.

"When you captured me. Yesterday, wasn't it? How did you do it? First, you earned my trust, and then you seduced me, so it would be easier for you to trap me during that 'date' of yours?"

She shook her head slowly. "I told you. You never showed up. You went AWOL all of a sudden. That's why Captain Ochre and I were looking for you at the house of your friend, Greg Dooley. We had traced you back to there. Only Mister Dooley was a Mysteron and..."

"Spare me. It's obvious you're lying. You said earlier that you were looking there for your commander."

"That's right. You are my commander. You are Colonel White, commander-in-chief of Spectrum."

Gray laughed bitterly. "How funny! First, you accuse me of having killed your commander... Then you say I AM him? Can't you get your story straight, young lady?" He shook his head. "I'm not your Colonel White... And I don't know anything about this 'Spectrum' of yours... Except that it seems to be a powerful enough service in this country."

"We're a multinational task force, answerable only to the World President... Don't you remember?"

"Great, World Government agents. As bad as Militarists. World Government turned its back on the people of Britain years ago, when it decided to let them rot under the Militarists' heel."

"Now then, that's not true..."

Gray feigned not to hear Rhapsody's plea.

The young woman sighed. *Better stop now, I'm not getting anywhere, she realized. I can't get through to him. I can't get him out of this influence they put him under. He needs professional help. As soon as possible.*

"Tell me something," Gray then asked her. His voice was calmer now, like that of a man really sure of himself and not the least affected by his situation. He looked Rhapsody straight in the eyes. "You and I... Have we been... intimate?"

She blushed violently. The thought ONLY was embarrassing enough. "No, sir, we haven't," she answered, shaking her head.

He seemed to believe her. "Good," he said, nodding with satisfaction. "I mean, I don't want to insult you or anything, but... I'm a married man, and I love my wife. And I don't know how I would have explained that to her."

Rhapsody stared at him in disbelief.

"Your wife?" she murmured.

"Yes. What? It surprises you that much that I should be married?" Gray frowned. "If you know so much about me, you must be aware of that..."

Rhapsody desperately tried to conceal her trouble and distress. It was too horrible... He actually thought his wife was still alive? She couldn't believe those monsters, who had done this to him, could have been so cruel as to put THAT thought into his mind... She turned away from him, so she would not give herself away.

He still noticed something was obviously wrong. "What is it?" he asked curiously.

Rhapsody waved her hand, unsettled. "Nothing," she said. *I won't tell him. I CAN'T tell him his wife has been dead for seventeen years. He wouldn't believe me. And if he did believe me, that would be too much of a shock for him. Given his present condition, who knows how he would react to the news...*

She saw him wince, as if suddenly in pain.

"Are you all right?" she asked with concern. She had noticed now pale he had turned; sweat was covering his face.

"My head hurts a bit... Not surprising, eh?" Gray looked at the girl. "You searched my pockets... You must have found a bottle of pills."

"Yes, I found it. But those are not headache pills."

"Well, they may not be headache pills, but they do me a lot of good. I need them to keep myself in check."

"What do you mean by that?" a puzzled Rhapsody asked. He didn't care to answer. He looked so pale, so tired... She frowned. "How long since you had a good sleep, sir?" Again, he didn't answer. The girl shook her head. "I'm sorry, I won't give you those pills. Not without knowing what they are. That's a responsibility I won't take."

He shrugged, as if he was indifferent to it. "Suit yourself..." he said in a whisper.

Rhapsody saw him wince again, and heard him give a low groan; his head went backward. *Something's wrong with him*, thought the young woman. To her dismay, he then slid to one side and sprawled on the floor, where he stayed motionless.

A worried Rhapsody jumped to her feet. "Sir? All you all right?"

His silence alarmed her. *He must be more badly hurt than I first thought!* She swiftly came to him, crouched by his side, and gently touched his shoulder. "Please, answer me. I just want to help you..."

The echo of her words had not faded away when Colonel White quickly sprang up, surprising her. His hands inexplicably free, he grabbed hold of her. He swiftly forced her to let go of her weapon, which clattered to the floor, and then imprisoned her in a thigh lock, putting his left arm across her throat and twisting one of hers behind her back. She struggled, vainly, for he was too strong.

"You've helped me quite enough already, young lady," he said from behind, in her ear. He opened his right hand in front of her eyes and she saw his wristwatch, just beside the free end of the cuff dangling from his wrist. "Next time you want to handcuff a man like me, try to remember to relieve him of his watch."

"You opened the lock with the buckle pin," she noted, swallowing hard. "I should have been more careful..."

"Yes, you should have. But it was a commendable effort." She was still trying to get free. Gray tightened his hold on her and she winced, feeling the pain of her imprisoned arm. "Come, come, now! Stop struggling! You'll hurt yourself. On your feet, girl!"

Gray stood up, forcing her to do the same, and carried her toward the table. Keeping hold of her arm, he released her throat and took his communicator.

At about this moment, he noticed it was beeping. He opened the channel.

"...Admiral, please respond!" he heard a voice calling to him.

Must have tried to contact me while I was struggling with the girl, he mused, concerned by the tone of urgency he was hearing.

"Gray here!" he barked into the communicator. "What's going on?"

"Spectrum is coming, sir! They're almost on us!"

Gray's features hardened. So, whatever it was worth, the girl had not lied to him about having called her own people... And now, they were about to enter the place.

"Get out of here!" he snapped to the other man. "Avoid capture and rejoin the others!"

"And you, sir?"

"Every man for himself, Mister! We'll regroup at the agreed point. That's an order!"

He heard the quick acknowledgment of the man and immediately cut contact. He was putting down the communicator to get a better grip on the girl when she suddenly thrust her head backward and hit him squarely on the face. Groaning in pain, he

lost hold of her; she stepped heavily on his toes and pushed him back away from her, with all her weight and strength.

Gray fell to the floor, carrying the table and all that was on it with him.

While he was struggling to get rid of the table which had fallen on him, Rhapsody sprang to the door; she didn't see her commander grabbing hold of his gun, which was not far from him and taking aim at her back.

"Hold it right there!" he bellowed.

She did not obey and swiftly opened the door to get out. Gray hesitated, his finger trembling on the trigger. *Who am I kidding?* he thought, a sudden bad taste in his mouth. *I can't shoot her in the back... But how CLOSE I came to doing it!*

He angrily tossed the table aside and got to his feet. Rhapsody had just disappeared from his view. He picked up his belt from the cabinet and ran to the door, putting it on. He stumbled against the doorway, upon reaching it and put his hand to his aching head. The wound on the left side of it had reopened, following the girl's last blow and it was now bleeding again.

He heard hurried footsteps on his right; turning in that direction, he saw the Angel pilot disappearing round the corner of the corridor. Gathering his strength, he set out in pursuit. He didn't know exactly what that girl knew about the activities of his team, but he didn't dare take the chance of letting her go back to Spectrum, to tell them something – anything – that might be of significance. Already she knew names, and had heard about the ship – that could be enough to endanger the mission. And on another note, he may have need of her as a hostage to get out of this place and avoid capture...

One thing was certain in his mind: if he didn't get away with this, there was not a chance in Hell he would let himself be taken prisoner by Spectrum. He would fight to the very end... and would rather die than be exposed again to the same sort of treatment he had received the last time he was captured.

* * *

The two Spectrum helicopters were overflying a disused steelworks just outside of Bristol. According to the onboard computers, the signal from Colonel White's Personal Tracker was coming from that place. Rhapsody had stopped sending Morse code and simply kept the device activated for Spectrum to follow the signal.

Captain Scarlet, on board Helicopter A04 with Captain Blue, would have given anything to be able to reach the young woman, to tell her that help was on its way. Unfortunately, the SPT was a

one-way device, and had by no means been designed as a communication tool: it was to be used in case of emergency, to permit an agent to call for help. This case certainly qualified as an emergency.

Scarlet watched through binoculars as Captain Magenta's team of Spectrum commandos disembarked from Helicopter A12. Following their leader's instructions, they were now spreading around the enemy complex, covering all visible exits. Three men standing guard next to a canvas-covered army-type truck, just in front of a garage door, tried to make a break for it in the vehicle. One of them was swiftly shot down; the two others retreated hastily into the garage, leaving their companion and the truck on the spot.

"There's no telling how many Mysteron agents there could be inside that factory," Blue noted to Scarlet.

His partner nodded. "At least we know the colonel is in there."

A few minutes earlier, they had intercepted a radio communication between the enemy agents. One of them was reporting to his superior, with some alarm, the approach of the two Spectrum helicopters. The other man, who at first took some time to answer the message, had given the order to abandon the place. It was the very recognizable voice of the Spectrum's commander-in-chief, Colonel White. There was no possible mistake.

There were some puzzling things about this conversation, though: the first man had called the colonel "Admiral" and the latter had himself used his own name of "Gray" to identify himself. Scarlet and Blue couldn't think why.

Scarlet was worried, too. It was clear to him, upon hearing the voice of the colonel, that he had escaped Rhapsody's custody...What then had happened to the British Angel pilot? Surely, she was in very grave danger now.

However, now was not the time for questions, and useless worries...

It was time for action.

"Magenta's men have surrounded the place," Scarlet reported. "They're about to enter."

"The roof seems safe enough," Blue announced in turn, finishing his inspection of it. "There's a large window at about the centre of it, and a stairway opening not far from it. Maybe we can get in through one of those."

"Take us down, Symphony," Scarlet called to the Angel pilot at the helm of the helicopter. "But approach carefully."

"S.I.G., Captain."

The young American pilot pushed the stick decidedly, taking the helicopter closer to the complex. Scarlet made a gesture toward Blue, instructing him to follow him near the exit hatch.

"We'll use the cable lines to get down on the roof," he announced. "Power packs may be very useful, but they have a tendency to hamper movements when you're on foot."

Blue nodded his acknowledgment. Scarlet hit the button and the hatch slid open before him, revealing the roof of the factory, a few yards below the hovering helicopter. The Brit dropped down his cap microphone to obtain a better communication with the pilot, over the engine and rotor noise. "You can lower the magnetic hook, Symphony."

"Helijet steady. Magnetic hook and line ready to go, Captain," came the answer over the speaker. "In three, two, one..."

In the cockpit, Symphony Angel pressed a button; the line over the exterior of the open hatch, just above Scarlet's head, was fired toward the roof below. The magnetic hook attached itself to the polished surface. In the meantime, Scarlet and Blue had both quickly strapped a security harness around their waists and were putting on leather gloves to get a better grip on the straps they then secured to the line.

Scarlet hooked his belt to the line and addressed the Angel pilot anew: "Right, Symphony, we're ready to go. Release the magnetic hook as soon as we reach the roof. Keep hovering up there and cover us with the machine gun."

"S.I.G., Captain Scarlet. Be careful down there. And bring the little sister back, safe and sound."

"Don't worry. I intend to do just that." Scarlet turned to Blue, standing right behind him, waiting in line. "Ready, Captain Blue?"

"When you are, Captain Scarlet," Blue nodded impassively.

"Let's go, then!"

Gripping the strap he had previously attached to the wire line, Captain Scarlet jumped into the void and slid down to the roof, closely followed by his partner.

* * *

Up on a hill, at a safe distance from the disused factory, standing next to an inconspicuous car, the man who had been Jason Shelby was using binoculars to spy on the Spectrum attack on the building. Next to him, Brighton was waiting, a bit uncomfortable. He would not be able to say if it was the Mysteron's presence next to him or the current deterioration of the situation that was making him feel so uneasy.

"Spectrum has almost taken over the complex, Mister Brighton," Shelby announced blankly. "Who stayed behind?"

“Lemmings, Thorsen and McAllister, sir,” Brighton answered gloomily. “I’m afraid we’ve lost them.”

“No matter.” Shelby put down the binoculars and moved toward the door on the passenger side of the car. “They were expendable.”

Brighton looked at him with perplexity, not sure how he should take the coldness of his tone. “And Colonel White, sir? Wasn’t he still useful to us?”

Shelby glanced at him over the hood of the car. Brighton had to force himself not to step back, seeing the emotionless expression on his face. “Colonel White has already performed his most important task in this mission,” the Mysteron said flatly. “He would have been useful for the next step, but he’s not really essential. And given his present, deteriorating state of mind, maybe it’s better that he should not be involved with the rest of the mission.” He gave an icy smile. “Let him fend for himself. We’ll see if he can get out of this one. Maybe he will rid us of some Spectrum agents, before he gets himself killed by them at the end. And that, Mister Brighton, is an irony even the Mysterons can appreciate.”

He sat down in the passenger seat, and Brighton, getting more and more uncomfortable, took his place behind the wheel.

“And what if he should break free?” Brighton asked.

“We’ll wait to see how things develop, Mister Brighton,” Shelby replied. “Then we’ll decide what to do. In any case, you must realize by now that, even if Colonel White evades capture, he is a doomed man.”

He stared ahead. “Let’s go join the lorry,” he said very quietly. “We still have a lot to do before we achieve the next phase of the mission. And then, we’ll get a chance to truly avenge the Mysterons.”

* * *

Dianne Simms had never been one to scare easily. That was one of the many reasons she had been chosen to be part of the Angel Flight pack. Today, however, she was afraid... more afraid than she would ever care to admit. And it was not only for herself.

She was perfectly aware that Colonel White was hot on her trail, although he was not in view. What was frightening her was the fact that she had no idea what he would do to her. He was not a Mysteron, of that she was certain, but he was even more unpredictable than if he were one.

Somehow, the idea that he was at war with Britain – and the rest of the World – had been put into his mind; in the process, all his memories of who he really was, of Spectrum and what the organisation stood for, were removed. He had become an

irrational, violent, and brutal man, capable of extreme acts. He had shot Captain Ochre in cold blood. He had almost killed that man in her cell with his bare fists. He had hit her – even though he felt ashamed of it right after. Now, after she had hit him over the head, cuffed him, and escaped from him, she suspected he would not hesitate to kill her. Especially if he felt he could be trapped by Spectrum.

He could also think of using her as a hostage to buy his way out of this place. Spectrum would never let him do that. He would be shot down at the first available occasion. That was how they stopped Paul, two years ago, she reminded herself. But while Captain Scarlet, having been Mysteronised, revived afterwards, free of the Mysterons' influence, the same would not happen for Colonel White.

Surely, there was a way to help the colonel get out of that living nightmare the Mysterons had put into his mind. But in order to do so, he must absolutely be taken alive. It was a sure bet the rest of Spectrum believed him to be a Mysteron, as she had thought herself. It would be too horrible if they should kill him, without really understanding what was happening to him. The Mysterons would have the last laugh over that one.

I must inform Spectrum of this, Rhapsody told herself, as she ran through the corridors, trying to find an exit. She looked constantly over her shoulder. The colonel was still out of sight. He couldn't be far behind, she mused, wondering why he had not simply shot her when she escaped him.

Where am I? she asked herself for the tenth time. It seemed to her this place had only corridors, offices, and iron staircases. Upon climbing one, she pushed a door and found herself in a big, spacious room, brightly lit, about two storeys high. There were wooden pallets lying everywhere.

Must be a storage room, the Angel pilot mused, stepping inside. Empty now. She looked around; not many places to hide... There was another door at the far side of the room. Aside from the one she had just used, it was the only entrance and exit to this place. She moved toward it and stopped suddenly.

The sound of an engine, coming from over her head, had drawn her attention. She raised her head to see, through a large skylight, a helicopter hovering steadily at less than a hundred feet. Her heart beat faster. She had recognized the unique outlines of a Spectrum helijet!

Her attention now fully focused on the aircraft, trying to see more of it and wondering what it was intended to do, Rhapsody made a few steps back toward the door at the other side of the room. She bumped into something. SomeONE, she realized almost instantly, jumping in surprise and turning on her heel. Two

strong hands grabbed her by the arms as she gazed into the bright and icy blue eyes of Colonel White.

"You're not planning on leaving me now, are you, darling?"

There was something of a cruel humour in his deep voice, so unlike him, as he said those words. With a strength suddenly increased by fear, Rhapsody struggled to get away. Not wanting to let her escape him again, the colonel wrapped an arm around her waist and held her close to him, from behind, while trying to control her with his other arm. It wasn't an easy task; she was kicking and clawing like the wildcat Brighton had described her to be.

"Hold on!" he grumbled in annoyance. "You're going to hurt yourself!"

He actually succeeded in snapping one end of the handcuffs he had in his hand around her right wrist. *Not again!* a distressed Rhapsody thought. *If he restrains me, I'll have no chance to get away from him!* Despair and frustration overcame her and then, without being able to stop herself, she screamed for help.

* * *

Two storeys higher, on the roof, Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue had touched down and disengaged themselves from the harnesses tying them to the helicopter line. Once they were free, Symphony had released the magnetic clamp on the roof and wound the line back up to the aircraft. Swiftly yet cautiously, the two Spectrum officers had come nearer to the skylight to peer down through it. They found themselves gazing into a large storage room, where the floor was about two storeys lower.

"We can't jump down there," Blue remarked. "We'd risk breaking our necks." He gestured toward a door nearby. "The stairway. Let's use that instead."

Scarlet nodded his agreement and was about to follow when he noticed movement inside the room below. A few feet away from the roof window, he saw two figures struggling. One of them was a tall, strong, white-haired man, dressed in commando gear, with combat boots, black trousers, and a khaki T-shirt. The other figure was that of a slender, red-haired woman, who seemed to be losing her fight.

"Dear God... Rhapsody!" Scarlet rasped, the words catching in his throat.

Blue quickly came back to take a look down. He recognized the tall, white-haired figure of the colonel, actually manhandling the British Angel pilot. He also saw the features of his friend, very pale, anger and fear apparent in his expression.

Then the desperate scream of the girl came to their ears. And Blue looked in total dismay as his partner took a step back, a grim determination upon his face. The American instantly understood what he was planning to do.

"Paul, wait!"

It was already too late. Taking a run up, Scarlet jumped right through the skylight. Blue's protests were drowned in a thunderous crash of broken glass.

"Damned, impetuous fool!" he muttered.

He briefly looked down to make sure Scarlet had landed safely and turned around without waiting much longer; he rushed toward the door, then down the iron staircase, aware that his partner would need all the help he could get when facing the lethal peril of a Mysteronised Colonel White.

* * *

Charles Gray had finally succeeded in imprisoning both Rhapsody's hands behind her back with the handcuffs. He glanced up toward the helicopter he could see hovering beyond the skylight above their heads. It was then that he had the startling surprise of a red-and-black-clad man suddenly jumping through it.

The sound of breaking glass echoed throughout the vast room and the roof – literally – came tumbling down. Although they were already out of range of the falling rain of glass, Gray pushed himself and his captive farther away. As they fell to the floor together, a last remainder of his past life instinctively compelled him to shield her with his own body. Only a few bits of glass came flying around them, but miraculously, neither was cut.

Gray heard a thump, as the crazy man who had leaped through the window landed on the floor, behind him. Almost blindly, he fired one shot in the direction of the sound. He saw the man in red rolling to avoid the bullet. *I'm too much in the open*, Gray realised grimly. Survivor's instinct then took total control of his mind and body. His left hand took the knife out of the sheath hanging from the back of his belt and, in the same swift movement, he forced Rhapsody to stand, pulling her close to him.

The movement was so fast that the young woman didn't even have time to react. She found herself with his arm across her throat again, the blade he was holding grazing her cheek. The colonel's other arm was stretched out, carefully keeping his pistol trained on his opponent, who was slowly rising from the floor, himself keeping his gun aimed at the alleged Mysteron agent.

Rhapsody's heart missed a beat when she recognised the grim features of her fiancé.

“Paul!”

Gray lifted an eyebrow, hearing the girl's desperate call. “*Paul?* So we're on first-name terms, are we?” He nodded toward the roof, his eyes not leaving the other man. “Nice entrance, by the way. Crazy, but nice...”

Captain Scarlet kept his gun steady with both hands. He had sustained a few cuts and bruises from his leap through the skylight, but nothing serious enough for him to get too concerned about. He was much more worried about Rhapsody's predicament; that damned blade was too close to her throat for his taste and comfort.

“Release the girl!” he ordered in a firm voice.

“Sorry,” he heard Colonel White answer very quietly. “She's the only shield I have. If I let her go, there would be nothing to prevent you from shooting me like a dog.”

Scarlet gave a brief glance at Rhapsody's face. The Angel pilot's blue eyes were widened in fear and complete despair as she was staring back at him. She swallowed hard. “Captain,” she said in a strangled tone, “don't shoot. He's not...”

The words died on her lips and she gasped when the colonel suddenly tightened his hold on her throat. “Shut up!” he told her roughly. “I don't want to hear one word out of you!”

Scarlet's face blanched as he saw the young woman wince. He automatically tried to get a better aim at White. The latter cocked the hammer of his gun, still pointed at the younger man. “You'd better be very sure about this, lad!” he told him, in an urgent and sinister tone. “If you shoot me, my hand may slip, and the girl could get badly hurt.”

“The man I knew would never put a knife to a woman's throat,” Scarlet replied harshly.

“Perhaps. But desperate situations call for desperate measures, ‘Captain’. You're a soldier, you should know that.”

Charles Gray blinked his eyes several times, trying to keep all his attention on the man in front of him. He had trouble concentrating. *That damned headache has come back with a vengeance!* he thought savagely. That last blow the girl landed on him a few minutes before was too much. If she tried that again...

“You keep quiet,” he whispered warningly in her ear. “One false move from you, and I won't be answerable for my actions.”

“Don't you hurt her!” a furious Scarlet hissed between his teeth.

Gray shook his head. “I won't if neither of you do anything stupid. I give you my word.”

Scarlet scoffed sarcastically. "And what is your word worth these days? There was a time I wouldn't even think to question it, but today..."

"Put your gun down!" Gray barked.

"YOU put YOURS down!" Scarlet replied almost with the same tone. "The others have abandoned you! Spectrum has surrounded the place! You can't go anywhere!"

"We'll see about that... In the meantime, put that damned weapon down!"

Colonel White had stressed every syllable with insistence. Scarlet narrowed his eyes, carefully gauging him, hesitating.

"What are you waiting for?" the older man impatiently shouted at him. "Do you want me to kill the girl just to make my point?"

The blade got dangerously close to Rhapsody's throat. Scarlet had to fight to keep a calm appearance.

"All right, don't panic!" he quickly answered. "I'll put the gun down..." Cautiously, he let go of the trigger, keeping his left hand well in sight, he crouched slowly to put the weapon on the floor, all the while keeping his eyes on White and the knife.

Curious, he noted. The colonel's face was awfully pale and covered with sweat. The eyes were looking daggers, but surrounded by dark circles, as if the man had not slept in ages. He seemed sick, and awfully nervous. Mysteron agents certainly didn't get sick, and it wasn't often they were nervous. They were usually cold, calculating, in control. The few times Captain Scarlet had actually seen any of them lose their cool was when their plans had been thwarted so close to success... and as he was told, it was probably due to some human trait they had kept from the victim they had been reconstructed from. Which made the present situation here even stranger... Even if it happened in the past that Colonel White let his temper get the better of him, never had he shown any sign of nervousness... So why would his Mysteron duplicate be like this?

He can't be getting feverish from that head wound, Scarlet mused as he slowly straightened up. *It's far too recent.*

He didn't have time to elaborate more on the question, though.

"Kick the gun away from you," White ordered him.

Scarlet shoved the weapon aside. "I'll do what you ask," he said. "Just don't hurt the girl..." He tried to sound as calm as he could. "You don't want to throw away your shield, do you?"

The colonel wasn't fooled. "Since she called you by your first name, it would seem to me she means a bit more to you than my 'shield'... What IS she to you, anyway?" he asked roughly.

Scarlet's eyes met Rhapsody's. *Better not let him guess how close we really are. He could use that against us.* "An important

member of our organisation," he said, as evenly as possible. He glared at White as he spoke the next sentence. "Too important to lose like this."

Some few yards behind the man and his hostage, Scarlet could see the door behind which was the staircase leading to the rooftop. He saw that door opening, as Captain Blue, gun in hand, silently slipped into the room, and quickly went into hiding behind a pile of empty pallets.

Quietly, as discreet as a shadow, the American made his way toward the three people standing in the middle of the room. He made brief eye contact with Captain Scarlet and continued his noiseless progression.

He's trying to get into position behind the colonel, Scarlet noted, when he saw his partner taking cover behind a large wooden beam. *Maybe if I could help him by distracting the old man...*

"Why don't you give up?" he asked White, changing the subject. "You said yourself your situation is desperate..."

"I will never give up!" White replied harshly. "That's just not in my nature."

"Yes, I know," Scarlet almost sighed. "But think about it: maybe we can help you."

"Help me?" White scoffed. "Frankly, I don't see what you people can help me with!"

"Please, listen to him," Rhapsody pleaded with urgency in her voice. "You really need help..."

"Quiet," White replied. "YOU tried that line, before, it didn't work. It won't this time either."

Scarlet could see Blue some feet to the left, behind White, aiming his weapon at his back; the American shook his head in negation. He couldn't fire, in fear of hitting Rhapsody, so close to his target. *And there's still that knife to consider,* Scarlet thought gloomily. He slowly walked toward his right. White shifted on his feet, instantly following his movement and keeping the gun aimed at the younger man.

"What are you doing? Stay where you are!"

Scarlet stopped, eyeing White closely. Still held as a shield between the two of them, Rhapsody frowned faintly, wondering why the captain had moved. He certainly didn't do that without a definite purpose.

Then it occurred to her. If Captain Scarlet was here, his partner, Captain Blue, could not be far... And she would have bet her own life that the American officer was somewhere behind the colonel and herself.

"Okay, I won't move," Scarlet said roughly. "You see, I'm doing exactly what you ask of me. Now you do something too: let go of Rhapsody."

That's it, the young woman thought, anxiously. They're setting him up for the kill. When he lets go of me, nothing will prevent them from shooting him.

She had to try to stop that.

"Captain," she said carefully to Scarlet, "please, you've got to hear me out..."

"Not now, Rhapsody," he replied a bit roughly. He was desperately trying to get her out of this mess, so Captain Blue could get a clear shot at her abductor. He didn't need her to make things difficult.

"I can't let her go," White said. "I may still need her."

"At least, get rid of the knife," Scarlet suggested. "I'm not armed anymore, and she isn't struggling. You don't need to keep that blade on her throat."

Rhapsody was holding her breath, staring at Scarlet with a desperate look of anguish. Why wouldn't he listen to her? Why couldn't he see that there was something wrong here? That Colonel White was not a Mysteron at all? His own capacity to detect the presence of a Mysteron should be telling him that... Or at least, he should have noticed the unhealed wound the drugged Spectrum commander had on his head.

Looking down at the young woman, Charles Gray was presently pondering whether to put down the knife or not. He really had no intention of hurting her. And threatening her with that sharp blade seemed so wrong to him. Still hesitantly, he took it away from Rhapsody's throat, and slowly slid it back into its sheath. The Angel pilot blew out a sigh, and Scarlet nodded his satisfaction.

"Right, perhaps now, we can have a civilized talk."

"The only talk we're going to have is about how you're going to let me get out of this place," White replied sharply.

"I can't let you go," Scarlet answered. "You're too dangerous for that."

"You think I'm dangerous," White said, aiming his gun right at Scarlet's head. You don't have any idea how dangerous I could be... You'll get me a helicopter and a free passage or..."

"Or what? You'll kill me?" There was a faint smile as Scarlet looked the colonel right in the eyes. "Much good it will do you..."

"Don't ask for it!" White hissed ominously.

"I'm not." Scarlet shook his head. "This doesn't have to go further. Forget your mission. Stop all of this... before it's too late and somebody really gets hurt."

"Don't pretend to tell me what to do!" White responded with a violent outburst of anger. "I know my duty! And I will do it, no matter what the cost!"

There was sadness in Scarlet's eyes as he sighed. "And I know mine," he answered in a low, almost painful but determined tone. "And I'll do it too, however hard it may be. I'm... truly sorry, Colonel White."

Gray blinked in confusion, wondering what that was all about. *Colonel White?* Why had that man just called him by that name, the same name the girl he was still keeping as hostage had claimed was his? And why did he sound so sad, right now?

Rhapsody had understood quite well. Captain Scarlet had made a last attempt to negotiate with the renegade, with no success, and now he had given the final signal for him to be shot down.

"No! Don't kill him!" With that distraught cry, Rhapsody desperately launched herself with all her strength and weight against the colonel, who was still holding her close.

Her action was so sudden that White didn't react to it. Unbalanced, he stumbled backward with her, and almost fell to the floor. He heard the crack of a shot, felt the wind of a bullet passing near, and then saw part of a wooden beam exploding under the violent impact of the projectile. Instantly, he understood that he had been set up as a target. His gun searched for Scarlet; the young man had sprung toward him, hoping to catch him by surprise. He dodged the first shot White took at him; Rhapsody managed to spoil the second one. The colonel threw the girl into the Spectrum officer's arms; the latter caught hold of her and tried to cushion her with his own body as they hit the floor, avoiding the stray bullets that passed over their heads.

Blue had cracked another shot at White, but only managed to slightly graze his left arm. The furious man turned toward him and took several shots in his direction. The American quickly ducked behind the much too fragile pallets. They didn't offer much of a cover as they exploded all around him in a rain of wooden splinters.

Too many enemies all at once, a feverish Charles Gray realised grimly. The best course of action would be to beat a hasty retreat. Which he did, running toward the door leading out of the room. He was disappearing behind it when Captain Blue's gun

fired again. But the bullet only produced a dent on the wall next to the door, at the exact spot Colonel White's head had been a second earlier.

Blue got to his feet and rushed toward the spot where Scarlet and Rhapsody had fallen. His partner had straightened up into a sitting position and was cradling the young woman's body in his arms, staring anxiously at her set face and closed eyes.

"Oh, God!" Blue gasped, kneeling beside them, "don't tell me she's..."

"No," Scarlet cut him off suddenly, with a voice filled with relief. "No, she's all right..." He gently stroked her head and heard her groaning faintly. She stirred. "She knocked her head when we hit the floor," the British captain explained quickly. "She's just stunned."

"What just happened?" a dumbfounded Blue asked.

"I'm not quite sure," Scarlet responded. Like Blue, he had seen Rhapsody's frantic attempt to save the colonel's life. He couldn't explain to himself why she had acted that way. Carefully, he put the girl into his friend's arms. "Stay with her. I'm going after him."

"Take this, then." Blue put his own gun into his partner's hand. Their eyes met. The American shook his head. "Do what you have to, Scarlet."

"I will." The bitterness in Scarlet's tone was palpable. It was obvious he would hate to do it, but that he would do it nevertheless.

Blue gently cradled Rhapsody in his arms as Scarlet got to his feet, checking the ammunition charge left in the gun.

"Be careful," Blue told him.

Scarlet nodded and hastily left the room, in pursuit of the fugitive. The door was closing behind him when Blue dropped down his cap microphone. "Captain Blue to Captain Magenta. Please report on the situation..."

"Magenta here," came the Irish accented-voice in reply. *"We have entered the premises with no difficulty. Have neutralized three enemy agents. Two of them are dead, the third is badly wounded. The place appears deserted. There seems to be nobody else in here."*

"Looks can be deceiving, Magenta. You and your men better be careful." Blue looked down as Rhapsody stirred anew in his arms. "Scarlet and I have entered the place too, using the rooftop," he told Magenta. "We have found Rhapsody Angel. She's out of danger. Captain Scarlet is presently in pursuit of the Mysterionised Colonel White. He's extremely dangerous. You must be cautious if you encounter him, and give assistance to Captain Scarlet in apprehending him."

"S.I.G., Captain Blue. We'll get him."

Blue cut communication. Rhapsody moved a little more and opened her eyes to see the American looking anxiously at her. "You all right, honey?" he asked her in concern.

"Yes," she answered in a rasping voice. "I must have hit my head... Ow..." She blinked. "Where... Where's the colonel?"

"He got away. Scarlet's gone after him." Blue sighed uneasily and stared at the young woman with obvious disapproval in his eyes. "In God's name, what got into you? We had him dead and you just..."

"I couldn't let you kill him," Rhapsody replied sharply, straightening herself up, despite the difficulty offered by the handcuffs that still restrained her.

"Rhapsody, I know what you feel, but he's a Mysteron now... HE would not have hesitated to kill YOU."

"He did hesitate, Captain... and he's NOT a Mysteron."

Blue gave the British pilot a disbelieving look; he frowned.

"Oh, come on now!" he retorted. "If he's not a Mysteron, why would he act that way?"

"He's been drugged, Captain."

"Drugged?"

"And brainwashed, most probably. You should see his arm. It looks like a railway track."

"My God," Blue murmured, pondering that new fact. Things became suddenly clearer. "That's why we haven't found his dead body..."

"There can't be any dead body, because that man is OUR colonel." Rhapsody nodded. "And he's very much alive."

"What have the Mysterons done to him?" Blue added, his voice cracking.

"I don't know exactly, but he's quite unstable right now," Rhapsody replied urgently. "But if he's still human, he can be helped. That's why I couldn't let you kill him."

"I see."

"And that's why you have to contact Captain Scarlet to tell him not to shoot him..."

"Oh yeah?" Blue extended his hand to his right and picked up something lying on the floor next to him, to present it to the young woman. It was Captain Scarlet's radio cap. "How do you propose I contact him?" he asked dully.

"Oh, no!" Rhapsody blanched, staring at the cap. Then she looked Blue in the eyes. "We must find them before it's too late."

Blue nodded. "I have to call Magenta to inform him of this new development," he said. He glanced over Rhapsody's shoulder, trying to get a look at her manacled hands. "And we have to find a way to free you of those things."

She blew out a sigh. “Just hand me your wristwatch,” she murmured dryly. “I’ll remove the shackles myself...”

Chapter 8

The fugitive ex-admiral Charles Gray had succeeded into putting some distance between himself and his pursuer, whose running footsteps he heard echoing at some distance behind him in the numerous corridors of the complex.

He was puzzled. Why had the girl helped him the way she just did? Why did she push him out of the way of a bullet obviously meant for him? It was a deliberate move from her heart, and he knew it, although the reason for it escaped him. For now, he was just grateful to her that she had done it.

All exits were sealed, the man in the red tunic had said. The others had left him. Nowhere to go, nobody to count on. All alone with no way out.

Well, it wouldn't be the first time, and Gray had not said his last word. If there wasn't a way to get out of this mess, he'd just have to FORCE his way out.

There was too much at stake for him to give up. The mission had to be completed. His superiors were counting on him for that. And then, maybe this whole civil war would be finished and done; Britain would be free, and he would be able to stop running into this kind of mess and go back to his home and his wife.

Elizabeth was waiting for his return. He could not, would not, disappoint her.

He saw a staircase at the far end of a corridor and rushed up it. The roof. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Maybe if he reached the roof, he would be able to find his way out.

He pushed the door at the top of the stair... And immediately took cover behind it. There was a helicopter hovering low, obviously keeping watch over the roof. He sighed heavily. Damn it all! He had seen that helicopter earlier, why had he forgotten all about it? It was so hard to think straight, with his headache becoming worse by the minute.

Escape would be difficult from the roof, he now realised. He was lucky the pilot of that helicopter hadn't spotted him yet. As long as nobody knew where he was, he had a chance to evade capture.

Now what?

The decision was taken out of Gray's hands when his good ear picked up footsteps coming quickly up the stairs. He saw a dark head, above a red tunic, appearing at the landing just two metres below him. He fired instantly. The man stepped out of reach of the bullet, which hit the concrete wall.

No other choice. Gray rushed out through the staircase door and onto the roof. He rolled into hiding behind a large chimney stack. From there, he watched the door. The second it burst open and the Spectrum agent showed his face, the fugitive cracked two shots. The younger man came completely into the open, running like crazy, and jumped behind a ventilator outlet. Gray's second bullet hit the wall just over his head.

That guy must be mad! Gray thought gloomily. *He must have known I was waiting for him... I could have blown his head off!*

He heard the sound of the helicopter engine approaching from above and looked up. The craft was not far away, so close in fact that he could discern the pilot's features... a young blonde woman whose attention was entirely focused on him. He also noticed the machine gun under the helicopter's belly. Any second, he could be cut in half by that thing.

Damn it! Time to get out of here... IF it's even possible. He eyed the distance separating him from the door to the staircase he had used earlier. That was the only way out.

He took several shots toward the ventilator behind which the other man was hiding, to force him to stay there. *I must be as crazy as that fellow,* he realised, rushing to the door. Curiously, the helicopter's weapon didn't make itself heard.

Captain Scarlet sprang out from his hiding place and jumped to intercept the fugitive. He caught him in midsection and tried to wrestle him to the ground. Gray turned around and tried to get a shot at the man hanging onto him. A strong grip grabbed his wrist and the shot was diverted away.

Scarlet had to use all of his strength and weight to bring down Colonel White. The two of them stumbled. They were fighting close to the side of the roof; White lost his footing and fell down, taking his opponent with him. With a startled cry, they both slid down the roof toward the dark ground some thirty feet below.

From the helm of her helicopter, Symphony Angel watched as the two men on the rooftop below her fought for supremacy. She gasped in distress when she saw them fall over the side to disappear from her view into the dark.

"Oh dear God," she muttered to herself. "This is getting crazier by the minute..."

Her epaulettes flashed blue. "Come in, Captain Blue."

"*Symphony, we need you to help us locate Captain Scarlet and Colonel White,*" Blue's voice said urgently. "*We believe they may be on the roof.*"

"They were," Symphony answered. "They just fell off it."

"*Say that again?*"

"They were fighting for a gun," Symphony explained. "I can't see them any more, it's too dark. But they must be somewhere on the ground. That's quite a dive... One of them might be injured. Maybe both of them."

"Okay, now... Can you tell me where they might be, as close as possible? It is of the utmost importance that we find them at once!"

"All right, then. I'll try to give you as exact a position as possible..."

* * *

The drop from the rooftop was the second one for Captain Scarlet this evening, but this time, he had no control over it whatsoever.

Scarlet still clutched his adversary. It was dark and, even if he had tried, he wouldn't have been able to see where he was falling with the colonel. It was pure dumb luck that the tarpaulin-covered lorry was right under them. They landed violently on the canvas, tore straight through it and they continued their fall into the back of the vehicle. Scarlet's body took the full brunt of the impact on the floor, White landing heavily on top of him, and he let out a cry of pain, before losing consciousness.

For a few seconds, a half-stunned Charles Gray lay still, over the younger man's motionless body. Moaning in pain, he raised himself on his elbows, and looked up, blinking, toward the rip through which he could see the dark sky and the rooftop he had fallen from. Three storeys, he evaluated, dumbfounded. He was lucky to be alive. If that man's body hadn't cushioned his own and if they had not fallen onto that canvas, which had broken their fall, he would likely have broken his neck.

He rose to his knees, biting his lip, stretching his strained muscles. He heard the other man emit a groan and looked down at him in disbelief. That he could be alive was a miracle in itself, but that he should regain consciousness so soon after that impact his body had taken, it was totally improbable.

But Scarlet grew quiet and didn't move. *He's out of it*, Gray realised with satisfaction. *Good. I'm not ready for a showdown right now.*

He got unsteadily to his feet. Things weren't getting any easier. His head was killing him now, not to mention the rest of his body. I may be getting too old for these games, he mused dryly.

He still had to escape his enemies. Taking a look around, he tried to figure out where he was. That was easy; the back of a

lorry. The one his men had probably left behind for his use, if he was not mistaken.

Marvellous. Now he had the means to make good his escape. All that was left to do for him was to get behind the wheel and he would have a good chance to get home free.

He moved to the rear of the lorry and was about to push the tarpaulin aside when he heard voices that forced him to stay under cover.

From the security of his hiding place, he saw a group of three men approaching the lorry; two of them were wearing the same black and white uniform he had already seen at the Naval Depot that very morning. The other was clad in the same attire as the unconscious officer in the truck, except his tunic and boots were of a different colour.

The men were searching the area, the one in the different uniform obviously giving the orders. Gray saw him sending one of the other two fellows to the other side of the building. The other man, who stayed with the officer, was carrying a strange-looking weapon equipped with shoulder supports. Never before had Gray seen a weapon like that.

The two remaining men were close to the lorry; carefully, Gray went deeper into the darkness, keeping his hand close to his combat knife. It was the only weapon left to him, he then realised bitterly. *Should have searched the other man,* he mused. *He must have something useful on him...* But now, he didn't dare leave his position. The knife would have to do, if it came to it.

The two men kept searching the immediate area around the lorry, using flashlights. *Looking for that other chap and me,* Gray understood. For now, neither of them seemed to have any interest in the vehicle itself. It was just a question of time, though.

The two men separated to broaden their search. The one in the coloured uniform stopped just a few feet away from the lorry and Gray saw him flip from his cap something that appeared to be a microphone.

"Captain Magenta to Captain Blue," the former admiral heard him say in a slight Irish brogue. "We arrived approximately at the point where Symphony said she saw our quarry fall. So far, we've found nothing. We'll keep searching until back-up arrives..." He paused, obviously listening to what was said to him, then he nodded. "Yeah, Blue. Don't worry. We'll be careful."

"Captain Magenta."

The man holding the strange-looking weapon was coming back to his leader, whose mic had returned to its previous place on the cap visor.

"Any luck, Willis?"

"I found this." The man handed a gun to his superior and then gestured toward the lorry behind them. "Near this vehicle."

Captain Magenta stared at the lorry; Gray, who had recognised his gun, drew further still into the shadow and grabbed the handhold above his head.

"Come with me," Magenta said softly. "But don't use that Mysteron gun. We have to take the fugitive alive. And he may be holding Captain Scarlet."

"S.I.G., sir."

The two men moved to the lorry; while Willis headed toward the rear, Magenta, drawing his pistol, moved cautiously toward the cabin. He opened the driver's door in one swift movement, aiming his weapon inside. The cabin was empty. Magenta went slowly around the front and then on the other side, checking under and over. He noticed a ripped piece of the tarpaulin on the roof, flapping in the wind. *And what if... they'd fallen inside?* he mused.

He found a small tear on the side of the canvas, which enabled him to peek inside the vehicle; he strained his eyes, trying to see beyond the darkness...

He saw someone there, lying on his back, motionless, and recognised the red tunic he was wearing.

Before he had time to call out, Magenta heard a thump and a low groan coming from the rear of the truck. He turned in that direction. "Willis?"

No answer. *Uh huh, trouble*, Magenta thought. Slowly, as silently as possible, he crept alongside the truck toward the rear, raising his gun. Nothing impeded his progress, until he reached his goal. He then saw Corporal Willis lying flat on his belly, in the dust behind the vehicle.

Magenta hurried to him and crouched at his side. He checked his pulse and was relieved to discover the man was alive, but unconscious. He had a big bump behind his left ear. A good indication that he had been knocked out by someone...

...who couldn't be very far.

Suddenly aware of another presence, Magenta looked swiftly around. He found himself face to face with a grim-looking Colonel White, staring at him from the shadow where he was standing. He had appeared there like some kind of a ghost, startling the Spectrum officer.

Magenta shrugged his surprise away and quickly got to his feet. He dropped down his cap mic: "Spectrum is White! Need immediate assistance!" he shouted, before stepping toward the colonel, raising his gun. He quickly realised he would never dare use it against his commander, especially after what Captain Blue

had just told him about his situation. Lowering the pistol, he chose to try a gentler, yet physical approach and walked toward White.

“Sir, please, don’t do anything rash...”

The first thing he saw was the furious, yet icy glance Colonel White was casting upon him, as he stood ready for his approach. The last was the right hand coming fast, straight for his face, palm first. Magenta’s quick thinking and reaction at this moment probably saved his life, as he slightly shifted his head to one side. Instead of striking him under the nose, as intended, the palm hit the side of it. Still, the violence of the blow did break the bone under the skin; Magenta heard it crack and sprawled on the ground with a yelp of pain, letting go of his weapon, which fell in the shadows.

Charles Gray looked down at the unconscious young man at his feet. From this one, like the other near him, he realised, he had nothing to fear for the immediate moment. But he’d had time to call for help and Gray thought that he shouldn’t stay around too long if he wished to avoid capture.

He picked up the officer’s gun. Then his eyes fell on the odd-looking weapon lying on the ground. A Mysteron gun, the captain had called it. Gray didn’t know what a ‘Mysteron gun’ might be exactly, but it was a weapon nevertheless, and in his situation, he couldn’t afford to be choosy.

He picked the gun up and quickly rushed to the lorry’s cabin. He climbed behind the wheel. No key. Not a problem for him. Gray hot-wired the starter system. The engine gave a satisfactory roar.

At that moment, Gray heard loud shouting and looked in the rear mirror; Spectrum men were running toward the lorry. *Too late, my friends*, the retired admiral thought with a sly grin. *I’m out of here*. His foot pressed down on the accelerator and the vehicle jumped forward... long before the Spectrum commandos, led by Captain Blue, had reached the spot where it previously was.

One of the men raised his rifle, but Blue put his hand on the barrel, pushing it down. “What do you think you’re doing?” he barked at the commando.

“Trying to get a good shot at the tyres, sir?” the man responded, apparently surprised by his superior’s intervention.

“Yeah, and if you miss and hit the fuel tank...” Blue let the rest of the sentence hang. Grumbling, he dropped his microphone. “Helicopter A12, a truck has just left the building, going full speed. Can you spot it?”

“Yes, *Captain Blue*,” answered the voice of the pilot.

“Follow it! Make sure you don’t lose it!”

“S.I.G., sir!”

Blue turned around at the sound of groaning behind him. Magenta, along with Willis, was trying to sit up. Rhapsody Angel, who had followed Blue with the commandos, had crouched beside the Irish captain to give him a hand. He was holding his head down with his hand on his bleeding nose.

“Oh, man...” Magenta grumbled, “What did he hit me with?”

Relieved to see that his colleague was alive and was only suffering from what seemed to be a rather minor wound, Blue left the Angel pilot to tend to him and then opened a priority channel to Cloudbase.

“Lieutenant Green?”

“Sir?”

“Launch all Angels! Helicopter A12 is presently following an army-type truck that escaped the net we set in Bristol. Patch him into Angel One so he can pass on co-ordinates.”

“S.I.G.!”

“Check out location for a SPV near my position, and get back to me.”

“Stand by, Captain Blue. Checking now.”

Blue turned back to Magenta. Rhapsody was examining his nose more closely; the second she touched it, the Irishman gave a low groan and winced.

“Looks broken,” she commented.

“FEELS broken,” Magenta responded between his teeth. He stared at Blue, standing over him. “It was the colonel,” he said with a shaken voice. “I... think he tried to kill me. If I hadn’t moved quickly enough...”

“He took off in that truck?” Blue asked.

“Yeah...” The thought that his commander had indeed tried to kill him was very uncomfortable for Magenta. Blue could relate to the feeling. He patted him on the shoulder.

“You’re okay, though?”

“My pride’s hurt more than anything,” Magenta grumbled. “I feel like I’ve let you down. Even if he IS the colonel, I should have been more prepared for him.” He shook his head, more annoyed at himself than anything else. “One of the hazards of my... er, ‘old job’, was that even good people could turn on you without warning. I should have seen it coming.” He looked at Rhapsody, still beside him. “You’re sure he’s not a Mysteron?”

Rhapsody nodded grimly.

“What did they do to him?” Magenta murmured.

“I don’t know exactly,” the Angel pilot answered sombrely. “But because of that, he has become terribly violent and unstable. He doesn’t remember any of us and regards us as the enemy.”

Magenta gently stroked her cheek; there was a look of concern in his dark eyes. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No... No, I'm absolutely fine," she said with a faint smile.

"Magenta, where's Scarlet?" Blue demanded suddenly, crouching next to his colleague.

The Irish captain nodded toward the direction taken by the vehicle. "In that truck," he answered.

"What?"

"In the rear. I saw him. Looked unconscious..."

"How the Hell..."

"I don't know. I'm just reporting what I saw..." A thought suddenly crossed Magenta's mind and he looked around. "Oh, dear Lord... the Mysteron gun!"

"What?" Blue murmured, suddenly worried.

"Willis was carrying a Mysteron gun... It's not here!" Magenta looked up to Blue with the same look of concern that was on his colleague's features. "The colonel must have taken it," he realised.

Rhapsody had frozen, a look of concern on her face; she stared at Blue. The latter kept himself from cursing; he sprang to his feet, using his mic again. "Lieutenant Green! Do you have that SPV location?"

"*Just got it, Captain Blue,*" the Caribbean voice responded immediately. "*It's twenty miles northeast from your current position.*"

"The fugitive's truck?"

"*According to Helicopter A12, it's going due north. The Angels should pick it up any minute now.*"

"Is that SPV accessible by 'copter?"

"*Yes, sir.*"

"Put me through to Helicopter A04, right away, then!" Blue demanded. "We've got to intercept that truck, before it's too late!"

* * *

Captain Scarlet woke up all of a sudden.

He was lying on his back, and found himself staring at a large rip in a dark canvas, that was flapping in the wind. He could see the sky, clouds and high treetops quickly passing by. He frowned; that sensation of movement he was feeling, that vibration, the low sound of an engine... he was riding inside a vehicle.

He remembered the fall he took from the roof with the colonel; the last thing he'd seen had been the roof of a tarpaulin-covered lorry he was about to hit.

I'm inside it. And it's moving.

Speeding, actually.

Scarlet staggered to his feet. He was physically fine, didn't feel any discomfort resulting from that fall, but the lorry's movement made it difficult for him to stand. Above the sound of the vehicle engine, he could definitely hear the roar of a helicopter rotor. He raised his eyes again and, through the rip, caught a glimpse of a Spectrum Helijet, following the progress of the lorry.

A wild guess who was behind the wheel.

Good, Scarlet mused. *Spectrum hasn't lost us.* He knew they wouldn't let the colonel escape that easily.

He had to admit he was rather impressed to see that the Old Man was well able to hold his own. He had been the best, during his time as a field agent in the Universal Secret Service. And despite his age, he was still going strong. The Mysterons, as always, had not made an idle choice by taking him over.

Right. They killed him. Mysteronised him... and left us to do the dirty work and pick up the pieces...

Now, Spectrum had no choice but to stop its commander.

Captain Scarlet looked up toward the rip; he didn't lose time pondering what his next course of action would be.

He hauled himself up through the torn tarpaulin and crawled out on his belly onto the soft surface of the roof. Despite the rip, the material was strong enough to support his weight and, carefully hanging to the railings and keeping close to the roof to avoid being blown away by the rushing wind, he began to silently move toward the driver's cabin...

* * *

Charles Gray couldn't shake that damnable helicopter flying over him. It was still following his vehicle twenty minutes after he had fled the complex in such a hurry.

It was curious how it wouldn't attack to stop him. He had seen one of those helicopters up close, he knew it had firepower. It could blow him away any time its pilot wanted to... But he wasn't doing it.

If you think I'm going to lead you to the others, think again, my friend! I'm not that kind of fool. I'll find a way to lose you.

The lorry was following the edge of a wood. Now, if he could just find a way in, maybe the fugitive would be able to lose himself under the trees...

There, up ahead. There was a gap in the trees; apparently a narrow beaten path... And quite fortunately, a lot of high trees hid its presence from the sky. Gray made a rough turn into it. The helicopter pilot wouldn't be fooled, certainly. He would notice the lorry's disappearance from the road, and would guess it had taken

a shortcut between the trees. By the time he actually found the route the vehicle had followed...

Well, it's a long shot, Gray realised grimly. *But one is always entitled to dream, right?*

It was worth a try, anyway.

Gray looked up; he could still see the helicopter hovering way above the treetops. He wasn't sure if its pilot was still able to see him, or if it was still following him, but he made no attempt to slow his vehicle down, even considering how bumpy the path had become.

Gray then heard a kind of a thump coming from the cabin roof. As if a great weight had fallen onto it. He didn't really have the time to ponder what it was, as he saw a shadow suddenly appearing outside, on the left side of the cabin. The door burst open and a streak of red came straight at him. Gray just had the chance to recognise the bright uniform, before he was hit in the stomach. The breath driven out of him, he almost lost hold of the wheel.

He hadn't forgotten about the Spectrum officer he knew was riding in the back of the lorry. Considering his state of unconsciousness, after that fall, he had just dismissed the possibility that the man would pose a real, immediate threat to him. He realised now he had made a big mistake by underestimating him so. The young chap seemed quite resilient and certainly determined to stop him at all cost.

He went for the wheel and the pedals. Gray wasn't about to let him take control and fought him off. Elbows and fists flew around in the narrow space of the small cabin. The lorry wove dangerously to and fro on the bumpy road, and its speed had increased.

We could hit a tree any second, Gray grimly noticed. And at this speed, it could prove fatal. He had just realised the danger when the vehicle swerved violently across the road before going straight into a ditch alongside of it. Gray gave a violent shove to disengage himself from his opponent and brutally slammed down the brake. The sudden stop made the Spectrum officer totally lose his grip on the wheel, and threw him against the dashboard.

Seconds before the vehicle tilted over into the ditch, the captain was thrown out of it. Gray hung on to the wheel, as the lorry overturned three times, rolling down the ditch, ripping its tarpaulin, losing tyres, and sending mechanical parts flying all around. It finally came to a halt at the bottom of the ditch, and lay there on its side, broken, completely useless.

For a few seconds, all was silent. Then a hand pushed open the door of the lorry and Charles Gray extricated himself from it. He jumped on the ground, stumbled, and fell on his knees,

breathing hard. As badly shaken as he was, with multiple bruises and cuts, he considered himself lucky. No bones broken, and while he was sure his muscles would ache horribly before long, he knew he hadn't ripped any of them.

However, what a headache he had! It was getting harder to think... The shock of that brutal fall, most probably. And he was also aware of a rapidly mounting fever. With annoyance, he wiped the perspiration from his brow with his forearm and then glanced at his hand. With blurred vision, he could see it shaking. And it wasn't just his hand: his whole body was shivering. His nerves were crumbling; he was losing it, and losing it fast.

No. Not now, please. I don't have time for this now... If only he still had that medication Shelby had given him...

But he did not. The Spectrum girl had deprived him of it. He would have to go without. He would have to worry about that later, when he got himself out of this jam.

The sound of a rotor made Gray lift his head. Above the dense treetops, he could see the helicopter still overhead... But differently this time. It was circling, as if in search mode. Obviously, its pilot had lost track of his prey. Probably never noticed the crash.

Good. Now would be the chance to get away from those Spectrum agents.

He stood on his feet, staggered for a second and caught himself on the side of the overturned vehicle near him. What direction to go, now? Toward the sea would be the best option. He looked around, trying to orient himself. *Why is it so difficult for me to even do that? I shouldn't have this much trouble...*

He then saw, a few yards away, the motionless body of the red-clad Spectrum officer who had tried to stop him.

He must have made a very bad landing, Gray mused, staring for a moment at the other man. The way he had been ejected out of the lorry, there was no way he could have walked away from it. He was probably dead. Unexplainably, Gray felt a certain sorrow at the thought of the young man's demise. There was a sensation of total, useless waste in this entire situation. It didn't need to come to that.

He walked toward Captain Scarlet and knelt by his side, looking for the slightest sign of life. He turned him on his back and, not really counting on finding any, searched for a pulse on the neck, just below the ear. He was astounded to find it strong and steady. Breathing also seemed regular enough. *That man must have muscles of iron,* Gray mused, shaking his head. He let out a heavy sigh.

"You're a lucky man, Captain," he murmured. "What a waste... A dedicated fellow like you would be such a help to the cause. Too bad you chose to stay loyal to the Government."

He rose and turned to move away, determined to leave before the Spectrum Helicopter found somewhere to land and its occupants came looking for him.

It was then he heard moaning behind him. Gray stopped in his tracks and spun around. The young Spectrum captain, still half stunned by his fall, was unsteadily trying to raise himself on his hands and knees. A dumbfounded Gray shook his head in dismay.

"I don't believe this," he muttered.

He felt the rush of adrenaline, as fury built inside him. Slowly, he came back toward Scarlet, picking up a thick dead branch lying on the ground.

"Stay DOWN, son," he suggested in a warning tone to the young man who was trying to regain his senses.

He wasn't sure Scarlet had heard him, but he saw his hand searching for the gun that was still in its holster. He stood over him. "Don't you ever give up?"

The second he saw the pistol out of its holster, Gray hit the extended arm with his improvised weapon. The gun flew out of Scarlet's hand and fell to the ground, out of either man's reach. With the same swift movement, the former admiral brutally struck Scarlet in the side. The Spectrum officer let out a grunt and sprawled on his back, clutching his side. An angry Gray approached him. "I said to stay down! You'd better listen, it's for your own good!"

Scarlet blinked, trying to dispel the pain, along with the fog his mind was in. He tried again to get up; a vicious kick in his belly knocked him back onto the leaf-covered ground. He was too incapacitated to avoid another blow from the wooden staff, which caught him over the shoulders.

"Why won't you keep down?" he heard White shouting at him. "I don't want to hurt you... I don't want to KILL you. I just want you off my back long enough for me to get away from here!"

Again, Scarlet tried to rise. He bit his lip; his whole body hurt. He was fairly certain he had a few broken ribs. "I can't... let you go," the told the colonel in reply to his tirade.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the staff coming again. To protect his head, he raised his arm and received the blow across it. He rolled with it, and found himself sprawled against the foot of a tree. *Maybe I'll be able to get some leverage from here...*

Gray saw the young man supporting himself against the tree as he staggered to his feet. His icy blue eyes glared daggers. "If I don't stop you," Scarlet continued in an even voice, though it was easy enough to hear the pain in it, "somebody else will."

A *stubborn one*, the brainwashed Spectrum commander mused, half-impressed, half-dismayed by the young officer's dedication. *He leaves me no choice.*

That infuriated him. More than it should have.

"You don't want to stay down?" he barked at Scarlet. "Good! Suit yourself, then! That's quite all right by me! I didn't want the situation to come down to this, but you're giving me no other choice! I can guarantee you, I'll kill you before you take me alive!"

White raised his staff higher. *Here it comes*, Scarlet realised, his eyes riveted on the man he thought was a Mysteron. *He's going for the kill...*

Gray knew a moment of hesitation. The young man's intense stare had stopped him. He could see no fear in it, just a determination, and a coolness he didn't often witness. There was something familiar in that look. He couldn't figure out what exactly; but it was so vivid he could not bring himself to strike the Spectrum officer.

The unexpected delay was the opportunity Captain Scarlet was hoping for. Colonel White was wide open. *Now or never...*

Pushing himself off the tree, Scarlet lurched at White. He felt the wind of the thick staff passing only millimetres over his head as he rammed into the other man's stomach and drove him back. The two crashed into some bushes covered with very nasty thorns. The fall broke the struggle. Scarlet quickly stood up, holding his left side, gritting his teeth in pain, and watched as White, who had lost hold of his club, also struggled to his feet, leaning on a nearby tree.

"All right! If you want me, come and get me!" Scarlet goaded his opponent, his eyes flashing with anger. "For what your masters have done, so help me, I'm going to kill you!"

White launched himself at Scarlet from a crouching position, with a roar of fury. He slammed him against the wreckage of the lorry. Scarlet's already injured back hit hard, sending another wave of pain through his entire body. White smashed his fist into the younger man's stomach, then hit him on the chin.

Scarlet avoided a second blow to his face just in time; instead, the fist hit the metal surface of the lorry and a muffled cry of pain and frustration burst out from between Colonel White's teeth. Scarlet jabbed his opponent's side, driving him out of the way just

long enough for him to dive away from his position against the wreck.

He delivered one punch to White's jaw, and was about to hit him again when he froze suddenly; the eyes staring at him, with that glitter of frenzy inside them, were definitely those of his commander, a man he had the utmost respect for, somebody he would even have called his friend. They were his, but they were somehow so different now, in the middle of that craggy face, covered with sweat and blood, distorted with the rage of a desperate and possessed man.

Possessed by the power of the Mysterons. Scarlet could not feel the alien's presence in him, as he usually did, but that wasn't so unusual: his built-in detector had sometimes been known to fail him in the past. Now was probably one of those times.

Captain Scarlet's brief hesitation gave a chance for Colonel White to land a vicious blow to his left side. The young Brit winced in pain, as he felt one of his ribs give. *What am I doing? He's as strong as I am, he's about the same weight as me, but I'm younger and should have the advantage. He's fighting like a raging bull, and I'm holding back.* Scarlet realised he was still seeing him as the colonel, not as the Mysteron pawn he had become.

And he's getting the upper hand because of that.

No longer.

The Spectrum officer deflected Charles Gray's next blow, and hit him in the stomach, putting all his strength behind his punches, catching his opponent off guard. His breath knocked out of him, the renegade's knees gave way. A series of quick and angry punches stunned him. He already had trouble seeing clearly, but now it was a complete blur of colours; he tried to get hold of the young man's body, to stop him from hitting so blindly. He missed. And a last blow to his already wounded temple drove him to his knees, at the foot of a tree.

The colonel stayed there for a couple of seconds, panting, trying to catch his breath and to regain his senses; Scarlet was standing nearby, ready to strike if he should come back. He watched in dismay as the older man clutched desperately at the tree and tried to help himself up. *I can't believe he's still trying! Doesn't he know when he's beaten? Obviously not.* Colonel White never was a man willing to yield. That certainly was one of his most enduring traits.

But the confused ex-admiral Gray had overestimated his capacity and couldn't find the strength to get up. His head reeling, his whole body in pain, he sprawled back onto the ground with a low moan and lay there motionless.

Keeping a careful eye on the man he still thought was a Mysteron, Captain Scarlet looked around for the gun he had lost; the one Blue had given him before he set out on pursuit of the colonel. He saw it on the leaf-covered ground, close to the overturned lorry. The Spectrum agent went toward it, and bent over to pick it up. Straightening up, he got a peek at the inside of the vehicle's cabin, and something caught his attention. He frowned in perplexity.

There was a Mysteron gun in there. *How the Hell did the colonel get his hands on one of those?* Scarlet wondered. *Could it be he was planning to kill me with that?*

Electricity was the Mysterons' Achilles heel; it was the only way to kill an otherwise indestructible Mysteron agent with certain effectiveness. From this discovery originated the creation of the Mysteron gun... which projected electron bolts against its target. Since Scarlet himself had been Mysteronised, his body recreated in the same fashion as the other duplicated agents, it was a good bet this weapon would destroy him as well as them.

He got his arm through the opening and pulled the weapon to him. He had to pull hard, as it was stuck under the dashboard.

When he finally got it out, Scarlet looked closely at the weapon. The barrel didn't appear as straight as it should have been, and the box containing the fragile mechanisms of the electron gun had a large dent in it. That probably occurred during the accident, Scarlet mused. He wasn't sure if the weapon was damaged or not. If so, it wasn't really reliable. The memory of what had happened some months ago, to the Mysteron agent who had stolen the prototype handgun the Spectrum Research Centre had built, was still clear in Scarlet's mind. The gun was defective, and when the Mysteron tried to use it against Scarlet, the weapon's circuitry overloaded and the electric charge surged through the Mysteron's body instead.

Right, I'm not about to use THIS gun, Scarlet thought grimly, leaning the Mysteron gun against the lorry. He would have to use Captain Blue's pistol, after all. It was insufficient to definitely stop a Mysteron, perhaps... but at least, it'd do the job temporarily. *And I won't risk getting myself electrocuted,* Scarlet added to himself.

A groan from Colonel White drew his attention. He came back to the man who was trying to rise anew, and looked down grimly at him. *This is not going to be easy,* he thought. He grabbed the alleged Mysteron by the collar of his T-shirt and forced him to his knees, putting the barrel of the gun to his head.

"You stay quiet," he said with a threatening tone. "ONE wrong move from you and I'll blow your brains out!"

The colonel uneasily straightened up on his knees. He still had difficulty keeping his balance, but he managed to stand as tall as he could.

"Put your hands on your head!" Scarlet ordered again. "With your palms up... carefully!"

White obeyed passively, still trying to regain his breath. "It seems you have the upper hand for now, son..."

"Don't call me that!" Scarlet barked angrily. The tone the 'Mysteron' was now using reminded him a little too much of the real Colonel White, whom he believed dead. He stepped back behind the man, his gun still aimed at the white head. He tasted blood in his mouth and spat it out in disgust. He had trouble focusing, as his head was spinning. There was something damp running down the side of his right ear. *Great. A concussion.* It would take a few minutes before his retrometabolism healed that. In the meantime, he'd have to put up with it and concentrate on his job.

He hesitated. Truth to tell, he didn't know if he should pull the trigger, now.

Capturing Mysteron agents wasn't something that commonly happened. They usually let themselves be killed, even going to the extent of destroying themselves, rather than be taken as prisoners. This one had already claimed that he would not be taken alive. And yet, here he was, in Captain Scarlet's own hands.

Could he be taken from the influence of his masters? Scarlet was himself the living proof that it was possible. But he was the one and only escapee of the Mysteronisation procedure. Because he was probably still alive when they scanned his body to create a duplicate of him... It was believed the Mysterons were now taking good care not to make that mistake, following their loss of control over him. Yet, they had made the same mistake again, with Major Blackheart. But the man was already a madman, and the powers of retrometabolism the Mysterons imbued him with had only served to bring him to the brink of ultimate madness, after he regained his freedom from them. As it was, it was highly probable 'true' Mysteron agents were beyond any help, but even that had never been truly proved.

Now what? What to do with Colonel White? A confused and frustrated Scarlet looked to the sky. He saw the Spectrum Helicopter still hovering up there, still searching for the fugitive. The Spectrum officer's thoughts were very far from that helicopter, as he shouted angrily into empty space, addressing Humanity's alien torturers: "Why did you need to take him, anyway? Why did you have to kill HIM?"

A puzzled Charles Gray thought the man behind him was speaking to him, and wondered who he was talking about. It occurred to him that it was probably the Spectrum commander that red-haired girl had already accused him of having killed... just before she declared HE himself was that commander. There was considerable confusion in all this, but Gray didn't want to figure out what it was exactly. He didn't remember having killed that man. He didn't even know if, indeed, he had killed him. And frankly, he didn't much care. The only thing important in his feverish mind right now was that he was a captive, yet again. And he didn't like it at all. He didn't want to be put back into that damnable contraption which had wreaked total havoc in his head. He didn't remember much, and he didn't know why that thing was used on him, but he still recalled the excruciating pain he felt from that first experience.

They wouldn't use it on him again, he decided with determination. He would rather die first. And the angry and upset young man who was presently keeping a gun aimed at him could very well help him in that matter.

I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I won't come home this time. Please, forgive me.

"You want to know what happened to your commander, don't you, son?" he quietly asked Scarlet.

"Shut up!" Scarlet looked at the Mysteron agent with fury in his eyes. He levelled the gun. "I've got half a mind to..."

"Why don't you do it, then?" White taunted him. "Why don't you pull that trigger and be done with it?"

"Don't TEMPT me!" Scarlet spat out. "I'm sick and tired of how you Mysterons keep manipulating and using us! And you seem to have a fancy for Spectrum members. First Black, then Brown and me, then Captain Indigo. And let's not forget the failed attempts against Destiny and Colonel White. Now you've killed HIM as well. One of the most decent men I have ever known! He even offered you peace once, and you shunted him aside! Well, that's the end of the line, mister. It's finished! I will not let YOU hurt other innocent people!"

Mysterons? Gray mused, frowning to himself. That word again... He wondered who they were exactly, why those Spectrum people kept mentioning them.

No matter. Soon, it will make no difference...

"What are you waiting for?" Gray asked Scarlet in a grim tone. "Come on, shoot! Or perhaps you like to make the pleasure last?"

"Tell me what you did with the body!" Scarlet barked, forcing himself not to listen to the taunting voice.

"The body?"

“Colonel White’s dead body! We haven’t found it yet! I know Mysteron agents have the habit of hiding the bodies of their victims... Where did you put it?”

Gray had not the slightest idea. He shrugged, indifferently. “You can search all you want, you’ll never find it.”

“Tell me where he is!” Scarlet demanded in anger. “He deserves a decent burial!”

Gray could clearly feel by the fury he heard in the young man’s voice that he was about to lose it. Have to keep it up; don’t let him think too much...

“What does it matter where the body is?” he said with an arrogant edge to his voice. “He’s dead. Nothing you can say or do will change that fact!”

“Why you...”

“I killed him. Shot him through the head. Isn’t that what you really want to hear me say? Now avenge your commander’s death and pull that trigger!”

Scarlet was on the brink of doing it; but the words he just heard made him reconsider. He looked intently at the kneeling man, who still had his back to him. Gray couldn’t see the perplexity on the young captain’s face, but he did notice his hesitation.

“What’s the matter?” he added roughly. “Don’t tell me you can’t work up the courage to shoot an unarmed man? Your Colonel White was unarmed too, when I executed him. I didn’t hesitate one second. Why should you?”

“Why... are you telling me this?” Scarlet murmured, frowning.

“I’m giving you the truth of what happened, that’s all,” Gray replied dully. “I killed your commander, you should kill me.”

“No.” Scarlet instinctively lowered his weapon, his eyes riveted on the back of his prisoner’s head. “This is crazy... There is something... not right.”

Again, Gray had sensed the faltering in the young man’s voice. *This one has a conscience*, he realised sombrely. *He won’t kill in cold blood so easily... The anger in him isn’t enough...*

Yet.

A daring, crazy scheme, suggested by despair, imposed itself into Charles Gray’s mind. *It’s hateful, but I have to do it*, he told himself, trying to disperse his feelings of guilt and repulsion over the very idea.

“So... Maybe you need some more motivation?” he said, between his teeth. “I’ll give you some... That girl I took prisoner at Greg Dooley’s house...”

“What about her?” Scarlet asked, instantly pricking up his ears.

White swallowed hard. "I had my way with her."

Scarlet blinked in surprise. "What?" he whispered.

"You heard me," White nodded nervously. "Ask her, if you don't believe me."

"You're lying," Scarlet realised.

"Am I, really? Ask her, I tell you. Maybe she'll deny it, but surely, you have already noticed her ripped clothes. She wasn't very... cooperative."

"Stop that," Scarlet snapped. "I've heard enough." He approached one step closer. "You're trying to get me angry by telling me all those lies."

"They are not lies."

"Yes, they are. I KNOW they are. You want to make me angry, so I'll pull the trigger and kill you." He shook his head. "You can't fool me. You're not a good liar. The man I know would NEVER act the way you described."

"You said he would never put a knife to a woman's throat either," White scoffed. "But you saw me doing it."

"There is something else," Scarlet replied, scrutinizing the man kneeling in front of him. "Impossibilities..."

"Such as?"

Scarlet tilted his head to one side. "When did you get that wound?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Those cuts on the left side of your head. I saw that after I jumped through the skylight. Were you cut then?"

White shook his head in negation. "No, it was... some hours before that. The girl broke a bottle over my head when we... fought. I told you she wasn't cooperative."

"That's enough of that," Scarlet told him dryly.

"What difference does it make?" White replied in annoyance.

Scarlet did not answer. With perplexity, he was staring at the wound. Normally, if sustained by a Mysteron, a wound like that would have been long healed. Why then was it still there, a few hours later?

Then he noticed something; on the back of his prisoner's neck, half covered by the thickness of his white hair. Carefully, Scarlet approached still closer, and pushed the soggy hair aside, to look more closely. He felt White shiver nervously when he grazed his skin.

"What are you doing?" the older man demanded.

Scarlet said nothing as he narrowed his eyes, looking down on White's neck. It was all covered with feverish sweat, dampening the hair, but that wasn't what was troubling the Spectrum captain.

The flesh on the nape of White's neck was swollen and had an ugly bluish-red colour. There were multiple red dots, all concentrated at the highest part of the neck, where it joined the head. There was no mistake about it, those were needle marks.

The kind of injuries a Mysteron's retrometabolic system would heal almost instantly.

Scarlet's eyes suddenly opened on the obvious. Now everything was clear to him. Why his built-in Mysteron detector had not worked in White's presence. Why this man's behaviour was so unlike Mysterons he had encountered. Why Rhapsody had pushed him away from the line of Blue's fire. Why they hadn't found the dead body of the real Colonel White.

There was no dead body. THIS was the real Colonel White.

"Those marks on your neck," Scarlet murmured in both relief and disbelief. "You've been drugged... You're not a Mysteron agent."

White sighed in frustration. "I don't even know what a damned Mysteron is!" he declared grimly.

Scarlet walked around to face him. The colonel's features were awfully pale, literally showered with sweat, covered with blood and bruises sustained during the recent crash and the fight. *He looks sick*, the English captain noted. *Lord, why didn't I realise sooner what was the matter with him?* The hair stood straight up on his neck at the thought of the way he had hammered his commander and at the realisation that he almost pulled the trigger on him.

"You say you don't know what the Mysterons are?" Scarlet repeated in puzzlement. "Yet, you're acting as their agent..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" White replied between his teeth.

"I have the feeling THAT, at least, is true." Scarlet shook his head. "They didn't Mysteronise you, but they're still using you. Against your will, isn't that right?"

"Go to Hell," White snarled. "If you intend making me talk... You'd better kill me instead."

"Why do you want me to kill you that much?"

"Isn't that what your kind is paid for?"

Scarlet shot him a perplexed look. His kind? A doubt inserted itself into his mind. "Do you know ME, sir?" he asked in a softer tone.

Charles Gray stared at the young man's grim and battered face for a few seconds; yes, it was familiar, somehow. But he wasn't able to recall where he could have seen him. He shook his head.

"Should I know you?"

"You called me 'captain', earlier."

"Isn't that what the girl called you?"

Scarlet hid his dismay and nodded his understanding of the situation. "You don't remember me. You don't remember any of us in Spectrum, I bet. Somehow, the Mysterons have erased your memories."

"What is it?" Gray grumbled in frustration. "You and that girl arranged this little game together? To what purpose are you trying to confuse me?"

"I'm not playing any game," Scarlet answered patiently. "And I'm not trying to confuse you; quite the contrary. You're confused enough as it is..."

Gray didn't reply. Again, Scarlet nodded.

"They have brainwashed you," he continued. "Used drugs to make you follow their orders and make us appear to be the enemy."

"You are the enemy!" White lashed out furiously. "STOP pretending you don't know anything about those drugs! YOUR people did this to me!"

"Nobody in Spectrum would ever do you any harm, sir," Scarlet answered softly. "That I can assure you."

White scoffed dryly. "Oh, that's right... That's why you keep chasing me around, trying to kill me!"

Scarlet shook his head in despair. His commander appeared fairly agitated, and his peaked features indicated how unwell he was. Which wasn't so surprising. "You look ill," he noted, instead of answering his hateful remark. "You need help..."

"I already told you," Colonel White retorted between clenched teeth. "Help from the likes of you, I can do without."

Scarlet sighed. "I thought you would see things that way," he replied. "Nevertheless, like it or not, Spectrum is going to help you."

"That doesn't sound at all comforting," White replied dully.

For a moment, Scarlet tried to figure out what he could say or do to reassure his commander and put his paranoia to rest. It seemed it would not be easy trying to convince him he had nothing to fear... He didn't know where to begin.

Captain Scarlet didn't really have the time to find an answer, as he heard the sound from the rotor of the helicopter still flying over their heads becoming stronger. That could mean only one thing. He looked up to see the aircraft indeed approaching their position over the trees. *The pilot must have finally spotted us*, Scarlet realised. *Too bad I don't have any means of communicating with it.*

Charles Gray was also looking up in complete dismay at the helicopter hovering over them, looking for a possible spot to land.

The minute they put me onboard, there'll be no escape. And the young captain who had captured him didn't seem to want to finish him, like he had hoped he would do. Gray couldn't explain to himself what could have happened for him to change his mind; a few minutes ago, he felt for certain that the young man, unable to control his anger, would shoot him. But then, suddenly, something happened, and his anger had dropped. Nothing Gray had told him, however infuriating, seemed to have worked to make him lose his calmness again.

A wave of despair washed over Gray; again, he was in the enemy's hands; they would do as they pleased with him. Even put him back under interrogation... and onto that abominable operating table, under the care of that 'doctor'.

Gray saw the slightest chance to escape that awful fate when he saw the Spectrum captain's attention being diverted by the hovering helicopter. For one second only. *Last chance, Charles. Try to make it count, or you're done for.*

From the corner of his eye, Captain Scarlet saw Colonel White make his move; so quickly, he hardly had time to react. His drugged commander lurched to his feet and jumped him, trying to go for the gun. The two men struggled for it, and it was all Scarlet could do to keep White from taking the weapon.

"What are you doing? Let go of that... You'll get yourself killed!"

Scarlet realised, almost upon saying the words, that it was exactly what his commander was so desperately looking for.

White's left hand reached for his belt and quickly drew his combat knife. Scarlet instinctively raised his arm to deflect the blow. The razor-sharp blade grazed his forearm and cut a deep enough slash across his face, barely missing his eye. Scarlet let out a muffled groan under the stinging pain, as blood gushed from the wound, half blinding him. Scarcely aware of his opponent's position, and since he could see no other way to stop him, he struck out with a powerful punch.

It caught White right under the chin and drove him back, causing him to lose hold of the gun he was trying to tear from Scarlet's hand. Unfortunately, the Spectrum captain also lost the gun, and it went flying to the ground again, away from the two men. Scarlet didn't see where it fell, but he could see White stumbling away, and ending up with his back against the wreck of the lorry.

A mortified Scarlet then noticed the Mysteron gun he had left leaning there. White saw it too... and took it, aiming it awkwardly, yet in a very effective angle, toward his opponent. The captain froze instantly.

"Don't pull that trigger!" he shouted forcefully.

White stood there, hesitant, holding the Mysteron gun steady, if even in an inexperienced way. Seeing it pointed directly at his chest, just two yards from him, Scarlet swallowed hard. Now, this was a very uncomfortable situation.

"You WON'T take me back in," White proclaimed between his teeth.

"Let go of that weapon, sir," Scarlet demanded, trying to sound as calm as possible. "You don't know what it can do."

"It's a gun, right?" White hissed. "It can kill you."

"Yes, I believe it could, but it can also kill you... or the both of us together, for that matter. Look at it: it was damaged during the accident. If you pull that trigger, there's no telling what might happen."

"You're bluffing!"

"I'm not. Please, put that gun down. I promise, you've got nothing to fear from me. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I've got nothing to lose, son! I won't let you capture me again! I'll die before I'm put back into that *Dream Spinner* contraption!"

Dream Spinner? Scarlet repeated in his mind. *Is that what they used against him?* "Please, sir... Listen to me..."

"No!" White barked savagely. "It's you who'll listen this time! I'm getting away from here! And I don't want you to follow me! If I have to kill you to make sure you won't, I..."

A powerful engine roar interrupted him; three triangular shadows suddenly passed by overhead, skimming the tops of the trees to the point of relieving them of some leaves. Startled, Charles Gray looked up. He just had the time to see three sleek white aircraft already departing. For a fraction of a second, he had let himself be distracted.

The sound of a brief detonation made itself heard, almost covered by the remaining echo of the planes' engines. Scarlet saw White flinch and clutch his right side with his left hand. The Mysteron gun was now pointed upward, away from Scarlet's chest. The captain took advantage of the situation and jumped his drugged commander, without asking himself exactly what was happening.

Colonel White was starting to level the weapon again, but Scarlet reached him in time. He grabbed the barrel with his left hand and pushed it away from him. He saw White's finger instinctively squeezing the trigger. Nothing spectacular happened, but he felt a tingling sensation in the hand that was holding the barrel. That tingling quickly spread up his arm right to his elbow.

The gun was malfunctioning, all right, and there was a fair risk it would overload and explode in the next second. Scarlet karate-

kicked the hand still holding the weapon and tore it out of its user's grasp. There was not much resistance on White's part, and, throwing the gun away from them, Scarlet hit the ground, bringing his commander down with him, shielding him with his own body.

He saw the blinding, blue flash of the electron gun as it exploded, a few yards away from them, and setting fire to a copse of trees and bushes.

Scarlet rose to his knees and looked around grimly. A second later, he realised, they both would have been killed... and this time, he wasn't so sure HE would have come back from it!

As it was, he was quite fine. His arm felt numb from the elbow down to the tips of his fingers and he could feel the annoying itching coming from the already healing gash on his face, but that was all.

As for Colonel White...

Obviously doing his best to stay conscious, he had risen on one elbow to stare with a mix of horror and shocked surprise at the burning trees not that far from them. The sweat beading on his forehead and the pallor of his face were a good indication that he wasn't feeling well at all. He averted his eyes from the fire to look at Scarlet, with a quizzical look.

"You saved my life," he told him with a croak in his voice. "Why...?"

Scarlet did not have the time to respond; White gave a low grunt and dropped down on his back, his strength betraying him for good. He closed his eyes, as his mind gradually fell into oblivion.

Hearing a rustling sound coming from behind him, Scarlet briefly glanced away from Colonel White and raised his head to see Captain Blue running out from behind the thickness of the wood. He had a rifle in his hands. Somehow, Scarlet wasn't even surprised to see him there.

Coming up to his partner and his commander, Captain Blue had flipped down his cap microphone to make a call to Symphony, whom he knew was following him in Helicopter A04. There was a medical team on board who would be able to take care of the colonel. He directed the Angel pilot to a nearby place he had spotted for her craft to land and asked for the medics' immediate assistance, while Scarlet was checking on their apparently unconscious commander.

"How is he?" Blue asked, cutting communication and crouching next to his friend. There was worry in his eyes, as he looked at White.

Scarlet eyed the rifle before turning his attention to the colonel.

"I wish I knew exactly," he said. "He's out of it, right now. I don't think he got hurt in the blast, but..." He looked closely at his commander's right side, where he had seen him reach with his hand earlier, and then stared back at Blue. "You used an anaesthetic on him," he realised.

Blue nodded quietly. After Symphony had dropped him at the location where he had taken the SPV, he had followed directions from Helicopter A12 to try to catch up with the lorry. He had no trouble finding the beaten path in the wood, obviously used by the fugitive vehicle, when it had seemingly disappeared from the road... Seeing the lorry in the ditch, Blue had approached on foot, with the weapon he presently held.

"He didn't leave me much choice, Scarlet," the blond American explained. "When I arrived, he had you covered with the Mysteron gun. I had to act quickly before he could pull the trigger...The Angels provided a helpful diversion so I had time to intervene." He gave a thoughtful look at the burning trees. "I guess you both nearly had it."

"The gun was damaged in the crash," Scarlet explained. He paused a second. "By the way, thank you."

"Don't mention it." He nodded toward White. "You found out he's not a Mysteron?"

"Yes. By the way he talked, what he said to me... It didn't sound right." He shook his head. "He didn't seem to remember me... I also noticed the back of his neck. There are several needle marks on it..."

"On his neck?" As Scarlet nodded slowly, Blue stared at their apparently unconscious commander. He removed his tunic and folded it to form a pillow he carefully put under the colonel's head; doing so, he took a look at the back of his neck. He saw the red spots and swellings on it and shook his head in disgust. "Rhapsody told me that he had some more of those marks on his arm... the left forearm, she said." He lifted the arm and examined the mentioned marks. He exchanged concerned glances with his partner. "What on Earth did those monsters do to him?" He noticed some bruises on the colonel's wrist. The same marks were also apparent on the other wrist. "Look at that: seems he was restrained somehow..."

"Must have been, for them to pump all that stuff into him," Scarlet replied dully. "Knowing him, there's no way he would made it easy for them. He talked about them using a '*Dream Spinner*' on him. I don't know what it is, but I intend to find out."

"Rhapsody also mentioned that."

"How is she?" Scarlet murmured, staring at his friend. He was worried. The last he had seen of Rhapsody, he had left her in the care of Blue. His friend grinned slightly at him.

"Fine, apart from worrying about you," he declared. "We had some worries, when we found out the colonel had taken off with a Mysteron gun, and you were in that truck. We knew we had to find both of you quickly if we wanted to avoid a tragedy."

Scarlet nodded silently. *Nearly had one, too*, he mused.

Blue was staring at the ugly scar across his face. It had become a line of crusted blood.

"That looks painful," Blue noticed, pointing to it.

"It's already beginning to heal, Adam. It will be only a memory in a very short while."

Blue gave a nod; he couldn't help but notice how his friend was using his left arm as little as possible. He saw that his hand had reddened, and that the skin under his nails had blackened at the root.

"You took a hefty shock from that defective Mysteron gun, didn't you?" the American asked with a tone of concern.

"My arm just feels a little numb," Scarlet muttered. "That's all."

"That's all? My God, Paul... You know you could have been killed!"

"Yes, HIM too!" Scarlet replied with annoyance, facing his friend squarely. "I will heal, Captain... But I'm not so sure about the colonel, right now..."

As if on cue, the Spectrum commander than gave a low moan and the two men returned their attention to him. He didn't open his eyes, to indicate he was still conscious; instead, his body began to shudder violently, before the alarmed gaze of the captains.

"He's going into convulsions," Scarlet realised quickly, leaning back toward White.

"Lord, he must be having a reaction to that anaesthetic, combined with all those drugs already in his bloodstream..." A worried Blue swiftly flipped down his cap microphone. "Captain Blue to Symphony Angel... What's the ETA on that medic team?"

"They're already on the ground, Captain, making their way toward you..." the Angel pilot quickly answered him. "They should be with you any minute, now." Blue heard Symphony hesitate, and then she spoke again, her voice filled with concern. "What's going on there?"

Blue didn't answer his compatriot right away, but looked toward Scarlet who was doing his best to take care of, and comfort, their agitated commander. Somehow, he felt guilty for having shot him

with the anaesthetic dart, but he knew he had had no choice in the matter. He shrugged off the thought.

Scarlet had his hands full with the colonel. "Call Cloudbase," he told his partner, wrapping his arms around White to prevent him from hurting himself. "Tell Doctor Fawn to have the sickbay ready for the colonel... We've got to bring him in."

"S.I.G., Captain," Blue responded dully. He saw a team of three men coming from behind the trees; they arrived at a run, then knelt beside Colonel White, taking the place of Captain Scarlet. That was the medic team from Helicopter A04, finally there to tend to the Spectrum commander.

Giving a sigh of relief, Captain Blue radioed the helicopter: "The medics are here, Symphony. We'll join you in a few minutes." Then he used his radio cap again, and made the call to Cloudbase.

Chapter 9

The same explosion... Like before. It kept coming back, again and again. Fiery, blinding...

...Burning.

Charles Gray could feel the heat scorching through him, consuming his body, his mind, his very soul. He fought against it, desperately, trying to get away from it.

But always, it was there; he could not escape it, no matter how hard he tried. He could not forget; he was still haunted by the sight of the fiery wreckage of the helicopter falling into the sea, taking his father's life with it.

Father... I could not save you...

Please, forgive me.

Through that eerie fog covering his mind, he witnessed it, over and over again, and was powerless to do anything while his father was dying so horribly... It was absolutely maddening. Somebody was responsible for that. A man he had trusted to this day and whom he would never have thought would have betrayed him the way he did. He remembered that he had been warned against that man.

In his tortured and confused memory, the scene of the falling, burning helicopter was suddenly replaced by the image of that man, wearing the uniform of a commander of the British Navy.

Jack... What have you done? WHY did you have to do that? I thought we were... friends...

He saw himself, entering a ship cabin – his cabin – finding Commander Jackson Bennett going through his personal things...

"What do you think you're doing here?" he called out furiously to the man.

He recalled his surprise when he saw a pistol appear suddenly in Bennett's hand, aimed straight at him. *"Looking for proof that you're dabbling in treason!"* Jackson had replied accusingly.

Gray had taken a step forward, oblivious to the threatening weapon. *"So, murdering my father wasn't enough for you, then? You want to kill me too?"*

He remembered fighting for control of the gun; then a detonation echoed in the small cabin.

Gray winced; *I killed him*, was the thought imposing itself in his mind. *That murdering scum... I killed him.*

The rest of his memories of this moment were drowned in a wave of confusion. He felt so weak. Even thinking straight was a difficult task. Where was he? What had happened to him?

"Hang on, sir. We're going to get you out of this."

That was another flash into Gray's tortured mind. He was feeling pain, throughout his body. A face was looking down at him. A young man with black hair, who gazed at him with concern. *"You're safe now, Admiral. We'll get you to a hospital."* That was the young man addressing him, in a decidedly American accent.

He remembered that he had grabbed the man by his sleeve, weakly. *"My wife... She was with me... Where is she?"*

The man gave him an odd look. *"Please, sir... Don't upset yourself. You're badly wounded."*

There was a distressed flash in the young man's sombre eyes. *What is the matter? Why won't he tell me?* Gray thought, very confused, filled with apprehension and grief over his beloved wife.

Elizabeth... Where are you?

And that young man... He should know who he was, he was sure of that.

Conrad...

Recollection of that name forced another memory, this one very recent, into Gray's mind. This time again, he was betrayed. By another man who had also been under his command. By someone who had saved his life and whom he had once considered a very close friend.

"Conrad... Don't let them do this!" His heart sank deeply into distress when his friend turned his back on him to leave him strapped down on some sort of operating table. The pain in his heart was almost as great as the pain his whole body and mind endured at that time.

He was helpless, and couldn't hope for any form of help, as they tormented him, trying to break him... He didn't know what exactly they wanted out of him. He just remembered how horribly they had hurt him.

The memory faded, but the pain stayed, excruciatingly alive in Gray's mind. For now, he was free of his restraints, but he could hardly rise from where he lay, although he was moving restlessly, trying to get away from these painful memories, to get out of this nightmare he was plunged into. It was so hard, and he felt so weak...

He was barely aware of people moving around him, tending him; somebody was putting a pad on his forehead, attempting to cool down his burning fever. Soothing voices were calling to him,

trying to reach him, to reassure him. He wanted so much to talk to these people, to ask them who they were and what they wanted of him. He could not.

It took a while before he realised that this time, however, it wasn't his memories playing tricks with his mind. This time, what he felt, what he heard, was real.

He finally opened his eyes, wearily. Through a fuzzy haze, he saw the worried features of a brown-haired man in his late thirties, looking down at him. He was wearing a white coat, like that of a doctor.

"You're awake," the man said, with an expression of relief and satisfaction upon his features, so obvious it could not be fake. "Thank God, you're coming out of it..."

"Where... where am I?" Gray asked in a feeble voice.

"Cloudbase, sir. In the sickbay."

"C-Cloudbase?" He didn't know that place; yet, the name was somehow familiar to him. He had heard it before.

The man nodded quietly. "You were brought here five hours ago... I've been tending to you ever since. You were burning with fever, delirious..."

"I don't... remember..." Gray murmured weakly.

He looked around. He was in some sort of hospital room. There was a projector above him, which was presently shut down and turned away from him. A table full of instruments and assorted bottles stood beside him. And he was lying on a padded examination table.

That gave him an uncomfortable impression of *déjà vu*.

Then it occurred to him. *Cloudbase*. That Spectrum girl he had captured at Dooley's home... It was she who had said that name. He was in the power of Spectrum. He was back into enemy's hands. Despair filled his heart.

"No," he whispered. "Not again... I won't let it happen again..."

He tried to rise from where he lay, but exhaustion pushed him back.

Why am I so weak? Why is it so hard for me to think? I can't stay here. I must get away.

In his desperation, he found the strength to pull himself up. The doctor next to him tried to push him back into a lying position.

"Sir, don't try to get up. You need your rest. You..."

"Keep away from me!"

Gray brutally shoved the man aside and succeeded in sitting up straight and swinging his legs off the bed in the same movement. Every muscle of his body was killing him, not to mention his head, as heavy as it could be. He saw the man raising his head toward an intercom.

"Doctor Fawn to Security! S.I.R. in sickbay!"

Doctor Fawn, Cloudbase's chief medical officer, watched in total dismay as Colonel White made to jump down from the table, where, for the last five hours or so, he had lain, moving restlessly, and mumbling feverishly. During that time, Fawn had treated his physical injuries, and had done his best to draw him out of the delirium the combination of the different drugs in his system had caused. He had just begun to get some positive results when the Spectrum commander had finally awakened.

He certainly wasn't well enough to be on his feet, Fawn thought quickly. And anyway, having learnt of the colonel's erratic behaviour of late, it wouldn't be safe to have him up and free at this time. He immediately gestured toward his assistant, standing at the other side of the room, working at a table to analyse a sample of blood he had taken from the patient earlier. The medic quickly came over and tried to restrain White. Despite his apparent state of weakness, the latter seemed ready for him and struck like lightning as soon as the man's hands were on him. His elbow caught him in the stomach first, then he hit him under the chin with his right fist. The well-intentioned medic fell heavily to the floor, stunned.

Charles Gray jumped to his feet. He was still staggering, but he was determined to try and escape this place. He turned his feverish attention to Doctor Fawn, standing a few feet from him.

The medical officer was starting to move closer, to help his assistant; he froze when he saw White taking an uneasy step in his direction. "Come here, now, 'Doctor'," the older man told him in an ominous tone. "I'm curious to learn what you had in store for me this time..."

Fawn stepped back. He could see the angry flash in the blue eyes that stared at him; clearly, there was murder in them. There was little doubt in Fawn's mind that the Spectrum commander had suffered a great deal at the hands of so-called 'doctors'... and that he now fully intended making HIM pay for that.

"For God's sake, Charles..." Fawn was desperate enough to call Colonel White by his real name, hoping it would somehow reach him, or perhaps even bring him to his senses. Obviously, as White continued his approach, it didn't work at all.

I'm dead, Fawn thought, all hope gone.

That was when a streak of blue appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and rammed violently into Colonel White, driving him back.

From the hallway where he was with Symphony – after all those hours, the two of them were coming over to learn how Colonel White was doing now – Captain Blue had heard Doctor Fawn’s desperate call over the intercom. He had stepped into the examination room just in time to see his commander trying to get his hands on the doctor. There was little time to think this over and so he simply threw himself at the colonel in order to stop him. White never saw him coming; he was thrown off-balance and sprawled onto the examination table behind him.

Blue succeeded in putting the colonel into a strong arm and shoulder lock, pushing his face down on the padded surface of the table. It wasn’t easy trying to keep him still, but the captain didn’t let go and made use of all of his strength and weight advantage to pin him down. From the doorway, where she was standing, Symphony was staring, quite dismayed by the awkwardness of the scene.

“Get your hands off me!” Colonel White demanded angrily, as he struggled to free himself.

“Sorry, sir,” Blue replied evenly. “I can’t let you hurt the good doctor. Believe me, you would hate yourself afterward...”

“I said: release me!” White’s voice sounded weak, despite the fury Blue was trying to contain. He was trying desperately to get out of the armlock. “You won’t be able to hold me forever!”

Obviously not, Blue realised, seeing how furiously White was struggling to free himself. He was stronger than the American captain expected him to be. Blue had to call on all of his strength to restrain him.

The medic White had previously manhandled was getting to his feet, trying to overcome his discomfort. Symphony entered to help Doctor Fawn keep him steady on his feet. At that moment, three security guards, responding to Fawn’s earlier call, rushed into the room. They came towards Captain Blue, who was still holding his opponent tightly. The captain let them handle their commander on their own, and let go of him as soon as he was sure they had him well in hand. They kept him down on the table and wrenched both his arms behind his back. Captain Blue, who had stepped in front of him, saw him wince.

“Be careful!” he told the guards sternly. “Restrain him, but DON’T hurt him.”

Colonel White was staring straight at Captain Blue, as a sturdy pair of shackles was snapped closed around his wrists. There was anger in his eyes. Along with fear and exhaustion. And no recognition whatsoever.

“I’m sorry for all this, sir,” Blue told his superior, in an apologetic tone.

"I'll get you for this!" White replied with a warning, promising tone.

Blue could see he meant it. "It's just a temporary measure," he responded, "until you cool off."

He addressed a nod to the three guards, who then raised their prisoner to his feet; he was still trying to get out of their hands, but there was little he could accomplish, since he was now shackled and they were holding him tight. He gave one last frenzied look toward Blue.

"You're going to hook me back to that *Dream Spinner* device, aren't you?" There was anger in the colonel's tone, but also despair and fear. Hearing his words, Symphony raised her head, staring at him with a quizzical and perplexed look.

"I promise you," Blue replied, "You won't be hurt. We're going to get you out of this. And we won't let the Mysterons get away with this."

"I don't know what these 'Mysterons' are!" White growled furiously. "I don't know what YOU people want from me! But I tell you, you WON'T find I'm an easy prisoner!"

"I didn't think we would," Blue noted, sadly. He looked at the guards. "I don't want him to leave the medical centre. Have him take a good shower, and bring him to a secured room. Medical personnel will see to him there, and tend to him. Give him something to eat..."

"I don't want ANYTHING from you!" White raged on.

"That's not wise, sir. I suggest you save some of your strength and make the most of our hospitality." Blue addressed the guards anew. "I don't want YOU to let him out of your sight. He's not to leave his room, without specific orders from Captain Scarlet or me. Understood?"

"S.I.G., Captain Blue."

"One more thing." Blue eyed Colonel White; the older man glared at him, infuriated. "Treat him well. Don't forget WHO he is." He was tempted to add '*He's not responsible for what he's doing*', but he kept that to himself. He watched silently as the three guards took the Spectrum commander out of the room.

Lost deep in his thoughts, Blue was barely aware of Symphony's presence near him, and only noticed her when she gently touched his shoulder. "You don't look too good, Adam," she murmured.

He shook his head, apparently distraught, and looked down at his hands. "I had no idea he was THAT strong," he replied in a whisper. He frowned. "To be forced to treat him that way... Can you believe what they have done to him? Is there anything they won't do?"

"I suppose not," the young woman answered. "But..." she sighed heavily, "at least, they didn't KILL him. The way they did with Captain Scarlet."

Blue stared at her with a quizzical look; there was something in what she had just said... A puzzling question he had not thought about, right up to this moment.

"What is it, Captain?" Symphony asked, seeing him so lost in thought.

"I don't know, I..." Blue shrugged. "There's something nagging me in all this."

Symphony nodded quietly. "Was it my imagination," she then said, "or did the colonel mentioned something about a... *Dream Spinner*?"

He stared closely at her. "Yes, he did. Why? Does that mean anything to you?"

She sighed. "Yes. Yes it does. It's some kind of mind control device I heard about, during my days in the Secret Service. Very nasty thing, I reckon. It can screw up a man's brain..."

"That, I can believe," Blue murmured. "What else do you know?"

"I'm not an expert on the subject, so I suggest that you communicate with the U.S.S. to see what they can tell you about it."

Blue nodded his agreement. "I'll inform Doctor Fawn."

Meanwhile, Doctor Fawn was giving his assistant his latest instructions regarding the patient. "Keep him under close observation," Fawn recommended. "Make sure he doesn't develop another fever or slip back into delirium. If you have to talk to him, don't say anything that might alarm him in any way. I'll come to see him shortly."

The man nodded his understanding and left the room. Fawn approached Blue and Symphony. He was still looking a bit shaken.

"Thank you, Captain," he said. "If you hadn't arrived when you did... I swear, he was about to kill me."

"He could very WELL have killed you, Doctor!" Blue replied sharply. "WHY wasn't he in restraints? You knew the state he was in!"

"He was, up until a few minutes ago. I wanted to check the injection marks on his neck, so I removed the restraints. I was just about to replace them when he woke up."

Blue took a deep breath to calm himself before he responded. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Doctor. It's just that I've seen what he can do to people. If I hadn't been here, he probably would have

killed you. I don't think he would have had any scruples about it. He didn't hesitate to shoot Ochre, and came close to killing Magenta. The poor guy was lucky to get only a broken nose."

"Not to mention that he would surely have killed Scarlet if you hadn't been around to stop him," Fawn nodded.

"I think you're selling him a little short, here," Symphony protested at this moment. "What about Rhapsody?"

"He kidnapped her," Blue replied. "Held a knife to her throat."

"But didn't harm her," Symphony insisted. "She told me he protected her from the others..."

"Symphony," Blue told the young woman gently, "I KNOW he's not responsible for his actions... I'm just pointing out that he could be very dangerous in the state he's in right now. And believe me, Rhapsody is the FIRST to admit he's to be approached with extreme caution."

Captain Blue was the one who had received Rhapsody's report, about two hours ago. She had told him many interesting things, notably that she had discovered that the other men with Colonel White were no more Mysterons than he was himself, and that there was mention of a ship, where some 'material' for their mission was to be transported. She didn't know what the material was, nor what kind of ship they were referring to, or even what 'mission' they were to perform. But she had the conviction that, unlike the colonel, these other men were quite aware of what they were doing, that they appeared to be mercenaries of some kind. A novelty, coming from the Mysterons, to use hired hands... It was as preoccupying as it was puzzling. It was something that needed to be researched intensively.

Rhapsody didn't report anything much about the way she was treated during her captivity; not in words, and not in her subsequent written report, either. It was quite succinct, and Captain Blue had a feeling it wasn't complete. She didn't lie, of that, he was certain; she just kept quiet about certain parts that may have happened during that time. He wondered why she had done that.

And if she wasn't trying to protect someone.

I may be imagining things, Blue mused, trying to shrug the thought away. *Maybe there's nothing to it, after all...* But he could not shake that feeling, and wondered if, by any chance, Paul could be aware of something he wasn't. Anyway, the British captain was bound to suspect something was wrong when he read Rhapsody's report.

Captain Scarlet hadn't come back in the helicopter that had brought the others back to Cloudbase; he had stayed at the enemy complex, to supervise the search for clues to what exactly

the Mysterons intended to do this time... and possibly some indication of how to help the colonel. He was to inform Blue of any further discoveries that might be made, and was to return to base in two or three hours. In the meantime, Blue had to hold a meeting with the staff to explain the current situation. Captain Blue was hoping they would find something more conclusive very soon. The investigation was still going on, one day had passed, and they were drawing closer to the deadline.

As if all that wasn't bad enough, there were also Spectrum Intelligence's frequent calls to Cloudbase. Agent Conners was still trying to get answers to his questions, and was constantly asking for Colonel White. Helped by Lieutenant Green, Captain Blue had done his best to fend him off. However, it was only a question of time before he suspected something was really going wrong...

"Where's Rhapsody at the moment?" Two hours ago, and after receiving her report, Blue had insisted that the Englishwoman present herself in sickbay for a physical examination. She was looking exhausted after her ordeal, but didn't want to take any rest. He had to order her out, and only then did she reluctantly agree to go. He had not seen the young woman since then.

"My assistant gave her a thorough check up," Fawn answered. "Aside from some minor bruises, she was only suffering from fatigue. When I saw her afterward, I ordered her to get a few hours rest. I reckoned the poor kid had earned it."

"That's quite right," Blue agreed with a faint smile. "So we'd better let her get her rest." Blue looked at his watch; it was now after 5:00 A.M. "It has been more than twenty-four hours since the Mysterons' threat," he said. "We still have forty-eight to go before the deadline, but we are no closer to a solution than we were at the beginning."

"Well, at least, we have Colonel White back with us," Symphony replied.

"A totally screwed up Colonel White. We're counting on you, Doctor, to help him as best as you can."

"You know I will, Captain."

"Symphony suggested that we get in touch with the Universal Secret Service. Seems they can give us information about that '*Dream Spinner*' device that was used to subvert the colonel's mind."

"I'll call them. I already communicated with Doctor Weiss, at the Spectrum Medical Centre. I will need her expertise."

"Do what you must, Doctor, but be discreet about it," Captain Blue noted, lowering his voice. "Remember, we don't want word to get out. And we certainly don't want Intelligence to find out about Colonel White's condition."

"I'll be careful," Fawn answered with a nod.

"Right. Captain Scarlet should be back from the ground in three hours tops. In the meantime, I will hold a meeting with the rest of the senior staff, to let them know what's going on. You don't have to attend, Doctor..."

"...Since I'll be rather busy with my patient, anyway," Doctor Fawn nodded thoughtfully. "Right. Well, be sure I'll inform you on new developments concerning him."

"Thanks, Doc. I know you'll do your very best."

"Keep your hopes up, Captain." Fawn gave a faint smile and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Colonel White is a fighter. I don't think the Mysterons have won this one yet."

* * *

Captain Ochre had the worst time working in his sickbay room.

The nurse assigned to his care – a Miss Lang – wasn't pleased at all to see him sitting up in bed, with a digital computer on his lap, doing research for the investigation in hand. She had taken it on herself to try and convince him to put that aside and to get some rest. Ochre had patiently explained to the overzealous woman that Spectrum was in a state of red alert and that it presently needed all available hands. His wounded shoulder, by his standards, wasn't so much of an issue, and it would certainly not stop him from doing HIS duty.

Nurse Lang was as stubborn as Ochre. She nearly bit Captain Grey's head off when he came the first time with those files for Ochre to review. She did the same when he returned, about an hour later, with new data to check. Like the veteran Navy man he was, Grey knew when he was outclassed and had beaten a hasty retreat. Left alone to fend off the nurse, who had multiplied her efforts toward him, Ochre had to use every means at his disposal, short of physical abuse, to get her to leave him the hell alone.

He was finding some interesting things in the files he was searching when he heard the door of his room slide open. *HER again*, he thought with annoyance, not even raising his eyes from his screen. *What is she up to this time? Will she try slipping a sleeping pill into my glass of water AGAIN?* That was Nurse Lang's latest desperate attempt to get him to rest. Ochre wasn't fooled, and had detected the sedative instantly; he had left the glass on his nightstand, vindictively thinking of a way to slip it back to that pest of a nurse...

He could feel her staring at him insistently. *Maybe if I totally ignore her, she'll leave me alone*, Ochre thought, pursuing his search. *With any luck, she'll get bored and go away*. Several

seconds passed. Then Ochre heard the woman clearing her throat. He frowned.

"When will you understand that I don't need you to take care of me! I've got work to do and you're annoying me! Go away!"

He heard a sigh. "All right, if you want it that way..."

Captain Ochre suddenly raised his head; the woman in front of him wasn't Nurse Lang at all. Instead, clad in a Spectrum Angel uniform, the newcomer gave him an amused grin.

"Rhapsody!" Ochre exclaimed with a voice filled with delight and relief. "Thank God, you're back!"

"So I take it you don't want me to go away?" the young woman asked humorously.

"Certainly not! I thought it was that dam – that nurse coming back to bug me again!"

"Oh yes!" Rhapsody said thoughtfully, sitting on a chair next to the bed. "I did pass by a disgruntled-looking woman, on my way here. She kept mumbling about a stubborn captain who didn't want to take her advice..." She smiled at Ochre. "I'm glad you're all right... Rick."

"And I am glad YOU are, too!" Ochre sighed. "You don't know how worried I felt. I imagined the worst..."

"I was worried about you too," Rhapsody responded. "How's the shoulder?"

"Oh, that..." Ochre gave her a cheerful grin. "That's nothing. In fact, I'll be out of this room in a couple of days... That, or that Nurse Lang will drive me completely nuts!"

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to see you sooner, Captain. After my report, Captain Blue ordered me out for a physical check up... And Doctor Fawn ordered in turn that I get some rest."

"I see people are taking good care of you," Ochre noted with a faint smile.

"Some are overdoing it a bit," Rhapsody replied a bit dryly. "You should have seen how the other Angels reacted to my return... You wouldn't believe the fuss they made of me! I swear, Destiny almost choked the life out of me!"

"It's just that everybody was concerned about you."

"Well, I'm not made of glass, Captain."

"Hey, I know you're a tough lady." He looked closely at her face. "What happened to you exactly? Go a few rounds with the champ?"

She frowned in surprise. "What?"

Ochre smiled and pointed to her left cheek. "You've got a rather nasty bump, there."

"Oh! That..." Rhapsody touched her cheek, where she knew the bruise was, under the makeup she had put on to hide it.

Obviously, it still showed. She grinned back at Ochre. "Things got pretty hectic now and then, Captain. This 'bump' is nothing serious... As they say: 'you should have seen the other guy'."

Ochre nodded slowly. He lowered his gaze. "It's a... strange situation, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it," the young woman sighed. She hesitated. "I can't believe that we ended up fighting the colonel... When I saw him shooting you, Captain..." She didn't finish her sentence and shuddered. Ochre nodded again.

"Thinking about it still gives me the willies, hon. I still wonder why I'm still alive." He paused. "Got any news about him?"

"I was hoping you would give me some."

Captain Ochre shrugged. "Last thing I heard, a few hours ago, he had shaken off that delirium he's been in since he was brought back here..."

"That's GOOD news, isn't it?"

"...But he tried to break free and attack Doctor Fawn."

"He didn't..."

"No. No, Captain Blue stopped him before he could reach Fawn. Since then, he's been held in a secure room. Under close surveillance." Ochre shook his head. "I read your report. You saw him act up close, Rhapsody. He's pretty far gone, isn't he?"

"I don't think he's that 'far gone', Captain," the British pilot replied. "I'm quite sure there's enough of himself still inside that can be reached." She shook her head in dismay. "I just don't know HOW we'll be able to do it and HOW LONG it will take."

"Hopefully, before the deadline the Mysterons set for that new threat of theirs..." Ochre grumbled.

"Why do you say that?" Rhapsody asked with a frown.

"I know Scarlet and Blue are hopeful the colonel will give us some information about what those damned – excuse me – what the Mysterons are up to this time."

"I don't know IF he'll be willing to help, Rick."

Ochre gave the faintest of smiles. "I just noticed... That's the second time you called me 'Rick'. Am I growing on you, by any chance... Dianne?"

"Don't get your hopes up too high, CAPTAIN," the woman replied with a smile of her own. She frowned. "You said you've read my report...?"

"Yes, Captain Grey brought me a copy a couple of hours ago. He asked me to check the names of those guys who were with the colonel at that factory."

"The human agents?" Rhapsody asked. "Did you come up with something useful?"

"I would say, yes..."

A faint knock at the opened door drew their attention; Captain Magenta, sporting a large plaster cast on his nose, poked his dark head through the opening. He addressed a large smile to the two people inside.

"I thought I heard a beautiful voice". His voice had taken on a strange nasal accent; that would have been amusing to Rhapsody if she had not known how he had ended up with a broken nose. "I was pretty sure it wasn't yours, Ochre."

Captain Ochre was staring at the cast covering his Irish counterpart's nose. "Hey, Magenta! That's a nice Jack Nicholson look you've got there!"

"Very funny," Magenta mumbled dryly, entering the room. "I just KNEW you wouldn't let that one pass by! I just hope I will be out of this cast before my holiday in Acapulco... I won't be able to get a proper tan if my nose is covered like this!" He looked at Rhapsody. "I thought you were supposed to get some rest, Rhapsody."

"I did, Captain Magenta," she answered with a smile. "Just woke up a few minutes ago..."

"Used the Room of Sleep, didn't you?" Magenta grinned. "You know what Doctor Fawn thinks about it..."

"Well, it's to be used in cases of emergency, right? The last time I checked, we were in one."

Magenta turned back to Ochre. "I heard you talking... And that's what I'm here for, actually. So you found something about those names in Rhapsody's report?"

"Oh, yes..." Ochre answered, coming back to his computer screen. "I DID find something interesting... I was getting a little deeper into it, before informing Scarlet about what I found."

"I'm sure he will be glad to know about it," Magenta added. "He's waiting impatiently for something positive to come up."

"Captain Scarlet is back from Bristol?" Rhapsody asked him suddenly.

She hadn't had the chance to meet with her fiancé since the episode at the enemy's complex. Scarlet first set out in pursuit of the runaway Colonel White, and then stayed there for the investigation, while Rhapsody was being flown back to Cloudbase with Captain Blue and their rescued commander.

Magenta answered her with a quiet nod. "He's been back for a couple of hours."

Rhapsody frowned; a bit puzzled. "I didn't know," she noted, almost exclusively to herself.

"He's been rather busy..." Magenta replied, failing to notice her thoughtful tone. "And you were supposed to rest, under the doctor's orders, weren't you?"

"Well, I'm not resting any more," Rhapsody replied, standing up. "And I'm quite ready to go back to work. Where should I report back to duty?"

"Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue are in the conference room. Last time I saw them, they were going through files in there, waiting for Doctor Fawn's latest report on Colonel White. I don't think you will disturb them if you report to them right away."

Rhapsody strode toward the door. "Thank you, Captain."

She went out, followed by Ochre's knowing glance. Magenta noticed this and looked at him curiously.

"What's with the smirk, Ochre?" the Irishman asked. "You know something I don't?"

"Maybe someday I'll tell you," Ochre replied with a mysterious glitter in his eyes.

Seeing that he would say no more for the time being, Magenta gave him a withering look, before sighing with annoyance. "You did say you had found something useful in that list for us to use...?"

"Give me a few minutes, and you'll have a full report."

* * *

Captain Scarlet was seated at the place of honour of the conference room – the place that habitually was Colonel White's – and was going through the various files stacked in front of him. The only other people in the room with him were Captain Blue, seated to his right, and Doctor Fawn, who had come a very short while ago to give them the latest information on Colonel White. Scarlet presently had the Spectrum medical chief's report in his hands and had been going through it for the last few minutes. The result was depressing. He raised his head to look at Fawn's grim expression.

"No change?" he finally summed up, very sombrely.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Fawn sighed. "Up until now, Doctor Weiss wasn't able to reach him." He sighed. "You've read the report: he's still utterly convinced that he's at war with Britain's Militarist Government, that held your country some twenty-five years ago..."

"...And that he helped overthrow," Scarlet said nodding. "I already know that, Doctor... He believes the Militarists are still in

control of the country after all these years, that he is wanted for his actions against the State, and that the World Government has abandoned Britain to its fate." He closed the report.

"Add to that that he thinks his wife is still alive and waiting for his return..." Blue then noted for his part. "That he was entrusted by his 'superiors' with a certain mission, and that Spectrum, which is indeed trying to stop him performing that mission, is the enemy."

Scarlet gave a tired sigh. "That doesn't make any sense!"

"To him, it does," Fawn remarked.

"Doesn't he even realise that there are huge incongruities in his assumptions?" Scarlet added. "For starters, the Militarist Government would never have stayed in power for so many years! The World Government would not have left Britain in its clutches, after promising help. The colonel would never have been able to evade capture that long, while continuing to wage war against the Militarists."

"Are you so sure of that one?" Fawn noted with a very faint smile. "You've seen how resilient he is..."

"Thank you, Doctor, you're a great help!" Scarlet replied in annoyance.

"Doctor Weiss already pointed out all those aspects, Captain. Colonel White doesn't want to hear any of them. He refuses to answer questions. About the only things he keeps saying are his name, rank and identification number."

"It says so in your report, yes..." Blue nodded.

"How is he behaving now?" Scarlet asked. "I know how violent he can be..."

Fawn exchanged glances with Captain Blue. "Since the last incident in sickbay, a few hours ago, he's been rather calm. He hasn't made any threatening move toward anyone. Of course, we're not taking any chances with him."

"Meaning?" Scarlet asked, puzzled.

"I ordered him restrained, and with a guard constantly watching over him," Blue answered. "We certainly don't want him attacking Doctor Weiss."

"We certainly don't want that, no," Scarlet mused. "How in Heaven's name did the Mysterons put all those crazy ideas in his head?"

"Thanks to the '*Dream Spinner*,'" Fawn said gloomily. He tapped another file lying next to the one Scarlet had been consulting before. The captain opened it, and Blue leaned toward it to get a peek inside, as the medical officer continued, "Following Symphony's advice, I got in touch with the Universal Secret Service to get some information on the device that was used on Colonel White. They wouldn't tell me much about its origins – they

even appeared to be rather shy about it. But I'm almost certain it was in use on British territory... and that the U.S.S. encountered it a number of times."

"What did they tell you about the effects of the device?" Blue asked.

Fawn shook his head. "Awful things. '*Dream Spinner*' is a bad name for it. It doesn't spin dreams, but pure nightmares. Using a combination of different methods – like electricity, ultrasonic waves with subliminal messages, hallucinogenic gases, and drugs, the device is able to rearrange the patient's memories."

"Rearrange memories?" Blue repeated, raising his eyes toward Fawn.

"Yes. At the basis of the *Dream Spinner* treatment, we find the memory of a real, traumatic event that happened in the life of the patient. Needless to say, that traumatic memory should suit the needs of the... operators. The *Dream Spinner* then weaves other memories – false as well as real – around that single traumatic event. In the process it erases those other memories that can come into conflict with what the operators want from the patient."

"And what the '*Dream Spinner*' puts into his mind becomes reality for the patient," Scarlet said, reading the doctor's report.

"Exactly. Nothing else exists outside of it. And then, to this reality, the... operators of the *Dream Spinner* link a 'mission' the patient is to perform for them."

"Good God," Scarlet murmured.

"You were right," Blue grumbled, reading on too. "This is an absolute nightmare." He paused a second. "Did you discover what kind of drugs were used on the colonel?"

"A rather ingenious and dangerous combination," Fawn sighed. "Some of these drugs I've never seen or even heard about. The auto-analyser came in pretty handy to find out their exact purpose. The majority of it matches what the report on the *Dream Spinner* says that device generally uses." He tapped on the back of his neck with his open hand. "Most of it was injected directly into the brain and nervous system. One of the effects of those solutions is that they induce extreme paranoia in the patient... and put him on constant edge. His adrenaline rate is increased to an incredible level."

"That's why he seemed so strong," Blue realised.

"Well, Colonel White was already a strong man before that," Fawn replied. "And that's probably what kept him alive during the treatment they put him through." Doctor Fawn saw the two younger men giving him a strange look. He nodded slowly. "The U.S.S. expert that talked to me told me the *Dream Spinner* can be used in two different ways: a full treatment takes days, even weeks, to take complete hold of the patient's mind. The other way

is a procedure that takes only about twelve hours at the most... The treatment is forced on the patient, whose vitals are brought to their limits. Only strong subjects survive that ordeal. If need be, they will be kept alive with drugs. An examination of Colonel White indicated the presence of such drugs in his bloodstream."

The two Spectrum captains stared at him in silence. The uneasiness in them was almost palpable. Even the usually calm Blue had difficulty keeping his anger in check; a close look at Scarlet's white features indicated to Fawn that the more volatile English officer had to fight himself not to let his fury get the better of him.

"The colonel disappeared two days ago, probably around 6:00 P.M.," Blue said, clearing his throat. "He reappeared the day after, around midday. Right, I would say they used that forced method on him..."

"If a mind can be subverted in twelve hours," Scarlet then added, "why use the other method at all?"

"Because with days of treatment, the patient is more controllable," Fawn explained. "There is no coming back for him. The reality the *Dream Spinner* then creates for him can't be removed. It is implanted forever."

Blue shuddered at the horrible implications of that possibility. Then a thought quickly imposed itself in his mind, bringing hope. "So there is a chance for Colonel White to get out of this... 'reality' that's been put into his mind?"

"There is a chance, yes. But..."

"I KNEW there was a 'but' somewhere," Scarlet noted sombrely.

"There is another reason why it is preferable for the operators of the *Dream Spinner* to use the long treatment. The forced one has consequences for the patient. He is rather difficult to control. He becomes unstable, erratic, prone to sudden mood changes. He could be violent..."

"Murderous?" Scarlet asked, raising an eyebrow.

"One word, one gesture can set him off," Fawn nodded with a sigh. "There is no telling what he might do." He hesitated. "Those pills Rhapsody took from him?"

"Yes?"

"They were primarily used to keep him in balance. With the treatment he received, constantly on edge, his nerves are in constant danger of breaking down. Those tranquilisers somehow kept him in control."

"That's what he said to Rhapsody, yes," Blue nodded, recalling the young woman's report.

"I suppose they also helped those who were using the colonel to keep him in check," Fawn added. "They certainly didn't want him to turn against them. The stuff is highly addictive, however."

"Addictive?" Blue repeated.

"Yes, Captain. Those pills, combined with all those drugs AND the anaesthetic dart you used on him caused the reaction that brought that delirium."

"He was in some kind of... withdrawal?" Scarlet murmured.

"That's about right. But he should shake that problem fairly easily. He's just lucky he didn't take too many of those pills."

"Great," Blue sighed. "At least there's ONE thing going right here!"

"How can we help Colonel White to get out of this?" Scarlet asked.

"By locating the memory that was used as a basis for the treatment. That memory is like a noose. It keeps the false reality together. We find it, and by working on it, we may be able to defuse the problem."

"May? You're not sure?" Blue said, frowning.

"The procedure may be long. The *Dream Spinner* uses the will of the patient against himself. The stronger the patient's will is..."

"We get the picture," Scarlet interrupted. "We all know how Colonel White is."

"Then you realize it could take days... weeks..."

"We DON'T have days or weeks, Doctor. Merely..." Scarlet checked his watch. "...forty-four hours, starting from now, before the Mysterons' deadline."

"That could prove difficult..."

"But not impossible?"

"I can't give you a definite answer, Captain Scarlet. I don't have much data on this possibility. According to that expert I talked to... It is fairly rare a *Dream Spinner* victim gets out unscathed from the reality that was put in his mind. To his knowledge, there are only two people who succeeded in doing so. The others... were left with the consequences, or..."

"Or...?" Blue repeated, seeing Fawn hesitate.

"...They got themselves killed performing their mission."

"Really marvellous," Blue grumbled. "Well, at least, we succeeded in capturing him, AVOIDING getting him killed. Maybe we'll be able to help him. What could that traumatic memory be, that was used against him?"

"Doctor Weiss is still working to find that out."

"I hope she comes up with something quickly," Scarlet sighed.

A beeping sound made itself heard from the intercom, drawing the three men's attention. Then the voice of Lieutenant Green

boomed into the room: "*Captain Blue, Captain Scarlet... Rhapsody is waiting to see you.*"

The two Captains exchanged glances. "You can let her enter, Lieutenant," Scarlet said after a short instant.

"Yes, sir."

The door to the conference room opened and Rhapsody strode in. She went directly toward Spectrum's two acting commanders and stood to attention before them. "Rhapsody Angel reporting for duty, sirs," she announced quietly.

"At ease, Rhapsody," Blue told her.

The British pilot obeyed. Captain Scarlet was staring intently at her; she noticed it and he welcomed her with a smile. "Good to see you back, Rhapsody," he told her simply.

"Thank you, Captain," she answered with a smile of her own. "I'm really glad to be back." They couldn't say more. Not in front of Doctor Fawn. As much as they wanted to talk to each other, they both knew they would have to wait until it was possible to do so in private.

The good doctor, meanwhile, was casting a stern look toward the young woman. "I thought I ordered you to get some hours of rest, Rhapsody. Shouldn't you be in your quarters right now?"

"I DID get some rest, Doctor," Rhapsody answered quietly. She had the impression of already having had this conversation before. With Captain Magenta.

"Right. Four hours or so. Considering what you've been through, I don't think it's enough."

"We have a small thing here that's called the 'Room of Sleep', Doctor," Rhapsody reminded him patiently. "Don't you remember? We use it in state of red alert and emergency, when we need to rest for a while..."

"Better and better," Fawn mumbled. "Cramming eight to ten hours of sleep into only four, thanks to some artificial sleep inducing device... That's not natural and it's not good for health. Physical and psychological."

There were smiles coming from everybody else in the room. They all knew Fawn's aversion to the Room of Sleep.

"I blame you for this, Captain," Fawn continued, turning to Scarlet.

"Me?" a surprised Scarlet replied. "Why?"

"Because of your peculiar physiology, enabling you to sleep only two or three hours a night. People are trying to keep up with you."

"Right, it's my fault," Scarlet said with a grim smile. "And the Room of Sleep was invented a year before I acquired that... physiology, for everybody's use."

"I don't know why I even try," Fawn sighed heavily. "I'd better get back to sickbay. I'll keep you informed on any developments about Colonel White's situation."

"Do that, please, Doctor."

"I'd better go with you, Doctor," Blue then added quickly, standing up. "I want to see for myself how things are going between Doctor Weiss and the colonel."

"If you want, Captain Blue..."

Scarlet rose as the two men went out together and the door slid closed behind them.

For a short moment, both he and Rhapsody Angel stared at it, before looking at each other. There was an unaccustomed uneasiness between them.

"I heard you were back," she finally said.

"Yes, I arrived on base whilst you were sleeping."

"You could have awakened me," she said with a shy smile. "If you needed to ask me something about my report, of course," she added quickly.

Scarlet shook his head. "You needed your rest, after..." He stopped suddenly, wanting to say something else but catching himself. "...after what I read in your report." He came over to her and took her hand in his, his voice revealing deep concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I...I'm fine," Rhapsody replied, reaching her other hand up to stroke his cheek. She smiled again, this time warmly. "Thanks to you."

Scarlet took the young woman in his arms and drew her against his heart, before she could make another move. He held her in an ever-lasting embrace, kissing her passionately. When their lips parted, after a long moment, he looked her in the eyes. "I was so worried about you, Angel," he whispered, not wanting to let her go.

"And I was worried about you as well," Rhapsody replied softly. "But I'm all right now, really."

He held her a little longer, then regretfully broke the embrace and motioned for her to sit. "I'm sorry, love, but I do have to ask you some more questions about what happened down there."

"Did you find anything interesting in the enemy complex?"

"A few things, yes..." Scarlet settled into the seat next to her. "Amongst other things, I found a World Navy uniform in a cabinet."

The sleeves carried the insignia of a full admiral, and the name on the badge was that of 'C. Gray'."

"What could Colonel White want with a World Navy admiral's uniform?" Rhapsody mused.

"I was hoping you could tell me. You found a World Navy admiral's I.D. card in his pocket."

"Unfortunately, all I know is what I put in my report." She looked at him. "Did Doctor Fawn give you any good news concerning him?"

"Not exactly," he sighed. "He gave Blue and me the details of what was done to him with that... '*Dream Spinner*' device." He shook his head in dismay. "I tell you, I know now why he's dreading that thing so much."

"It was that awful for him?"

Scarlet nodded grimly. "Doctor Fawn is not even sure we'll be able to get him out of this."

"He WILL get out of this, Paul. You know he's a fighter. He won't give up."

"I'm afraid that's exactly part of the problem. You see, the *Dream Spinner* used his own will against him. That's why it's so hard for us to get through to him. Doctor Weiss is still trying. So far, he doesn't want to listen to reason."

"There MUST be a way to reach him," Rhapsody replied. "We have to keep on trying."

"We won't give up, love. Believe me." Scarlet lowered his gaze, looking down at the top of the desk. "He's not responsible for what he has done so far, I know, and we have to help him pull through." He looked back up at the young woman. "I want to know... He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"If you have read my report, then you know he didn't. So why ask that question... Captain?"

He gently touched her cheek, where the makeup covered her bruise. "Then how did you get that?"

"Why is everybody so concerned about me?" the young woman grumbled.

Scarlet's smile was a sad one. "Dianne, I'm not just anybody. And it's not the captain who's asking you..." He bowed his head. "I nearly killed him, you know."

"The colonel?" Rhapsody asked with a puzzled look.

He nodded. "I thought he was a Mysteron duplicate and..." he shrugged. "I laid into him with my bare fists. And then, I almost shot him. If he hadn't tried to make me even more angry..."

"Why did he try to make you angry?"

"He wanted me to kill him. He didn't want to be taken alive. So he began telling me all these awful things..."

"What... things?" Rhapsody asked, seeing him hesitate. Scarlet didn't answer. He was looking rather embarrassed. The young pilot narrowed her eyes at him, trying to decipher what he could be keeping from her. "What did he tell you to make you angry, Paul?"

"Well, he..." Scarlet glanced at the woman for another hesitating and embarrassed instant. He cleared his throat and dared not look her in the eyes when he finally spoke, with only a murmur. "He told me that... he had his way with you."

She sat upright, gasping in outrage. "Don't tell me you BELIEVED him!"

"Well, no," Scarlet protested, "not at first, anyway..." Seeing Rhapsody starting to protest, he added quickly, "Listen, for me, he was a Mysteron... and Mysterons don't have any interest in that sort of thing, right?" He sighed and looked away. "Then I realised he wasn't a Mysteron at all and... well..."

"You wondered if it was true."

"Put yourself in my place, Dianne: I did see you before going after him. I saw your ripped shirt under that military jacket you were wearing... And I witnessed how uncharacteristically brutal and violent the old man had become, even before learning about his... ordeal." Scarlet's voice took on a gloomy tone. "Before I was able to overpower him, he tried to kill me several times, with whatever he could lay his hands on... He beat me up like a common hooligan, without recognizing me. Is it any wonder that I should ask myself if, by any chance, he could have..." He didn't finish the sentence.

Rhapsody sighed, shaking her head. "Paul, I promise you, he didn't touch me," she confirmed in a low voice, grasping his hand to emphasize the point. She saw the relief on his face. She paused a second, before continuing. "Would it have made any difference to you?"

"About you?" Scarlet replied, surprised by the question. "Of course not, you know that. It's just that I was so afraid... that what the colonel said was true."

"Put your fears to rest. It wasn't true." Rhapsody sighed, hesitating slightly. "He didn't touch me, Paul. On the contrary, he defended me."

"At Dooley's house, yes. Ochre told me about that..."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what?"

"It was from one of his men – well, now I'm wondering how much he really was in control of them, seeing how they were obviously using him..."

“Angel, please, don’t change the subject: What did that man do to you?”

“Let’s just say he was rather... insistent, toward me.” Rhapsody saw her fiancé’s features becoming very hard. “Don’t worry, I repelled him quite easily; I suppose he didn’t count on my fighting back... That’s when my shirt was torn...”

“Go on,” Scarlet demanded, his voice expressionless.

“Colonel White stumbled on the scene.” The young woman shook her head. “He completely lost his temper. He beat the man up and almost reduced him to a pulp.” She shivered. “I’ve never seen him that angry, Paul. I hardly recognized him.”

“What happened to that man afterwards?” Scarlet asked thoughtfully.

“I don’t know exactly... The beating took place in the room they had locked me in. Colonel White had me brought to his... ‘quarters’, for want of a better word. I didn’t see the man after that.”

Perhaps for a good reason, Scarlet mused for himself. When he had searched the complex in Bristol, with the Spectrum commandos, he had found a dead body in what appeared to be a cell. Judging by his clothes, the fellow was one of the men under the colonel’s command. He had a bullet in his head, and by the appearance of his face, had received a very harsh punishment before being put out of his misery. Scarlet had wondered who that man was and what he could have done to merit such a fate. Now knowing what had happened, it seemed fairly apparent that Colonel White had executed the man. It was extreme, certainly, but Scarlet couldn’t help but think that, if the colonel hadn’t killed that scum, he himself would probably have been tempted to do the same, upon learning what he had tried to do to his beloved Angel.

“You casually left that episode out of your report,” Scarlet noted in a falsely stern voice.

“Just the details of what happened, actually. I didn’t want to upset you, Paul. Anyway, I was meaning to tell you personally about that incident. Not by writing it down on paper.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Would I lie to you?” Rhapsody smiled lightly. Then a thought crossed her mind; she lowered her gaze. “There is still another detail I didn’t write down in my report.”

“What is it?” Scarlet asked, slightly worried.

“Colonel White saw my engagement ring...” The young woman gave her puzzled fiancé an embarrassed look. “I was keeping it on my necklace, you know, with that charm I bought in New Orleans, when we went there together...?”

Captain Scarlet nodded his acknowledgment. He knew about that charm. He had an exact copy of it himself, hanging around his neck, with his Spectrum dog-tags. Rhapsody had given it to him, during that time she was referring to, and it had never left him since. It was a cross between a love token and a protective charm, to be precise. A small, ancient coin, that had the image of St. Michael the Archangel engraved on one side. Rhapsody had found two exact similar copies of that charm in an old New Orleans bazaar. She had taken them to a jeweller to have the other side flattened and a very personal design – angel’s wings and halo – engraved on it. At first, Scarlet thought it a shame that she would have the original design of those ancient coins destroyed... But the personal design was a sweet touch... And at least, it was in accordance with the design on the other side.

“When that pig in my cell ripped my shirt, it was revealed,” Rhapsody continued. “I didn’t notice, before Colonel White mentioned it to me.”

“What did he say?”

“That it was a... nice looking piece of jewellery... And that it would look better on my finger.”

“I agree with him on that one.”

“Don’t mock me, Paul. He didn’t make anything more of it at the time, but when he’s in his right mind again, he’s bound to suspect something is going on between us.” Rhapsody sighed. “Especially after the way I blurted out your name, after that jump you made through that skylight!”

“Your reaction that time doesn’t prove anything, love,” Scarlet replied. “I surprised you, that’s all.” He paused. “Anyway, I think we should concentrate on more immediate problems, for now. We’ll have time enough to worry about all this when the old man is, indeed, out of this jam.”

“I certainly will be glad when he’s all right, Paul.”

“Yes, me too.” Scarlet gave a faint smile, changing the subject, “You know, it’s a serious offence to falsify official written reports...”

“Oh! Like you never did it before?” Rhapsody scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Scarlet smiled, almost mockingly. “And it’s even more serious to strike a superior officer...”

“Like you never did THAT EITHER,” Rhapsody replied in the same tone. “I was afraid for my safety. I only defended myself.”

"You broke a bottle over the colonel's head," Scarlet mused. "That is... If THAT is true..."

"Well, THAT is true. He was becoming quite agitated and accusing me of being responsible for what he had been through..."

"Yes, I read that on your report."

"Like you, I thought he was a Mysteron at the time. If I'd known he wasn't one..."

"You wouldn't have hit him?"

"Probably not so hard, anyway."

Scarlet smiled slightly. "That's my girl." He took her hand again and drew himself closer to her.

"So you see, Captain Scarlet: I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

"I should never have doubted you, my lady."

He came closer still. But the intercom then made itself heard again, this time conveying the voice of Captain Magenta. "*Captain Scarlet?*"

Sighing, Scarlet cast a murderous look toward the loudspeaker. Rhapsody was doing her best not to laugh at his look of discomfiture.

"What is it, Captain?" Scarlet called out.

"I've got Captain Ochre's report here for you, concerning that list of names he was supposed to check. He found some very interesting things."

Scarlet gave Rhapsody an apologetic look and moved away from her, reluctantly. "Back to business," he muttered. Then, addressing the intercom again, "You can come in, Captain Magenta."

The door slid open and Magenta walked in, a file under his arm. He addressed a grin to Rhapsody. "We have to stop meeting like this, Rhapsody," he told her pleasantly.

When Scarlet cast her a puzzled glance, she explained with a faint smile how she had visited Captain Ochre earlier and met Magenta there. Scarlet nodded quietly. "How is Ochre, by the way?"

"If he ever tells you he likes it in sickbay and that he feels he's well treated, don't believe him," Magenta laughed. "He will be pulling your leg."

"There's a nurse in there driving him crazy," Rhapsody added with amusement. "He can't stand her..."

"Miss Lang, I bet," Scarlet mused.

"You know her?"

"Fortunately, I never have to stay in sickbay long enough to get to know her too well." Scarlet nodded to his Irish counterpart. "Now, what has Captain Ochre found, Magenta?"

"Do you want me to leave, Captain?" Rhapsody suddenly interrupted.

"No, I may need some information out of you. Those names Ochre was checking were the men you mentioned in your report."

"We also have the formal identification of those three men who were killed when Spectrum raided the complex yesterday," Magenta added.

"Then start with that, Captain."

Magenta opened the file to consult it. "Fingerprints told us those three men were named Jack Lemmings, Philip Thorsen and Dan MacAllister. They were known hired mercenaries who had been active in Africa, Asia and in some remote parts of South America. Each one of them had served in different armed forces around the world, and every one of them had rather impressively bad records. MacAllister was even wanted in Australia for assault and battery on a superior officer. He deserted shortly before court-martial."

"Charming fellow," Rhapsody murmured.

"Known mercenaries?" Scarlet said, frowning.

"And it wasn't just those three. There were more. For example, Garrett Brighton: his name comes out of the WAAF enlistment roll, from a couple of years ago. Was kicked out of the Armed Forces for indiscipline and dishonourable actions on duty. Wanted for the murder of a British officer in Bermuda."

"I knew he was bad news, the minute I saw him," Rhapsody grumbled, almost to herself.

"I've got another one. Jonathan Dempsey: his name was closely linked to that of Brighton. Partners of some sort. Deserted from the U.S. Air Force. Had a criminal record in the United States. Was known as a vicious mercenary in various hot spots round the world."

"Wait," Rhapsody suddenly said. "I remember that man very well, he made an indelible impression on me..."

"The man you told me about a few minutes ago?" Scarlet asked her.

She nodded. "Why are you talking about him in the past, Captain Magenta?"

"The guy's dead, Rhapsody."

"Dead?" a puzzled Rhapsody repeated.

Scarlet nodded. "I found his body myself. Properly executed, with a bullet in the head."

Rhapsody let the answer sink into her mind. Her gaze became a sorry and gloomy one. "Dear God," she murmured. "He killed him."

"The colonel, right?" Scarlet asked, raising an eyebrow.

"He was so furious with that man," she answered with a nod. "He nearly killed him with his bare hands... To think he would finish him off with a bullet..."

"Well, we don't know what happened exactly," Scarlet noted. "All we know is that that man, Dempsey, was killed. Maybe we'll find out the circumstances of his death later." He watched as Rhapsody, very thoughtful, sat down on one of the chairs set around the conference table. Thinking that the colonel could have murdered that man in cold blood – even if his actions had brought it upon himself – was obviously something of an uncomfortable realisation for her. For all of her experience in the field, she probably never had envisioned her commander acting that way. It was true he wasn't himself these days, however.

For myself, the British captain added to himself, I can't say I'm sorry that bastard is dead...

"So all these guys were mercenaries," Scarlet said, thoughtful.

"Yes," Magenta agreed. "And NONE of them was Mysteron."

"As we already knew. We had already checked the dead men with a Mysteron detector... And in her report, Rhapsody had confirmed they were human." Scarlet looked thoughtful for a second. "Strange... If not for Greg Dooley's reconstruct who attacked Rhapsody and Ochre, nothing would indicate that the Mysterons have anything to do with this whole business."

"Don't forget Captain Black was spotted around Quartermaster Dooley's home, the day Colonel White disappeared," Magenta pointed out. "And I have something here that may prove that the Mysterons definitely have a hand in this."

"What's that?"

"The last name on Rhapsody's list. Ochre told me he had a terrible time finding data on it, since he was trying to relate it to the other names. Then he found it. On a report Captain Grey was working on. Do you remember that World Navy officer that was found dead in the Thames?"

"Yes I do," Scarlet said, nodding. "He had been shot through the head. Captain Blue asked Grey to investigate."

"Well, it's his name that appeared on Rhapsody's report." Magenta consulted his file again. "Lieutenant Commander Jason Shelby. Worked at the World Navy Armaments Depot, British section, in Bristol. Went AWOL three days ago with a truckload of armed ship torpedoes." Magenta handed the file to Scarlet who consulted it quickly. "Two days ago, the London police found a

dead body floating in the Thames with a bullet in his head. Spectrum received notification of this yesterday, as you know, while we were searching for Colonel White. The description of that body matches that of Shelby... And Rhapsody's description of that other Shelby she encountered in the complex also is a perfect match." Magenta pointed to a line in the report. "Check this: after examination, it was discovered that the guy found in the Thames was dead a good two days BEFORE Shelby disappeared with those torpedoes."

"So a Mysteron duplicate stole them," Scarlet mused. "What kind of torpedoes were they?"

"That's what's curious about the whole affair," Magenta answered. "The damned things were commissioned twenty-five years ago, specifically for some British destroyers. They can't be used in today's warships and submarines. Shelby was supposed to bring them to a place where they could be defused and dismantled."

"What do the Mysterons want with twenty-five-year old torpedoes?" Scarlet mused, perplexed.

"Wait," Rhapsody said suddenly, causing the two officers to turn toward her. "Don't you see the correlation, here? A Mysteronised Navy lieutenant commander, stolen Navy torpedoes..."

"And a former Navy admiral," Scarlet finished, closing the file.

"That Brighton chap at the complex, he called Colonel White 'Admiral'. I do know a few people still have the habit today of calling him that, but..."

"...But why would a common mercenary do it?" Scarlet added, nodding.

"And..." Rhapsody continued, "he did mention a 'ship'. The colonel was rather upset that he did so in front of me."

"What kind of ship, I wonder..."

"So, what are we to believe?" Magenta asked. "The Mysterons intend to attack the Navy... or use the Navy to attack something or someone?"

"And why use mercenaries to do their dirty work this time?" Scarlet said. "That's a first. Generally, they Mysteronise somebody who then is totally devoted to them... Why then use people who could not be totally reliable?"

"We just have to be grateful they didn't Mysteronise Colonel White," Rhapsody replied, "and just... brainwashed him."

Scarlet gave her an odd look. "Exactly," he then said, with a thoughtful frown. "Why not?"

"Captain?" his compatriot said, puzzled by his tone.

"Indeed, why not Mysteronise Colonel White?"

"Your compassion for the old man is simply heart-warming, Scarlet," Magenta remarked, almost sarcastically.

Scarlet shook his head. "You don't understand, Magenta. I'm trying to figure out something. I know Captain Blue is wondering about it too. Why did the Mysterons go to all the trouble of capturing and brainwashing the colonel, when they could simply kill him and then Mysteronise him? We all know they work methodically... They NEVER do something without a precise reason."

There was a short moment of silence. It was suddenly interrupted by Rhapsody.

"They wanted human agents."

"What?" Magenta said with perplexity.

"They needed HUMAN agents," Rhapsody repeated. "That's why they brainwashed the colonel. That's why they're using mercenaries who are not Mysterons."

"But... WHY?" Scarlet mused.

"Because human agents are undetectable," Rhapsody said, continuing her line of thought.

Scarlet and Magenta stared at her. "That must be it," Scarlet agreed, nodding slowly. "Yes... Spectrum can detect Mysteron agents... But HUMAN agents can go wherever they please, and do their stuff before anybody realises they are even there."

"Dear Lord," Magenta murmured. "So, to carry out their threat this time, the Mysterons needed a totally devoted, brainwashed, HUMAN Colonel White."

"Excuse me, Captain," Rhapsody retorted at that moment. "They needed 'Charles Gray'... Admiral Charles Gray, of the World Navy, the man who opposed the Militarist Regime and helped restore the monarchy in Britain."

"The Orkney rebel hero," Scarlet mused. "They erased his Spectrum identity. Suppressed his knowledge of it. They selected his memories, kept those pertinent to their mission, notably, those of the time he was in the Navy... and of the time when he defied the Militarist Government..."

"...And made him think he had continued to fight that same Government, to this day," Rhapsody continued.

Magenta frowned. "Why did they do that to him?" he said with a perplexed tone. "What is the Mysterons' objective, anyway? What do they want from him?"

"Maybe he knows?" Scarlet mused.

"You think so?" Magenta asked him.

Scarlet shook his head. "I really don't know." He went back to his place at the conference table to retrieve his cap. "But I intend to find out..."

Chapter 10

Six hours had passed since Captain Scarlet had put Rhapsody Angel back on duty and received Captain Ochre's research report. During that time, he had conferred with Captain Blue, and the two of them had decided on the course of action to take.

It now seemed obvious that this time the Mysterons needed to use human agents because of Spectrum's inability to detect them, in the way it was possible to detect duplicates. But still, Spectrum now had to figure out what it was these agents were intended to do. Apparently, it had something to do with the Navy; the World one or the British one, it wasn't really clear at the present. Since Colonel White had a World Navy I.D. card in his real name, it was evident he was to use it... unless he had already done so.

Captains Ochre and Magenta were assigned to try to find out if there were any kind of official or unofficial events for 'Admiral Charles Gray' to attend that would suit an eventual Mysteron plan... or if, by any chance, the said admiral had already been seen somewhere. Captain Grey was checking anything out of the ordinary, in the recent past or near future, in the Navy area. Everybody was still searching for who the second "honoured outlawed hero" could be and what the Mysterons' intended target was.

Captains Scarlet and Blue took it upon themselves to see if there was a way to possibly get some information out of Colonel White. They realised from the beginning it would not be easy at all.

Doctor Weiss, head psychiatrist at the Spectrum Medical Centre, was trying very hard to make the colonel listen to reason. After hours of fruitless attempts, she agreed with Blue and Scarlet that it would be a good idea to call upon Symphony Angel to give a helping hand. Symphony had worked for the U.S.S., prior to joining the Spectrum organisation; she had experience of questioning people, even those in conditions similar to that of Colonel White – although, she had to admit, not QUITE in his condition. She knew how to be gentle and tactful in those kinds of circumstances. More importantly, she had been in contact with Charles Gray a few times during the course of her work in the Secret Service. Blue and Scarlet had hoped her presence and questions could somehow trigger some memory in Colonel White's mind which would prove helpful to him.

So far, it hadn't worked much better.

Captain Blue was standing in front of the large window of the observation room, arms folded, looking rather gloomy. On the other side of the window, seated at a small table, Colonel White was facing Doctor Weiss and Symphony. He was looking very calm, seemingly in control of himself, and not threatening at all. Spectrum wasn't taking any chance with him, however. Handcuffs with magnetic locks, which could not be picked, had been secured around his wrists, and then attached in front of him to a belt. Even his feet were restrained. A security guard, unarmed to avoid giving any ideas to the prisoner, stood next to the door, behind him, discreetly away from the table, but keeping a watchful eye on it.

Captain Scarlet entered the observation room, and came to stand next to his partner. He had come from the Control Room, where he had been for the last few hours, checking U.S.S. data with Lieutenant Green. He had a file under his arm.

"Any good news?"

Blue shook his head. "No, sorry, " he answered somberly. "There's no change at all. He's still the same." He sighed and then turned away from the window to walk towards the table beside them. He poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher and drank it with one big gulp. Scarlet stared at him intensely.

"Maybe you should get some rest, Adam. You've been up for a long time..."

"Don't feel tired." Blue put down his glass and gestured toward the glass window. "Besides, who could sleep while he's that way?"

"What have they talked about, all this time?"

"The girls have been doing all of the talking, actually," Blue grumbled. "HIM, he doesn't say much. They tried to make him talk about his time in the Navy... About himself, his family, his wife..."

"Did Doctor Weiss tell him that she was..."

"No, not yet. She's still unsure how he would take the news of her death... That she's actually been dead for the past seventeen years." Blue shook his head. "He doesn't remember much about the day he was captured. Except what Rhapsody had already told us about it: that he was at his old friend Dooley's house and that he was ready to meet with her..."

"... And that he believed she betrayed him to his enemies, and lured him into a trap."

"Right. He remembers what they've done to him quite vividly... Although it seems evident he doesn't know WHY exactly. He figures they wanted to make him talk. He figures that WE are THEY." Blue sighed again and poured himself another glass of water. "Doctor Weiss and Symphony tried to convince him we're not the same guys who had done this to him, that we were on his side and that we wanted to help him. Didn't work." He took a sip.

"They told him again and again that the civil war in Britain was LONG finished, that there were no more rebels there, and that in fact the rebels had won. That didn't work either. He thinks that's some kind of a trick to get to him. They told him about his time in the Secret Service; that didn't work out EITHER. He's still living in the world the *Dream Spinner* put in his head." Blue put the glass down again. "So the girls questioned him. Tried to make HIM explain to them WHY he believes so strongly that world to be true." He turned to his partner. "I don't know how many times they tried, how many times they asked him the same questions, again and again... Neither Doctor Weiss nor Symphony can reach him."

"Did Doctor Weiss talk to him about what he said while he was delirious?" Scarlet asked.

Blue nodded slowly. During his transport back to Cloudbase, and while under the care of Doctor Fawn in sickbay, Colonel White had talked a lot in his feverish delirium. Not enough to make himself understood clearly, however, but still, some of his words had aroused curiosity.

He was pleading with somebody to leave him alone, to stop hurting him. He had desperately called out to his father, to his wife, to a man named Jack... That one he seemed quite angry with, since he hurled imprecations at him, accusing him of being a murderer. And there was another name that had caught attention, when he had called it out.

He had mentioned 'Conrad'.

Captain Black.

It wasn't clear yet if the colonel was recalling some old memories regarding the man he had long considered his friend... Or if he was remembering something that had happened to him recently. Captain Blue and Captain Scarlet knew that Black was somehow involved with their commander's disappearance, two days earlier. Maybe that was coming back to haunt the colonel.

"They tried that too," Blue answered his friend. "But it didn't touch him in any way. It's like he doesn't want to hear them out."

"That's exactly it, I'm afraid." Scarlet stared through the window, thoughtfully. "So, no clues about the traumatic memory that was used as a basis for the *Dream Spinner* treatment..."

"The... 'noose', as Doctor Fawn called it? No. So far, not a clue." Blue shook his head. "Do you think it could be his wife's death?"

"No, he would probably remember it, then. I'd say it's probably something that happened when he was in the British Navy, some twenty-five years or so ago..." Scarlet sighed. "That damned contraption they used on him has done considerable damage," he

noted dryly. He opened the file and took out a large photograph, which he handed to Blue. "Here. The U.S.S. sent this to us a few minutes ago. This is what a *Dream Spinner* looks like."

Blue examined the picture closely. It showed a padded operating table, surrounded by all kinds of electronic devices. The table was obviously controlled by a complicated computer board, linked to the various monitors. Electrodes and wires covered the floor, connected to the table, under which a piece of hydraulic machinery was apparent. Blue took the rest of the file from Scarlet and read a detailed description of the *Dream Spinner*.

The hair on the back of his head stood up straight as he read.

Metal cylinders, containing hallucinogenic gases of unknown composition, connected to a respirator, which was to be placed on the patient's nose and mouth.

Digital sound disk containing recorded ultrasonic waves, with subliminal messages, usually employed during brainwashing sessions; the sound conveyed to the patient by the use of ear-jacks.

High voltage electrodes, to be put on strategic parts of the patient's body, to break down his physical resistance.

Long hypodermic needle, mounted onto a hydraulic device, set directly under the patient's head...

Heavy duty restraints...

Blue read two more lines before angrily throwing down the file, scattering its contents across the table behind him. It was all he could do not to tear the papers into shreds. "Drugs, electricity, ultrasonic waves... They used all the dirty bag of tricks on him!" the American lashed out furiously. "According to this, they even used a gag so he couldn't cry out! This is... monstrous! Why did the Mysterons put him through that treatment?"

"Unfortunately, this *Dream Spinner* thing is not the Mysterons' doing," Scarlet replied. Blue stared at him. Scarlet shrugged, gesturing toward the file. "That thing wasn't conceived by a Mysteron mind. Maybe they used it, but a human mind definitely invented it. The U.S.S. told us the British section had one of those devices, taken in a raid some years ago... The thing was supposed to be safely dismantled, stashed away, in secure storage... They checked up on it after our call. It had completely disappeared..."

"Disappeared...?" Blue repeated, frowning "You mean, stolen?"

"From a secure storage facility of the Secret Service, yes... An inside job, most probably."

"The Mysterons have infiltrated the Secret Service?"

"Well, just to be sure, I've already dispatched agents from Spectrum London to check that out. They'll investigate everyone who may have been able to pull a trick like that. Checking them out with Mysteron detectors, looking into possible 'accidents' the Mysterons could have used to their advantage... With the collaboration of the U.S.S., of course." He paused a second. "But quite frankly, I doubt if they'd find any Mysteron insider."

Blue gave his friend an odd look. "What do you mean?"

Scarlet shook his head. "We've already checked out 'accidents' in the vicinity of London, Blue. When we were looking for the colonel. We would have found out if any U.S.S. employee had been killed..."

"Except if said accident was carefully covered up."

"Well, that's also a possibility. Anyway, that official from the U.S.S. British Section who talked to me said the *Dream Spinner* had probably been stolen months ago... He wasn't too proud of admitting it to me, you know. So, if an insider did the job, any evidence of it could have been erased with time. Furthermore, the Mysterons don't work that way. Planning something like this, MONTHS in advance? That's definitely not their style. And seeing as 'human agents' are being used by the Mysterons for this particular case..."

"The insider may be human," Blue finished.

Scarlet snorted. "The colonel would have a fit! He worked so hard to purge the service when he was there..."

"What are we facing here, exactly?" Blue murmured, pondering, gazing into empty space. "You're right, Mysterons wouldn't plan a scheme like this on a prolonged schedule... And using a device like this *Dream Spinner*... Even knowing that they need human agents to do their dirty work this time, it's so unlike them." He stared back at his friend. "What if it were humans who did that to the old man?"

Scarlet nodded slowly. "That would explain the hired hands, the brainwashing session, the stolen goods from the U.S.S. months ago..."

"Working for the Mysterons," Blue added, frowning. "Hired by them... Who could they be? Another party, with its own agenda, maybe? They CAN'T be aware of the Mysterons' true objectives! No human in his right mind would help them to achieve 'ultimate destruction of life on Earth!'"

"One can only guess, Captain."

"Makes you so proud to be part of the human race, doesn't it?" Blue sighed.

"That's only a theory, Blue," Scarlet noted quietly. "We have no evidence that there is indeed such a group, working for the Mysterons. Until we can be sure of that, we'd better keep it to

ourselves." He paused. "Maybe the colonel will be able to tell us something about that, when he's himself again."

"You're right," Blue admitted, nodding. "Let's not spread the word around for the time being." He sighed. "Well, humans or Mysterons, they'd better stay out of my way. I don't think I'd be able to control myself."

"You're angry?"

"Angry's not the word. Furious. Completely outraged. Even IF they used humans, the Mysterons ARE responsible to what happened to the colonel. I can't believe they did such an awful thing to him." Blue looked at White, through the window, and then turned his attention toward his friend. "There are no depths they won't stoop to, are there? Taking over Conrad, killing you and Steve to tamper with your genes and control you... That wasn't enough for them. They had to do this to him." He sighed again. "At least they didn't Mysteronise him,"

"No. What they did to him was worse," Scarlet remarked. He walked to the table and gathered the papers back into the file. Blue gave him a puzzled look. Scarlet shook his head. "It looks like he has had a bad and very painful experience," the Brit explained. "At least, my... death... was quicker."

"It wasn't quick at all," Blue replied bitterly. "And certainly not painless. They let you burn alive, Paul."

"I know. Remember I still have nightmares about it from time to time." He patted his friend's shoulder. "I was talking in relative terms, Adam. I don't know how much time it took them to subvert his mind. But it must certainly have been slow, and excruciatingly painful, if we are to judge by all those instruments described in there and the marks on his body. They must have worked on him for hours."

"According to Doctor Fawn, some twelve hours," Blue sighed. "Lord, it's horrible." He took another look through the window. "I pray we'll be able to help him out."

"We have to think we will. Listen, I know how you feel about this... I feel the same, too. But, we still have a job to do. Remember, we have a Mysteron threat to face."

"They intended to use the colonel. We have him now. Could it be enough to stop them?"

"If I know them – and I know them well – I have to say no. And you know that too. The colonel is just one card. The Mysterons still have another."

"Right. That second outlawed hero. We still have no idea who it could be. Someone in that group of hired hands, maybe?"

"There's somebody who may be able to help locate him... or her, since we don't know who we're looking for, exactly."

"The colonel?"

“The colonel.”

“Not in his present state of mind, Scarlet. You saw it. He still thinks of us as the enemy. So far, we haven’t managed to convince him to the contrary.”

“Then we have to try harder. We have to get that information on what the Mysterons are up to this time. You said it yourself: they intended to use him. He must KNOW something.” Captain Scarlet gave a low sigh. “And the deadline established by the Mysterons isn’t our only problem, you know... We have yet another one, that makes this situation even more urgent.”

“You’re talking about Spectrum Intelligence, right?”

Scarlet nodded. “Our friend Conners keeps calling here, demanding to speak to Colonel White. I don’t know how long we will be able to keep this up. We certainly don’t want HIM – or anybody else in his section – to find out what’s happened to the colonel. The minute they know, they’ll want to question him themselves. He may be Spectrum’s supreme commander, but, in the state he’s in right now, he no longer has the capacity to command. They will be quick to point that out to us. In that case, Intelligence will have full authority to take charge.”

“Would it really be so bad to let them, then? It’s their job to question people. They could get results, where we can’t.”

“You forget: Conners is in charge of the investigation.”

“Oh!” Blue gave it some thought. “I’m sure he would LOVE to have the colonel under his responsibility. He knows how the old man despises him.”

“Right,” Scarlet said gloomily. “Well, I have no intention whatsoever of letting Conners get his dirty hands on Colonel White. I still remember what he did to me.”

“He wouldn’t DARE go to those lengths with our commander!”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Anyway, neither Spectrum Intelligence nor Conners knows about the colonel’s present predicament... So why tell them?”

Blue narrowed his eyes at his friend. “Are you seriously suggesting that we CONTINUE to keep the charade up?”

“As long as it can work.”

“You said yourself earlier that you didn’t know how long we’ll be able to keep it up.”

“We need all the time we can get, Blue. So we can get ourselves the information we need... and, at the same time, to help the old man get out of this jam.”

“You know, when you present it that way, it sounds like a piece of cake,” Blue replied, rather mockingly. “May I make just an itsy bitsy note of interest, here? If that sympathetic fellow Conners – or anybody else for that matter – ever finds out what we’re doing

right now... you do realise we may end up in deep trouble? At the very least, we... could be charged with conspiracy.”

“Colonel White’s last order, before he went down to the surface a few days ago, was to give us command over Spectrum, Captain Blue,” Scarlet replied with a faint smile.

“Oh, sure... I bet it will look GOOD as a defence during our court-martial... You know as well as I do that it was meant as a temporary measure, Scarlet.”

“As it will be, Captain. As it will be.”

“And what do you think the colonel will say about this, if – when – he’s his old self again?”

Scarlet’s smile was again a faint one. “Knowing him, I’m fairly sure he’ll be tempted to put both of us up in front of a firing squad... And that, given the circumstances, he would probably step in front of it with us.”

“In which case, at least ONE of us will survive.”

“I need your consent for this, Blue. But if you feel otherwise, I...”

“Did I say I wouldn’t back you up?” Blue grinned in turn. “You know I will, Captain. We’re partners. We always stand together.”

Scarlet thanked him with a nod. “We’ll have to inform the senior staff about this,” he added. “Discreetly.”

“I already asked for their discretion, earlier. I don’t think they will present any difficulty in continuing to keep the secret a while longer. For the colonel’s sake.” Blue paused a second, and lowered his gaze. “May I ask you a question, Paul?”

“What is it?”

“Why are you doing this?” Blue looked again at his friend. “Why are you willing to risk so much, personally, to help him out? I know you’re not doing it only to stop the Mysterons...”

“You have to ask why?” Scarlet looked through the window, directly toward their commander, still sitting there, obstinately keeping his defence up against Doctor Weiss and Symphony Angel. “Don’t you know the answer?”

“I guess I know, yes,” Blue sighed. “Because of the way he stuck his neck out for YOU two years ago, when nobody else in the World Government believed in you?”

Scarlet nodded. “He put his career on the line for me. I owe him that much... And why are YOU doing it?”

“Me?” Blue gave a glance too toward Colonel White, before giving his answer, very quietly. As much as I love my father, I never felt like he was the kind of man I would like to become. He never was much of the role model for me. Colonel White, on the other hand... Well, that’s the sort of man I certainly would like to become.”

"You're already half-way there, Big Blue," Scarlet told him with a fond smile.

"Oh, do come on," Blue mumbled, feeling the heat coming to his ears. He cleared his voice. "So... how do we proceed now?"

* * *

Charles Gray felt tired. And annoyed. He had not slept soundly for hours... days, it seemed to him. It was even more apparent his body was in dire need of rest since his capture by Spectrum.

He had to admit they didn't mistreat him. They had kept him under guard, in a comfortable enough room, with a decent bed, gave him a shower, tended to his injuries and offered him food – that last thing he had obstinately refused. He was far too afraid they would put some kind of medication or drug into his nourishment to take the chance of eating anything. He had only accepted some water, from a cooler, and had insisted that it was tasted before drinking it himself. One of the guards assigned to him had no trouble complying with his demand. Gray had deemed it safe enough and had drunk his fill.

That first woman had been questioning him for hours now. Three, four, even five... he didn't know exactly. He had no means of telling. Strange questions, she had asked him... She kept enquiring for his name, and encouraged him to talk about himself. It was obvious she was a psychiatrist of some sort. It wasn't so rare that psychiatrists should conduct interrogation sessions. Under the cover of friendliness, and kindness, they could wheedle their way into a person's mind to find what they were looking for. Gray knew he had to be very careful what he told this woman... And not to listen to anything she might say in return, in order to make him talk.

Then came that other woman. Younger, apparently in her late twenties, tall, with blonde hair, very beautiful. She was casually, yet fashionably, dressed, and didn't look at all like a psychiatrist. And even less like an interrogator. This made Gray even more suspicious of her. She kept referring to how they knew each other, how they had met in the past... Gray didn't remember ever seeing her, but she seemed so sincere, he wondered if it was true... After all, there were big holes in his memory... She could be telling the truth. However, he had to stay cautious. Since she was with Spectrum, there was an enormous possibility that she was trying to confuse him into making a mistake that would make him talk a little too much...

He had noticed her American accent. *Is this Spectrum organisation using a bunch of mercenaries or what?* Gray wondered. Up to now, he had encountered two English people, one Irish, some Americans and a doctor who sounded slightly Australian... Who were all those people, anyway? And more importantly, what did they want from him?

They were civil enough toward him. Perhaps TOO civil. Certainly, that was hiding something.

"Ladies," he said to the two women, after the older one had made a lengthy, talkative speech, "haven't you had enough of this conversation? This is becoming boring..."

Doctor Weiss stared him straight in the eyes. "Because you have the impression we're having a conversation?" she asked him. "If you were actually talking to us, Charles, we would be having one..."

"But I AM talking to you," he answered with a faint, mocking smile.

She was constantly addressing him by his first name. Like a friend of old. Obviously a strategy to get him to open up.

"Not really, since you don't listen to what we have to say," she replied in her turn.

"Then maybe it's because I don't find what you're saying interesting." He frowned. "I'm still trying to figure out WHAT it is you want from me."

"We keep telling you, sir," Symphony then said, "We want you to remember."

"And if there's nothing TO remember?"

"You did admit you had trouble with your memory," Doctor Weiss noted.

"Yes... But it doesn't mean I have to accept all these things you're trying to convince me are true."

Doctor Weiss exchanged glances with Symphony. For the past hours, they had done nothing but go round in circles... They knew Colonel White was growing tired, but he was stubbornly keeping his guard up. They were tiring too, which made things all the more difficult. Obviously, he had far more resistance than they...

The intercom gave a faint signal, before the voice of Captain Blue made itself heard in the interrogation room: "*Doctor Weiss, would you mind coming to see me for a minute, please?*"

Weiss stared at the intercom for a second, wondering what it was about; in principle, the interrogation was not to be disturbed, but seeing as it wasn't going anywhere so far... She stood up, giving a nod toward Symphony and, followed by the attentive eyes of Colonel White, walked toward the door. It slid open to let her out.

White eyed the guard standing there, still watching him closely. The Spectrum commander turned back to face Symphony. He gazed at her intensely for a brief instant, before clearing his throat.

"Well, it seems we're alone, you and I," he noted.

She shook her head. "You forget Jarvis, over there."

"The security guard?" White shrugged. "He doesn't count." He paused. "Now that that psychiatrist is out of the picture, maybe we can have a normal discussion..."

"I seem to recall that it's what we've been trying to do for the last few hours." Symphony was keeping on her guard. She wondered what could be going on in the head of her commander right now.

"So according to you, we've known each other for a number of years. We worked for... the U.S.S.?"

"Yes... The Universal Secret Service..."

"I know what the U.S.S. is, young lady. And we worked there together?"

"Not exactly. We were from two different departments. I was in the New York based department. You headed the British section. But we met during the course of our work. The first time during a social event."

"Is that so?" Charles Gray gave a devilish smile. *She's lying*, he decided. *ME, head of the British Section of the U.S.S.? There was no British Section for the U.S.S., to begin with.* However, there was a Military Intelligence Bureau, based in London, and their work there looked a lot like what the U.S.S. was doing elsewhere... Could there be collaboration between these two organisations? Perhaps... The U.S.S. was a World Government organisation ... And Spectrum was too, according to that red-haired girl who had briefly been Gray's captive. It seemed obvious that the World Government was helping the Militarists against the rebels now.

I wonder what else she will tell me, Gray asked himself, staring at Symphony. He was curious to know...

"So we met during a social event?" he repeated thoughtfully.

"Nearly five years ago. In London," Symphony nodded.

"So if what you say is true... you must have met my wife as well?"

Symphony kept a set face; she knew Colonel White believed his wife to still be alive. So far, Doctor Weiss hadn't tried to convince him otherwise. Truth to tell, she didn't know how to handle this particular part of the problem. Until the colonel

became really aware of his condition, it might not prove safe to tell him. There was no way to guess how he would react, considering his present state.

"No, she wasn't there," Symphony said simply, without really lying. "But you made quite an impression on me... Sir Charles."

Gray frowned. "What did you call me?"

"Sir Charles. That's how you were presented to me. You were wearing some badges on your chest I had never seen before. And a cross on a red ribbon around your neck, and a red sash going from the right shoulder to the left hip..." She smiled slightly. "Before that day, I had never encountered a real-life English knight..."

Gray's jaw dropped. "Knight? Me?"

"Somebody explained to me what the badges and sash meant. Knight Grand Cross, Order of the Bath."

"You're pulling my leg..." Gray mumbled.

"I wouldn't dare, sir."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Gray replied, frowning even more deeply, raising his voice. "'Knight Grand Cross, Order of the Bath'? How could I have been awarded one of the most prestigious honours British Royalty has to offer? There is no more Monarchy in Britain. The Royal Family has been in exile for years... How could I have been knighted, then?"

"Now, sir..."

"STOP lying to me, young woman!" Gray hissed between his teeth, his eyes flashing.

"Please, sir, try to stay calm," Symphony told him, rather worriedly.

"I am calm." Charles Gray glanced toward the security guard behind him. The man had made a step in his direction. "Steady on, Jarvis... I'm not about to jump at anyone's throat." He moved a little on the chair he was seated on, making his cuffs jingle against the metal ring attaching them to the belt. "I'm not in any position to do that, you know?" he added, giving the man a sardonic grin.

Jarvis kept a stern face; Symphony gestured him not to move, and he stepped back to his place, right next to the door, his eyes still riveted on the prisoner. The latter turned back to face the young woman.

"You don't believe me," she remarked quietly.

"Why should I believe you?" he replied coolly. "It's obvious you Spectrum people are trying to confuse me..."

"We're not trying to confuse you."

"Well, you would say that... You're following your superiors' orders by doing this, right?" Gray gave Symphony a curious gaze. A faint smile crossed his face. "What is your name?"

"I told you that already. It's Symphony."

Gray frowned. "That's not your real name..."

"That's the one you gave me," Symphony answered.

"I gave you?"

"When I joined Spectrum, about three years ago."

Gray shrugged. "You're still trying, right?" He paused, staring at her. "What if you're not really following your superiors' orders? What if, instead, you're a compulsive liar or something like that, and you can't help telling lies?"

"I'm not lying to you, sir."

"Either way, it's not your fault." He gave her another smile. "What is it your superiors want from me?"

"I can tell you we don't want to do you any harm." Symphony carefully answered.

Gray nodded quietly. "Coming from you, I can believe that..." He paused. "You don't look like a bad person..."

She looked at him sharply. "You have something on your mind, sir?"

He kept staring at her for a few seconds, with a very grave look. He bent toward her, the best he could, given his restraints and the table between them. "Help me get out of this, Symphony," he said in a whisper, almost pleading. "Help me get my freedom back. Come with me and join the cause. We can use someone like you..."

Symphony almost drew back; she hadn't been expecting this. She shook her head. "I don't think it would be in your best interest if I did that, sir."

Gray sighed inwardly. He hadn't really expected her to leap at his proposal, but he had to try. This didn't make it any less frustrating. "Haven't you had enough of this?" he continued insistently. "Don't you get tired of being used by others?"

"I'm not the one who's being used here... sir."

He frowned. "And what do you mean by that?"

Symphony didn't have time to answer. The door behind Colonel White slid open and she saw Captain Scarlet entering, a file in his hand, and stopping just inside the doorway. She looked past the colonel's eyes to gaze into the other officer's.

"All right, Symphony," he told her. "That will be all, for now."

She nodded and quietly stood up to leave her seat, making a large detour around Colonel White to walk toward the door. The

Spectrum commander didn't turn around to follow her or to acknowledge the other man's presence. The young woman stopped next to Scarlet and gave him a thankful look. "I think you arrived just in time, Captain," she whispered to him. "I was getting the impression he was about to lose his cool."

"I heard," Scarlet answered in the same tone, his eyes on Colonel White's back. "I had the same impression." He looked at the young woman. "You did your best. I'm taking over."

"You...?" Symphony stared at him for a second, perplexed. Then she smiled sadly. "I hope YOU won't lose your temper."

Coming from anyone else, Scarlet could have taken offence at that remark. As it was, from Symphony, and knowing how straightforward she was, he could only smile back in humour. He could never get angry with her. She was too much like him. Like the little sister he never had.

"You know me too well," he replied. "Don't worry, though. You can go, now. Take a few hours rest. You've earned it."

"Thank you, Captain."

Symphony walked through the door, which slid closed behind her.

Scarlet turned his attention again toward the man seated at the table, obstinately keeping his eyes front. *He must have recognised my voice*, the British captain mused to himself. *I don't know what he could be thinking right now, but I'm sure he's preparing for a confrontation with me...*

Scarlet quietly walked round the table toward the chair Symphony had occupied a minute ago. Charles Gray glanced toward the young man, dressed in the bright red tunic, who passed near him. Indeed, when he had addressed the girl, upon his entrance into the room, the former admiral had recognised the voice of the Spectrum agent who had taken him prisoner – *when was that? The day before?* Since then, Gray hadn't seen anything of him. He had been wondering where he could be...

"I heard what you said to Symphony," Captain Scarlet told him quietly after clearing his throat. "Believe me when I say it wasn't worth the effort. She's not the kind of woman who can be bought that way..." He sat down, putting his file on the table in front of him. He noticed then the perplexed, even dumbfounded frown on Colonel White's features, as he stared intensely at him.

"Excuse me," the older man noted ever so calmly, "by any chance, do you have a TWIN, or something like that?"

Scarlet stared back at him, with an inquisitive look. The colonel shrugged, nodding straight at the young officer's face. "I would have thought that I'd done as much damage to the face of the man who captured me as he did to mine..." He frowned more deeply. "And I'm pretty sure I CUT him..."

Scarlet looked intently at the bruised face of his commander. He slowly shook his head. "It's a... rather long story," he said, hesitantly.

"Tell it to me. It seems I have all the time in the world."

"Well, I, for one, haven't. Sorry. It will have to wait."

Gray shrugged indifferently. The door slid open again behind him, and Captain Blue stepped in. Gray slightly turned his head in his direction. Him too, he recognised.

The blond officer who had prevented his escape from the sickbay.

"Are things arranged with Doctor Weiss, Captain?" Scarlet asked his colleague.

He had asked Blue to inform the psychiatrist of their decision to take over from her and Symphony and have a conversion with Colonel White themselves. He was wondering what Doctor Weiss would think of that idea. He saw Blue nodding at his question. "Not only is it arranged, but she even thinks it's not such a bad idea."

"You don't say..."

"Said it could even do a lot of good for him to see familiar faces and have a talk with us."

Familiar faces, indeed, Scarlet mused. Considering in which circumstances he 'met' with each of us recently... Maybe we'll be able to smooth things over a little, here. He addressed Colonel White. "You do recognise Captain Blue, sir?"

"We've... encountered each other."

That wasn't the answer either Scarlet or Blue had hoped to hear; but somehow, it didn't surprise them.

Blue turned to the security guard, still standing next to the door. "Will you hand me the key, Corporal Jarvis?"

"Captain?" There was a puzzled look on the guard's face.

"The key to the restraints. Give it to me, please."

Corporal Jarvis nodded and produced the key from his trouser pocket. Blue took it, and gestured toward the exit. "Leave us, now. We won't need you for the time being."

"Are you sure, Captain?"

"Captain Scarlet and I will be able to handle the prisoner if any problem arises."

Jarvis hesitated a brief instant before nodding his acknowledgement. He walked out the door and it slid closed after him. Blue quietly came toward Colonel White who was looking at him expectantly.

"What is it you intend to do now?" he asked sombrely. "Gentle persuasion didn't work out, so now you're planning to be more brutal?"

"I just want to remove those restraints, that's all. I'll feel more comfortable seeing you out of them... And I'm sure you'll feel that way too." Blue crouched in front of a disbelieving White and unlocked the cuffs, freeing his hands. He did the same with the feet before standing up to go sit beside Scarlet. The latter was casting a thoughtful glance toward their commander who had brought his hands up to rub his sore wrists. White shot him back a suspicious look.

"Isn't it better that way? Blue asked with a faint smile.

He saw the Spectrum commander shaking his head, apparently unsure. "I really don't know. I'm still wondering about your motivation in setting me free. It's not the sort of... 'interrogation' I'd expected of you."

"Why is it that you're always expecting the worst from us?" Scarlet asked.

"You nearly killed me," White responded ruefully. "Why shouldn't I expect the worst?"

"He's got a point there," Blue noted quietly.

White nodded toward Scarlet. "I seem to recall, however, that YOU saved my life."

"I did."

"You KNEW that gun was going to explode."

"I merely suspected it could be defective."

"What KIND of a weapon was it? I've never seen anything like it... And I certainly never saw one blow up like that before."

"An electron gun," Blue explained. "We... use it against Mysterons."

"That's not the first time I've heard that word... 'Mysterons'. Who are they?"

"At this point, if we told you exactly what they are, you wouldn't believe us," Blue answered. "Let's just say they're responsible for your... present state."

White frowned. "And what do you mean by my... 'present state', exactly?"

"You experience severe memory loss," Scarlet explained. "Disorientation, sudden mood changes, violent behaviour, paranoia... Not to mention, of late, headaches, sudden rises in body temperature, and shakes..."

The older man scoffed sulkily. "What are you... doctors?"

"That's not ours, but Doctor Weiss and Doctor Fawn's diagnosis," Blue replied. "You remember Doctor Fawn? You wanted to wring his neck in sickbay early this morning... After he had tended to you."

"Sorry. I had a rather bad experience with doctors recently," White replied somewhat coldly.

"That's what we understood." Scarlet produced a picture from his file and carefully slid it across table, face down, toward White. "I think you know about this... Tell me if I'm wrong."

White eyed the younger man with a probing look, before taking the picture and turning it over to take a look at it. The two captains saw him cringe upon looking at what they knew was in the picture. He raised a furious, yet controlled gaze upon them.

"I get it," he said in a low, sinister tone. "If I don't prove cooperative enough, you're going to put me back on that thing, aren't you?"

"You DON'T get it," Blue quickly answered. He gave a sideways look at his partner. "I told you it would be a bit too harsh showing it to him that way..."

"Nobody will put you back on that thing, sir," Scarlet said in a reassuring tone. "We don't want to do you any harm."

"You Spectrum people keep saying that... Why show me that?"

"We wanted to make sure you recognized it. That picture has been sent to us by the Universal Secret Service. It's a *Dream Spinner*. That's the origin of your problems."

"And you think I don't KNOW that?" White angrily threw the picture onto the table. "Am I to believe the U.S.S. is using this contraption to question its prisoners?"

"The U.S.S. doesn't use this device," Blue replied. "And its purpose isn't interrogation."

"WHAT is it, then?"

"It's a mind controlling device," Scarlet answered. "It implants false memories... and erases real ones. It makes people believe things. To push them to act in a certain way."

White's face stayed imperturbable. He stared suspiciously at the two men. "Your Doctor Weiss and that little lady with her..."

"Symphony HATES being called a 'little lady'," Blue noted.

"Anyway, they've already tried that line with me," White noted flatly. "They didn't succeed in convincing me. What makes you believe you will?"

"We HAVE to convince you, sir," Blue replied, shaking his head.

"GOOD LUCK, then," White shot back, stressing every word. "I'm not a fool you can manipulate easily!"

"Unfortunately, you already HAVE been manipulated," Scarlet retorted with a dull tone.

"Don't be IMPERTINENT, young sir!" White looked at each of the two captains in front of him. "What IS IT you want from me?"

"We want our commander back," Blue answered.

"That man is dead!" White said savagely, between his teeth.

"No, I don't think so," Scarlet retorted, his calm contrasting with the older man's agitation. "I believe he's still very much alive..."

White gave him an intent look. "You're still implying I AM your commander," he realised, shaking his head. "I am not your Colonel White."

"Yes, you are," Blue insisted.

"That's insane... If you believe so strongly NOW that I am your commander, why did you try to kill me BEFORE?"

"It's rather difficult to explain... But believe us, you are Colonel White."

White's features became hard. "My name is Gray, Charles Gray. Former captain of the British Navy. Former admiral of the World Navy. My identification number is 187C34729..."

"That's all true, 'Admiral'," Scarlet answered, sighing. "But it's also true you're Colonel White, supreme commander of Spectrum."

"...And your boss, then?" White asked sarcastically. "Then I order you to let me go!"

"That's a bit premature at this point."

"I thought you'd say that... Listen, I'm tired of your game..."

"It's not a game. It's deadly serious."

"Oh, THAT I can believe!" White shook his head. "If I don't play this your way, what's going to happen to me?"

"Hopefully, we'll be able to make you see the truth," Scarlet said. "Eventually."

"And hopefully, before it's too late," Blue added.

"Too late for what?" an annoyed White replied.

He didn't receive any answer; the two Spectrum captains exchanged glances. Upon Blue's nodding to him, Scarlet cleared his throat. "Would you mind answering a few simple questions... 'Admiral'?"

Charles Gray braced himself. *Here it comes*, he thought grimly. *The real questioning begins. I'd better be careful of what's going to happen now.* "I'm warning you, I'm not about to let you..."

"What year is it?"

White stopped in the middle of his sentence, interrupted by the English captain's quiet and unusual question. He frowned. "What?"

"What year is it?" Scarlet repeated, carefully stressing each word very calmly. He saw the other man hesitate.

"What kind of question is that?"

"How OLD are you, sir?" he asked again.

"I was born July 14th, 2017..."

"That's not what I asked. I want you to tell me your age."

White scoffed. "Can't you work that out yourself?"

"Why won't you answer, sir?" Blue asked quietly.

White kept silent. Scarlet narrowed his eyes at him. "You don't want to answer because you don't know," he noted quietly.

"That's preposterous!" White grumbled.

"Is it?" Blue replied. "I would say it appears you don't know what year it is... Why is that?"

Still no answer.

"How long since you retired from the World Navy?" Scarlet asked.

"I didn't retire. I..." White stopped again, obviously searching for the right word.

"Quit?" Scarlet suggested. "Or better... deserted?"

"Tell us in what circumstances," Blue added.

"I wasn't happy at the way the World Government turned its back on the British people."

"How did the World Government do that exactly?"

"Do you want me to give you a history lesson?" an aggressive White replied.

"I'm a historian," Scarlet answered back. "And I can assure you, the World Government never did what you implied." He shook his head. "You didn't 'desert', sir. You retired from the World Navy with full honours. An admiral at thirty-one... A hero."

Colonel White gave a faint snort of contempt. "Talk about a hero..." he murmured.

Scarlet raised an eyebrow. *Touched a raw nerve, here... I wonder what's eating at him?* He exchanged another glance with Captain Blue. His partner had obviously noticed the same thing.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Scarlet asked carefully.

He saw the older man shrug with indifference. "You say you're a historian. YOU tell me."

"We'd rather you did, Colonel," Blue insisted.

White turned a furious look toward him. "Stop calling me that! My name is Charles Gray," he repeated, obstinately. "I was an admiral in the World Navy. Identification number 187C34729... I've got no more to say to you!"

"You've got much more to say than you think," Scarlet replied. "Who's the 'Thorn'?"

"Excuse me?"

"Does the codename 'Thorn' mean anything to you?" Scarlet insisted.

"Never heard that name before in my life!"

"We're sure to the contrary," Blue replied again, pointing to the older man. "You're the 'Thorn'."

White frowned. "What?" he murmured. "What are you saying?"

"Or rather you were. That's the codename under which you were known when you were a field agent in the U.S.S."

White smiled sarcastically. "According to that young blonde woman I was HEAD of the British section of the U.S.S.!"

"You started out as field agent. That's why you retired from the Navy..."

"Quite a demotion. I would have relinquished a rank of admiral for a job as a FIELD AGENT?"

"Why not? According to you, you would have relinquished it for a job as a fulltime rebel."

"I've only done what my conscience and duty were telling me to do!" White snapped angrily.

"So you did when you joined the British section of the Secret Service."

"There's no such thing as a U.S.S. British Section. There never has been!"

"You're wrong," Scarlet quickly retorted. "Throughout the time the Militarist Government was in power in Britain, there was an underground service bureau of the U.S.S. in England. It was monitoring the Government of the time. It's through that underground bureau that the British rebels came into contact with the World Government to ask for President Bandranaik's help."

White gave the young man a suspicious look. "How did you know that?" he asked.

"I told you: I'm a historian. And my family had its part in the insurrection." He looked sharply at the older man. "Did YOU know any of that information yourself, sir?"

"What are you trying to get me to say?"

"How is it you didn't know about the U.S.S.'s involvement with the rebels?" Scarlet persisted.

"I don't know ANYTHING about the US.S.! I've never been part of it! If you think I would BETRAY my own..."

"How about your wife?"

Hearing Scarlet's words, Colonel White became totally livid. "Leave my wife out of this!" he warned the younger man.

"Don't go too far, Scarlet," Blue whispered to his friend.

"I must, Captain," Scarlet replied dully, his eyes riveted on those of his obviously infuriated commander. "We have to go on."

"If you make any kind of threat toward my wife," White said between clenched teeth addressing Scarlet directly, "I swear to you, I'll kill you!"

"I already told you, killing me won't do you any good. And I promise you, I'm not threatening your wife. I just want you to tell me how you met her."

"What's that got to do with anything you're telling me right now?" White shot back. "I told you to leave her OUT of this!"

"Tell me how you met her!" Scarlet demanded forcefully.

"I don't have to tell you that!" White shouted back.

"Why?" Scarlet barked in turn. "Don't tell me you don't remember that!"

White quickly stood up, sending the chair rattling noisily on the floor. Blue jumped to his feet also, ready to prevent any move his commander might make. Oddly, Scarlet didn't move from his seat; his eyes were locked onto those of his furious commander. The latter didn't move from his spot. He was really upset, and it was also apparent he was desperately trying to conceal his confusion. *He really DOESN'T remember*, the British captain realised. And it was so obvious it was frustrating him a lot. The edge in Scarlet's tone disappeared instantly. "That's true, isn't it, sir? You don't remember..."

Charles Gray didn't answer. He was trying hard – so very hard – to recall to his mind that particular event; not to tell it to these men – it was too personal, too private to tell them – but for himself. He felt so terrible that he couldn't even remember THAT, a memory that should have been so precious that nothing should have touched it.

The *Dream Spinner* hadn't even left him that, he noted with resentment.

He gauged his opponents. They had already proven to him that they could handle him, separately. The black-haired man had almost killed him; the blond one was strong as an ox. *I may be confused, but I'm not totally irrational*, Gray thought gloomily. Against the TWO of them, he had no chance to escape, whatsoever.

Casting a withering look toward Blue, who was still standing ready for him, he drew the chair to him and sat back down.

"Leave me alone," he replied bitterly, lowering his gaze.

Scarlet sighed. "I can see how this upsets you, sir."

"You don't know ANYTHING about me."

"I know enough to tell you about what the *Dream Spinner* made you forget." White raised his head toward Scarlet. The latter nodded quietly. "You met your wife during your first years in the U.S.S.," he said to the older man. "She was assigned as your field partner after the first one you had was killed on duty. She was codenamed 'The Rose'."

"The Thorn and the Rose..." Gray scoffed dryly. "Very poetic..."

"Does THAT remind you of something?" Blue asked.

There was something of a softer note in the colonel's voice when he spoke, with a sad smile. "My wife wasn't a spy..."

"I think U.S.S. operatives preferred to be called 'agents'," Scarlet retorted.

"That's not the historian talking again, is it?"

"I got that from my grandfather. He worked for the U.S.S. You met him there."

"Really now?" White grumbled. "I keep telling you: I never worked for the U.S.S. And my wife certainly didn't either."

"Yes, you did," Scarlet insisted. "Both of you worked there." He sighed. "Don't you realise what's the matter with you, sir? Don't you see the reason WHY you can't remember how you met your wife is because the *Dream Spinner* has erased all of your memories of your time in the U.S.S.?"

"It's probably because those memories conflicted with what the *Dream Spinner* implanted in your mind," Blue added. "That's how this thing works, sir. It weaves and realigns memories, and gets rid of what is unwanted."

"On the other hand, while the *Dream Spinner* implanted those memories, it seems that it didn't leave you with many details about them," Scarlet pursued. "You think Britain is still under the control of the Militarist elite. You were made to believe you deserted from the Navy, when the World Government didn't fulfil its promise to help the British people. And yet, you don't remember any DETAILS of those events. Do you know how exactly you came to work as an underground rebel? How did you meet those men you were with, when Spectrum took you back? Why can't you even recall what year we are in? The *Dream Spinner* didn't give you any of those details."

"The year, sir, is 2070," Blue then said. "According to what you're telling us, you would have been fighting the Militarists for the past twenty-five years. In twenty-five years, there is A LOT of detail you should be able to remember..."

A hesitant Charles Gray pondered what was now stated to him. There was an impression of truth in those words. It would explain so much. *Could it be...*

No. Don't let yourself be manipulated that way, old man!

"So you say..." White replied adamantly. "But that doesn't prove ANYTHING! That *Dream Spinner* device played tricks with my mind, I admit, but... if what you say is true, to what purpose would somebody have done that to me? Why play with my

memories that way? What does it serve?" Colonel White shook his head. "I can't believe any of this is true!"

"You MUST believe it, sir. The *Dream Spinner* made you believe the civil war wasn't finished in Britain..."

"All of you, you've said this to me, again and again..." White sighed. "Will you PLEASE change the record?"

"Hear us out, sir, and try to understand what was done to you," Scarlet replied sternly. "The *Dream Spinner* erased any memory of the civil war being won by the rebels... That war has been over for the past twenty-five years..."

White shook his head obstinately. "No... You're lying to me..."

"The open conflict didn't even last a MONTH," Scarlet continued. "The Militarist Government had no other choice but to step down, and gave the governing power back to the people. The rebels WON, sir... Britain joined the World Government."

"The World Government turned its back on Britain!"

"President Bandranaik gave the rebels the support they asked of him."

"Perhaps he did. For a time. But then he let us down." White waved toward the two Spectrum officers. "Spectrum is a World Government organisation, right? So that means the World Government is siding with the Militarists now? Politics make strange bedfellows, don't you think?" He stared straight at them and narrowed his eyes. "Or perhaps it is the reward on my head that brought you people against me?"

"You mentioned that 'reward' already," Blue noted. "Why would there be a reward on your head?"

"The British Militarist Law is quite eager to get its hands on me, is it not?"

Scarlet frowned. "You have nothing to fear from British law, sir," he retorted quietly. "Why would that be the case?"

White scoffed dryly. "What about that man I killed?"

"You're talking about Jonathan Dempsey?" Scarlet asked.

White gave him an odd enough look. "What are you talking about? Last time I saw that swine Dempsey, he was alive. Not well, but alive. The Militarists wouldn't give a damn about Dempsey, anyway..."

Scarlet nodded slowly. He'd have to come back to that subject later. For now, there was another question that needed to be clarified. "Who are you talking about, then?"

"Don't pretend you don't know," White mumbled. "I'm talking about Jackson Bennett."

Probably the 'Jack' he had mentioned during his delirium, was the common thought in both Spectrum captains' minds. The one he kept insulting...

"Who's Jackson Bennett?" Blue asked.

"Who WAS Jackson Bennett, you mean. A confirmed and loyal Militarist, that's who and what he was..."

"And when did you kill that man?" Scarlet asked in turn.

"Still you pretend you don't know. I thought you were an historian." He sighed. "All right, if you want to play this game... December 13th 2046... That's the date that was on my calendar..."

"December 13th..." Scarlet frowned deeply. "Dear Lord..."

"That day means something to you, Captain?" Blue asked his partner.

Scarlet nodded slowly. "Yes, definitely. That's the day Captain Charles Gray of the British Navy turned against the Militarist Government... and demonstrated it very clearly by using his destroyer, the *Sir Francis Drake*, to engage the *Lord Horatio Nelson*, and two other warships, in order to protect Liberty Base, a base the British rebels had set up in the Orkney Islands."

"Well, well, well... What do you know?" White mocked him. "You really ARE an historian."

Scarlet frowned. "Who was that Jackson Bennett to you?"

White didn't respond. His eyes were riveted defiantly on Scarlet's. *He won't say anything else on the subject*, the British captain realised instantly. He cleared his throat and stood up, tapping on his colleague's shoulder to attract his attention. "A minute of your time, Captain Blue..." He added, addressing Colonel White, "If you'll excuse us, sir..." Again, the older man didn't answer. He watched with silent curiosity as Scarlet drew Captain Blue toward the other end of the room to converse with him more privately. "What is it?" Blue asked in a whisper. "You think you're on to something?"

"I don't know..." Scarlet replied. "We need more information on that Bennett character... and probably the events surrounding what happened on the 13th of December 2046... I know what happened historically, but we need more detailed data, from that day and of the other days surrounding it. Particularly, the days preceding."

He gave a look toward White who kept his seat, looking around, apparently not trying to listen to them. Scarlet wasn't fooled. *The old man must certainly be hearing a few words...*

"Go see Lieutenant Green and help him search the colonel's personal files. I bet you'll find something interesting for us, regarding those events. Also, check the World Military database from that period. Find out if there's anything in the enlistment roll concerning Jackson Bennett."

"What about the British Military database?" Blue suggested. "Britain was not part of the World Government in those years. If

Bennett was British military, it's quite possible his name won't appear on the World Military enlistment roll. Especially if he was killed before Britain joined."

"You're right. You'd better check that too." Scarlet paused.

"You think we've found our 'noose'?"

"I wish I could be sure... But it's something we have to check, right?"

"What will you do, while I'm going through those files?"

"I haven't finished with our friend, here."

"You plan to continue talking to him?" Blue said, frowning. "Are you sure it's wise?"

"What are you afraid of, Captain? That we'll end up killing each other?"

"Considering recent events..." Scarlet silenced his friend with an old-fashioned look. Blue answered with a knowing smile. "Okay then," he added out loud. "We'll do it your way." He glanced in Colonel White's direction. "I'll better get going. It's a tall order you just gave me and I have a feeling it could take a little time... I'll contact you if we find anything."

"Likewise."

"Be careful."

Blue directed his steps towards the door. It slid open before him and he walked out. Colonel White watched as the door slid close again; he had just the time to have a peek at the security guard, standing just on the other side. He turned towards Scarlet, who was sitting down again.

"Change of plans?" the older man asked.

"Let's just say what you just told us may have brought something up," Scarlet replied. "Captain Blue is going to see if he can find some more details..."

"I understood that, you know," White answered. "I may not have heard your conversation too well, but..."

"Right, your ear." Scarlet nodded. "Doctor Fawn told us the eardrum in your left ear had been damaged. That's probably due to one of the aspects of the *Dream Spinner's* treatment."

"You don't say..."

"Doctor Fawn says the problem is only temporary. You should hear just fine in a few days."

"Glad to know that. WHY are you so good to me, anyway?"

"I think you should know the answer by now."

"You're trying to convince me I'm your commander..."

"Yes, but not for the reasons you obviously believe. You think we want to make you talk."

"And that's not what you're been trying to do?"

"You know we'll find what we need, anyway. Spectrum has very sophisticated computers and has access to every database in the world... But you can spare us the waste of time by being a little bit more co-operative..."

"Right, you would say that. And I'd say that I'm GAINING some time..."

"For what, sir?"

White shrugged. Scarlet stared intensely at him. *Still can't reach him*, he mused ruefully. *Well, Doctor Weiss didn't succeed either. And I'm no psychiatrist... What could I possibly say to make him listen to reason and see the truth?*

"What is it the Mysterons wanted you to do for them?" he asked quietly.

"I keep telling you," White mumbled. "I don't know ANYTHING about those Mysterons. Unless it's the name you Spectrum people use to refer to British insurgents..."

"No," Scarlet murmured, sighing. "No, that's not it. The Mysterons are... well, a worldwide threat to Humanity, to say the least."

"'Threat to Humanity'?" White scoffed. "Aren't you pushing this a bit far?"

"Absolutely not, sir. You can take that from me." Scarlet shook his head. Trying to convince the colonel of his good faith could prove a bit hard if he were to explain to him that the Mysterons were aliens from Mars, intent on destroying all life on Earth, and that, to carry out their revenge, they used tremendous, unknown powers, one of which enabled them to reconstruct objects or people after they had been destroyed or killed. "They act as terrorists," he said simply, "But they're not your typical terrorists... They're using people – innocent people, unaware of what they really doing – to achieve their objectives... Like they intended to do with you."

"You're telling me those Mysterons are behind what was done to me with that *Dream Spinner*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because they wanted to use me?" As Scarlet nodded quietly, White pondered the revelation for a few seconds. He frowned. "And they're doing this all the time with people?"

Scarlet sighed. "The use of the *Dream Spinner* is a first, as far as we know." *The use of human agents too*, he added to himself. "Generally, they use another, different technique. A more radical one."

"What is it?"

Scarlet shook his head, hesitating. "Right now, I'd rather not tell..."

"I wouldn't believe it, right?" White scoffed. "Or rather, it's a long story?"

"You're right on both accounts, sir."

"And I think you're simply lying to me," White added, roughly. "You want to know who my superiors are, right?"

"Sir..."

"I don't know exactly where you're driving at, with your 'Mysterons' story, but it isn't working. I won't talk." The colonel gave an exasperated look toward Scarlet. "I'm tired. I haven't slept much these last few days... At least, not any RESTING sleep. I can't keep this up... Leave me alone. I won't answer ANY MORE of your questions..."

Scarlet hesitated; Colonel White sure looked like he could use some sleep. "I would like you to get some rest, sir," he said quietly, with a deep sigh. "But time is running out..."

"For you to stop what the 'Mysterons' are planning to do, right?" White said with irony. He shook his head. "My name is Charles Gray," he then added, much to Scarlet's dismay, "former admiral in the World Navy. My identification number is S-00498W01..."

Scarlet suddenly stared at him intensely, in disbelief. "Repeat that, please."

"What?" Colonel White asked, frowning.

"Repeat that identification number!" Scarlet demanded forcefully, grabbing a pen from the pocket of his tunic.

Surprised by the young man's outburst, White obeyed passively, and looked puzzled, as Scarlet was opening the file in front of him to consult it quickly. "S-00498W01... But what are you..."

"That's not the same I.D. number," Scarlet cut in, finding what he was looking for on a piece of paper. He turned his eyes back to White: "187C34729... What that does say to you?"

White seemed confused; he shook his head. "That's... my identification number. I... must have made a mistake..."

"No. No mistake," Scarlet replied evenly. "187C34729 is your World Navy identification number. S-00498W01," he turned the paper toward the colonel to show him what he had just written on it, "... is your SPECTRUM I.D. number." He pointed to the number imprinted at the top of the document.

White shot him a dumbfounded glance before taking the paper to look at it. It was a short computer printout; it showed a black and white photograph of him, wearing what appeared to be a uniform similar to that of the young man in front of him, but with a

tunic apparently coloured white. There was a short description of him, his date of birth, a rank...

...And the identification number he just blurted out seconds ago.

"That must be a trick," White whispered, frowning in disbelief.

"A trick, really?" Scarlet replied calmly. "Well, if you think it is, explain to me how I could have achieved that one..." He gave the faintest of smiles to the incredulous Colonel White who had raised his eyes toward him. "Your memory's coming back, sir..."

Chapter 11

A trick... It's got to be a trick.

But... how could they have done it? former Admiral Charles Gray mused. How could they have compelled him to mistake that series of numbers for the World Navy identification he had received so long ago? It seemed so impossible, but...

The *Dream Spinner*. They had put that 'identification number' in his mind by way of the *Dream Spinner*.

But if it was the case, then all the things those Spectrum people were telling him, about his mind having been tampered with by that damned contraption, about false memories planted in his head... then they would be true?

Wouldn't they?

Gray had tremendous trouble considering that eventuality. So many of his memories were gone, the mere idea of those that were left being false was... maddening, to say the least.

No. They're trying to manipulate me... They want to deceive me.

Why would they do that? This is so troubling...

The English Captain didn't want to let go. Seeing that Gray was still incredulous about this whole I.D. number issue and all it could imply, he pursued, relentlessly, presenting other arguments, other so-called 'proofs'. Gray didn't want to listen, and obstinately used every means to resist. He pretended again he was tired and that he needed to rest. The younger man did not permit him that. He pressed on, ruthlessly.

It went on for two full hours.

Captain Scarlet could see Colonel White was wearing out. But still, the older man refused to give. He had ignored Scarlet, insulted him, even threatened him a couple of times, almost jumping at his throat on at least one occasion, but catching himself just before actually doing so. The Spectrum captain couldn't help but notice that, despite Doctor Fawn's assumption that a mere word or move could set him off, the colonel was actually getting more and more in control of his outbursts of temper.

He imagined it could only be a good sign.

How can I reach him? Scarlet was asking himself. This was getting really frustrating... His commander didn't recognize him, didn't listen to him, refused to take any food, and still considered himself a prisoner. How was it possible to make him understand

that it wasn't the case, that he was one of them? That here, on Cloudbase, he was among friends, and therefore had absolutely nothing to fear?

Sure, this interrogation room was not a familiar environment for him, Scarlet pondered. Cooped up like this in here, he could not see what Cloudbase really was.

And what if...

Well, why not? It could work.

Charles Gray could see the eyes of the young captain light up, as if an idea had suddenly come to his mind. He had confirmation of that when the Spectrum officer called upon Corporal Jarvis and another security guard. The two men entered and, following the captain's orders to them, Admiral Gray found himself back in shackles. This time, however, his feet remained free.

"You've had enough, then?" Gray asked the red-clad officer. "I am to go back to my room?"

"No," the captain responded shaking his head. "There is another place I want to take you."

"Ah!" Gray pondered this a few seconds and thought he had it all figured out. "I don't need medical care anymore, so I will be going to the brig..."

"Wrong again, sir."

Captain Scarlet was answering with as even a voice as he could produce, trying not to alarm Colonel White. He saw, however, the flash of concern in the older man's eyes, as he was obviously worried about where he was going and what would happen to him. Scarlet smiled reassuringly.

"Don't worry, sir. I have already promised you, nothing bad will happen to you."

"Why these shackles, then?" White mumbled, showing his hands, now restrained to that damned belt.

"Mainly for security. As we're going to walk through Cloudbase's corridors, I don't want you to try and make a break for it." Scarlet paused. "You've already tried it."

"If you were in my situation, you would probably do the same," White replied dryly.

Scarlet paused a second, before answering, with a very calm voice. "Actually, I WAS in your situation, once. And it's because of what you did THEN, that I'm so willing to help you NOW."

Colonel White stared intently at him, obviously wondering what he was talking about. Captain Scarlet didn't add anything else and put his cap on, before dropping his mic. "Lieutenant Green? I have

a couple of favours to ask of you..." He glanced at Jarvis who nodded to him that the prisoner was now ready to go. "First of all, have the corridors between the interrogation room and the Promenade Deck empty of all personnel until further orders... and then notify the Angel pack to get ready for a demonstration. I'll give you the word shortly."

The mic returned to its place on the visor and Scarlet turned to his commander, who was still scrutinizing him with a curious look. The captain gestured toward the opening door. "This way, please, sir..."

"Promenade Deck'?" White repeated. "What is this Cloudbase of yours, anyway? A carrier, or something like that?"

"Oh, that's right..." Scarlet said innocently. "We haven't told you that, yet..." He took the colonel by the arm and gently guided him toward the door.

* * *

Cloudbase's Promenade Deck was the only strictly non-duty area of the entire hovering military base. It was the favourite spot of many Cloudbase officers, including Captain Scarlet and Colonel White himself. The Spectrum supreme commander often went there to relax and do some gardening. It was also there that he usually gathered with Scarlet, Rhapsody, and Doctor Fawn for Sunday tea. It had become something of a tradition, started almost from the beginning of Cloudbase's active duty, three years earlier. Captain Black was of the gathering, in those days, and Scarlet remembered how he and Colonel White always had those animated discussions on sports... most noticeably team sports. It was during those conversations that Scarlet had learned of Colonel White's love for them... Especially basketball. That he was captain during his time at King's College, and that he had led his team to victory three consecutive years. Thinking of his commander as an eagerly sportive teen was something of an odd concept for Captain Scarlet.

That, of course, was some years before a still very young Charles Gray enlisted in the Navy and trained to become an officer.

Captain Scarlet was hoping that the familiar setting of the Promenade Deck would somehow trigger something in Colonel White's memory and compel him to at least listen, and consider what he was trying to make him understand.

All the way to the Promenade Deck, Scarlet explained about Cloudbase to his amnesiac commander. At first, White feigned complete indifference, but as the Spectrum Captain continued his depiction of the hovering carrier – going into such details as how it

was constructed, four years ago, in different factories around the world and then assembled in space before being brought down into the stratosphere to sit at about 40,000 feet above Earth – it became quite apparent the colonel's interest had been stirred. He didn't ask any questions. He merely listened carefully to what Scarlet was telling him. He took great care not to look TOO interested, though. But Captain Scarlet was not blind to the obvious.

He may be taking mental notes on the enemy's strengths, the British captain mused. Or maybe he hopes I'll accidentally indicate a means of escape. He may be brainwashed and disoriented, but he's still the strategist. Unfortunately for him, I won't be that careless...

The door leading to the Promenade Deck opened before Scarlet and he entered. White followed and passed before him to step further into the large room. He looked around him, with unconcerned curiosity, at all the trees and exotic plants that thrived in there. Aside from the absence of animal sounds, anybody could believe he had stepped in some flourishing part of the Rain Forest.

Scarlet stopped the security guards before they could walk into the Promenade Deck and asked them to wait outside, by the door. It slid closed and the young Brit quietly approached, as White came closer to the large bay window that enabled visitors to look outside. He did so, staring indifferently at the clear blue sky and white clouds passing by, his back turned to Scarlet. The latter left him to his observation and deep thoughts, hoping it could somehow yield some results.

"Lovely setting," the colonel then said in a flat tone. He turned back to face Scarlet. His features were expressionless. "Can I go to my room now?"

The captain stared at him very quietly for a few seconds, trying to see if that set face was keeping something from him. He couldn't decipher anything.

"So this place doesn't remind you of anything?" he asked.

His elder shrugged his shoulders. "Should it?"

"You like this place a lot. The little free time you allow yourself, you mostly spend it here, stargazing, doing some gardening, writing... On Sunday, whenever it's possible, you receive some of us from the senior staff for tea, here."

"Really?" White scoffed mockingly. "I didn't know I was such a good-intentioned commander... Or that I was such a sucker for traditions..."

Scarlet rolled his eyes. *I much prefer him SILENT than sarcastic, he told himself. He really can be disagreeable when he's like this...*

He wasn't giving up on his commander yet. He approached him and took him by the shoulder.

"Come close to the bay window, sir."

White obeyed passively. Scarlet pointed toward the flight decks they could see very clearly, from where they stood. "On the higher deck, you can see the Angels," the captain explained. "Our interceptor jets. They're the best in the world."

Admiral Charles Gray looked down. He could indeed see three white, sleek interceptors, standing in Delta formation, on the higher and narrower deck. He remembered having seen those jets quite recently, skimming the treetops over his head.

"I hope you properly thanked those pilots for having saved your life," Colonel White noted matter-of-factly, addressing Scarlet.

The latter answered with a rueful smile, but said nothing.

"We're really 40,000 feet up in the air?" White asked him.

"Yes, sir. Why do you ask? Are you wondering how you'd escape from such a height?"

"Curiosity, that's all," White mumbled quickly.

Scarlet didn't believe him in the least. But he did not make any remark on the subject. He shrugged. "Then I'm glad something DID catch your interest, after all."

"Yes, right," White replied with annoyance. "Really interesting." He turned back to the door. "Get me back to my room. Or my cell, wherever you want me."

"I want you HERE, for the moment," Scarlet retorted dryly, seizing his arm to stop him from leaving. "I'm not done with you, yet."

"I was afraid you would say that," White answered, tiredly. "What now?"

Scarlet dropped his cap microphone. "Lieutenant Green, launch all Angels." He motioned to Colonel White to look through the window. The older man did so, staring down at the three interceptors on the higher deck. Less than thirty seconds later, the first one literally catapulted itself into the sky. Fifteen seconds after, the two remaining Angels followed and joined the first one.

The three of them turned around and came back toward Cloudbase, flying in close, perfect formation. They passed by the Promenade Deck like lightning, wagging their wings in unison. Colonel White's eyes followed them as they shot upward into the sky. The Spectrum commander seemed less than impressed. Or rather, he didn't seem to care at all about what he had just seen.

"Don't tell me you brought me up here to try to impress me with this demonstration!" he scoffed, turning toward Scarlet. "What is this, a show of force? Trying to make me understand that our efforts against your kind are useless?"

Scarlet stared at him incredulously. "You believe that's what I'm trying to do right now, sir?"

White did not respond. Scarlet sighed. He led his commander to a nearby set of chairs and table and made him sit there. He took the other seat. "I brought you here, hoping it would somehow jolt your memories of what and who you truly are."

"I know who I am."

"Yes. 'Charles Gray, former World Navy admiral'. I lost count of the times you've said it. What about that 'mistaken' I.D. number? How could you explain a Spectrum identification number ending up in your head?"

"I hope you'll tell me."

"NOW who's playing games, sir?" Scarlet gave another sigh and dropped down his cap microphone. "Lieutenant Green, recall the Angels," he said. He paused, looking at White. "The... operation didn't work as we hoped it would." Scarlet heard the disappointment in Lieutenant Green's acknowledgement; he knew exactly how the young man was feeling. The mic returned to its place. "You've seen the Angels take off countless times," he explained his commander. "That's why I asked for this demonstration..."

"Like you said, 'so it would jolt my memories'?" White noted flatly. "Sorry, Captain. There are no memories to jolt."

"You believe there aren't," Scarlet replied persistently. "But they are there. They're just buried very deep. We just have to dig further to reach them."

"This is becoming very tiring... Why don't you tell me what your superiors want from me and be done with this charade?"

"There is nobody else here to answer to than yourself, sir. And right now... you're quite unable to take command. That leaves Captain Blue and me."

"The two of you?"

"You left us in joint command before leaving for the surface on holiday, some days ago."

"Simple captains in charge of so huge an organisation? And your commander... a colonel?" White's tone was sardonic enough.

Scarlet shook his head. "Spectrum ranks are not what they appear, sir. They serve to protect our anonymity."

"As the codenames? 'Scarlet', isn't it?"

"That's right, sir."

"Your friend, I'm not sure... But you're definitely military."

“Right again, sir. My family has a long military tradition. I was in the WAAF before joining Spectrum. I had the rank of Colonel.” Scarlet paused a second, before adding, carefully: “Does that remind you of anything?”

White shrugged. “Not a thing. Should it?”

“You’re the one who actually convinced me to join Spectrum.” Scarlet paused. “And you did it here... You and Captain Black, to be precise.”

He watched for White’s reaction. He saw none.

“Captain Black?” White repeated. “By the name, obviously one of your own.”

“For a time he was your right-hand man in Spectrum. The best of us. Your friend and mine. You knew him under another name: Conrad Turner.”

Again, Scarlet watched and waited; White did nothing more than shrug. “That name isn’t familiar to me.”

“Are you sure?” Scarlet insisted. “You’ve mentioned it, already, when you were brought up here to Cloudbase, delirious with fever.”

“Oh yes... I think your psychiatrist told me that, too.” White shook his head. “Sorry. Doesn’t ring a bell at all.”

“Then why did you call out his name while you were feverish?”

“You’re sure I really did that?”

“I have no reason not to believe Doctor Fawn. It was in his report.”

“And I have no reason to believe you.”

Scarlet scowled. He stared intensely at his commander, who met his gaze without flinching. He was serene enough; no deception apparent in his look. It could be possible he didn’t remember Conrad, after all; the fever could simply have brought up the memory of the renegade captain from the colonel’s subconscious.

“It may surprise you, sir,” Scarlet then said evenly, “but I DO believe you.”

“Indeed, you surprise me, son,” White answered back sarcastically. He held out his hands, the best his restraints allowed. “Sorry, didn’t mean to call you that.”

Clearly, he remembered the words that had been exchanged between the two of them, during that fight they had in the wood. Scarlet smiled quietly. “No offence taken,” he said. He nodded toward White’s bruised face. “And sorry to have been so rough on you.”

Colonel White lifted an eyebrow. “This is even MORE surprising,” he replied. “I remember that you wanted to kill me, before saving my life when that gun exploded...”

"I'm sorry to say that I would probably have killed you if you hadn't tried to make me angry."

"So it's something I said that stopped you?" White paused. "What mistake did I make?"

Scarlet sighed. "Let's say I realised you weren't at all what I thought you were and that, obviously, you weren't responsible for your actions."

"Even with what I said concerning the girl?" Scarlet didn't blink. If White thought he would provoke a reaction, he was mistaken and would wait in vain. He shook his head. "I'm sorry I said that. I lied, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"How is she, anyway?"

"Rhapsody's quite fine. She didn't suffer much from her ordeal. In fact, she's already back on duty."

White looked down. "I'm glad she's all right," he said in an undertone. "She saved my life, I know that... Putting her own on the line..."

"She did it because she thought we would be able to help you. She has faith in you. A lot of us have." Scarlet scratched his ear. "However, I suspect she might be disappointed that her little demonstration with the others just now was fruitless..."

White gave him a puzzled look. The young officer nodded toward the bay window. "She was at the helm of one of the Angel jets that just took off from the upper deck."

"She's a combat pilot?" White mused.

"Yes, sir. That's her principal duty."

"She's not... a spy?"

Scarlet shook his head in negation. "She was a detective, in one of her earlier jobs," he explained. "Trained by the best. That why she was sent after you with Captain Ochre, when you disappeared, two days ago."

"I thought she was a spy."

"Spy... Militarist agent... Bounty hunter... Double agent, maybe?" Scarlet shook his head. "You were wrong on all counts about Rhapsody, sir. She didn't trap you to hand you over to your enemies."

White pondered that for a few moments. "Well, what you're saying right now may be true or not," he said evenly. "I don't know, really. What I know is that I really didn't want that young lady to get hurt."

Scarlet nodded slowly. *That must be true too, he mused. He seems far too sincere to fake this. Rhapsody is right. There is still*

enough of the old man's real personality present in him. Surely, he can be helped...

"Is that why you protected her from Jonathan Dempsey?" he asked the colonel carefully.

"She reported that episode?"

"She told me you tore into that man with your bare fists. Beat him to a pulp."

"I lost control," White murmured, looking down at his hands. "Happens a lot since I was put through that... *Dream Spinner* treatment. One of the consequences of that, I suppose..." He paused. "Well, anyway, I don't regret giving that swine the lesson he deserved."

"That's what you call what you did to him?" Scarlet asked, scratching his ear again. "A bullet in the head? A lesson?"

The colonel gave him an odd enough look. "You mean he's dead?"

"Yes, quite dead," Scarlet responded, watching every reaction from his commander. "We thought you had... executed him. Obviously, it wasn't the case. You don't even seem to know he had been killed."

"No, I didn't know."

"Do you have any idea WHO might have killed him?"

White kept silent for a short instant, pondering that. Shelby's final words concerning Dempsey came to his mind. "No," he finally said, "I don't have the slightest idea."

Scarlet narrowed his eyes at the older man. "I'm sure you're lying," he noted. "You DO know who killed that scum."

White frowned deeply. "What do you care, anyway? You've just said it yourself. Dempsey was scum. Why would his death have any significance to you?"

"His death, no. But who killed him... I like to know who I'm up against." Scarlet paused. "A Mysteron would have killed him without a second thought. So I'm betting it's Commander Shelby who did it."

Charles Gray frowned. He wasn't surprised that the young officer should know Shelby's name. *The girl would have told him about that too*, he realised. He didn't pick it up and chose to engage in another subject.

"Still with those 'Mysterons' of yours, then? WHAT are they, Captain?"

He still didn't know who and what the Mysterons were but considering all the secrecy these Spectrum agents kept around them, there was certainly something really terrible about them. /

wouldn't believe it, they said, Gray mused inwardly. *What is it they're keeping from me, anyway?* He didn't know why, but the more that word was mentioned around him, the more uncomfortable he became. The hairs on the back of his head were even starting to stand right up...

"You're not answering my question," Scarlet noted. "So I've guessed right, haven't I?"

"And you didn't answer MY question. So we're even."

"You asked it just to divert the conversation," Scarlet replied. "You're still trying to PROTECT those men..."

"And WHY shouldn't I? They're my men... They saved me from that damned *Dream Spinner!*"

"No, they're not, and they didn't... Truth to tell, they are THE ONES who had hooked you to that thing!"

White became livid; he quickly stood up to face the younger man.

"You're trying to set me against my own people!" he accused him.

"Oh, come on, now!" Scarlet replied, groaning. "They're not your people! They were manipulating you!"

"No, YOU are manipulating me!" White spat out, still accusingly. "Or at least, you're trying very hard... But I tell you, you won't succeed!"

Scarlet gave an exasperated sigh and slowly came to his feet. "Still, you REFUSE to see the obvious," he retorted sharply. "Why can't you accept the truth of what we're telling you?"

"Because it's not the truth!" White almost shouted at him.

"Oh, yes, it is!" Scarlet replied with the same tone. "And you know it." He poked his commander's chest. "You know it, here, in your heart."

White took a step back. "DON'T touch me!" he hissed between his teeth.

"Colonel, we're all your friends here, and..."

"Don't call me 'Colonel!'" White shouted again. "I'm not a colonel!" He eyed the younger man with an icy glance. "And I'm certainly not your friend," he added in a murmur.

There was dismay in Scarlet's blue eyes as he stared back at his commander. "You're really a stubborn mule, you know that?" he realised with bitterness in his voice. "I thought I knew that, but now I see just how obstinate you can be..."

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"You don't seem to understand the problem, sir. We're taking enormous risks, everyone on the senior staff, by trying to help you on our own..."

"I've never asked you for anything!"

"Notwithstanding the risks we're taking, and the consequences for us, what YOU risk, sir, is far less enviable. We all know that, and we don't want you to suffer any humiliation or disgrace."

"Then you should have killed me in the woods," White replied with deadpan aplomb. "That would have spared us all a lot of trouble."

Scarlet stared at him incredulously. "No, on the contrary," he said sadly. "The trouble would have been far worse..."

"Right. You would have passed over the chance to get your hands on a very valuable prize... one who could provide you with important information and whom you could torment all you like."

"You can't BELIEVE that!"

"What am I to believe, then?" White barked furiously. "You're trying to convince me of some foolish assertion that I am your commander! That I was brainwashed to do the bidding of... of some terrorist group you call the Mysterons! I say YOU are doing the brainwashing, Captain, RIGHT NOW! You're obviously working in the interest of some Militarist officials, who want to drive me completely mad so I become totally useless to the cause! You can be proud of yourself! Your family can be proud of you, too! Militarists, the whole lot of you, I bet!"

Scarlet bristled, hearing those words. "My family fought on the same side as you during the British insurrection," he replied icily. "I was too young when that occurred, but my father, my uncles, my grandfather, even my great-grandfather... You INSULT them by calling them Militarists. All of them were in the British Army, sir, but NONE of them hesitated to take a risk, and adopt a cause they believed in, for the freedom of their country. Like YOU did yourself."

"Words," White mumbled. "Those are only words..."

"Metcalf men don't believe in mere words, sir. We believe acts are needed to support those words. And acts have always defined who and what we are!"

White frowned, staring with perplexity at the younger officer's grim features. "Metcalf?" he repeated with a murmur.

"That's my name, sir," Scarlet said with a nod.

I've heard that name before... Charles Gray told himself, rather troubled. Yes, indeed... The name was associated with the cause... He knew of a very influential and dedicated old general by that name, who had decided to give his support to the so-called rebels, encouraged by his son and grandsons... He was with that delegation that had met with World President Bandranaik... It's so confusing... WHEN did I learn that? Who told me of all this...

"The eldest has your name, Charles. Must be about your age, too. With a young boy of his own..."

Lord, White realised, recalling that. *Father...*

His father, Alexander Gray, had told him, shortly before...

Captain Scarlet saw a flicker of pain cross Colonel White's eyes. Obviously upset, his commander turned his back on him. "Get me back to my room," he heard him say dully.

What is it? Scarlet wondered, perplexed. *Just my name COULDN'T have had such an impact on him... It would be too easy...*

There must be something else.

"Something wrong, sir?"

"Leave me alone, damn you!" White shouted at him. "I've had enough of your lies!"

Scarlet sighed. He realised the older man was about ready to jump at him. He would probably have done it if he weren't restrained like he was. *It was a mistake, bringing him here. He seems worse than when we arrived...* The British captain shook his head in consternation. He should have known better than to try to deal with him on his own. The best course of action would have been to leave Doctor Weiss to take care of the colonel.

Scarlet was giving up hope that this situation could be kept a secret from Intelligence much longer. They will take him in. They'll deal with him themselves... *Maybe Adam was right. Maybe it would be better this way. This is their job, after all. Let's just hope they won't be too rough on him, and that they will help him shake off the state he's in right now.*

As for US, we still have to stop the Mysterons and those people who have done this to him!

"All right, sir. I'm finished with you now. If that's what you want, I'll have you taken to your room in sickbay."

Scarlet took his commander's arm, and, as gently and carefully as possible, began to lead him toward the exit of the Promenade Deck.

And suddenly, Colonel White stopped dead, having taken only three steps. "Wait..." Scarlet turned to face his commander, and found him staring intensely at a precise spot. Frowning, the captain looked in the same direction and discovered the object of his elder's attention. He froze too.

It was a white rose tree. The only one on the Promenade Deck... It had only four or five flowers still blooming on it, but it was still beautiful.

His eyes riveted on the tree, Colonel White approached it slowly. Scarlet let him do as he pleased. Upon reaching it, the

Spectrum commander crouched down, still gazing at it with a very intense look.

"That tree..." he said hesitantly.

"It's yours," Scarlet explained calmly. "Your pride and joy. You, exclusively, tend it. You forbid anyone to touch it."

"It's been trimmed recently," White continued.

"Yes, by you. Before you went on the surface, some days ago..."

White didn't say anything. He was literally fascinated by the tree. His shackled hands delicately grazed one of the roses. White petals fell between his fingers. Almost despite himself, a single word came to his lips. A word he whispered almost inaudibly. "Elizabeth..."

A door opened in his mind. He could see images, in quick, successive flashes. Being recalled to London... boarding a private plane with his beloved wife, Elizabeth... the craft experiencing trouble as he fought desperately at the helm... the dive... the crash... and the awful sensation of loss and loneliness, more devastating than any physical pain, as he woke in that helicopter, after being rescued...

"My wife... She was with me... How is she?"

The sorry look of the young man who was tending to him, and the uneasiness he felt in him was more than sufficient to tell Charles Gray that something was so terribly wrong.

He fell to his knees, as the painful realisation sank into his mind and heart at the same time.

"Dear lord," he murmured. "Elizabeth... This tree... this tree is for her..." He swallowed hard, shaking his head, looking at the tree with total disbelief. And yet, he couldn't dispel the truth that was imposing itself on his mind. He fought off the tears that were threatening to overcome him. "I've lost her..."

Standing behind, Scarlet understood instantly what was happening to his commander, as he saw him bow his head. At the very moment when Scarlet had almost despaired of making him see the truth, memories were coming back to him. But not at all pleasant memories. He was remembering about his wife... about the tragedy that happened so many years ago. The British captain felt a wave of sorrow for the older man. *How terrible it must be, to wake up to reality like that, and to discover that the one you care about most in the world is not there anymore...*

How would I feel, myself?

He put his hand on the colonel's shoulder. "I'm really sorry, sir. It must be... hard, I know..."

"You really think you know?" There wasn't any aggressiveness in Colonel White's voice. Only pain and sorrow. And doubt that anybody would understand what he could be feeling right this moment. He continued staring at the tree. "It was... a long time ago, wasn't it?"

Scarlet hesitated a second; then he sighed. "Seventeen years, sir."

"Seventeen years..." White echoed absent-mindedly. He shook his head. "That's why I can't remember her older... I can't believe this... So long ago... I..." His features became hard. "How could have I forgotten about THAT?"

Scarlet thought of answering, but stopped himself right away. He sighed deeply. "Again, I'm sorry, sir."

White faintly nodded his thanks. "I need to... gather my thoughts, Captain... IF indeed, I am your commander..." He stared a moment again at the rose tree, before turning to raise a quizzical enough look toward the younger man still standing behind him. "Then I must have... private quarters on this base of yours?"

* * *

Before agreeing to his commander's demand to take him to his quarters, Captain Scarlet took him for a visit to sickbay. He wanted to make sure he was all right after he had remembered the truth about his wife. White didn't resist; nor did he protest. He was quite calm and willingly answered the simple questions Doctor Weiss and Doctor Fawn asked him. The subsequent physical and psychological check up lasted more than two hours; having been satisfied that his recovering memories had not brought some injury to her patient's still fragile psyche, Doctor Weiss, after having agreed with Doctor Fawn that there was now no danger in it, prescribed him a mild tranquilizer.

Only after that did Scarlet take his commander to his personal quarters.

Free of any restraint, Colonel White looked silently around, assessing everything in the room. He paid more attention to the personal stuff adorning the place – things he recognized, and others he didn't – pictures and framed medals hanging from the walls, a couple of antique trinkets, trophies of all sorts... He looked curiously at the highly detailed plastic model standing in honour on a high chest, just under a large oil portrait. That last

thing he knew very well... Just to be sure it was authentic, however, he checked the signature. Satisfied that it was the real thing, he turned around to come back toward a silent Captain Scarlet, seated on the visitor's chair in front of the antique oak working desk.

White pointed toward one of the medals hanging in a frame. "That's not genuine," he noted evenly.

Scarlet shook his head. "A copy, then. You must be keeping the original in a safe place."

White nodded, without elaborating more on the subject. He gave another, thoughtful glance around.

"Feels like home," he said quietly.

There was some sadness in his voice, Scarlet noticed, as the older man sat down on his leather armchair. He settled himself comfortably, before picking up the picture of his wife which stood on the desk. He stared at it intently, almost with veneration in his eyes. He nodded thoughtfully.

"That's the last picture that was taken of her," he explained. "It was about two weeks before... the plane crashed." He paused a few seconds, before continuing, "We had just arrived at this little cottage in the Highlands. Elizabeth had inherited it from a long-lost uncle... We were to spend a few weeks' holiday there. A little peace and quiet. Unfortunately, I was recalled to London. I... I was a key witness in some kind of hearing, or something..."

"For the U.S.S.?" Scarlet suggested. He did know about his commander having played an important role in cleaning up the London Bureau of the Universal Secret Service, years ago. Though during the British insurrection, the section had performed invaluable service to the rebels, it had become, in the following years, the shame of the whole U.S.S., infiltrated by double agents, triple agents, and spies, bribes exchanging hands on a daily basis... It took some dedicated men like Scarlet's own grandfather, the then almost retired Paul Blake, and Charles Gray, along with a lot of investigation and legal procedures, to bring that U.S.S. section back to its old glory.

"I wish I knew exactly," White said, shrugging. "I still can't remember... What I DO know, however is that Elizabeth would not let me go alone. She wanted to come with me. She would not budge one inch in her decision. She was... quite stubborn, you know. So we boarded that private plane together."

White stopped, seeming to remember something. Scarlet saw him remove the cardboard on the back of the frame; a yellow piece of folded newspaper clipping slid into the open hand of the Spectrum commander. He unfolded it to reveal the news article Scarlet had seen on the computer the day before; the one relating

the plane accident that had occurred seventeen years ago. The captain shook his head.

"I didn't know you kept that in there."

"Yes, well... Call me a masochist if you want... Despite what it represents, that was the very last reminder I had of my wife. I couldn't bring myself to part with it." White carefully folded the paper and put it back behind the photograph, in the frame, before putting the same frame flat on the desk's surface. "She was thirty-three when that crash happened. And pregnant. The child was to be born two months after... Dear Lord, I can't imagine it was... seventeen years ago." He stopped, staring at the picture, lost in his thoughts. "While I was recovering in the hospital, after the crash, I learned that she was expecting a girl. Elizabeth had been informed of that shortly before we boarded that plane. She never told me. I suppose she wanted to keep it as a surprise."

"You seem to remember quite a lot, sir," Scarlet remarked. "And it's surprising how... well you're taking all this."

"Looks can be deceiving, Captain," White replied dully. "But it's been years... I can't change anything now about what happened then. It doesn't make it any less painful, however..." He shook his head. "I still can't get over the fact that I've forgotten about it. It should not have happened." He looked at Scarlet. "I KNOW I still don't remember everything about her... But, a lot is coming back to me... As for the rest..." White gestured hopelessly into empty space. "My memories are still quite fuzzy..."

"Well, if you're remembering about her, there's a good chance the rest will come back shortly to you."

"You really think so, eh?" White gave a sigh, in which it was easy to read frustration. "I don't understand... I mean, I'm inclined to believe that you told the truth... That the fact that I forgot about my wife's... being gone for so many years, isn't a simple amnesia, following the *Dream Spinner* treatment I received... That, in fact, the memory of her still being alive was planted in my mind..." He scrutinised the young captain with a quizzical glance. "WHY do that? Why make me believe she was still alive, in the first place?"

Scarlet gave it some thought. He shook his head again. "I don't really have an answer. But maybe... they thought it would increase your efficiency in the mission they had for you. Perhaps they thought that having a wife to come back to was an additional motivation."

"By 'they'... you mean those Mysterons of yours."

"They had a hand in what happened to you, sir."

White shook his head, still obviously doubtful. "I wish I could believe you implicitly, Captain. But I can't shake the feeling that I CAN'T TRUST you entirely. There's still nothing to tell me you haven't staged this whole affair."

"Would I go this far?" Scarlet asked quietly, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know, I..." White sighed, taking his head between his hands. He ran his fingers through his silver hair and slightly grazed the dressing that covered the swellings on the back of his head, still a vivid reminder of what had happened to him. He raised his eyes to look at Scarlet. "I admit... you're familiar, somehow..." He narrowed his eyes. "I don't know if I can trust you, that is true, but I'm sure that I know you."

Scarlet smiled reassuringly. "That's a step forward, anyway..."

"You said your family was involved in the insurrection," White continued. "And that your name is Metcalfe..."

Scarlet nodded. "Yes, sir. Paul Metcalfe."

"I know of men bearing the Metcalfe name..." White continued, frowning. "Wasn't your grandfather called Samuel? A former Militarist... He was part of the delegation that approached President Bandranaik to request World Government support against the Militarists..."

Scarlet smiled again. "That was my great-grandfather, actually... Before the civil war, he was indeed a convinced Militarist... but he saw what the Government had become, and joined the rebel cause as his son and grandsons had done. He didn't want his great-grandchildren – my cousins and me – to grow up in a Military State."

"Great-grandfather?" White repeated.

"That WAS almost twenty-five years ago, sir," Scarlet explained, shaking his head. "Samuel Metcalfe died in July 2052... five years after the end of the civil war... And three months after the World President made him one of the first four-star generals in the newly formed World Army/Air Force, for his actions during the insurrection."

White scowled. "Now I feel old..."

Scarlet laughed. "You're still young enough to give us a run for our money, like you did yesterday, sir... You're certainly not old... My father is only a couple of years older than you..."

White stared Scarlet straight in the eyes. "What is your father's name, Captain?" he asked, a sudden thought coming to his mind. "It's not... CHARLES Metcalfe?"

Scarlet frowned. "You remember that, sir?"

"No, not exactly. I..." White sighed deeply, then shrugged. "Just recalling a conversation I had with MY father, a very long time ago..." He stared again at the puzzled younger man. "Talk

about a coincidence..." He cleared his throat. "You also said your grandfather was in the U.S.S..."

Scarlet nodded. "My maternal grandfather, yes."

"Not a Metcalfe, then."

"No. His name was Paul Blake. I was named after him." Scarlet rubbed his chin. "And you knew him."

"So you said, already," White noted, still apparently defiant.

The younger man stared at him, thoughtfully. "It's the truth, sir. I'm not lying to you."

White closely scrutinised the young man's face. He wasn't able to read anything deceitful in his clear blue eyes. He slowly shook his head. "You seem sincere enough..."

"I am, sir."

White was still intensely gauging the younger officer. "Let's just say for now that I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt... To you and that organisation of yours"

Scarlet blew out a sigh of relief, before answering with a roguish smile. "I suppose that, FOR NOW, it will be enough..." *Yes, for now, he added inwardly. At least, we're progressing, here... But there is a lot more work to do before winning his trust completely.*

But... was it enough, at this point, to think he would reveal what the Mysterons' plan might be? The British captain realised fully that his commander, still confused enough, could very well interpret this as the final chapter of an elaborated scam to extract information out of him.

Scarlet hesitated a few seconds, looking at Colonel White with a wondering look. Then he decided to give it a try. This was his job, anyway... And time was really running out. He started out, unsure. "About the Mysterons, sir... I hope you won't take it the wrong way, but I have to ask you..."

A beeping sound at the door interrupted Scarlet and drew his attention. "Who's there?" he called, turning toward the door.

"It's me, Captain Scarlet."

It was the voice of Captain Blue, coming from the loudspeaker. *Finally*, Scarlet thought with satisfaction. He hoped his partner had found something in his latest search. Perhaps something that would at last convince White to confide in them. They certainly had dire need of that. Under the circumstances, Scarlet was prepared to wait before asking his commander about the Mysterons' plans.

"Come in, Captain Blue."

The door slid open and Captain Blue stepped into the colonel's quarters, a folder under his arm. With one quick glance, he grasped the situation. A couple of hours ago, Scarlet had called him in the Control Room, to tell him about what had happened on the Promenade Deck. He was pleasantly surprised to see that White was still out of restraints.

"How's it going?" he asked Scarlet.

"Slowly," his partner replied. "But... it's encouraging."

"So I see. You're not at each other's throats."

"The... 'admiral' admits he doesn't trust Spectrum entirely," Scarlet explained. "But it seems that now he's more willing to listen."

Blue nodded slowly. "Glad to hear that." He stared at Colonel White, who returned the same intense look. "You look tired, sir. How are you doing? Considering... what you just learned?"

"I feel tired... Captain," White responded, shaking his head. "But I can't rest. Right now, I..." He hesitated, then turned in Scarlet's direction. "How did those doctors of yours put it?"

His compatriot nodded and addressed Blue. "He's working purely on adrenaline... given what was done to him. Fortunately, rather than fight us, his energies are focused on trying to sort his thoughts out and to understand what happened to him..."

"I can see HOW it's good." Blue paused a second, staring at his commander, before turning to Scarlet. "How much can we tell him before he...?"

"Before it sets me off?" Blue turned again toward Colonel White, who had uttered these words, very calmly. The older man gave him an understanding nod. "I'm quite aware of that aspect of my condition, Captain. Before being captured by Spectrum, I was taking some medication to... fight that." He shook his head. "It wasn't always a complete success."

"Do you... feel any craving for that medication, sir?" Blue asked with concern.

"Your doctors told me it was addictive stuff. If indeed it is true, I don't feel any need for it... for now." White addressed a wicked smile to Blue. "Perhaps I'll find another way to vent the frustration..."

"By 'getting at me', perhaps, sir?" Blue retorted flatly, remembering the threatening words White had addressed to him, some hours earlier in sickbay.

"Right now, I'd be foolish to try, wouldn't I?"

The smile on Colonel White's face broadened. Blue couldn't decide if he should respond to that smile with a scowl, or a grin of his own. He chose the latter, and added a shake of his head. "I'd say you'd be better served to wait and hear what I have to say, before deciding to try and strangle me."

"You have good news?" Scarlet asked, expectantly.

"It depends on your point of view." Blue paused again a few seconds before brandishing the folder. "I found information on Jackson Bennett." He checked the colonel's reaction to the mention of that name. He saw the older man frown.

"I already know what's in that," White declared.

"You think you do, sir?" Blue replied. "I may surprise you, you know..."

"Blue, stop beating around the bush," Scarlet cut in at this moment. "What did you find?"

Captain Blue opened the folder, and started reading the file within, pacing around the room. "It's on the Navy enlistment rolls of the British Military, during the time of the Militarist Government, that I found the name of Jackson Bennett... Brilliant subject. His record was remarkable for twelve years, serving on various British warships. Militarist partisan to the core, very loyal to the regime of the time, even to a fault. His loyalty – some would say fanaticism – had pushed him a couple of times to perform acts that did not meet with the complete approval of his superiors, who transferred him frequently. They probably felt they didn't need a loose cannon in command of a warship, because, despite his record, he never advanced to the rank of captain. The highest rank he received was that of commander." The American captain stopped in front of Colonel White. "His career ended abruptly in 2046. He was first officer on board the *Sir Francis Drake* destroyer, commanded by Captain Charles Gray, when the latter decided to turn his ship against the British Navy, in order to protect a rebel base in the Orkney Islands. Needless to say, the captain's decision didn't please Commander Bennett at all..."

"That will be quite enough, Captain," White grumbled dryly. "I do not need to be reminded of what happened then. I killed him. I found him going through my things in my cabin. He drew a gun on me. We fought for it, I won. And shot him with his own gun. The Militarist authorities have wanted my head ever since, for murdering such a 'loyal officer'."

"You didn't murder him," Blue replied.

"That's right, you were at war," Scarlet added. "Bennett was..."

"A traitor, Captain?" White interrupted. "Forgive me... But seeing that I decided to side with the rebels... it would seem it was me who would be considered a traitor..."

"I was going to say 'an enemy', sir," Scarlet replied softly. "And no, you were never considered a traitor. But rather a hero."

"Oh, right... You're still trying to mellow me so you can earn my trust," White scoffed. "What difference could it make, anyway? I shot Jackson Bennett and he died. End of story."

"Well, it's not the end you seem to think, sir. You didn't let me finish." Blue closed the folder and put it on the desk, looking closely at his commander. "You did find him searching your cabin. You fought with him for the control of a gun. He was shot. But you didn't kill him. He didn't die."

Scarlet almost jumped. "What?"

"What are you saying?" White said in turn, frowning.

"You didn't kill Jackson Bennett. The gun went off by itself during your fight with him. The bullet hit him. He was severely wounded, but he didn't die... You left him in the care of your onboard medic and his life was saved."

"Wait a minute... That can't be right!" White protested. "I REMEMBER tearing that gun out of his hand and shooting him down like the dog he was! He was dead, at my feet!"

Blue tapped the folder. "I have YOUR own report confirming what I say, sir."

"MY report?"

"The report you wrote at the time, concerning THAT incident."

White stared in disbelief at the young fair-haired captain before turning the folder toward him and opening it. He recognized the first document in it as being a copy of a British Navy report, the kind he had written so many of in the past. He read it quickly. The story reported in it was familiar, but at the same time so different from what his memories were telling him. The report didn't seem quite right, but... the words, the style... It was his.

He pushed the folder away from him. "Forgery," he mumbled, obstinately.

"I don't think so," Blue replied without losing any of his calm. "This paper is quite authentic."

"So," Scarlet murmured, "that memory seems to have been planted in your mind, sir..." He sighed. "So much for my theory that it could be the 'noose' we were looking for..."

"Wait," Blue said quietly. "I may have my own theory, regarding that noose..."

"What are you talking about?" White growled at that moment. "What is this 'noose' you're looking for? I don't understand any of this!" He noted that he was about to lose his temper and took a deep breath, before continuing, his voice still edgy, "I tell you I KILLED this murdering scum!"

"Why do you call him that?" Blue asked quietly.

"That's what he was!" White replied sharply. "A dirty bastard, murdering scum! A killer!"

"Who did he kill?" Scarlet asked.

White did not answer. Scarlet turned to Blue, with an inquiring look. The American shook his head. "After the civil war," he explained, "Commander Jackson Bennett was court-martialled for criminal acts during the war." He nodded toward the folder on the desk. "It's all in there. Following Captain Gray's report, Bennett was accused of having sabotaged a helicopter that had carried Admiral Neil Matheson – a very strong supporter of the rebel cause – onboard the *Drake*. Admiral Matheson was delivering information for Captain Gray, to inform him of the situation that the rebel base in the Orkneys was facing..."

"I remember that," Scarlet said, musing. "It was even rumoured that it was Admiral Matheson who recruited Captain Gray to the cause, at that moment. Because the admiral had come to see him, just before he decided to turn against the Government. It was never truly established, for Charles Gray never confirmed nor denied it. As for Admiral Matheson himself... he wasn't there anymore to comment." He frowned. "The official report says that he died at sea..."

Blue nodded. "More precisely, the admiral's helicopter exploded on takeoff from the helipad of the *Drake*. Obvious sabotage. Then the incident with Jackson Bennett and the gun happened in the captain's cabin..."

"What could he have been looking for there?" Scarlet mused, giving a sideways look to Colonel White. "Information on the rebels? Something the admiral would have given his captain?"

"Proof of treason," White said, lowering his gaze. "At least, that's what he said..." He shook his head. "That doesn't make sense... What you've just said happened then with that helicopter and Admiral Matheson is all true... But I still remember having killed Bennett!"

"Like you remembered your wife still being alive?" Scarlet asked carefully.

"That's not the same thing!" White snapped. "My memories of my wife were confused, rare... I couldn't even recall her older than her thirties... with good reason, apparently. But Bennett..." He sighed. "The case of Bennett is different. What happened that time, I remember quite vividly!"

"Which is even more reason to believe that memory has been planted," Blue remarked.

"That's crazy!" White retorted.

"This WHOLE situation is crazy enough, sir," Blue answered back. "That seems to fit right in." He waited for White to protest again, but the older man kept silent. The incredulous way he was still staring at Blue was enough of a protest in itself. The American

captain crouched in front of him. "If you want proof, sir," he told him with a gentle tone, "I can give it to you. It's easy. Bennett is still alive today. The court-martial didn't give him a death sentence. While it was certain he had something to do with the sabotage of that helicopter, there was no real proof that he had performed it himself. He served fifteen years in a military prison. He's out today, and lives in London. I can have him flown here to Cloudbase. I'm sure that even after twenty-five years, you'll be able to recognise..."

He couldn't say more. White had bristled at his suggestion, and became very pale. A furious, fiery glow in his eyes, he leaned toward Blue. "If indeed that creep is alive, I certainly don't want to see him!" he shouted with barely-contained anger. "Damn it, if I come face to face with that loathsome..."

"Why do you hate him so much?" Scarlet asked suddenly.

White had become agitated again, and it was easy to notice that this had begun the moment Blue had started talking about Jackson Bennett. The correlation was too evident to dismiss.

"I have good reason to hate him!" White said savagely, turning toward his compatriot.

"Yes, indeed," Blue murmured. "You certainly have a good reason..."

"You know about this, Blue," Captain Scarlet noted.

"I do." Blue gave a hesitant look toward Colonel White. The latter first met his stare, then turned his eyes away. Blue stood up and handed his folder to Scarlet. "Admiral Matheson was not alone in that 'copter when it exploded," he told his partner. "He had a pilot... and that pilot died with him." He shook his head, as Scarlet opened the folder. "I suppose historic military books tend to forget lower ranks... Check out the name of that pilot, Captain."

Scarlet had already found it; he frowned deeply. "Flight Sergeant Alexander Gray, British Air Force..." He turned an understanding look toward Colonel White, who was still obstinately looking away, apparently not wanting to hear any of this. "Your father..."

Blue nodded slowly. "Captain Gray was on deck when the explosion occurred," he explained dully. "He saw it all... And reported it afterward."

"No wonder you hate that man Bennett so much..." Scarlet closed the folder. "I knew your father was a helicopter pilot, and that he died on duty... But you never told me..."

"WHY and WHEN would I have told you?" White replied, teeth clenched, not even raising his eyes. "I still DON'T remember if indeed I know you as some kind of a friend!"

"You do know us, sir. Believe us." Scarlet turned toward Blue. "You were right, Captain. You have found the noose."

"Yes," Blue mused, with a shake of his head, staring at White with a sorry look. "I think I have..."

"Will you tell me what it is you're mumbling about that 'noose' of yours?" White snapped, suddenly turning a furious gaze in direction of the two captains.

Scarlet sighed and approached his commander. "The *Dream Spinner*, sir, uses the memory of a traumatic event as the basis for its... treatment. Around this 'noose' is threaded the 'reality' that was put in your mind, with real memories, which were tampered with, and false ones..."

"Like your conviction that you had killed Jackson Bennett," Blue emphasized.

"...And the one that your wife was still alive," Scarlet added carefully.

"I hope you're not telling me that my father's death as I remember it is ALSO a planted memory?"

"No, sir. It's not. It's all too true. The *Dream Spinner* needs to use a REAL traumatic memory to thread around."

"Why this one?"

"I'm no psychoanalyst," Scarlet sighed, "but I would say that it may be because it inflames your hatred of the Militarist Regime."

"I followed my conscience and convictions when I turned against the Militarists, Captain. I didn't do it because I hated them!"

"Perhaps not... But the *Dream Spinner* made sure the little hate you may have had was fed sufficiently... Doctor Weiss would probably be able to see clearly through this."

"You've got to be kidding..." White murmured, dumbfounded.

"Unfortunately, we're not." Scarlet paused a moment, so his commander would have time to let all that information sink in. He cleared his throat. "The good news is that we have apparently found the 'noose' we were looking for. Doctor Fawn believes that by finding out this traumatic event in your life, we will be able to help you get out of this nightmare."

"And get back my entire memory?" the colonel asked.

"Hopefully, yes."

"You're not sure."

"Truth to tell? No... Your situation is a difficult one. It could be a long ordeal..."

“And if it’s not the RIGHT traumatic memory?”

There was a pause. Blue narrowed his eyes at his commander. “There are others?”

“YOU tell me!” White scoffed. “I’m the one with the defective memory, here! And apparently, I can’t even rely on what I think is true!” He frowned. “How can I TRUST any of what you’re saying to me? As far as I can tell, you still want something from me. How do I know you’re not sweet-talking me, manipulating me, only to worm it out of me?”

Scarlet hesitated. He exchanged glances with Blue. “We admit we NEED information from you,” he answered finally.

“Well, surprise, surprise!”

“About the Mysterons, and what they could be planning this time,” Blue added in turn.

“THEM, again!” White muttered. “I keep telling you, I don’t know the FIRST THING about those Mysterons!”

“They’re the ones responsible for what happened to you,” Blue continued.

White sighed with exasperation. “You’ve already said that. Why are you so sure of that?”

“Because of Captain Black’s involvement in your abduction.”

White gave a puzzled look toward Scarlet, who had said those words. “Now I’m more confused. I thought this ‘Captain Black’ was one of your own.”

“You told him about Black?” Blue asked his partner.

“Only in passing,” Scarlet answered. He then addressed his commander. “He WAS one of our own, sir. He’s not anymore. Two years ago, he was taken over by the Mysterons. He’s worked for them since then, and he’s probably the most dangerous and wanted man in the world right now.”

“‘Taken over’...” White repeated in a low tone. “Whatever does that mean?”

“It’s really a complicated story...”

“It seems there’re a lot of those going on in your organisation.”

Scarlet gave a rueful smile. “Only when it concerns the Mysterons.”

White didn’t find this amusing at all. “You said I KNEW this Captain Black...”

“He was your friend,” Blue answered. “A very close friend, before this whole business with the Mysterons began. He...”

"I've heard enough!" White interrupted suddenly. Before the eyes of the dismayed Spectrum captains, he got up, and turning his back on them, went to stand in front of the oil portrait of the pirate, hanging behind his desk. He leaned heavily against the chest, upon which stood the plastic model.

He rubbed his temples; his head was killing him. He heard the voice of the blond officer as he was approaching behind him. "Sir, please... You must understand how important all this is."

White closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "Give me some breathing room, Captain," he demanded.

"Time is running out," Scarlet added in turn, standing up from his seat. "As we speak, right now, the Mysterons are planning to kill someone. They must be stopped, and it's Spectrum's job to do it."

"Please, leave me alone," White tried again, this time with impatience.

"Sir, we can't," Blue insisted, always with a calm tone. "We're sorry, but you may be holding some important clues to what the Mysterons..."

"I said ENOUGH!" White's temper snapped suddenly. He violently hit the chest with his open palm, before spinning on his heel to face the two captains, standing a couple of feet from him, on the other side of the desk. "Stop this! I don't want to hear anymore! I'm really, really tired of all this! I'm tired, and I can't think, and I CAN'T believe any of this is true!" White's eyes darted suspiciously at the two men standing in front of him. "What if it's all an elaborate scam? What if you are only lying to me, manipulating me... trying to confuse me, so I tell you what you want? As I've suspected all along?"

"Stay calm, please, sir," Scarlet asked quietly, stepping toward his commander. "Your temper..."

"Leave me alone!" White barked, stepping back. "What you're trying to do with me is despicable... Acting friendly toward me, trying to get me to open up... Just to get information from me!"

"That's not it," Blue protested, approaching to stand next to Scarlet. "Please, try to overcome your paranoia. It's been induced in you by the *Dream Spinner* treatment..."

"I know what that damned device did to me!" White replied sharply. "And I won't let YOU finish the job!" His head felt as if it was literally splitting, and he felt hot. He could feel the frenzy, was aware of the adrenaline mounting within him. He was trying to fight it; but it was so hard. "Explain to me... Those 'Mysterons' you keep talking about... Why would they do this to me? Why am I so important to them that they would torment me the way they did?"

"Aside from the fact that they consider you a menace to them... That's part of their actual threat," Scarlet answered. "They wanted the 'Orkney rebel hero'. They tried to get him back from the past..."

White frowned deeply and shook his head. "You don't make sense... I'm no hero!"

"Your acts say differently," Blue replied. "What about that rebel base you saved, twenty-five years ago?"

White said nothing.

"You know, Liberty Base," Scarlet pressed, staring intensely at White. When the older man still didn't answer, a suspicion suddenly crossed his mind. "I thought you remembered this..."

"I do remember it," White snapped.

"How WELL do you remember it?" Scarlet went on, insistently.

White turned around, without answering. It was obvious he was deeply troubled. The same nagging feeling was still gnawing at Scarlet. He came closer. "What do you remember of this, sir?" he asked again.

"I arrived too late," White said, almost whispering.

Blue heaved a deep sigh. "Oh, no... Don't tell me..."

"You did not," Scarlet retorted, answering White.

"That's not what my memory tells me!" White shot back, sharply turning on his heels. "I failed! I arrived too late! People died because I wasn't there in time to save them! I was much too preoccupied with..." He stopped, unwilling to go on. But it was too late. Both captains had heard the bitterness in his tone.

"You were too preoccupied with what?" Scarlet asked.

"Forget it," White mumbled.

"Bennett, right?" Blue remarked quietly. White stared at him; his eyes were trembling, but blazing with anger. The American gave a knowing nod. He had figured it out. "The incident with Bennett happened just before you intervened against those other warships that were sent to destroy that base... You think you were too preoccupied with your own, personal vengeance... You believe it interfered with your duty."

"Stop this," the colonel growled between his teeth.

"Now I get it," Blue continued. "'Some hero', you said earlier, about yourself."

"It didn't happen the way you think, sir," Scarlet told his commander, in a reassuring tone. "You didn't arrive too late."

"DON'T tell me THIS memory has been tampered with too!" White said with irritation.

"Unfortunately, sir... I'm afraid so."

Colonel White stared incredulously at each of the two younger men. His headache was becoming stronger. He was feeling more and more confused, and deeply troubled; he couldn't concentrate and assimilate all that these men were telling him. His mind was about as tired as his body. It was simply refusing to accept any more of this.

He couldn't help but think that he was but a toy in a very large game of betrayal. Too strong was his conviction that these men were trying to deceive him. He couldn't, wouldn't let them win. He glared at them with fiery eyes.

"No," he murmured. "I don't believe it. Those awful memories... about me having killed Bennett... about my arriving too late to help those people at that base... about the civil war going on for so many years... They can't be false... It's much too convenient... I refuse to think this..."

"Sir, believe us," Scarlet sighed. "What we say IS the truth. Those memories ARE lies."

"And I suppose you think I should feel RELIEVED that these memories may not be true?" White snapped with fury. "No. No, that's still you Spectrum people toying with me!"

"Sir, please..."

"Those... 'Mysterons'... I bet they don't even exist... You invented that just for my benefit... for this little game you're playing..."

"I wish it was true," Blue replied, rather harshly. "But they're all too real, sir. For the past two years, they're been turning upside down the lives of every human being... especially Captain Scarlet's."

White blinked in surprise.

"What do you mean, 'human beings'?" he demanded, not understanding what the blond captain was driving at, and frowning with exasperation. "What are you talking about, exactly? Try to make sense, man!"

He's losing it, Scarlet noted to himself, seeing how pale and furious his commander had become. Large beads of sweat covered his forehead. He was looking exactly the same way the captain had seen him before, when they had fought in that wood. Back then, there seemed to be no way to stop him. Scarlet wondered with a certain dismay if he and Blue would have to resort to brute strength to try to keep the colonel from hurting himself.

"You'd better sit down, sir," he tried again, still with a soothing voice, approaching one step closer.

He was trying to reach out to White with his right hand. The colonel struck it with a heavy backhand, pushing the help away from him. "Get away from me!" White spat out with utmost disgust.

"We just want to help you," Scarlet tried again.

"I don't want your help!" That was a desperate cry, the most violent outburst either Scarlet or Blue had heard from their commander since he had been taken back to Cloudbase.

White stepped away from them, and then staggered suddenly. He reached for the desk with one hand, while putting the other to his pounding head. He gave a low grunt.

In the same, quick movement, Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue were at their commander's side, at the very moment his knees were giving way under him. They stopped him from falling to the floor and kept him as steady as possible on his feet.

"Sir, what is it? What's wrong?" White could hear the concern in the blond American's voice. He raised his head, trying to dispel the turmoil his mind was in. The pounding between his temples was making that impossible.

"I don't feel so good..." he murmured faintly.

"We'd better get you to bed," the colonel heard the faraway voice of Captain Scarlet say.

He didn't protest. Simply nodded his consent. He wasn't in any state to resist and refuse help at the moment. It was all he could do to stay up and awake.

"Yes, I think it would be... a good idea."

With these words, a sudden pain tore inside Colonel White's head as a violent flash of white light came searing through it, seemingly burning his eyes from behind. He winced, the strength left his legs, and he had the impression his mind was diving into a deep precipice along with his now strangely weightless body. The last thing he was aware of was of helping hands catching him before he reached the floor and the concerned voice of the English captain using his cap communicator to call for a doctor...

* * *

Spectrum Captain Forest stepped forward to clasp hands with the Cloudbase staff officer who had come to meet him at the Naval Armament Depot, which Forest had been assigned to watch over. Captain Grey had radioed him a couple of hours earlier to inform him of this visit in the course of the investigation on the

present Mysteron threat. Forest was a brand new field captain, having being promoted to the rank only two months ago. He had served as a field lieutenant for a little less than a year, being assigned this job after his six months' hard training at Koala Base, Australia, training ground for recruits who were to become Spectrum officers and field agents.

Captain Forest had first met Captain Grey when the Cloudbase officer had come to address the recruits at Koala Base. It was at that moment that he had learnt about the senior captain's background as a World Navy officer – like he was himself, before joining Spectrum. Grey had made an indelible impression on the younger man. It was always a bit intimidating to encounter one of the higher staff officers of Cloudbase. They were all preceded by a formidable reputation.

Looking the younger man straight in the eyes, Captain Grey gave him a large smile and nodded thoughtfully. "Lawrence, isn't it?"

Forest's smile broadened even more. "Captain Forest, now, sir," he announced.

Grey assessed the dark green uniform. "So I see."

"I'm flattered that you should remember me."

"I always remember people like you, Captain. At Koala Base, you struck me as a dedicated young fellow, eager to learn and serve. You had asked me many questions during that speech I gave there, I recall."

"Yes, Captain, I did."

"You were a Navy man, too. All the more reason to remember you!" Grey paused a second. "How are you doing in your new job?"

"I think it's going well. Aside from this assignment, I mean."

"Boring?"

"To say the least. But I don't mind. I know I've been assigned here because of my Navy background."

Forest motioned the senior officer to follow him into the office that had been given to him two days earlier. The two of them entered and Forest closed the door behind, before going to his desk.

"I have the information you wanted about those torpedoes that were stolen three days ago." Forest took a folder that was on his desk and handed it to Grey. "It's all in there. I hope it will help."

Grey nodded and opened the folder to consult the documents inside of it. "Not nuclear," he mused.

"No, sir. But pretty dangerous, nevertheless. There were twenty of them. Code-named White Shark 14. Ten feet long, nose

reinforced with a special alloy, principally made of titanium. With built-in beacon transmitter and timing device.”

“Can either detonate on impact, or penetrate before detonating, depending on how it is programmed,” Grey went on. He mused over the next line. “Mainly used in British destroyers from 2044 to 50... Not compatible with today’s warships or submarines.” He closed the folder. “Now I wonder what the Mysterons could want with those...” He looked at Forest. “None of those ships are still in service today, I think...”

“No, Captain. But five surface ships still exist. And also one submarine.”

“Accounted for?”

Forest nodded. “Three are in drydock, here at the depot. The submarine is too, so badly damaged that if it were to be put into the water, she would sink like a rock...”

“That leaves two.”

“Those two destroyers have been recently reclaimed by the World Navy. For the Memorial Ceremony which is to be held in Iceland, sir. Seems the two of them were there at the time. The Navy wanted them on hand to be part of the small fleet of ships that’s supposed to sail off the coast of Iceland for the ceremony.”

Grey nodded thoughtfully. He knew of this, of course. The Memorial for the British nationals who had died during the Iceland territorial dispute, some twenty-five years ago. In his years when he was in the British Navy, Colonel White – Charles Gray – had been involved with that event. Spectrum had investigated it, in case it could be an occasion for the Mysterons to use for their present threat. But while the organisation would be in attendance for security, just to be sure, the event was dismissed for a possible Mysteron action, as no ‘crowned head’ was to attend it.

However, there was a chance that a couple of ‘honoured outlawed heroes’ would be present for the occasion...

“Are the armament systems of those destroyers functional, Captain?” Grey asked Forest.

The younger man shook his head. “No, sir. They were dismantled and rendered ineffective by the Depot ordnance disposal team. For safety reasons.”

“If I recall correctly, Lieutenant-Commander Shelby was part of that team, right?” Grey noted. “So it would probably be easy for him to repair the system of one of these ships to render it functional again.”

“I can’t say it’s impossible, sir,” Forest nodded quietly.

“When were those ships reclaimed, Captain?”

“The *Pembroke* left here two days ago, just before we heard of the Mysterons’ threat. One Captain Kevin MacBain of the World Navy, British section, came to the Depot with a skeleton crew and

claimed the ship. His papers were in order, the requisition sheet correctly completed. When I arrived here, after the Mysterons' announcement, I had a team of Spectrum field agents sent to the *Pembroke*. With a Mysteron detector and all the rest. Just to make sure everything was clean."

"I take it it was," Grey mused. "What about the second destroyer?"

"She was reclaimed yesterday. We had time to do a thorough inspection of the ship and the people who came to take her away. They checked out okay." He scratched his ear. "Very interesting, though. It was a World Navy Admiral who claimed that ship. I know he has a very renowned reputation here in Britain... And I'm pretty sure I've seen him before..."

Captain Grey froze, hearing that.

"Was it Admiral GRAY? Charles Gray?"

"Yes, that's his name. Relative of yours, Captain?"

"Hardly." Captain Grey put the folder down on the desk and opened his tunic pocket. He took out a picture that he handed to Forest. "This picture was taken at least fifteen years ago. Was it this man?"

Forest examined the photograph. It was a portrait of a forty-something, distinguished-looking man, with white hair on his temples. He was wearing the cap of a World Navy officer, and his shoulders sported the insignia of full admiral.

"I only got a glimpse of him myself, Captain," Forest explained. "But... yeah, it's him. He was older, but..." He frowned, looking more closely at the picture. And then stared at Captain Grey, with a perplexed look. "Captain... he looks like..."

"Stay quiet about this," Grey interrupted him, almost whispering. "You are bound to secrecy about this as of now. It's highly restricted information, Captain."

Forest blinked in surprise. "Of course, Captain... I'll keep quiet. But... the colonel... I mean..."

"He's all right. I can't tell you anything else, I'm sorry." Grey blew out a sigh, before swiftly moving on to the most important aspect of the situation for the time being. "Now, tell me quickly: what is the name of that ship he took from the Depot?"

* * *

Seated on the chair he had pulled nearer to the bed, Captain Blue was attentively watching Colonel White who was lying there, apparently sleeping soundly. Since he had collapsed in front of Scarlet and Blue, nearly three hours ago, he had not made a

single move. Called to his bedside by the two anxious captains, Doctor Fawn had examined the Spectrum commander, to declare that physically he was just fine; in this aspect, his body was simply exhausted, in desperate need of rest. Which was what he was getting right now.

Scarlet had been recalled to the Control Room by Lieutenant Green, and Blue had stayed alone at their commander's side, watching vigilantly over him. They didn't put him back in restraints; they didn't think there was any need for it now. Perhaps he was still fairly troubled, but they felt he was no longer as dangerous as he had been before. And they had agreed that, in order to win his trust, they had to prove their good intentions and make a constructive gesture toward him.

Blue looked down into his empty cup. He was now on his fourth coffee in the last three hours. If he was tired, he didn't feel it one bit. Too much stress, most probably, he mused, staring back at his sleeping commander. He could feel the anger boiling inside of him, and was doing his best to keep it in check. *How could they have done this to him? Playing with his mind like they did... Is there no end to the Mysterons' cruelty? Won't they ever stop this sick game of theirs?*

Sighing in frustration, he stood up and slowly walked toward the coffee maker sitting on a table, just beside the high chest, behind the working desk. He poured himself another big cup. *Maybe Fawn was right*, he told himself, taking a sip of the warm beverage. Maybe they were all trying to keep up with Captain Scarlet... After what the Mysterons had done to him, he needed far less sleep than an ordinary man, now.

First Scarlet and now White... Perhaps the latter was not killed and Mysteronised, the way the first had been, but after what he had been put through, Blue wondered if he'd ever be the same again... or even if Spectrum would succeed in getting him out of this nightmare.

He hoped the Mysterons had not irremediably destroyed the mind of his commander.

Blue took another sip of coffee; doing so, his eyes met with those of the pirate illustrated on the oil painting hanging over the chest. The man had a certain style, the American had to admit, musing. A flagrant nobility in his bearing... Strangely, Blue found he had the eyes of White... But it was clearly impossible. A trick of his mind. He shook the thought away and went back to his chair.

He was sitting down when he heard the colonel moan and saw him stir. *He's coming out of it*, he realised, putting down his cup on a low table near him. He came closer; White was muttering something, but he couldn't make out any of it. Blue strained his ears, but with no more success.

Now White was moving a little more, like somebody struggling against a bad dream. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead. Blue leaned over the older man.

Colonel White suddenly sprang into a sitting position, waking up all of a sudden. Blue caught him in mid-movement and stopped him from getting up. He could see the all too evident terror in his commander's face and wide-open eyes, as he was looking around, searching for a non-existent threat.

"Easy now, sir," Blue stated with a calm voice. "You can relax... You just had a bad dream."

"A dream?" Colonel White's voice was a little more than a murmur. He looked around again, as if he was waiting for somebody – or something – to jump at him and attack him. The only person in the room with him was obviously the blond American, gently but firmly holding him. He looked up into his face. "The *Dream Spinner*..."

"There is no *Dream Spinner* here, sir," Blue assured him. "Believe me, you have nothing to fear from that thing anymore. You're safe and amongst friends."

"Friends..." White repeated with the same voice. "I wish... I wish I could be sure..." He heaved a deep sigh and let himself fall back onto the bed. He put his hands on his pounding head. "What... what happened?"

"In two words?" Blue answered with a nod. "You fainted."

"I fainted?"

"Yes... Don't you remember? You were becoming quite agitated, accusing us of trying to deceive you..."

"Yes, I do remember..." White murmured, staring vaguely at the ceiling. "How long was I out?"

"Three hours or so." Blue had taken a pitcher from a low table and was now pouring some water into a glass. "I would say it was not such a surprising reaction..." He offered the glass to his commander and gave him a faint smile. "...considering what you had just been through."

White eyed the glass with a somewhat suspicious glance for a few seconds; he then rose on one elbow and decided to take it. "Yes... I suppose it was not." He drank half the content of the glass in one big gulp and handed it back to the young captain.

"Feeling better now?" Blue asked.

"Only just." Carefully, White sat up and swung his legs off the bed. His body was hurting all over. *Well, I've put it through a lot since yesterday*, he mused grimly. It was inevitable he would feel the strain eventually. He grunted faintly and rubbed his aching shoulders with one hand. He saw the concern in Captain Blue's eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"Just my muscles calling me back to order," White replied in a pleasant tone. "If you recall... I've done a lot of... 'exercise', lately. I'm not a young man anymore."

Blue's smile broadened. "I would say you're in much better shape than some people half your age, sir."

"Thank you... I think." The colonel stared straight into the eyes of the younger man. "I'm still trying to figure out what your angle is in all this," he muttered.

"We told you already: we want to help you get through this and get our commander back."

"And stop those people you call 'Mysterons', right?"

"It's Spectrum's job to stop them, yes. And considering that they planned to use you to carry out their threat this time, I'd say it's of the utmost importance that we succeed... If only for your sake."

"My sake?"

"I know you: you'd never forgive yourself if something should happen because of some action the Mysterons made you do. You'd feel responsible."

White's stance became more intense. He frowned. "Why do I have the feeling you've been through this before?"

Blue shook his head, without answering. Yes, *to a certain extent*, he had to admit. In those first days after Scarlet had shaken off the Mysterons' control over himself, it was all Blue could do – along with White himself and Doctor Fawn – to convince the British captain he wasn't responsible for anything that had happened – or might have happened – during that time.

"Don't worry, sir. We'll help you out."

"I don't know yet what to make of all of this." White looked around. "Where's your friend?"

"Captain Scarlet has been recalled to the Control Room. He was needed there. This is a military base, sir. And we need a commander to keep it running." *And most of all, we need our real commander.* If Blue wasn't missing his guess, Lieutenant Green's urgent call earlier had something to do with Martin Conners or even someone else in Spectrum Intelligence still trying to butt in on what was really going on on Cloudbase.

Blue was scrutinizing White with attention and concern. He was still fairly pale, and it was apparent he was still suffering from a headache, as he was rubbing his forehead. "I could do with an aspirin," the colonel mumbled.

"I can ask Doctor Fawn to come back," Blue proposed.

"No. That won't be necessary," White replied quickly, shaking his head. "I've seen enough doctors for the present..." He stopped

suddenly, as if what he had just said had woken up something in his mind. Blue saw the eyes of his commander becoming distant, as if he was lost deep in his thoughts.

“Sir?”

A new flash of light, similar to the one he had just before losing his senses earlier, suddenly appeared in Charles Gray's mind. This time, however it was also accompanied by images. Familiar images he would have given anything to escape.

Again, he was seeing himself strapped to the padded table, subjected to the torment of the *Dream Spinner*. The face of a man wearing a white shirt was looking down at him, in a cold and unfeeling way. “*We are a whole Network,*” the man was telling him. “*That’s the name you can call us...*”

White felt the sudden pain on the back of his neck; the deafening sounds in his ears, as if he was back there and then.

He flinched and closed his eyes, giving a low grunt. Seeing that, Blue came closer to put his hand on the older man's shoulder.

“What is it, sir? Are you all right?”

White opened his eyes. They were still looking into empty space.

“The Network...” he murmured, frowning.

“Sir?” The surprised Captain Blue realised instantaneously that his commander was remembering something of significance. “What is it, sir? What do you remember?”

“I...” There was a moment of hesitation from White's part. “I... just had a flashback... About that *Dream Spinner*... There was that doctor and...” Frowning, he looked deep in the eyes of the young man, who was staring at him with that sincere look of concern in his clear blue eyes. “He mentioned something about... being part of a ‘Network’.”

“A ‘Network’?” Blue repeated, puzzled.

“That's what he said... ‘Network’.” The colonel gave Blue an inquisitive look. “Could it be that you were wrong after all, about your... Mysterons' alleged involvement?”

“No.” Blue sighed heavily. “But it could confirm some doubts we were having about this whole affair... What can you tell me about this ‘Network’?”

“Sorry. That's all.” Blue stared at his commander who, seeing the apparent scepticism in him, shrugged his shoulders. “Believe me, Captain. I'm not lying to you. I may not entirely trust you... but I'm ready to believe your Spectrum has nothing to do with what happened to me with that *Dream Spinner* device.”

"So you finally believe that we had no hand in that?" Blue asked with a note of hope.

White hesitated. "To tell you the truth... It's just an impression I have. I must admit that... I've been treated fairly well, since you took me prisoner."

"You are not our prisoner, sir."

"What about the earlier restraints?"

"What about your attempts to kill some of us?"

White took his time, thinking this over. He shook his head. "I did give you cause for concern about that, right?"

"That's not our ONLY cause of concern right now in regard to you, sir."

"So you keep saying." White quickly changed the subject. "Look... I will not lie to you, Captain. It's true I'm not sure I should trust you. But I'm as eager as you seem to be to get my hands on those men. I'm not about to forget what they did to me..."

"Well, don't worry," Blue said in a promising voice. "We'll get them."

White nodded thoughtfully, without really answering. *He still seems a bit under the weather*, Blue noted, looking gravely at his commander's tired features.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee, sir?" The American pointed in the direction of the coffee maker with his thumb. "Black, with no sugar, I believe?"

White nodded again. Blue stood up and, keeping an eye on the colonel, just in case, went back to the coffee maker to pour another cup. He gave another curious look at the pirate portrait, before coming back to sit down in front of his commander and presenting him with the cup.

Colonel White didn't hesitate one instant to accept it and took a sip. He grimaced, tasting the bitterness of the coffee. Blue gave a shy smile.

"I admit I don't make such great coffee."

"It's drinkable," White replied, putting the cup down. He added with a weak smile, "Try a pinch of salt in the grounds. One of the more important things I learned early in my career, when we participated in joint exercises with your Navy."

Blue smiled back. "That must be why everyone lets Brad make the coffee in the officers' lounge," he said, half to himself.

But White wasn't really thinking about the coffee, rather that he could take something to eat, now. His stomach was crying out for food and he could see no further point in fasting any longer. He was about to ask Blue for at least a sandwich when he noticed that his attention was still focused on the oil portrait.

He gave another faint smile and cleared his throat. "Like it? It's my wife's..."

Blue thought he had heard wrongly. "I beg your pardon?"

"My wife painted this," White explained, nodding toward the portrait. "She was... a real artist, in her spare time. She painted that for me for our second wedding anniversary. Not bad, is it?"

"Quite remarkable, actually," Blue replied, staring at the painting. He almost chuckled, turning his attention back to the colonel. "I noticed that pirate had your eyes... I thought it was my imagination."

"Er... no, Elizabeth did that on purpose." Colonel White gave the younger man a somewhat embarrassed smile. "When she offered that painting to me, she told me that, since she never encountered the fellow, she was entitled to a little 'personal creativity'..."

"...And she gave the guy your eyes."

"Right." White sighed. "I admit I wasn't so sure I was flattered by that. After all, he had started out his career as a slave trader... Not really something I would like to be associated with."

"Who is it?" Blue asked with curiosity, staring again at the portrait.

"Sorry, I thought you knew. That's my wife's interpretation of Sir Francis Drake."

Blue let the information sink in. He was still looking intensely at the oil painting; his eyes felt on the plastic model standing just underneath it. "That ship is also named 'Sir Francis Drake'," the captain mused, frowning. He turned toward White. "Captain Ochre gave you that model as a birthday gift, two years ago..."

"Ochre... That's the name of that man I shot at Dooley's..." White seemed perplexed. And troubled. "Captain, I'm sorry, I..."

"That was the name of your destroyer, twenty-five years ago," Blue continued, without really hearing what the colonel had just said.

"Why, yes," White agreed, hesitating. "The *Sir Francis Drake* was my ship, when I was in the British Navy... That's why my wife painted this portrait..."

A doubt was taking form in Blue's mind. He frowned deeply.

"I thought that guy Drake was an explorer, and an admiral, under Elizabeth the First. He was the man who defeated the Spanish Armada, right?"

"Drake wasn't only an explorer and an admiral of the English Fleet, Captain. As I said, he was also a slave trader..."

Blue thumbed toward the portrait. "That's why he looks like a pirate? He was one?"

“England’s enemies of the time certainly called him that. The country’s Treasury was almost empty during Queen Elizabeth’s reign. It needed to be replenished. The Crown then relied on sea adventurers like Francis Drake to do it... if in a rather unorthodox way. He received full mandate from the Queen to attack merchant ships from enemy countries, such as France and Spain, and to relieve them of their riches... which he then gave to the Crown. He was a privateer... or what the French called a corsair...”

“A privateer?”

“Yes. A thief, a bandit... a pirate, to the enemy. A hero for England.” White shook his head, grimly. “Rather a shady character, anyway.”

“An outlaw...” Blue murmured, looking into empty space. “A honoured hero...”

“Honoured?” White repeated. “Why, yes, certainly. But...”

The doubt in Captain Blue was now a complete certitude. “Dear God... How could we have overlooked that?” He stared at Colonel White and took him by the shoulders. “The second ‘outlawed hero’...”

“Excuse me?” There was confusion in the Spectrum commander’s eyes, as he tried to understand what it was the young man was now telling him.

“Thank you, sir,” Blue said to his commander, with a satisfied grin. “You just helped to elucidate another part of the Mysterons’ cryptic threat.”

“I was afraid of that,” was Colonel White’s grim response.

He looked on as Captain Blue dropped down his cap microphone to contact Scarlet in the Control Room. Giving a low groan, the Spectrum commander took a sip of coffee. Again, he grimaced and put down the cup. The beverage really tasted too bad...

Maybe it was time he finally accepted a decent meal, after all...

Chapter 12

“Right, Captain Blue. Minutes before you informed me of your discovery, Captain Grey had contacted me from Bristol about the disappearance of the *Sir Francis Drake* from the Navy Armament Depot...”

Consulting the file he had in his hand, Captain Scarlet was pacing round the Conference Room, behind Captain Blue and Colonel White, who were seated at the round table. A very watchful Blue was keeping a curious and careful eye on their commander, who, still free to move, was keeping rather quiet for the moment. He was quite busy eating a well-deserved meal. That he had refused to accept it earlier wasn't obvious at all now, as he was literally devouring the one-inch thick medium steak he had asked for.

Captain Scarlet stopped his pacing, right behind White and again consulted the first page of the report.

“The ship was taken yesterday, by former Admiral Charles Gray,” Scarlet explained. “He seemed to have all the right authorisation to claim it, and his I.D. papers were quite in order.” He stared at White, who had just pushed a large piece of meat into his mouth. “That's why you needed the uniform I found in that cabinet at the Bristol complex yesterday. And that's why you had that World Navy I.D. on you...”

“You needed that destroyer,” Blue continued, his eyes still fixed, fascinated, on the silent – and eating – White. He shook his head. “The *Drake* must be that ship Rhapsody heard you talk about with that Brighton guy while she was your prisoner.”

White swallowed his piece of meat, before answering with a nod and a very quiet voice, “I didn't talk about the ship at all. Mister Brighton did all the talking. I would not have risked mentioning it in front of the girl.” He cut himself another piece of meat. “Delicious. Be sure to congratulate the cook for me.”

“The *Drake* was supposed to be taken – along with the *Pembroke* – to the ceremony being held tomorrow along the coast of Iceland. While the *Pembroke* showed up to join the fleet going there, the *Drake*...” Scarlet looked over White, “...disappeared without a trace.”

“A ship that big?” Blue noted, frowning.

“Admiral Gray was known to be very skilled, in his time, at playing hide and seek with the enemy.” Scarlet paused. “For now, we can't locate the *Drake*.”

"I thought all the Navy warships were equipped with a special tracking device, so their position would be known at all times," Blue noted. "Doesn't the *Drake* have one?"

"Yes, the *Drake* WAS equipped with one. But she's been in dry dock for the last few years and the device was disabled. Captain Grey said in his report that the officer responsible for the maintenance team at the Depot was sure that the device had been put back on line when the ship was taken out, supposedly for that ceremony. It wasn't. Most probably, it was disabled again... by Shelby, or even by the... Admiral, for that matter. It's a computerised device." Scarlet cast a thoughtful glance at Colonel White. "And you certainly know your way around computers, don't you, sir?"

Blue stared at Scarlet gloomily before turning to their commander. "Why did you need that ship?" he asked calmly.

The latter didn't answer and took another mouthful. Scarlet sighed. "Now we know at least one of the reasons why the Mysterons needed HIM and those hired hands with him..."

"It wouldn't have been possible for Mysterons to enter the Depot," Blue stated, nodding.

"Not without being exposed. Captain Forest says that EVERYONE at the gate was checked with a Mysteron detector since we heard of this new threat."

Masticating energetically, White looked at the two men with open curiosity. A *Mysteron detector*, he repeated inwardly. That was what he had seen the preceding day, when he had presented himself at the Depot... the thing he had first mistaken for a weapon. He remembered that the lieutenant who had welcomed him at the gate, a Lieutenant Lannigan, had indeed called it a 'Mysteron detector' and that it was able to 'somehow spot Mysterons'...

"Will you tell me what these Mysterons are, and how you Spectrum people can spot them, using a piece of machinery?" the colonel suddenly asked.

"You SAW the Mysteron detector," Blue realised.

"Oh, yes, I saw it..." White cut another piece of his steak. "So... what are these Mysterons?"

WHAT seemed the perfect question to him... Judging by the few clues he had been able to gather about them, he was beginning to wonder if they were... human.

Why am I even considering this possibility? Gray was asking himself. As bizarre as the eventuality might be, it seemed also, strangely, very unsettling...

"I don't think it would be a good idea to tell you," Blue noted.

"...because I wouldn't believe it? So it's that amazing?" White smiled roguishly. "I've seen my share of strange things in my life, young sir... You'd be surprised what I may be willing to believe."

"You'll forgive us if we're rather... doubtful about that."

"Right now, we would like very much for you to believe US," Scarlet said.

"That may be asking too much at this moment." White took another mouthful, and concentrated again on his plate.

"How long since you had a decent meal, sir?" Blue asked, still watching in fascination his obviously famished commander.

The latter shrugged, with some indifference, without bothering to answer the question. Since he had been released from the *Dream Spinner*, he had not been able to eat anything solid. Some of the drugs that had been pumped into his bloodstream must have played tricks with his stomach, somehow. That was part of the reason he had refused to accept anything to eat since his capture by Spectrum – that, and the fact that he was really concerned that something could have been slipped into his meal.

"Let's see what we have," Scarlet said, sitting down next to Blue, rubbing his chin. "We've identified our two 'honoured outlawed heroes' as being former Admiral Charles Gray and the destroyer he commanded about twenty-five years ago, the *Sir Francis Drake*."

"Strange..." Blue grumbled. "I would have put my money on Captain Black as being the second 'outlawed hero'. He was a celebrated hero, some years ago... And certainly, he is outlawed NOW."

"Two days ago," Scarlet continued, "Admiral Gray was kidnapped at the house of his friend, retired quartermaster Greg Dooley, and then underwent the *Dream Spinner* treatment to force him to follow certain orders... What was the name of that group involved in this operation again?"

"The Network," Blue answered. He indicated White who had almost finished his meal. "At least, that's how the... 'Admiral' remembers it." He and Scarlet had been careful to avoid referring to their commander as 'Colonel White'. He still doubted that that identity was really his, and it seemed to infuriate him whenever he was called by that name.

"Right, the Network... We suspected that such a group was helping the Mysterons... It seems we guessed right." Scarlet paused a second. "We'll have to learn more later about this 'Network'. For now, let's continue our recapitulation: yesterday, the *Drake* was taken from the Navy Armament Depot in Bristol, by Admiral Gray himself... We know that three days ago, Lieutenant-

Commander Jason Shelby disappeared with a truckload of torpedoes from the same Depot. Now we know that Shelby was taken over by the Mysterons and that those torpedoes were meant to be used by the *Drake*..." Scarlet narrowed his eyes, looking at White, who was still eating, seemingly paying little attention to what was being said. The British captain knew that the appearances were deceiving... his commander wasn't missing a single word. "The armament system on board the ship was rendered non-operational, when it was taken to dry dock, years ago," Scarlet continued, addressing Blue. "But it is highly likely that Commander Shelby would have been able to correct that and that the *Drake* will now be perfectly able to launch those torpedoes against their intended target."

"Which we don't know anything about at the moment," Blue added, nodding. "Our only clue is that he – or she – is a 'crowned head'... The term is applicable only to a reigning monarch, right?"

Scarlet nodded. "After the coronation, yes. Other members of royal families are not 'crowned heads'."

"Which reduces our research a bit," Blue sighed. "Still, there are still a few 'crowned heads' in Europe – and in some little states in Africa and Asia..."

"Just about all of them are under Spectrum protection," Scarlet noted. "And the majority of them are out of reach of an attack from a warship like the *Sir Francis Drake*. And there is still the possibility that the Mysterons are using a symbolic term, here, pointing to someTHING, rather to someONE..."

"I still think it has something to do with Britain," Captain Blue replied. "Maybe the intended target IS the King of England. The Mysterons intended to use a British subject... and a British warship."

"Well, for now, like the world's other monarchs, the King is quite safe," Scarlet replied. "And I can't see HOW the Mysterons, using the *Drake*, would be able to touch him where he is at this moment."

Colonel White had stopped eating; he was giving a puzzled look toward the two captains, conversing before him. "There's a king back on the British Throne?" he asked, addressing Scarlet.

"King George the Seventh," Scarlet answered, nodding.

"George..." White repeated, thoughtfully. "I still remember him as the Prince of Wales... As far as I can recall, the last time I heard of him, he was in exile, with the rest of the Royal Family."

"He's been King since a few weeks after the end of the civil war, twenty-five years ago," Scarlet explained. "He was very involved with the Coalition that helped overthrow the Military Regime." He looked closely at White as he added, "Like my great-

grandfather, he was one of the representatives who asked for President Bandranaik's help against the Militarists."

"Yes..." White said, nodding in turn. "I seem to remember that too..." He shrugged. "Strange how details like that seem to slowly come back." He paused a few seconds. "So I suppose it was by him that I was... knighted? If I am to believe what that blonde girl told me before..."

"Believe it, sir. Symphony told you the truth," Scarlet replied. "You received the Order of the Bath, about fifteen years ago. For outstanding service to the nation throughout the course of your career." He turned toward Blue. "Which is one of the reasons why Captain Black couldn't be that other outlawed hero, Captain Blue. Remember: the Mysterons were referring to an HONOURED one. Conrad Turner was never knighted, never received that kind of honour, however heroic his past actions were."

"I still find that hard to believe, you know?" White nodded, again thoughtful. "I don't remember having been knighted. I suppose I'll have to wait to see if something will come back, before passing judgement on that."

"Best course of action for now," Blue agreed, rather gloomily. "In the meantime, WE have to try and find some clue to what the Mysterons intend to do... and to stop them at all costs."

"And in order to do that, we must find out WHERE the *Drake* is. Fast. And that's where you come in, 'Admiral'."

White frowned deeply. He couldn't help but notice that the conversation had radically changed in the last hour or so. Although the two captains were still trying to convince him of their good faith, their priority had shifted now to trying to locate the missing ship and find out at whom it was intended to strike. "Time seems to be of the essence, here," he noted, addressing the two men. "Why do I have the feeling you're in some kind of hurry?"

"Because we are," Scarlet answered.

"The Mysterons' deadline is getting dangerously close," Blue added.

"Deadline?"

"Two days ago, they announced that they would destroy one 'crowned head' using two outlawed heroes, within the next seventy-two hours."

"We lost the first day trying to find you," Scarlet explained. "The second in attempting to make you regain your senses." He consulted his wrist-watch and shook his head. "We have about twenty-four hours left."

"Wait, I don't understand," a puzzled White replied. "If I'm following you, I have to say these Mysterons posed some kind of a riddle as a threat?"

"They always announce their threats," Blue answered. "And sometimes, in riddles, like this time."

"Why? Surely they must know you would try to stop them..."

"They're counting on it, actually. With them, it's a 'war of nerves'."

"A sick game, if you ask me."

"Yes, a sick game. Unfortunately, we have no choice but to play along with them."

"This time, sir, they decided to use YOU, to carry out their threat," Scarlet continued. "Up until now, we have done the best we could to prevent anyone outside of our senior staff learning what'd happened to you... of your involvement in what has already happened. It wouldn't suit Spectrum if it became known that our commander has been brainwashed into killing someone – like a head of State."

"The scandal, you mean?"

"Worse than that. Spectrum is the World Government's ultimate task team. Its reputation isn't spotless, because of Captain Black's involvement with... the Mysterons." Scarlet had come close to saying *'with what happened on MARS with the Mysterons'*, but he stopped himself just in time. He shook his head. "We don't want to lose the people's trust in the work we do. They're counting on us to protect them from the Mysterons' threats. It's our job, and so far we've done it well. But if what happened to you becomes known..."

"That trust could be shaken," Blue added gloomily. "And I believe that's what the Mysterons had in mind when they decided to make use of you. That's why we kept this to ourselves, and the senior staff of Spectrum. Not even the World Government authorities know about your ordeal."

"Unfortunately," Scarlet sighed, "I'm afraid we won't be able to keep it a secret for much longer... That's why we have to see this operation through quickly."

"It's important that you co-operate with us, sir," Blue said. "If you help us locate the *Drake* and stop the Mysterons before they can carry out their threat..."

"...Then nobody will have to learn of my 'involvement' in this," White added, thoughtfully.

"There will be less risk that it would be discovered, anyway."

"I see." White paused again, before staring closely at the two captains. "If what you're saying is true... then you're taking tremendous risks to help me.... Why are you doing this?"

"We already explained that to you, sir," Scarlet answered.

"Tell me again."

"You're our commander," Blue replied. "Do you need a better reason than that?"

"So you're doing this out of loyalty to me?"

"What do you think, sir?"

White stared deep into the eyes of the blond-haired captain; he could see no deception in them. Then he raised his eyes toward Captain Scarlet; this one too, seemed sincere. *Do I dare trust them?* a hesitant Charles Gray asked himself. Could he take the risk of believing them, without reservation, and helping them with their investigation? If they were telling the truth, and he kept silent, then it could mean the death of an innocent person. He would be an accomplice to a heinous act, the kind of thing he had abhorred all his life... the very reason that had pushed him to turn against the Militarist Government, so many years ago.

On the other hand, if all this conversation, and all that preceded it, was just an elaborate scheme intended to make him talk... then he would become a traitor to all he held dear.

There must be a way to be sure... to find out where the truth lay.

White blew out a deep sigh. Perhaps, there was a way... but it was a risky move.

"What do you want from me?" he asked the two Spectrum captains.

Scarlet kept himself from sighing with relief. *Finally...* "Tell us what you know," he answered. "Perhaps that will give us a clue to what the Mysterons are planning."

"As I told you, I don't know anything about these Mysterons. And the little I remember about the 'Network' I already told you."

"Will you tell us who the Mysterons' target is?"

"Your 'crowned head', eh? Sorry... I can't."

The frustration was fairly apparent in Blue's features; he exchanged a concerned glance with Scarlet, before pursuing, "Sir, we realise that you don't fully trust us, but you must understand that somebody's life is at stake..."

"I think it's you who doesn't understand, Captain. I can't tell you... because I don't know."

"You don't KNOW?"

"No, I don't." White's stare crossed with the two Spectrum captains. He could see in their eyes that they didn't believe him. He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm telling you the truth, gentlemen. I really don't know who this 'target' is. I did take the *Drake* from the Depot, following the orders I was given. I sailed it to a safe place. And there was to be an operation in which the ship was to be used. I know Lieutenant-Commander Shelby had provided us with torpedoes for the mission... But I don't know anything else. I was to wait for further instructions."

"That doesn't make sense," Blue muttered, still incredulous.

"Quite the contrary," Scarlet replied. "It makes perfect sense." As Blue stared back at him with the same perplexed look, he added, "Why would the Mysterons trust him with the full knowledge of this mission? Even if the *Dream Spinner* had made him receptive to their orders, it also made him unstable. Not fully reliable."

Blue nodded his acknowledgement. "Yes, why run the risk of him losing it in the middle of the mission? I see your point, Captain Scarlet." He turned his attention back to Colonel White. "Okay, I'm willing to accept that you don't know who the Mysterons' target is. Then maybe you'll be able to tell us where we can find the *Drake*."

The colonel answered with a faint smile. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that either."

Blue scowled. "Don't tell us you don't know," he retorted. "You just admitted you took it to a safe place."

"It would surprise me very much if it's still there," White answered quietly. "Since my... capture by you people, I'm fairly sure Mister Shelby would have taken it elsewhere." He paused, weighing carefully what he was about to say. "But if you still want to know where I took it, I can show you the place." He could see the perplexed and incredulous look on the two captains' features. They were not sure if they should believe him.

"Where is it?" Scarlet asked carefully.

"It's a cove, about eighty miles north from Bristol."

"The Angels and Spectrum helicopters covered that section of the country," Blue remarked suspiciously. "Since you were fleeing in that direction when you escaped from the factory, we thought we might find something. We came out empty-handed."

"This cove is well hidden, Captain. You wouldn't find it if you didn't know where to look for it." White scratched his ear, smiling broadly. "I believe it would have been a perfect place for smugglers, a couple of centuries ago..."

"You have the co-ordinates?" Scarlet asked.

"No. Sorry. And it's rather difficult to pinpoint."

"We'd better send a patrol right away to find this cove," Scarlet said, turning to Blue. "It's somewhere to start looking for the *Drake*."

"You won't find it, Captain," Colonel White then remarked. He saw the two Spectrum officers turning again toward him, staring at him with curiosity. He shook his head. "It would take you too much time to find it, anyway," he said quietly. "Time you can't afford to lose. As I told you, it's well hidden."

Scarlet narrowed his eyes. "What do you suggest, then?"

"I can take you there."

Silence followed the colonel's suggestion. He could still see the suspicion in the two captains' eyes.

"You want us to let you guide us there?" Blue asked, puzzled.

"Yes. That exactly what I'm asking of you."

"Why would we do that?" Scarlet asked in turn. "It's not really a good strategic move. You could use that opportunity to escape us."

"It would save you precious time," White stated quietly.

"I don't think it's enough. We spent too much time and energy to get you back. We won't take the risk of losing you again."

"Yes. How are we to know you won't try to escape, while you're down there?" Blue added.

"I can't convince you that I won't, unfortunately," White replied. "But I can assure you, Captain, that even if I don't quite know what to make of all what you've already told me, I sure as Hell want to learn more and be sure of its veracity."

Colonel White paused a second. He could still see the hesitation within the two Spectrum agents.

Indeed, Scarlet and Blue still had their doubts, wondering what could be going through their commander's mind. Was this a trick? Was he sincere? It wasn't easy trying to read on his face if he was concealing something from them.

"That's why you want to go down?" Scarlet stated.

"For the most part, yes."

"And the rest of the part?"

White sighed. "I want to be in on this. If you told the truth about those Mysterons and what they did to me, to use me to carry out their threat, then I want to participate – if only a little – in your operation to stop them. It's the least I can do. Think of this as a way to redeem myself for what I've already done." He looked closely at the British captain's face. He saw an almost imperceptible twitch over his left eye. *Touched a nerve*, White

realised. He didn't reveal his observation, and put it somewhere in the back of his mind, for further analysis later on.

"Are you sincere about that?" Scarlet asked, frowning.

"Yes, I am, Captain. I think that, at this point I've got nothing more to lose. But I've certainly got a lot to win."

"What about your life?" Scarlet asked again.

White scoffed. "It's been turned upside down ever since I was put onto that damned *Dream Spinner*. I can't rely on my memories, so I don't really know what my life's been like for the past twenty-five years. If this operation could only help me get my life back... then I think it's worth the effort."

There was a moment of silence; both captains scrutinized their commander closely.

"I wish we could actually trust you," Scarlet murmured, pondering.

"You want me to give you insurance?" White asked, seeing him hesitate.

"We know you can't," Blue noted. "We're sorry. But it's too damned risky."

White frowned. To say that he wasn't disappointed would have been a lie. "What will you do with me, then?" he asked, keeping himself from growling with frustration. "Leave me to rot in a hospital cell?"

"If it means keeping you safe until you get your senses back, yes," Blue answered firmly.

White scoffed dryly. "I'm touched by your concern for me, Captain!"

Blue gave a faint sigh and shook his head. There was obvious regret in his eyes. "Forgive me, sir," he retorted, trying not to sound too harsh, "but I say it's just common sense not to trust you. You DID try to kill some of us. Captain Ochre is in a hospital bed with a hole in his shoulder. Magenta is nursing a broken nose. You took several shots at my partner and myself, and beat him up. And I won't mention your attempted attack on Doctor Fawn, while trying to escape from sickbay."

"Yes... Thank you for not mentioning it."

"The point is, there's a fair chance that you still think of us as the enemy. Perhaps not consciously. But it's still there in the back of your mind, with the paranoia the *Dream Spinner* induced in you. Until you recover from it, and your memory comes back, I don't think we should let you out of our sight... and certainly not allow you to run free. We'd better keep you safely here on Cloudbase."

"And if I give you my word?" White replied. "Surely you know that I would keep it?"

"Be fair, sir. We all know what your word is worth. In normal circumstances, none of us would dispute it. But right now, the situation is far from normal. If you still think of us as the enemy, I'm pretty sure that you'd want nothing more than to get your freedom back, and would promise anything to get ONE chance to escape us. In that case, all bets are off."

White seemed mortified. He stared a moment at the set face of Captain Blue and saw in his features that he was determined to keep to his decision and that he would not budge. The Spectrum commander then turned his attention to Scarlet, who had kept silent all this time. He addressed him with renewed hope. "And what have YOU got to say about this? You're in joint command with him. I made you this offer in good faith... Will you give me the chance to redeem myself?"

Scarlet hesitated a few seconds. He exchanged glances with Blue; his partner's expression was as determined as his commander's was pleading. He sighed.

"I'm really sorry, sir," he then said, very gently. "But I have to concur with Captain Blue."

White's face became hard, hearing those words; Captain Scarlet had the sudden, terrible impression that the colonel had taken his statement as some kind of a condemnation. The eyes of his compatriot became cold with bitterness.

"I see. Sorry, you say." He narrowed his eyes at Scarlet. "I thought YOU, at least, understood what I feel about this whole crazy situation."

"I DO understand," Scarlet retorted. "But we have to keep you safe. Despite yourself, if need be."

White scoffed and looked away. "You said you had faith in me," he grumbled dryly. "You're showing beautiful proof of it right now!"

"Sir," Scarlet protested, "how can we make you realise that we're doing this for your own good?"

"What good is there in keeping me locked up?" White replied sharply, his eyes blazing with anger. "I don't LIKE being treated as a prisoner!"

He was staring straight into Scarlet's eyes when a new headache hit him; it was not as violent as the preceding ones, but it nevertheless sent his head reeling.

The two captains saw him blink a couple of times and rub his head with his hand, groaning in obvious pain. They both stood up

to approach their commander. Scarlet reached him first and leaned over him.

"Are you all right, sir?" he asked, gently taking him by the shoulder.

Colonel White didn't answer, concentrating on dispelling the searing pain in his head. He heard Scarlet's voice through a thick fog, as if it was coming from the far end of the large room, like a distant echo.

He was also hearing the echo of water striking against the outside of a ship...

He shook his head. THAT came from within his mind... A fleeting memory suddenly came back to him. He tried to reach for it.

A flash. A gun in his hand. Himself, walking slowly in a narrow cabin. His ear catching a faint sound.

Come and get me if you want me...

White grunted with annoyance. Still that memory of him having shot Jackson Bennett, was his first thought. But then, he realised... it was different.

This wasn't the same memory.

The cabin wasn't the one he had on the *Drake*, years ago. It was smaller. The sounds of water he was hearing were also different from what he remembered from the inside of a surface vessel.

It was the persistent echoing sound heard from the interior of a submarine.

Where are you? You said you wanted my skin... Come and try to get it! I won't make it easy for you.

This memory was recent, Charles Gray realised. Far more recent than what he remembered – or thought he remembered – of the events that happened on the *Drake* so long ago. *When did that occur, damn it? Is this memory real, or another trick of my mind?*

He had the strong impression he was in danger, watched by an enemy that he knew was determined to take his life. The thought in his mind was: They're coming. Now's the time they choose to strike... He was ready for them. They would find out he was not easy prey.

"Sir, can you hear me?"

Still, Captain Scarlet's voice was reaching him, but it didn't drive the memory away. It was still there, vividly present in Gray's mind and becoming more and more detailed.

He passed by a cabinet, without even thinking of checking it out, and walked toward the door leading out of the cabin. If somebody should be behind that door, waiting to attack him...

Then he heard it. A creaking sound from behind. The cabinet! He turned around quickly, ready to shoot at whoever would be behind him. He had but a glimpse of the determined and gruff face of the man he found behind him and it made his finger freeze on the trigger. He didn't have time to speak, as a fist came straight at his face.

"Sorry about this, sir..."

Then the memory went completely black.

As the pain slowly dispersed from his mind, Charles Gray stared in disbelief at the young man kneeling in front of him, with that look of worry on his features. The face he had just seen in his memory... the face of the man who attacked him...

It was his.

"Are you all right, now, sir?"

The voice had the same note of concern as before, Gray noticed, but suddenly, it didn't ring at all true to his ears. That man, he remembered, he had confronted him, in other circumstances, in a different setting... He had attacked him, knocked him out... Gray remembered that uncomfortable feeling of danger, of a threat against his life. Was the Spectrum officer trying to kill him, that time?

"The last time that happened to him, he was having a flashback."

That was the American captain's voice. He was standing next to his colleague. He, too, sounded genuinely concerned. But after what he had just remembered, Charles Gray wasn't sure anymore. He had been so willing to believe them, so near to trusting them, but now...

Now he didn't know what to believe.

"I'm... all right, now," he stated, sighing tiredly. "It's over..."

"Is Captain Blue right?" Captain Scarlet asked. "Did you just have a flashback?"

Colonel White stared at him with hesitation. *Can't tell them. Can't let them know about that memory... They may get suspicious about me...* He shook his head slowly. "Yes, but... it was like the last time... Same memory. Me, the *Dream Spinner*... the doctor..."

"Nothing new?" Scarlet insisted.

“No... Nothing new.”

Scarlet nodded quietly. “Well, I can see how this could be obsessive,” he noted. “It was a trying experience for you.”

“Yes, indeed,” White murmured, rubbing his temples. “And it’s still going on...”

Scarlet was about to add something when a beeping sound coming from the intercom loudspeaker suddenly interrupted him. He raised his head, imitated by Captain Blue and Colonel White, as the voice of Lieutenant Green made itself heard: “*Captain Scarlet, Captain Blue. Could you come over to the Control Room, please?*”

Blue dropped down his cap mic. “What is it, Lieutenant?” he called with a flash of annoyance.

“*We need to talk, sir,*” came Green’s swift reply. “*We have... a problem.*”

Scarlet used his mic also. “What kind of problem?”

“*Intelligence, sir.*”

Scarlet gave a look toward White, then consulted with Blue, who nodded his acknowledgement.

“We’re coming right away, Lieutenant,” the Brit announced to Green. His mic returned to its place on the visor and he turned to Colonel White, while Blue went toward the door. “You will have to excuse us for a moment, sir,” he told him. He heard the door slide open behind him and gave a quick glance to see Captain Blue gesturing to Corporal Jarvis, who stepped inside the room. “Jarvis here will keep you company,” Scarlet added quietly.

“A rather polite way to say he will keep his eye on me,” White deadpanned.

Scarlet thought of making some reply, but he couldn’t think of anything. What the colonel had just said was all too true, anyway. “We won’t be long,” he continued. “And we’re not so far away. If you want to talk to us...”

“I get the point,” White sighed. “I’ll ask the corporal, here.”

Strange, Scarlet observed. *Since that last headache, he seems rather... distant. What was it that he really remembered just then? And if it wasn’t the same thing as before, why won’t he tell us?* He shrugged. He would have to come back to this later on. For now, his attention was demanded elsewhere.

“All right, Captain Blue,” he said turning toward his colleague. “Let’s see what the lieutenant wants to see us about.”

Both Blue and Scarlet strode out of the room, the door sliding behind them; for a very short moment, Jarvis’ eyes followed the two captains’ departure. Colonel White immediately noticed his guard’s distraction and quickly took advantage of it. Discreetly, he

covered the steak knife with his hand, and slipped it swiftly inside the sleeve of his shirt.

When Jarvis turned to his charge, a second later, the knife had completely disappeared from view. Colonel White gave him an innocent enough look. "Would you please order me a coffee, Corporal?" he asked very quietly. "A GOOD coffee, please... and make sure it wasn't made by your Captain Blue..."

* * *

Captains Scarlet and Blue entered the Control Room to find Lieutenant Green seated in front of his communication console. The look of relief they saw upon the young man's face as he saw them enter did nothing to reassure them about what was going on.

"Now, Lieutenant," Blue said, approaching the communication officer with his partner. "What seems to be the problem this time?"

"We have trouble coming our way," Green answered. "I just had a call from London Headquarters. Senior Agent Wade from Spectrum Intelligence informed me that Special Agent Conners had received the authorisation to board an SPJ to come up for a little visit."

"He's coming to Cloudbase?" Blue asked, frowning.

"Yes, sir. I just received radio confirmation on his ETA. He'll arrive in about one hour. Two at the most."

"Talk about coming uninvited," Blue grumbled dryly. He glowered at Scarlet. "Did he give you any indication that he might come when you talked to him earlier?"

"No," the British captain answered. "When Lieutenant Green called me into the Control Room a few hours ago, it was to help him repel another call from Conners. He was still trying to get in touch with Colonel White... The lieutenant had run out of excuses, and Conners was getting VERY insistent. Nevertheless, I thought I'd succeeded in fending him off."

"You mean you told him to buzz off."

"More or less. And more POLITELY than that."

"That would surprise me very much." Blue gave a sigh. "I just KNEW that weasel would spell trouble. If he sets foot on Cloudbase he's bound to discover the truth... We must stop him!"

"We can't, sir," Green answered. "I just checked with Spectrum Intelligence concerning the reason for his coming up here. He wants to question Rhapsody Angel and Captain Ochre concerning their ambush yesterday. AND he wants a word with Colonel White."

Scarlet scoffed dryly, giving a sideways look toward Blue. "Perhaps he wants to discuss our cavalier conduct toward him."

"Or he suspects something," Blue retorted.

"He MUST suspect something, Captain Blue. But I doubt he knows exactly WHAT's going on behind his back." Scarlet rubbed his chin, thoughtful for a few seconds. "Where's Rhapsody Angel at the moment?" he asked Green.

"On duty in the Amber Room, sir."

"Good. When you get confirmation of Conners' arrival on Cloudbase, you will launch all Angels."

"What do you plan to do?" Blue asked with perplexity. "Have the Angels blow Conners out of the sky?"

"I wish," Scarlet replied with a faint smile. "No, with Rhapsody gone on patrol, he won't be able to question her."

"Good idea. And what about Ochre?"

"He's still in sickbay, yes?"

"His condition isn't severe enough to prevent Conners from questioning him, Scarlet."

"Oh, I don't know... He could still be under the influence of a very strong sedative or painkiller for the next few hours..."

"You think Conners will buy that?"

"Maybe not. But then again, I'm sure the nurse assigned to Ochre won't let him get near enough to her patient to bother him."

"Miss Lang, right?" Blue asked with a faint smile.

"Right."

"What about the reports?" Blue asked again. "We were able to prevent Conners getting Ochre's in London HQ, but he's bound to demand it again... along with Rhapsody's..."

"Both those reports are needed for our present investigation, Captain," Scarlet noted. "And right now, in this state of red alert, WE have priority, and those reports are to be considered restricted information." He tapped Green's shoulder. "The lieutenant here just has to make sure Conners won't get through the computer files to get his hands on them."

"Don't worry about that," Green said, grinning broadly. "He won't even come close to them."

"Okay, then," Blue admitted. "That can take care of that part of the problem. Temporarily. We still have one left." He stared Scarlet straight in the eyes. "How are we going to prevent Conners from seeing the colonel? With the two of them on board Cloudbase, we're courting disaster. Conners WILL find out that our commander is being kept under very tight surveillance."

"Yes, which means the colonel can't stay on Cloudbase, Captain Blue."

"I already worked that out. But I don't think we can even take him to another Spectrum facility. Not without running the risk of having people wondering about him..."

"And eventually finding out the truth," Lieutenant Green added gloomily.

"You're absolutely right, both of you," Scarlet agreed, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "That's why I'm thinking that maybe we'd better reconsider Colonel White's own proposition."

Not knowing what his superior was implying, Lieutenant Green stared in silence, as Captain Blue frowned. "You're not SERIOUSLY suggesting..."

"Yes I am, Captain Blue. We agree to his proposition to go to the surface to help us locate that cove he told us about. If he's serious about wanting to redeem himself, we've got to give him a chance to actually do it."

"Are you serious, Captain?" Lieutenant Green's half-exclaimed doubtful remark caused Scarlet to turn toward him with a silencing and annoyed look. The communication officer cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Sir..." He turned back to his console, trying not to listen to what was going on behind him.

"You're crazy!" Captain Blue stated in turn. "In his present state, we CAN'T trust him to act as we'd like him to! You know how unpredictable he is!

"Yes, I know that, but... don't you think we can, at least, give him the benefit of the doubt?"

"That's too big a risk. He could make a break for it! Heck, it could be dangerous for HIM as well as for us! Imagine being forced to hunt him down again! Imagine INTELLIGENCE hunting him down! Now, I realise you feel sympathetic toward him. I do, too... And I know WHY you feel so strongly about this..."

"Yes, I know just how he feels, having people doubting me..." Scarlet replied morosely. "Or did you forget?"

"Come on, now," Blue protested. "The situation's not the same!"

"You think it's not?" Scarlet challenged, his blue eyes flashing icily.

"When you came back to us, two years ago, you were yourself, Captain. Now, you must admit, the colonel... the colonel isn't QUITE himself."

"You couldn't be so sure I was really myself, back then. I had to prove that I was, if you recall correctly. The difference is that I had the time to do so. And Colonel White gave me the opportunity to make it count. Today HE doesn't have the luxury of much time. We're only one step ahead of Intelligence, as we speak..." He hesitated a second, before adding, "... And still one step behind what the Mysterons are planning to do."

Blue scowled at those words. "I know we still have their threat to consider," he stated dully. "We must stop them, but I don't see how the colonel can help us do it, even if we let him go down there..."

"I've got an idea about that, Captain," Scarlet retorted. "Now I admit it represents an enormous risk, but... we have to take it."

Blue gave another frown, staring at his friend with perplexity. "WHAT are you saying, here? You've got a plan?"

"Yes, I have one," Scarlet nodded. "And yes, it is risky. Perhaps even improper..."

"Would you PLEASE tell me what it's all about?" Blue demanded with an exasperate sigh. "Or do I have to remind you that time is running out quickly?"

Scarlet gave a faint smile, before turning toward Lieutenant Green. "Call for Captain Magenta, Lieutenant," he asked him. "Tell him to join us here, in the Control Room. Right away."

Blue frowned. "Magenta? What do you need Magenta for?"

"As soon as he's here, Captain Blue, I'll explain my plan to you," Scarlet assured his friend and partner. "We'll need all the help we can get... And we must prepare this very carefully, to minimise the risks..."

* * *

"Would you mind telling me what made you change your mind?"

At the helm of Spectrum Passenger Jet C31, Captain Scarlet cast a glance toward Colonel White, seated by his side, his hands safely shackled to his belt. He seemed gloomy, but was calm enough, ever since their departure from Cloudbase, an hour before. Yet, there was still that glow of defiance in his eyes, evidence that he didn't completely trust the captain's intentions and didn't understand in the least his motivations. Scarlet gave him a quiet nod and responded with a reassuring smile.

"I told you already," he quietly said. "Captain Blue and I decided to agree to your suggestion and give you the chance to prove you were sincere about it."

"Bull." The brusque reply surprised Scarlet. That wasn't an expression he had heard often from his commander's mouth. White presented his shackled hands. "If you trusted me enough to accept my proposition, then why am I still wearing these?"

"Mainly for security, I assure you. It's the usual procedure."

White scoffed. "I've heard that one before!" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "There's something else going on that I don't know about, right?" Scarlet didn't answer. White grumbled with annoyance. "Why isn't your Captain Blue with us?"

"He had to stay on Cloudbase. One of us must act as commander when the other is away."

"That's wise. But is that why the two of you were at the Complex when you found me?"

Scarlet scowled. Not much got past the old man, even in his present state. He was still as quick-witted as he usually was.

Convincing Blue to go along with his plan hadn't been easy, Scarlet reflected. His partner was still pretty uneasy about it. Too damned dangerous for his taste... But Blue had to admit that they couldn't permit themselves the luxury of waiting any longer... Too much was at risk here. The colonel's present condition had to be kept a secret until all of this situation was resolved... and since Special Agent Conners was coming to Cloudbase, there wasn't much choice about what to do. And whatever the two captains decided, it had to be done quickly. The Mysteron threat had to be eradicated, Colonel White had to regain his mind – and the trust of his senior staff – along with his rightful place at the head of Spectrum.

The risk was warranted.

A light on the instrument panel flashed white, beeping at the same time. That was the onboard radio, notifying a call from Cloudbase. Scarlet flipped up a small red switch.

"Captain Scarlet here. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I've got the preliminary report of the teams searching the coast north of Bristol, sir," came Lieutenant Green's voice over the cockpit speaker.

"Any luck in finding that cove?"

"So far, no. None of the teams has found it yet." Green paused.

"Captain Grey found something interesting, though."

"Go ahead."

"A private air freight company, by the name of 'Campbell Air Transport Company', has its own airport for goods transit, north east of Bristol. The owner communicated with the local authorities yesterday. According to him, the airport had been raided by a group of heavily armed men, all dressed in commando uniforms. They locked up the owner with his employees and stole a cargo helicopter."

Scarlet frowned. "A cargo helicopter?"

"Yes, sir. The biggest the Campbell Company owned. The owner and his employees managed to get out of their prison and alerted the police. Captain Grey went there to investigate. The thieves left their vehicles behind. Captain, they were army-type vehicles. One of them was the lorry that originally transported the torpedoes that were stolen from the Naval Depot, some days ago."

Scarlet glanced at Colonel White. "Was this something planned all along by those men?" he asked him.

The older man shrugged. "Not that I know of. Looks to me like the raid you Spectrum people mounted on the Complex yesterday

must have forced Mister Shelby to improvise to get away with the material..."

Scarlet nodded thoughtfully. That's a strong possibility... He addressed Lieutenant Green again. "Thank you for the information, Lieutenant. Keep me informed of developments." He paused, before adding, tentatively: "Has... er... our 'guest' arrived at Cloudbase, yet?"

"No, sir. Not yet. But he confirmed his ETA. He will be arriving shortly."

"Right. I'm counting on you to keep him occupied."

"Will do, sir. Don't worry. He won't find you out."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. We should be reaching our destination in about thirty minutes. I'll maintain radio silence. But I'll contact you if we find anything."

"S.I.G., Captain Scarlet. Cloudbase out."

Scarlet cut communication; he didn't turn to look at Colonel White, but he could feel the intense stare the older man was keeping on him. He let him make the first move.

"We had to leave your base quickly, right?" White asked quietly.

Scarlet lifted an eyebrow, turning toward his commander. "What makes you say that, sir?"

"Why, by your conversation, it seemed obvious." White answered, shrugging. "You said to me earlier that until now you had kept my... condition a secret from about everyone outside your senior staff ranks..." He watched for Scarlet's reaction. "So I think that maybe somebody is on to you."

Scarlet didn't answer. The colonel calmly nodded his head. "So I'm right, then."

"I didn't say that."

"Your silence is eloquent enough. Somebody outside of your organisation is on to you and you had to evacuate me from your Cloudbase so they wouldn't find out too much."

Scarlet hesitated a second, before sighing and finally answering. "Let's just say we're working outside Spectrum's... conventional methods, here. Some... sections of our organisation probably wouldn't appreciate our keeping this secret from them."

White gave the faintest of smiles. "I've got the feeling you have a particular 'section' in mind, Captain. Let me make a wild guess: considering the situation, this... 'section' would have full authority to take command, is that right?" He saw by the look on the younger man's face that he had guessed right again. "So... what do you intend to do now? Where are we going?"

"I thought you would guess that too. I intend to find that cove with your help," Scarlet replied simply.

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?" White asked, still incredulous.

"And why wouldn't I be serious?"

White sighed. "All right. I'll buy it." He looked around, through the cockpit canopy, obviously searching into the empty sky around the jet. "Where is our escort?"

"What escort?" Scarlet asked innocently.

"I don't know... Another jet, a helicopter... one of those Angel interceptors you showed me on your base."

"The Angels are busy on another mission. They were sent to patrol the airspace over Iceland." Scarlet glanced toward the colonel, still keeping an eye ahead. "Since the *Drake* was supposed to go there in the first place for the ceremony, we thought we'd better check it out more closely. Just to make sure there was nothing suspicious there."

"I'll buy that too."

"As for Spectrum helicopters, we should be encountering some when we reach the English coast. They're already searching the area."

"Yes, I heard that too. For that cove I told you about."

"That and any possible evidence for the *Sir Francis Drake*'s passage."

"Like that stolen cargo."

Scarlet nodded. "That could give us further indication of those commandos' whereabouts," he noted. "Captain Grey will be investigating it more fully."

"You have a 'Captain Grey'?" Colonel White asked with curiosity.

"Yes. You want to know something amusing? He also was in the Navy before joining Spectrum."

"Hilarious," the colonel replied in a mumble.

Turning to him, Captain Scarlet saw that he was still checking around, looking for any aircraft flying nearby. His commander was still doubtful.

Scarlet reached for his tunic pocket, unzipped it, and took a key from it. He stretched out his arm toward the colonel's restrained hands and put the key into his palm.

"Here. You'll feel better out of those."

An incredulous White stared at the key for a moment, before raising a perplexed look toward the captain's quiet face. "What does this mean? Why are you giving me that key?"

"So you can free yourself," Scarlet replied facetiously. "Don't tell me you'd rather keep those handcuffs?"

"What about 'security procedure'?"

Scarlet shrugged. "There's only you and me here. Who else is going to know?"

Still a little unsure, Colonel White looked down for a moment at the key. Then, he decidedly inserted it into one of the locks. Scarlet looked on as his commander removed both shackles and belt. He let them fall noisily to the floor, right next to his seat.

"Thank you," White finally said. He was eyeing the young captain very carefully, as if trying to understand his true motive.

Scarlet nodded his acknowledgment. "Don't mention it," he replied. "I don't particularly like seeing you in handcuffs..."

"You didn't free me just for that reason," White noted dryly. "Why are you trying to humour me?"

"I'm not trying to humour you. Seeing you like this, it doesn't feel right. You're my commander."

"So you keep saying. You have another reason. I'm sure of it." White rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You said... that once you were in the same situation as me."

"I'm surprised you remember me saying that. I had the impression then that you weren't listening to me."

"Well, I was listening. And that particular line caught my attention." White paused. "What did they do to you, exactly, those... Mysterons? They brainwashed you? The way they did to me?"

"Not that way," Scarlet said in an undertone.

White slowly nodded. So. He had guessed right. That was why the young captain seemed so sympathetic toward him. He really knew what it was like, being so confused, lost, waking up to discover how somebody else had manipulated you so wickedly for their own ends.

Not knowing where lay the truth.

"That's right," he recalled wistfully. "You also said that, as far as you knew, the use of the *Dream Spinner* in my case was a first... That the Mysterons usually use a different, more drastic method." He cast a sidelong look toward Scarlet, who was staring straight ahead, beyond the canopy. He didn't seem to have any reaction to the words addressed to him. White shrugged indifferently. "Of course, if we are to believe my memories of what happened to me, those who did that to me could very well not be your Mysterons..."

"You'd better believe they're implicated in this whole affair," Scarlet snapped suddenly, still watching ahead.

"Then why not use the same method for me as they did for you?"

"The Mysterons always have a precise reason for what they're doing."

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Scarlet hesitated. Maybe it was time to actually explain some facts to his still amnesiac commander. He wasn’t sure how White would take it, really. But he was certain of one thing: he couldn’t be kept in the dark much longer, concerning the Mysterons, and what they were doing in order to manipulate people as mere tools.

The captain blew out a sigh.

“We have ways of detecting Mysteron agents,” he said carefully.

“Yes,” White acknowledged slowly, “that device I saw at the Naval Depot...”

“Right.”

“Whatever this detector does, it didn’t work on me...”

“Because you’re not a Mysteron.”

“But...”

“That’s why they didn’t do to you the same thing they did to me,” Scarlet cut in, before White could protest further. “They didn’t want you to be detectable. If you had been Mysteronised, you would have been.” He stared at his commander. “The way I am.”

“Mysteronised?”

“That what we call their... process, to take over a person.”

“How does that device work?” White asked, with a perplexed frown. “I can’t understand how your detector could distinguish one person from another... Do the Mysterons put something inside these innocent people they use as pawns? An electronic mind controlling device which can be identified, or...”

“No. Nothing like that.” Scarlet paused a second, looking for the right way to answer. “After their... Mysteronisation, Mysteron agents have a unique, physical signature,” he finally continued, shaking his head, seeming to take no notice of White’s incredulous objection. “Without going into details, I’ll just say that it makes them different from any... normal human beings. The Mysteron detector is able to pick up that signature.” He paused again. “The Mysterons didn’t Mysteronise you, because you had to retrieve the *Sir Francis Drake* from the Naval Depot. A Mysteron agent could not have gone through the gate without being spotted. As a normal human, you had no trouble whatsoever getting in.”

“Wait. What do you mean exactly, ‘normal human being’?” White seemed rather perplexed. “You’re talking as if these Mysterons are not actually human.”

“And what if I were to tell you they’re NOT?”

White didn’t reply. Obviously baffled, he was waiting for Scarlet to continue his explanation. The latter sighed. “The Mysterons use a rather unique method, to get you under their control,” he said.

“And when you are, they own you, body and soul.” He paused, uncomfortable. “If you still have a soul,” he added bitterly.

White frowned deeply, his curiosity having been stirred. “WHAT did they do to you?”

“They killed me.”

Captain Scarlet’s statement had been made in a low and very sombre tone. Charles Gray nearly didn’t hear him. He turned a perplexed stare in the Spectrum officer’s direction and saw him, his features now hard and grave, still looking straight ahead. Inexplicably, a shiver ran down the colonel’s spine. There was something suddenly strange about that young man... He cleared his throat.

“For a dead man, you look rather alive, Captain.”

White’s voice sounded pleasant enough; it was understandable that he was sceptical about Scarlet’s declaration. The captain turned toward him, his eyes still very hard.

“I told you the Mysterons had a drastic way of taking full control of people,” he said coldly. “Can you think of anything more drastic than death?”

White frowned again. “You’re not serious about this, are you?”

“Do I sound like I’m kidding?” Scarlet answered. He returned his attention up front. “The Mysterons kill people they want as their agents... and then return them to life, to serve them... Almost as mindless drones, unable to resist their orders. Bent on carrying out their evil...”

White scoffed. “You EXPECT me to believe that? You want to make me BELIEVE that Mysteron agents are some kind of... zombies?”

“They’re not zombies. They were Mysteronised. A process that we don’t really understand... But you could say it’s akin to cloning. But not *exactly* cloning...”

“Cloning?” White repeated with an incredulous tone. “You say those agents are clones of dead people?”

“Of some sort. We prefer to call them reconstructs, or duplicates.”

“YOU’RE a clone?” White shook his head, still sceptical.

Scarlet scowled. He certainly hated that word. But if it could make Colonel White understand...

“You might say that, yes.”

“And those... agents are dedicated to the Mysterons?”

“Irrevocably. As far as we know, the Mysteronisation process is irreversible.”

“If it’s true, then what about YOU? You’re not under their orders...”

"The Mysterons made a mistake with me. They're very careful not to do it again. They released me, or lost their control over me... and I regained my own free will. We don't know how it happened exactly. I was just very lucky."

"I don't BELIEVE this," White declared, clenching his teeth. "You're trying to take me for a fool."

"Am I? Think about it, sir. Doesn't it explain why I was so ready to kill you yesterday? I thought you were your own reconstruct and that the Mysterons had killed you... so that reconstruct would act for his masters."

"You said I disappeared two days ago," White grumbled. "The cloning process takes time, Captain. A human can't be cloned in so short a time!"

"I told you it wasn't exactly cloning, sir," Scarlet replied. "Nothing similar to what is known on Earth. The Mysterons have their own powers to duplicate humans... or objects, as they please."

"Objects?" White shook his head. This was becoming more and more confusing by the minute. He tried to assimilate what Scarlet had just told him.

A unique phrase had caught his full attention.

"Wait a second..." he said with an incredulous voice. "'Known on Earth'... Are you suggesting that they're not from this Earth?"

"I'm not SUGGESTING anything." Scarlet was gravely staring ahead. "They're from Mars."

There was a moment of silence. White was staring at Scarlet, his face without any expression betraying his reaction. The Spectrum captain cast him a quick glance, wondering what was going through his mind. He could easily guess his commander didn't believe him at all.

Which, all things considered, wasn't so surprising.

"I was wondering when the little green men would pop out in this foolish story of yours..." White declared in a deadpan tone.

"It's not a foolish story," Scarlet protested dryly. "All of this is true. And the Mysterons are not 'little green men'..." He paused a second. "At least, I think," he added without humour.

"Oh, please! Will you stop this nonsense?" White snapped suddenly. He was evidently irritated by what the Spectrum officer had just revealed to him. "Did you really think I would swallow all of this?"

Scarlet let out a sigh. *Well, it was worth a try, at least...* "I WARNED you that you wouldn't believe it," he reminded his commander.

“Obviously!” White shot back, scoffing loudly. “What did you hope to accomplish by telling me all these absurdities?”

“Like I told you, all this is true... And all I hoped for was to win your trust.”

“Well, I've got some surprising news for you, young man...”

Something suddenly jabbed into Scarlet's right side, as Colonel White came swiftly nearer to him. He felt the sting of a pointed object closely pressed under one of his ribs. Frowning, he lowered his gaze, to see that his commander was holding a knife with a very firm hand, keeping its sharp point against his body, and threatening to plunge it in. The young Brit raised his eyes to look into those of the seemingly very determined White.

“You didn't succeed,” the older man icily said, finishing his earlier statement. He shoved the knife uncomfortably closer to Scarlet's side. “Don't try anything,” he warned him.

“A steak knife,” Scarlet noted, his calm not leaving him. “How crude.”

With his free hand, White quickly relieved the Spectrum officer of his gun, and brandished it in his face, throwing the blade away. “You'd prefer me to use this?” he asked in a very cold tone.

“Actually,” Scarlet replied rather coolly, “I would prefer you to stay quiet.”

“Don't play games with me, Captain,” White answered abruptly. “I'm not in the mood right now.”

“Me neither.” Scarlet shook his head with obvious discontentment, looking ahead. “Captain Blue suspected right, then. You only made this proposition of yours so you could get a chance to escape.”

“Don't make any mistake about this, Scarlet. I was sincere when I made the proposition. I was going to play it fair.”

“What changed your mind, then?”

“I remembered something that made me lose my trust in you.”

“In the Conference Room,” Scarlet recalled. “Yes, I can see when it was...” He frowned, curious. “What was it you remembered?”

“Something about you, specifically.”

“Me?”

“I was inside a submarine. I was feeling that somebody was hunting me down. YOU were hidden inside some kind of a cabinet. You attacked me from behind and knocked me out...”

“Oh! That...” Scarlet shook his head. He rolled his eyes, sighing with obvious frustration. “Of ALL the things for you to remember just then, it HAD to be that unfortunate incident,” he grumbled.

“Unfortunate incident’?” White repeated incredulously. “You don’t deny it happened, then?”

“No. It DID happen, sir. Two years ago. But there is an explanation for it...”

“Enough. I don’t want to hear it.”

White removed Captain Scarlet’s cap and threw it out of the cockpit, into the cabin behind them. Then he enquired for the young officer’s tracker, which he knew was on him. He destroyed it under his boot. Keeping a watchful eye on Scarlet, he opened up a panel under the instruments and tugged out a handful of electrical wires, destroying the radio controls in the process. He then settled himself back into his seat, his newly acquired pistol aimed squarely at his prisoner. “Now, you’re going to do exactly what I tell you to. And don’t make any false moves. I don’t want to, but I’ll kill you if I have to.”

“I take it we’re not going to that cove you told us about,” Scarlet remarked.

“Not if I want to avoid those Spectrum helicopters you told me are flying over that area.”

“I see. I suppose that cove doesn’t exist, anyway.”

“It does exist, Captain. But as I told you, the *Drake* isn’t there anymore. It has been taken to a more secure place. Quite some time ago.”

“So, contrary to what you led us to believe, you know where that ship is.”

“Yes. I know where it was to be taken.”

“And that’s where you want to go now.” Scarlet stared intensely at his commander. “You want to return to your ‘men’, don’t you? We’re inside a Spectrum Passenger Jet,” he reminded him. “They could very well welcome us with blazing guns. They’ll blow us out of the sky.”

“I don’t think so. They don’t have anything powerful enough to do that. The *Drake* isn’t equipped with surface to air armament.”

“Yes,” Scarlet said, nodding. “Only torpedoes.” He gave a faint smile. “Thanks for confirming that to me.”

White scowled. “You have no way to pass this information to Spectrum, anyway,” he reasoned.

“No. Right now, I don’t.” Scarlet frowned. “Spectrum will find out what happened.”

“You’re keeping radio silence,” White reminded him. “It will be a while before they notice anything is wrong.”

“But they will, eventually. You know, I make a rather bad hostage, ‘Admiral’.”

“Believe me, if there had been any other way for me to escape, I would have used it. I want nothing to do with hostages. Certainly not one as dangerous as you are.”

Scarlet sighed. “So, now you think you’ll be able to fulfil your mission, right?”

“You don’t get it, Captain.” White had a moment of hesitation, before continuing: “I don’t dismiss all that you’ve told me already. I remember quite vividly my wife being dead. I have some fleeting memories that seem to fit right in with what you told me. But I don’t TRUST Spectrum. And I don’t know if I should trust those you’ve just called my men. But I still have a lot of questions within me, and I want answers to those questions. It seems I can’t get it straight from you. That’s why we’re going where I think I can find those answers.”

Scarlet gave him an interrogative enough look. He wasn’t sure if he had understood clearly what his still confused – and certainly paranoid – commander was implying.

He knew that paranoia was a direct side effect of the treatment he had received from the *Dream Spinner*.

“What will you do when you have the answers you’re looking for?” he asked.

“It depends on what they’re going to be.” White paused. “I’m not about to act rashly, Captain Scarlet. I want to know exactly where I stand in this war of yours. Then I’ll decide what I should do. Be sure that I’ll follow my conscience and that I will do my duty accordingly. I’ve always done so.”

“I must say, I prefer that.” Scarlet addressed his commander with a faint but satisfied grin. “And I don’t think I can ask for more, at the present. Except...” He indicated the scarlet-handled gun. “Are you certain THIS is really necessary?”

White shook his head. “As necessary as those cuffs were, before you removed them,” he responded bleakly. “Sorry. You’ll have to tolerate it. At the very least, my keeping you in check will serve to prove to the others that I am on the level with them.”

“That’s a point of view,” Scarlet declared, rather gloomily.

“And if YOU’RE on the level with ME, their assumption could prove useful in time.”

“Very risky,” Scarlet mused. “For you as well as for me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid for your life, Captain. I wouldn’t believe it.”

“No, I’m not afraid. Not as much for me as I would be for you. But it doesn’t seem as if I have any choice, anyway.” He looked up ahead, into the clear blue sky. “So, what are your instructions, now, sir? Where are we going?”

* * *

Liberty Base.

Of all the places Captain Scarlet would have thought the *Sir Francis Drake* might be, this would have been the last on Earth.

Colonel White had instructed him to make a wide easterly detour to avoid the rapidly approaching area where Spectrum helicopters were searching for any clues of the *Drake's* passage. After he was sure that truly nobody was following them, and that their course had gone unnoticed, he ordered the jet to fly due north, in the direction of the Orkney Islands. Scarlet obeyed the directives given to him without a flaw. Not that he was afraid for himself if his commander should shoot him down. He was just concerned that if that were to occur, he might lose control of the craft and send it crashing down.

By the time the Passenger Jet was flying over the northern coast of Scotland, Scarlet realised that there was no way anybody at Spectrum would guess where their craft had disappeared to. He couldn't contact Cloudbase directly, nor any other Spectrum facility, and even less other military bases. No help to be expected from Liberty Base itself. Since about ten years after the end of the British civil war, the base had been completely deserted. Nobody went there, except, maybe, a couple of times a year, some curious tourists and History students, who had received special authorisation from the military. Those occasions were rare, and growing even more so as years passed by. Paul Metcalfe was only a child when he first visited the place. He remembered the base as still being a busy hive of military people. He didn't come back for eight years after that. There weren't many military in those days, only a handful serving as tourist guides. Now, he knew, it was all but forgotten.

Some twenty-five years earlier, Liberty Base had been established in a remote part of the eastern mainland's northern shore. There wasn't a large population around the immediate vicinity of the base and even if there had been, the people of these parts would not be inclined to investigate what might be going on there. IF they were even aware of it.

Scarlet doubted there was even a Spectrum facility around there.

Still following Colonel White's instructions, Captain Scarlet brought the SPJ at low altitude over the one-time rebel base. Looking through the canopy, the place indeed seemed abandoned. It was in a sorry enough state, the Spectrum officer

observed. But still, he also noticed that the ruined look of it was due only to neglect and by the normal flow of time.

"Not looking too bad after all these years, eh?" Scarlet said, addressing Colonel White. "Do you see any trace of bombing down there?"

"What are you driving at?" White mumbled, keeping his gun on the Spectrum officer, and yet casting a glance at the ground below them.

"According to what you were telling us on Cloudbase, you arrived too late to save the people of that base, twenty-five years ago..." He nodded toward the base. "I know it wasn't the case. And I think what you can now see of the state of this place would tend to prove I told you the truth earlier."

White didn't answer. Obviously, the captain was right. Although in an apparent state of abandonment, the base didn't seem to have suffered any military strike of any kind, be it recent or dating back several years. The kind of attack he remembered would have left its mark even twenty-five years later.

Still, it didn't prove anything.

"Where's the *Drake*?" Scarlet asked him.

"Over there." White pointed toward the dock. Alongside the pier, Scarlet could see a bulky frame, covered with what looked like diffused lighting camouflage. It could have passed for an otherwise abandoned ship, all covered with rust and greenish decay.

Absorbed by his observation of the hidden destroyer, the Spectrum captain felt a swift tap on his right upper-arm. He turned his head in that direction to see the barrel of his gun, still pointed at him. White nodded toward a specific location, down on the ground. "Sweep over the runway there," he instructed. "Then bring this jet down."

Scarlet nodded in turn, acknowledging the order. He pushed the control column forward toward the runway and made the jet sweep slowly over it. Carefully, he scrutinised the runway's surface. It was damaged, full of holes and bumps, produced by time, but still, good enough for a safe landing. He put his craft into landing position.

SPJ C31 touched down without a flaw on the bumpy runway. Captain Scarlet killed the engines before turning to his passenger.

If Colonel White seemed rather pleased by the landing, it was also obvious to Scarlet that he seemed somehow annoyed. He was looking through the canopy, all around the surrounding grounds, with expectation in his blue eyes. He didn't seem to see

anything he could be waiting for. Scarlet looked too, searching. He knew what his commander was expecting.

But the runway appeared to stay as deserted as before the landing.

"No welcoming committee, it seems," Scarlet noted quietly.

"Let's get out of this plane," White replied rather harshly.

He extracted himself from his seat and with the gun, motioned Scarlet to do the same. He walked behind his prisoner toward the hatch leading out of the craft. Scarlet followed instructions and pressed down the button to open the door. Moments later, the two of them were carefully stepping out of the SPJ, looking around for somebody to come greeting them. In one way or another.

Nobody showed up. The only sounds the two men could hear were the wind, blowing over the surface of the runway and between the many buildings they could see around them, and the rush of the nearby tide.

If not for the presence of the *Sir Francis Drake* they had seen earlier, there would have been no indication that anybody had come to this place for quite some time.

"Looks like a bloody ghost town," White mumbled, his weapon carefully still aimed at Scarlet, his eyes scanning around. "Why isn't anybody coming? They must have seen us..."

"They must, certainly," Scarlet concurred. "Maybe they're waiting for a better opportunity to surprise us..." He scrutinized his commander. "There's Mysterons among them. I've learned to expect anything from Mysterons... They have the knack of appearing when and where you don't expect them."

"Still with those Martians of yours?" White mocked the captain with evident sarcasm.

"Don't take them too lightly, sir," Scarlet advised him. "They're quite lethal."

"So you say." White shook his head. "Well, whatever those Mysterons are, if they won't come to us, we'll go to them. They certainly MUST be near the *Drake*, or, at the very least, won't have left the ship unguarded." He pointed toward the construction in front of which the SPJ had stopped. "The harbour is on the other side of this hangar. If I remember correctly, there's a direct access through it."

"How long since you came here last, sir?" Scarlet asked him.

"Many years, I'm afraid," White responded.

"I've been here twice," Scarlet said. "My father brought me here for a visit when I was eleven. I came back when I was studying British military history..." He shook his head. "It's changed a lot."

White had to agree. The place didn't look at all as he remembered it.

But then again, he couldn't really count on his memory.

"Let's go, Captain," he instructed the Spectrum officer, indicating the hangar.

"Aren't you afraid we'll walk right into a trap?" Scarlet remarked.

"If I am to consider what you have told me, do you really think those people will kill me... after all the trouble they went through to get me?"

Scarlet considered this a moment; he couldn't think of a good enough answer. It was easily evident to Colonel White that he had made his point. He urged his captive to walk toward the hangar and followed close behind, still keeping him in check with the gun.

The access door to the hangar wasn't locked; the two men had only to push it in order to enter. They found themselves inside a very large, almost empty room, in a very sorry state. The concrete floor was all covered with dirt, oil stains, and debris. The roof was heavily damaged, with many large holes which let enough sunlight enter to light the place. Rusted pipes running along the roof were broken and leaking muddy water. A very strong smell of fuel mixed with damp was present all over the place.

On the facing wall at the other end of the hangar, a garage door was wide open and the two officers could easily see the harbour beyond it. Right in front of that door, in the middle of the hangar, stood a transport helicopter and a heavy-duty fork-lift truck.

But still nobody in view.

This is getting unnerving, Scarlet thought. And a quick look in the colonel's direction informed him that the older man was feeling more-or-less the same.

Carefully, the two men approached the craft. Scarlet moved to investigate it. As he yearned to understand more of this strange situation he was involved in, Colonel White was keeping the captain on a long leash, confident that he would not try to escape him or make any wrong move toward him. However, just to be on the safe side, he was keeping a close eye on him and his finger on the trigger of his weapon.

On the side of the helicopter, the words '*Campbell Air Transport Co.*' was written in big black lettering. Through the canopy, Scarlet took a look inside the cockpit. Then, he walked around and went to slide open the cargo door. There was nothing to be found inside. He looked toward White. The latter nodded.

"Obviously," he said, "this helicopter would be the one stolen from that private airport near Bristol."

"Obviously," Scarlet repeated. He closed the door, sighing. "Right. So, the torpedoes are here, all right. With the *Drake*. Everything's falling into place. Except that we still don't know who the Mysterons' intended target may be." He gave a suspicious look toward Colonel White. "That is... SPECTRUM doesn't know. What about YOU, sir?"

White frowned. "What about ME?"

"You didn't tell us where we would find the *Drake*," Scarlet noted accusingly. "Is there anything else you didn't care to tell us?"

Colonel White couldn't believe his ears. His eyes flashing with anger, he stepped threateningly toward Captain Scarlet. "How many times do I have to tell you that I don't know ANYTHING about ANYONE being the target of those so-called terrorists you keep referring to!"

"How can I be sure you're not lying to me?" Scarlet asked coldly, without flinching away.

"You arrogant son of a..." White choked the last part of his insult in a loud grumble. "How can you imply such an incriminating accusation against me? It's one thing to withhold information on where my ship was hidden, but to endanger an innocent life..."

"Forgive me for being blunt, sir," Scarlet replied, not changing his tone, "but you have to admit that I don't have any reason to..."

He stopped suddenly. A wave of nausea suddenly hit him and made him sway; he reached for the helicopter fuselage to keep his balance.

White watched as the young man's face became very pale and slick with sweat.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, concerned that the Spectrum officer might be trying some trick to deceive him and take him by surprise. "You look ill, or something..."

"I'm not ill." Scarlet put a hand to his pounding head. He knew the symptoms all too well. That could mean only one thing. "There's Mysterons around..."

Colonel White was about to vehemently admonish the young man, when he stopped dead; there was something in Scarlet's weary tone that made him realize that there really was something serious in what he was presently telling him. Before he could voice his concern, however, a faint sound from behind him caught his good ear. He sprang around, his gun at the ready; he found himself face to face with a man, dressed in complete commando

attire, who had suddenly appeared from behind the helicopter. The man was himself keeping a pistol aimed at White.

"Don't move!" he barked in an authoritative voice.

White hesitated, as he recognized the man now threatening him as being Brighton, one of those who had closely worked with him on recovering the *Drake*.

Captain Scarlet was mortified. That he had let himself and Colonel White be surprised that way was embarrassing enough – especially considering that he already knew there were enemies around, waiting to attack them. Now he understood they were in deep danger, much more than he had anticipated when he had suggested this mission. There was now a gun aimed at Colonel White, and the man holding this gun could fire at any moment. The British captain had not made all these efforts until now just to see his commander murdered before his eyes.

He did not have the time to make a move. From behind him, he felt the presence of another commando suddenly stepping out in view, coming from the other side of the transporter. *Where are THEY coming from, anyway?* Scarlet mused inwardly. His reaction was too slow to prevent the barrel of a big rifle to come into contact with his spine, making him freeze instantly.

"You heard the man, Spectrum. Don't do anything foolish, and keep your hands up!"

There was no alternative left. Groaning, Scarlet obeyed passively.

Colonel White was relieved of his gun by the first man; upon hearing the voice of the other man, he turned his head in his direction. The captain saw the confused surprise on his commander's face as he looked upon the face of the commando keeping Scarlet in check.

"Dear God, Dempsey!"

Scarlet shivered. *Dempsey*. The man he had discovered dead at the complex, with a face reduced to a pulp and a bullet in his head... He looked over his shoulder, to peer right into the same but unscathed face, which was looking back at him with that cold, unfeeling stare the Spectrum captain knew well.

So, this fellow behind him was the *Mysteron* whose presence he had just felt.

"Glad to see you found your way back to us, Admiral," Dempsey was saying to White. "And it seems you have brought with you one of those Spectrum scum."

"You lied to me!" With that cry of outrage and fury, Colonel White, ignoring the threat of the two commandos' guns, walked determinedly toward Scarlet, to catch him by his uniform collar.

The surprised captain could see his commander's face was livid with anger and his knuckles were white.

"You're a damned liar!" White literally spat in his face. "You did nothing but try to manipulate me with your stories!"

"I never lied to you," Scarlet protested vehemently.

"Shut up!" White barked savagely, brutally pushing the younger man against the helicopter behind him. "I won't hear anymore!"

Scarlet blanched. That the Mysterons would have replicated Dempsey wasn't something he had anticipated at all, when he had instigated this mission. If Captain Blue had suspected anything of the sort, he would never have agreed with it. And it was most probable that Scarlet would not even have considered risking the life of Colonel White in this adventure under these circumstances.

Now it was too late to go back. And with these new developments, it could prove a very uncomfortable situation.

Even a lethal one.

Dempsey was looking at the scene with some sort of perplexed satisfaction. It was obvious he had a clear understanding of what was presently happening. *Like a tiger who's found a tethered goat*, Scarlet thought, giving the Mysteron a murderous sideways look.

As for Brighton, who had come closer, he seemed at the same time suspicious and doubtful of what was going on. His gun was still aimed at White.

"What about Dempsey?" the latter pursued, addressing Scarlet roughly. "How can you explain his presence here? You told me he was dead!"

"Dead?" Dempsey scoffed and gave a devious grin. "I can assure you, sir," he told White, "I'm far from dead. In fact, I've never been more alive..."

I bet, a bitter Captain Scarlet mused inwardly. Mysteron or man, by the look of evil contentment obvious in his features, Dempsey was still the same scum.

You think you hold all the cards, right now... but I'm not out of aces yet.

Although he had to admit, trying to prove himself to White would be tremendous trouble.

"I saw him dead," Scarlet insisted, staring implacably at Dempsey. "THIS is not the same man." He looked back into Colonel White's eyes. "This Dempsey is a Mysteron."

"Enough!" White shot at him. "How can you still try that with me? You try to pass yourself off as a friend... You played with my mind!"

"I did nothing like that, sir."

"You disgust me. I could just... kill you."

Unwillingly, Scarlet shuddered. He could see, by the fever in his eyes, that the Spectrum commander was on the brink of losing it again. *I'm in deep trouble*, he realised. Looking into the cold blue eyes fixed on him, he had the very disturbing feeling that he had lost his commander's trust and that he would never be able to regain it. Not before the irreparable would have been committed.

Considering his particular state, Scarlet wasn't afraid to be shot and killed, but to think that Colonel White could be the one to pull the trigger... He wondered what it would imply for his commander's psyche. Could it demonstrate somehow that there was no way for him to come back now? If he were able to kill one of his own officers in cold blood – even Scarlet, not knowing about his virtual indestructibility for now – could there really be a way to save him after that?

Was there still, NOW?

"It may be a trick," he heard the voice of the other commando, Brighton, say with concern. "These two are playing us for fools."

"Don't you trust the admiral, Brighton?" Dempsey replied unemotionally. "He's our commander, after all..."

"No, he's not!" Scarlet shot at the Mysteron agent with righteous anger.

For that, he violently received the butt of the rifle in the stomach. Grunting in pain, he sank to his hands and knees, gasping for air.

Colonel White released him, and turned toward Dempsey with a look of disapproval. "Stop that!"

Hope renewed in Scarlet's heart, at the sound of those words.

"What's the matter, Admiral?" Brighton suddenly asked, on the defensive, still concerned about what the brainwashed Spectrum commander could do. From where he was, Scarlet could see his finger playing nervously with the trigger of his gun. It wouldn't take much for him to let loose. "Want to protect that one? Like you did the girl?"

"What did they do to you, sir?" Dempsey asked in turn, very quietly. "Tried to turn you against us?"

"He's with Spectrum, I tell you," Brighton insisted between his teeth.

"I'm not," White replied dryly.

"We can't trust him," Brighton added, not hearing the older man out. "He's too unstable. We don't know what he might do next. He's been that way since that *Dream Spinner* treatment..."

Still on his knees, Scarlet was still trying to overcome the pain in his stomach. "Yes, YOU did a good job on him, didn't you?" he said, under a laboured breath. That caught White's attention. Holding his aching stomach, Scarlet gave a quick nod toward

Dempsey. "Look at him, sir," he said forcing every word out of his mouth. "Look at his face. You hammered into that face with your bare fists... Does it show now?"

"Get up, you bastard!" Brighton caught hold of Scarlet's collar and brutally dragged him to his feet. Still incapacitated, and since Dempsey's rifle was still on him, the captain did not resist. He collided against the helicopter's surface one more time and was kept in check there by the two armed men standing on either side of him. His eyes were still riveted on his confused and doubtful commander.

"Does he have the faintest mark of beating on his face, sir?" Scarlet continued quickly, trying to ignore the threat of the guns. "He's not the same man, I tell you!"

White averted his eyes, hesitantly, not wanting to look into the distress he could see in those of the young captain; he didn't want to run the risk of believing him and trusting him again.

The hesitation in him didn't go unnoticed by Brighton.

"I tell you he can't be trusted!" he snarled. "We don't need him for the rest of the mission. Mister Shelby said so himself."

"And what would you want us to do with him, kill him?"

Dempsey's mocking tone rang absolutely false to Scarlet's ears. That one was up to something.

"We can't do that," Dempsey continued. "After all, he's one of us... We don't treat our own this way. And you're wrong. He may still prove useful."

"He's also right," White replied frowning. "I'm unstable. I can't be trusted. I can't even trust myself."

"Then I may have a way for you to prove yourself, Admiral."

Dempsey took Scarlet's gun that Brighton had tucked into his belt. Before the other man could stop him, he threw the weapon at a surprised Colonel White, who caught it on the fly.

"What are you doing?" Brighton shouted to the Mysteron agent.

"Proving to the admiral that I trust him." Dempsey's tone then became very cold, as he continued, pressing his own weapon against Scarlet's side. "Now prove we can trust you, sir. Kill him."

"What?" murmured a dumbfounded White, frowning deeply.

"Kill that Spectrum officer," Dempsey explained. "Then we'll know you're really on our side."

A half-angry, half-concerned Captain Scarlet was staring straight at his commander, who was looking at the gun he was handling as if it was the first one he had held in his life.

White took a few steps back, uncertain. He shook his head. "I can't kill an unarmed man," he declared.

"You don't know how many times he has done that himself!" Dempsey growled harshly. "He would not hesitate, if the circumstances were the other way around!"

"Colonel White, don't listen to him!" Scarlet called out in desperation.

He felt the barrel of Brighton's gun being thrust against his right side, trying to intimidate him into staying silent. It didn't work.

"I tell you, he's a Mysteron," Scarlet finished.

White gave him a cold glance. "I'm not your colonel." He raised the gun and aimed it at Scarlet. "And he DOESN'T look like a zombie to me," he added in a sinister tone.

Scarlet went cold inside, when he saw the dark eye of the gun aimed at him.

"All right, then" he murmured, in as quiet a voice as he could produce. "Kill me. If that's what it takes to prove to you I'm telling the truth, do it then. Pull the trigger. I just pray that it won't prove that you are now beyond any help."

Still trying, Charles Gray noted. It was amazing to see how this young man's determination wasn't allowing him to give up. Even in this desperate situation. He was about to die, and yet he didn't want to let go. How tragic. Such a man would have been so precious for the cause.

He took careful aim. *The heart. He doesn't have to suffer needlessly. I can at least give that to him.* And he was looking at the weapon so calmly, waiting for death to claim his life. White couldn't help but be impressed by the Spectrum officer's courageous attitude. The same couldn't be said for Brighton, as the man was carefully stepping aside, as if uncertain that Colonel White's aim was reliable.

Seconds passed, but Colonel White's finger was still hesitant to pull the trigger. *Come on, old man... Do it! It wouldn't be the first time... It's not so difficult... Remember Bennett. You didn't hesitate to kill that creep, right?*

No. He didn't kill Jackson Bennett. According to those Spectrum officers, the gunshot was accidental. And Bennett was left in the care of the *Drake* onboard medic. His life was saved.

Was that true?

"He won't do it," Brighton hissed between his teeth. "He will turn against us..."

"We're waiting, Admiral," Dempsey called to White insistently. "Prove your allegiance to the cause. Kill him. Now."

"Colonel, please reconsider." Scarlet was trying again to call upon White's conscience. He felt more closely the barrel of the rifle against his side. *Great*, he thought gloomily, clenching his teeth. *If it's not by Colonel White's hand that I'll be shot, it will be by that one...*

Charles Gray was still hesitant. If he had not killed Jackson Bennett, who had murdered his father and for whom he felt the most profound disgust, how in Heaven's name could he pull the trigger on THIS man?

Of course, as far as Gray knew, he was an enemy. A very dangerous and resourceful one. Too dangerous to keep unchecked. Enemies of war were meant to oppose each other. There could be no place for feelings of guilt, or remorse, when it came to killing an enemy. The former admiral was aware that he was also still bitterly suffering the intense feelings he had experienced from the discovery that the captain had lied to him, and tried to deceive him. But was this enough to warrant executing him like that, without any form of judgement? Despite all that stood between them, he felt somehow sympathetic toward the Spectrum officer. And still, there was that lingering feeling that he, indeed, knew him, far better than he could remember.

What if, after all, there was the slightest chance that Captain Scarlet had told him the actual truth?

"What are you waiting for, Admiral?"

That deep voice addressing him brought Colonel White out of his temporary trance. It was Dempsey's. The true nature of the commando, whom he knew as definite scum, came back to his mind. That was not somebody he would like to be associated with or compared to. And this creep was demanding, very insistently, the Spectrum officer's death.

All the previous considerations were put aside. Executing the prisoner now would only demonstrate that he, Charles Gray, was no better than Jackson Bennett himself.

He lowered his gun and then, threw it decidedly at his feet. "I'm sorry," he said, in as firm a voice as he could produce. "I'm not a cold blooded murderer."

He saw the relief on Captain Scarlet's face. He could see no expression on Dempsey's. The commando's eyes were still cold and seemingly unfeeling as he stared at him.

"Then I suppose that you have outlived your usefulness, *Earthman*."

The name made Gray blink in surprise. He froze.

"I told you he would turn against us!"

Everything suddenly happened very quickly, almost all at once. With those words he had just pronounced, Brighton raised his gun and took aim at a startled Colonel White. A first shot was fired and Captain Scarlet saw his commander instantly dropping to the ground. Seeing that Brighton was about to fire again, the Spectrum captain became blatantly oblivious to the rifle directed at him and jumped at Brighton's gun, bringing it close to the commando's body. A second shot made itself heard, almost drowned out by two consecutive, more powerful detonations. Dempsey had coldly discharged his rifle into the officer's back. Scarlet felt a searing pain tear into him; with a cry of pain, he fell to the ground, almost on top of Brighton. He nearly didn't hear a series of gunshots ringing out over the echo of the rifle shots.

Consumed by the sudden pain, Scarlet was lying on his side, his eyes toward the Mysteron agent whom he saw being violently pushed back against the helicopter's shell, as if he had been hit by a strong impact. The bewildered Spectrum officer saw him slide to the floor, his weapon slipping from his hands, and his chest literally riddled with bullets. When he reached the floor, Mysteron agent Jonathan Dempsey was dead.

A faint sound caught Scarlet's ears; fighting both pain and the unconsciousness threatening to claim him, he uneasily turned his attention in the direction of that sound. Through a confused daze, he saw that Colonel White was slowly getting to his feet. He had in his right hand the red-coloured gun he had dropped earlier; a greyish-white smoke was coming out of the barrel.

Quickly, White strode toward the downed officer and crouched beside him. He cringed, seeing the blood covering his back, where the bullets had hit him. There was an exit wound on the right side of his torso, bleeding profusely.

"Captain..."

Scarlet's eyelids fluttered. Struggling to stay awake and to disperse both the pain and the fog in his mind, he looked up at his commander. "You're all right..." he observed with a note of puzzlement in his voice.

White nodded sadly. "I ducked the instant I saw Brighton levelling his gun at me. The bullet didn't even graze me. I don't have a scratch. But you..."

"I'll be all right..." Even without hearing the obvious pain in Scarlet's voice, Colonel White would not have believed him. He had seen enough injuries in his time to know that the wounds the captain was suffering from were severe enough. Nevertheless, he

was quite astounded to see him trying to raise himself on one elbow.

"Don't try to move," he dictated him, gently pushing him back to his previous place. "Keep quiet, Captain..."

Scarlet nodded. He grunted, biting his lip, closing his eyes for a moment; the pain was nearly intolerable.

"The others...?" he asked, staring at the colonel.

White looked around. Dempsey was half sprawled against the helicopter; not far from there, Brighton laid, his eyes wide open, a bleeding hole in his chest.

"Both dead," White declared. "I killed that scum Dempsey. Too late to stop him from shooting you in the back, I'm sorry to say... Brighton..."

"I turned his gun against him."

Scarlet gave another groan of pain. White twitched uncomfortably; he couldn't help but feel responsible for what had happened to the young officer.

"You can't stay here," Scarlet stated, panting, as quickly as he could. "The shots will draw the others... They mustn't find you. Leave now..."

White gave him a hard enough look. "If you think I'll leave you here, hurt as you are... You're wrong, soldier! You're coming with me." He knelt, and tried to raise the wounded captain, but the latter caught hold of his arm. Strangely, the colonel noticed, the man's grip was still strong enough.

"I CAN'T follow you!" Scarlet said between clenched teeth.

"Then I'll CARRY you," White insisted roughly. "I won't leave one of my men behind to get myself to safety." He hesitated, before adding, with less edge to his tone, "And you are one of my men, aren't you, Captain?"

Scarlet tried to focus on what the colonel was now trying to tell him, if still with some uncertainty. He gave a nod of acknowledgment, swallowing hard under the growing pain. "I am, sir."

"Then let's get the hell out of here together."

Colonel White leaned again to help the wounded man to his feet. That was when he heard the sudden rushing sound of running feet. Raising his head, and looking all around, he saw several men entering the hangar, from different entrances. In an instant, he realised that they would not be able to get out of there, to get back to the SPJ and escape. They were trapped. His hand curled around the butt of his gun, as he felt tempted to use it to

defend his life and that of the man lying there, bleeding. He gave him an interrogative gaze. Notwithstanding the obvious pain he was in, Scarlet coolly evaluated the situation they were in and stared back at White, shaking his head in negation.

"Don't try it," he whispered. "It'll be foolish."

Colonel White gave a submissive nod. He had come to the same conclusion. As the men came closer to surround them, he slowly raised his hands, staying on his knees, and presented his weapon, his finger off the trigger, to clearly indicate his surrender. The pistol was roughly snatched from his hand, and he felt the barrel of a gun pressed against his head. He heard several weapons being armed loudly, and then aimed at him and his injured companion.

We're dead, was the gloomy thought imposing itself in his mind.

And he had nobody to blame but himself.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a hand, in a slow and composed gesture, pushing away the gun pressed to his head. The owner of that hand stepped in close to him, standing tall, obviously waiting. White raised his head.

He saw the very quiet and cold features of Lieutenant-Commander Jason Shelby, looking down at him.

A chill ran up Colonel White's spine as he realised that Shelby's look was now very similar to that of Jonathan Dempsey. He found himself even more unsettled, when the man gave him a fiendish grin, and spoke to him in a voice as icy as the grave.

"Nice to have you back with us, Admiral..."

Chapter 13

Lieutenant Green was standing in the hallway, waiting for the door in front of him to open. He was nervous enough, dancing from one foot to another, and was wondering now if it wasn't too reckless on his part to have accepted this mission from Captains Scarlet and Blue.

Get a hold of yourself, Seymour! he admonished himself. They didn't force you to do this. You volunteered!

Me and my big mouth...

Of course, he HAD to do something. He wanted to help. He couldn't let his superior officers down. More importantly, he couldn't let Colonel White down.

When Captain Scarlet had revealed his plan to Captains Blue and Magenta, in front of him, Green could see that the blond American officer was not totally convinced, after hearing his partner out, that he would indeed follow him in this. Scarlet's plan was even more dangerous than he had anticipated. Both for Scarlet AND for Colonel White. And, as Scarlet had said, it was somehow a bit improper... It meant, quite bluntly, using the colonel. Something Blue wasn't so sure was a good idea. But then, Green had asked to speak his mind. And to Blue's utmost surprise, he had sided with Captain Scarlet, approving of his plan.

"I agree with Captain Scarlet," Green had said with assurance. "We should give the colonel the benefit of the doubt. And an even chance to prove himself."

"And if he doesn't," Blue had noted, still doubtful, "you'd be ready to see us use him so we can resolve this whole affair, Lieutenant?"

"Maybe then, it will make him finally see the truth. The way I see it, sir... it can only help him."

Blue had stared intensely at the communications officer. Of all of them, Lieutenant Green was the one who worked closest with Colonel White. Captain Blue knew that the two of them had grown close to each other, despite the fact that, in the beginning, the colonel hadn't been too sure about having such a young man as his aide and communications officer. By the colonel's standards, Green was only a kid. But he was such a talented young man, and had already accomplished so much in his short career... Colonel White had had to remind himself that he, too, had to fend off the critics of his elders, especially when, at the early age of twenty-

nine, he had become the youngest commander of a warship in the British Navy.

As for Green, he would have done ANYTHING for his colonel. His opinion weighed heavily against Blue's hesitation. Blue gave up, and agreed to Scarlet's plan.

Green had seen Colonel White shortly after his arrival on Cloudbase. It had pained him, and saddened him, to see him so feverish, and delirious, as Doctor Fawn tended to him. He had felt rather distraught, especially when he had learned what exactly had happened to him, with the *Dream Spinner* treatment and the rest... He couldn't help a shiver running down his spine, thinking of it now. And the way the colonel had acted during this whole affair... It wasn't like him at all. Not what Lieutenant Green knew of him, anyway.

Anger was boiling inside the young communications officer's heart. Those who had done this to his commander could not be allowed to go free. Scarlet's plan had also the merit of probably locating them, along with helping Colonel White to shake off this condition he was in.

So Green agreed to do anything that would be asked of him, in order for the plan to succeed.

He didn't count on having to be the one to greet Special Agent Conners on Cloudbase.

All things considered, the young man thought gloomily, *I would rather be in Captain Scarlet's place...*

The door of the SPJ docking bay opened and Green straightened up. Martin Conners walked in quickly. Green had encountered him a couple of times. Notably, when the Intelligence man had been sent, along with his superior, Thomas Wade, to investigate Captain Scarlet, after the first encounter with the Mysterons – during which Scarlet had kidnapped World President Younger. Conners had struck Green as a rather despicable character. Colonel White didn't like him at all, and especially was appalled by the way he kept tearing at the British captain. The Spectrum commander had interceded on Scarlet's behalf, stopping Conners' overzealous actions, and reporting him to Wade.

Conners certainly didn't take this too kindly. If he was waiting for an occasion to get his revenge against White, now could be the time.

IF he suspected anything.

"Welcome to Cloudbase, Mister Conners," Green greeted the newcomer.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Green." Rudely, Conners didn't extend his hand to the younger man. *Just as well*, thought Green. *I won't have to shake hands with that creep...*

"I was dispatched to take you to the Control Room upon your arrival here, sir," Green continued quietly. "If you'd care to come with me..." He motioned Conners to follow his lead toward the elevator, some few metres behind them. Conners nodded to the young Black man and walked with him. They entered the elevator and the door closed behind them.

"I take it Colonel White is able to see me right away, Lieutenant?" Conners asked.

"Not exactly, sir..." Green had carefully prepared his answer, so he could get it out as he had been instructed. "Colonel White is unavailable right now."

"Unavailable?" Conners repeated. There was some kind of distracted tone in Conners' voice that made Green wonder what was on his mind exactly. The man from Intelligence paused a second. "Who's going to receive me, then? Captain Scarlet?" The tone was now openly mocking. Almost loathing. It was obvious, Conners didn't like Scarlet at all.

The door slid open and the two men stepped out, directing their steps towards the green door leading to the Control Room.

"Captain Scarlet is also unavailable, Mister Conners," Green said quietly.

"Ah!" They stopped in front of the door, and a seemingly still unsurprised Conners turned to Green. He had one of those deceitful smiles on his face. "Then it will be Captain Blue," he decided, matter-of-factly.

Green hesitated, pushing the button to open the door. "Not exactly, sir..."

The door slid open and Conners turned toward the opening. A few feet from him, in the middle of the now stationary walkway, a tall man with dark hair, and a grin going from one ear to the other, was looking straight at him, apparently waiting.

"Mister Conners," Lieutenant Green said with a smile of his own, "you know Captain Magenta, I presume?"

* * *

Captain Blue pushed aside the metal plate covering the entrance to the hidden storage compartment situated inside the SPJ passenger cabin area. He looked around, making sure that there was nobody around. The jet was empty, Captain Scarlet and Colonel White having left it some minutes ago. *So far, so good*, he mused. The Spectrum commander had not suspected his presence at all.

From where he was hidden, Blue had heard some of the commotion inside the cockpit. As Scarlet had predicted, Colonel White had taken advantage of the situation to try to escape Spectrum and rejoin those he thought were his men. The mere thought was uncomfortable enough for the American captain. Deep down, he had hoped, without really believing it, that his commander would not do so. That he would prove himself worthy of trust, stay true to his word, and not try to escape. But for all his unpredictability, he had acted exactly as expected. Even though he was deeply disappointed, Blue knew it was only logical for White to do this. White had brought them to the *Sir Francis Drake*, the Mysterons, and those men from the 'Network'. They were hidden in Liberty Base, of all places. That was quite cunning. Of course, that shouldn't come as such a surprise. The Mysterons were known for their cunning.

Or maybe it was Colonel White's own idea... That would be just like him to pull something like that.

That detail didn't matter much right now. Blue knew that he and Scarlet had to follow the intended plan. They were to use the advantage provided by this new development to discover the Mysterons' present objective and to put an end to it. And, at the same time, if they were lucky, they would find out more about this 'Network' that had captured and transformed their commander into this ruthless enemy they had to deal with.

Blue carefully looked around. There was nobody in the jet, save himself. He had heard Scarlet and White leave, some minutes ago; following the plan, Blue had waited before coming out of hiding. Now he extracted himself from the cramped compartment, carefully keeping his head down, and his gun in hand. He took another look around, and saw Scarlet's cap lying near the cockpit entrance. Predictable. White had deprived his 'prisoner' of his means of communication with Spectrum. Blue entered the cockpit; he found the radio, damaged beyond repair, and what looked like pieces of a crushed SPT, on the floor. The colonel had done a thorough job.

Not so thorough as he might think, Blue added to himself with glum satisfaction.

The exit hatch had been left open. Keeping out of view, Blue inspected the area; the abandoned runway on which the SPJ had landed was completely deserted. Like Scarlet and White before him, Blue found this rather strange. And also unnerving. There was no way the jet could have stayed completely unnoticed.

Scarlet and White were also out of view. *Where can they be?* Blue mused. *They can't be very far...* He was hoping that his partner would be careful; he was responsible for White's security,

during this operation. If anything should go wrong and the Spectrum commander were to be hurt...

Blue jumped out of the craft. Swiftly, using as much cover from the shadows as he could, and looking around frequently, he made his way toward the nearest construction – a hangar in front of which the SPJ had stopped. He kept himself against the wall. Still no one in view. That was certainly creepy.

Better start having a look around, Blue reasoned. Find Paul and the colonel. And then to see what's going on here. Then, he'd have to contact Spectrum...

Blue was starting to move along the wall toward the door, about five metres away on his left, when he heard several gunshots, from within the hangar itself. He froze on the spot. Voices caught his ears, along with fast footsteps. Somebody was coming his way. Quickly, Blue ran toward a big heap of discarded mechanical parts not far from him. He slipped behind, into the shadows, keeping his pistol ready for use.

He hid just in time. A team of armed commandos were turning the corner of the hangar; two of them quickly charged into the building, while the two other sprinted toward the SPJ that Blue had just left, and entered it, rifles in hand. Blue kept quiet, following the men's progress with his eyes.

Looking frequently around, he then quickly and carefully moved toward the door. It was half-open; he stole a glance inside, but from where he was, he could only see a big helicopter – a transporter – standing right in the middle of the very large hangar. He could also see several armed men and could hear voices, although he could not make out what was being said.

He couldn't see more, but he was about certain this entire ruckus could only be for Scarlet and White. He was worried. They could very well be in trouble. *I've got to help*, Blue decided. *But how?*

Entering by this door was out of the question; he would be too much in the open and would be seen instantly by those guys inside. He would not be able to be of much help if he were to be killed upon entering. *I've got to find another way in*, he told himself.

He checked over his shoulder toward the SPJ. In any case, if he were to stay there, he would soon be discovered. So he had to make his move. Quietly, after a last regretful look inside, he turned away from the door, and, following the wall, went in search for another, safer entrance...

* * *

"Dempsey's dead, sir."

With eyes as cold and expressionless as the grave, Lieutenant-Commander Jason Shelby glanced at the commando who had crouched next to Dempsey to check on him. At his left, another man made almost the same announcement. "Brighton is too, sir. A bullet right through the heart."

Shelby walked quietly toward Captain Scarlet, lying on the floor; former Admiral Charles Gray – Colonel White – was keeping his head elevated, and was pressing a bloody handkerchief on the wound in his chest, trying to keep him from bleeding too much.

"This one's still alive, it seems," Shelby coldly remarked. White gave him a hostile look. He ignored it. "What happened here?" he asked, gesturing toward the two dead men. "That's quite a mess... Are you responsible for this, Admiral? Did you kill those men?"

"I killed them," Captain Scarlet replied quickly, in a cracked voice, filled with pain, before his commander could utter a single word.

White stared down at him, dumbfounded that the Spectrum officer was still intent on protecting him, by trying to minimise his involvement in what had occurred. And he was doing so by putting his own life on the line, yet again, not withstanding the fact that the man he was attempting to save from harm had been disloyal to him.

White wondered if it was even worth the effort, especially when he heard Shelby's next, sarcastic remark: "Really, now? How did it happen, then? We saw your arrival here. We saw that you seemed to be the admiral's prisoner when you entered this hangar. I thought Dempsey and Brighton would be more than sufficient to investigate and make sure it wasn't a trick by Spectrum. I wonder... The admiral had the gun - how did YOU get your hands on it?"

Scarlet didn't answer this time; he had trouble keeping himself conscious and focused; he was in too much pain and felt so weak. He could barely keep his eyes open.

"How are you doing, Captain?" Colonel White asked him with concern.

The wounded captain was making a supreme effort to suppress the thick cloud his mind was inexorably diving into. The pain made it difficult to concentrate. Each breath was an agony for him. "Hurts... like hell," he muttered, his voice trailing away.

It was so weak White hardly heard him. He swallowed hard; he definitely felt guilty about what had happened; he could see the young man was drifting into a state of semi-consciousness. "I

know, son. I'm sorry," he told him in an encouraging tone. "Just hang on."

Scarlet answered with a faint nod. He bit his lip, gave a muffled grunt, and closed his eyes.

"Captain?" White called out to him. Scarlet was obviously alive; the colonel could feel still his heartbeat under the hand he was pressing on his wound; he could hear his laboured breathing. But already, the captain was too far gone into unconsciousness to answer coherently; White heard nothing but a very faint groan.

"Was there anyone else with you, Captain?" Shelby asked roughly. "Is Spectrum nearby, getting ready to attack?"

"He can't hear you," White dryly answered. "Are you too blind to see how badly he's been hurt?"

"If that's a problem," Shelby replied coldly, "it can easily be solved." He turned toward the commando nearest to him. "Finish him off."

"No!" White snapped angrily, even as the man was levelling his gun. Shelby motioned him to wait.

"Then maybe you'd better tell us yourself what we want to know, sir," he continued evenly, addressing White.

"Nobody was with us," White countered. "We came alone."

"Just the two of you?"

"Yes. I took advantage of the fact that we were on that plane alone to divert it and escape from Spectrum."

"Taking that officer as a hostage?"

"Yes."

"And you came here. You brought Spectrum here."

"Spectrum doesn't have the slightest idea where we are. They must have noticed our disappearance by now, though."

"You didn't give our location to Spectrum, then?"

"No. I didn't betray you." *But I betrayed HIM*, Colonel White inwardly added with bitterness, looking down at the apparently unconscious man he was tending to.

"Is that true, now?" Shelby quietly said. "We shall see..." He took his pocket radio and made a call to the team investigating the SPJ presently parked on the runway. He asked for their immediate report on what they had found so far.

"*The onboard radio has been destroyed, sir,*" came the reply from the radio. "*We also found a Spectrum officer's radiocap lying in the passenger cabin...*"

"Any trace that somebody else was travelling in that jet beside the admiral and the Spectrum officer?" Shelby asked.

"*As far as we can tell, no. We're still searching.*"

“Do that.”

Colonel White met the eyes of the Mysteron agent, who, still very calmly, was now changing the channel on his radio to make another call.

“Shelby to Drake... Does the radar screen show any trace of suspect craft or ships cruising around here?”

“Darrow here,” came another voice from the radio. *“Nothing to report, sir, aside from usual air or sea traffic. Sonar is also all quiet.”*

“So nobody is on to us,” Shelby mused, staring straight at White. “It seems you told the truth, Admiral.”

“I just received a report from our man in Edinburgh, sir,” the voice of Darrow continued. *“We have an unexpected development.”*

“Go ahead.”

“Our objective’s departure has been brought forward. Instead of leaving tomorrow morning, it will leave port this afternoon, around one o’clock.”

White pricked up his ears. *Objective? Leaving port from Edinburgh?* Could it be they were referring to that ‘crowned head’ that Captains Scarlet and Blue had told him about? The target those Mysterons wanted to destroy?

Yes... That must be it. He himself wasn’t aware what the ‘mission’ he was to perform was all about... Maybe he would learn more now.

He saw Shelby giving him a perplexed frown, before turning back to his radio: “Did our man tell you anything about why there’s been a change in the schedule?”

“Seems it was to accommodate some Scottish officials who wouldn’t be able to attend the ceremony otherwise, sir. As far as he could tell, everything else seems normal.”

“No Spectrum agents nosing around?”

“Our man was particularly careful to make sure of THAT, sir!”

Shelby kept silent a moment, his eyes fixed on White, watching his every reaction. “Do you know anything about that, Admiral?” he asked him after a short moment.

White shrugged. “About what, exactly?” he replied roughly. “I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

Shelby quietly shook his head. “I suppose that too must be true,” he mused. He consulted his watch. “All right. It means we have to leave within the hour if we are to strike according to plan.” He gave Colonel White another suspicious look and noticed that he was watching him vigilantly. He narrowed his eyes at him.

He's on to me, it's obvious, the Spectrum commander mused gloomily. He doesn't trust me at all, now.

"No matter about the change of schedule," Shelby added coldly. "It only means we'll have to strike earlier than anticipated. And I'd already decided that we would leave immediately, anyway. Even if the radar screen doesn't show anything suspect for the moment, I don't want to run the risk of Spectrum falling on us like some bird of prey. Are the torpedoes all onboard?"

"Yes, sir," Darrow's voice answered. "*And the torpedo tubes are all operational now.*"

"Have the *Drake* ready for launching, then. We're coming right away."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Shelby cut contact and addressed an even icier look toward Colonel White. "It seems you'll be able to undertake this mission our superiors had entrusted you with, sir," he told him.

There was a sarcastic undertone in his voice that didn't escape White. It was fairly apparent he didn't believe the Spectrum commander was playing fair.

Maybe he was even thinking that the colonel had finally shaken off the treatment he had received from the *Dream Spinner*.

He doesn't know how far I am from that, White reflected. He couldn't even decide if, indeed, Shelby was behind this. He just knew he couldn't trust the man. He couldn't trust anybody, anymore.

Just as he had been unable to bring himself to trust Scarlet.

Stay in the game, old man. Just pretend you're in it, for the time being. Play for time.

"Let's go, men. We're leaving right away."

Colonel White snapped out of his thoughts when one of the commandos took him by the arm to urge him to stand up. He shrugged the man off. "What about him?" he asked suddenly, addressing Shelby, and nodding toward Captain Scarlet.

"We go, he stays," Shelby responded. "We don't need him."

"You don't intend to leave him all alone here, without any medical care? That would be condemning him to certain death!"

"Why should his fate concern you?" Shelby asked flatly.

White scowled. "While I was Spectrum's prisoner, this man treated me better that I would have expected. I'll be damned if I don't repay him in kind!"

Shelby gave him a very icy, and emotionless smile. "Your compassion will be your downfall, Admiral." Implacably, he looked

down at Scarlet, whose pain and loss of blood had brought an apparent state of drowsiness he was still desperately fighting against. He nodded slowly. "All right, then. He'll come with us onboard the *Drake*." His eyes met those of Colonel White's. "Maybe he will be useful, after all..."

The Spectrum commander shivered, now wondering whether the decision was good or bad either for himself or the injured man he was attempting to protect.

* * *

It took some time for Captain Blue to make his way around the large hangar. He didn't encounter any of the enemy manpower. So far, he guessed, he had been lucky. Perhaps too lucky. While for him it seemed far too easy to progress freely on enemy ground, he was well aware that his partner and his commander could be in deep trouble.

He hadn't been lucky enough to find another, safer entrance to the hangar, but he had made an important discovery. He was now on the other side of the hangar, right next to the harbour upon which, when Liberty Base was a fully-operative military base, warships came to moor.

There he saw it, moored to the pier. The destroyer that Colonel White had taken out of the Naval Armament Depot in Bristol.

The *Sir Francis Drake*.

The top of it was covered with diffused lighting camouflage, which was projected by at least six powerful beams disposed on the length of the pier. Possibly, Blue imagined, the *Drake*'s own stealth capacity had been dismantled many years ago, when it had been decommissioned. Men were currently turning the projectors off, while others were transporting material onto the ship, using a large gangway. From where he was, Blue was still unseen; he hid behind a large crate and watched the activity in silence. These guys all seemed in quite a hurry.

As if they were preparing the ship to leave...

Captain Blue saw the same group of armed commandos he had seen earlier coming out from the hangar, from a large garage door; among them was Colonel White, apparently unharmed, walking next to a man who Blue recognized right away from having seen his picture a number of times since the preceding day.

Lieutenant-Commander Jason Shelby.

Or, more precisely, this one was his Mysteron duplicate.

Just behind them, two commandos were dragging a seemingly unconscious Captain Scarlet; in any case, he was unable to walk

by himself, for the two commandos had to fling his arms across their shoulders to keep him upright. Blue noticed that the back of his partner's uniform had turned to a darker shade of red. Blue winced, realising instantly that it was soaked with his friend's own blood.

Blue morosely recalled how he had earlier disputed with Scarlet which one of them would be in the cockpit with White and deliberately set himself up for him to try and make a break for it. Scarlet had smiled and simply remarked that only he could be the obvious choice. There was a risk that the one performing that particular part of the plan could be shot – by White or anybody else. The possibility of that had become a dreadful reality, now. Of course, Blue knew that his best friend had a far better chance of surviving than he did himself, so he could only agree – if rather reluctantly – with Scarlet.

The very idea of knowing that his partner had been hurt, and was now in the enemy's hands, was, however, very unsettling, and very difficult for Blue to accept. And it was still unclear what responsibility White had for that. *Guess I'll have to wait until later to find that out.*

If there was a later.

Blue watched as the group of commandos walked towards the *Sir Francis Drake*, dragging Scarlet along with them. White was following, and Blue noticed how one of the men kept behind him, a gun aimed at his back.

These guys don't seem to trust the old man, Blue noted. *At least, not entirely. By the looks of it, they don't want to take any chances with him.*

Shelby stopped to exchange a few words with a man standing on the pier, who was apparently supervising the various operations. After nodding to him, he motioned to his group to continue walking. They all directed their steps toward the gangway and began climbing it.

They were all going aboard, Blue realised. They were getting ready to leave. Probably for their mission. And they were taking Colonel White and Captain Scarlet with them.

Well, they won't get far, Blue decided. *Time to call in the troops and put a stop to it.*

He dropped his cap microphone.

He hadn't noticed the presence behind him before that exact moment. He didn't even have time to call up Cloudbase. The butt of a pistol fell heavily onto the back of his head. With a faint grunt, he collapsed to the ground, without even having seen the enemy who had so treacherously attacked him.

Captain Black stared at the Spectrum officer, sprawled unconscious at his feet. Negligently, he played with the gun he had just used to knock him out. There was no compassion on his features, no recognition of the man who, two years ago had been of one his closest associates. Now Captain Blue was but one enemy he had to dispose of, for the Mysterons to complete their plans.

Black raised his expressionless eyes toward the pier. Nobody seemed to have noticed what had just happened not so far away from there. Black was standing there, right out in the open; he could as well be totally invisible.

Earthmen fools...

Black focused his eyes directly toward the bridge of the *Drake*, on which he knew Mysteron agent Jason Shelby was standing. The latter was watching as the commandos came aboard, bringing with them Colonel White, kept under close guard, and Captain Scarlet, still unconscious and defenceless. He literally went into a state of trance, becoming oblivious to any other presence.

"Commander Shelby, this is Captain Black, relaying instructions from the Mysterons. You are to proceed with the mission according to plan. The Sir Francis Drake shall send the 'Crowned Head' to the bottom of the sea, and Colonel White shall be at the helm of his ship when this is done... Make sure both Spectrum officers do not survive the operation. Spectrum will suffer a crippling blow... and the Mysterons will prevail in this war against Earth. We cannot fail now!"

* * *

For the last three hours or so, the *Sir Francis Drake*, which had been for a time one of the most glorious warships of the British Navy, and then the World Navy, had been sailing quietly off the eastern shores of Scotland, after leaving the safe harbour of Liberty Base, in the Orkneys.

Confined to sickbay since the ship had cast off the ropes, former Admiral Charles Gray had been despairing of saving the life of the injured young Spectrum captain who was lying on his stomach on the recovery bed, motionless and unconscious ever since the moment he had been put there.

If convincing Lieutenant-Commander Shelby to bring Captain Scarlet onboard had been relatively easy for Gray, he had soon realised how hopeless the situation was. There wasn't much left in the de-commissioned old sickbay to properly tend to the serious wound suffered by the Spectrum agent. It was all Gray could do to get his hands on a couple of first aid kits. There was no medic

onboard either, and Gray, who wasn't much of one, had to insist vigorously that somebody at least helped him provide medical attention to the injured man. One commando had stayed with him in sickbay. Armed, of course. As if Scarlet would be any threat in his present condition.

It's probably ME that man's keeping an eye on, Gray had reasoned dully.

The bullets Scarlet had taken at nearly point blank range had gone right through him, which saved Gray the trouble of worrying about that. He would never have dared try to extract them all by himself. Closely watched over by the commando, the admiral had removed the wounded man's upper clothes, sodden with blood, using a knife to cut right through his dark shirt. Stopping the bleeding, curiously, had proven far easier than Gray expected. In view of the wounds' severity, he was about sure the captain would have bled to death; already, he had lost so much. The only help the commando gave him was when it came to putting tight bandages around the officer's chest and carefully lie him down on his belly. Then the man left, taking care to remove any object in the first aid kit that could be used as some kind of weapon, and locking the door behind him.

Charles Gray had removed his military jacket, stained with the Spectrum agent's blood, and sat down on a stool next to his 'patient', watching over him. Scarlet was stable enough; awfully pale, weak and still unconscious, but alive. If just barely. He was hanging on to life as no other man Gray had ever seen before.

Gray was still reliving in his mind the scene that had brought this dreadful situation. He could not forget how Scarlet had jumped that gun to stop Brighton from firing a second, lethal shot in the direction of the one he had called his commander. Scarlet had certainly been aware of Dempsey's rifle aimed at him, but he had ignored it. To save Gray's life, he had put his own on the line.

A second time, a gloomy Gray added inwardly. *And this time, he'll more than likely die for it.* There was not much more he could do to attend to the younger man's serious wounds. Without appropriate medical care soon, Captain Scarlet would surely die.

And I will be responsible for it.

At least the Spectrum officer was unconscious now. That spared him needless suffering. It was a kind of blessing, Gray thought, as he had been unable to find any painkillers to give him.

The former admiral took a quick glance towards the closed door. He knew the armed commando who had helped him with Scarlet was now standing guard on the other side. Shelby didn't trust him anymore. Of that, Gray was sure. He had seen it in the man's eyes. The strange look Shelby had cast on him, when

Scarlet had told him the he was the one who had killed Brighton and Dempsey, was confirmation enough that he suspected Gray of having a more personal hand in this. After all, he was the one who had the gun in his possession.

Gray was also aware of another thing: by saving Captain Scarlet's life, when Shelby had ordered to finish him off, he had exposed his own. If anything of what the Spectrum officer had told him already about the Mysterons was true, it was surprising that Shelby had not simply executed BOTH of them by now.

We're not out of danger yet, Gray brooded. Why did he spare us? He has kept us – ME – alive... Why? What is he planning?

"The Mysterons always have a precise reason for what they're doing." Those words from Scarlet kept coming back to Gray's mind, haunting him.

What could they want ME for, anyway? What was that objective they had, that was to leave Edinburgh in – what – less than two hours from now?

Grunting, Gray took his head between his hands; it had started pounding painfully again. *Don't go too fast, Charlie. There's nothing to say that there is any truth in what Scarlet and those other Spectrum people had told you...*

Right. Dempsey DID call him 'Earthman', with so much loathing and hate in his voice... Didn't that confirm Spectrum's assertions about those Mysterons? Wasn't the fact that Captain Scarlet had caught two bullets in the back at point blank range, saving his life, another proof that he was sincere, and ready to lay down his life for him?

Then... what about those contradictory memories of Scarlet assaulting Gray in that sub? Something the Spectrum officer didn't even deny had happened?

Why is it so difficult to think, to sort all that out? Gray asked himself with growing anger. I CAN'T decide what to do anymore! He knew of a fact about which Spectrum had not lied to him: the *Dream Spinner* had indeed induced intense paranoia in him. A paranoia that was confusing him and preventing him from seeing clearly enough to make any good judgement.

"What should I do?" he murmured with a sigh. "My God, I was able to take life-or-death decisions without much as a twitch, before all this... Now I feel useless. I don't know what to believe anymore..." He looked desperately at the motionless body lying on the bed before him. "Well, I may not be sure of much right now, but I DO know ONE thing: you saved my life again. There is absolutely no doubt about that." He leaned closer to Scarlet, watching him intently. "Captain, can you hear me?"

There was no movement from the Spectrum officer, no indication that he was conscious. Distraught, Gray sat back straight and sighed again.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault you got hurt this badly. I brought you straight into a trap and didn't heed your warning when you said that's exactly what would happen. Brighton would have killed me if you hadn't intervened. And that swine Dempsey... he shot you down without any mercy."

Thinking he had heard a sound coming from the door, Gray checked in that direction. But luckily, it remained closed. He grumbled sullenly. This paranoia was really getting out of hand.

"I wonder if it was worthwhile," he added with bitterness. "I'm not the man I used to be. I'm unable to decide what to do... Whatever these Mysterons intended to do to me with that treatment, they certainly screwed up my brain... Tell me, what would your commander's course of action be right now?" No answers came from the unconscious man. "I'm not sure even now that I am indeed your Colonel White. Shows you how confused things are in my head. I... I certainly could use some advice now, Captain. Yours would be welcome." Still nothing. Gray frowned. "Come on, Metcalfe," he called out in a more insistent and commanding voice, "show me some life, here... I don't want your death on my conscience!"

He heard a faint groan from the wounded officer. Scarlet stirred a little, like a man suddenly disturbed in his sleep. Then he grew quiet and lay still again.

That got Charles Gray worried. He wondered if he had not witnessed the last signs of life of a dying man. He quickly rose from his stool and came closer. He pricked his good ear to listen to the officer's breathing. He could hear it, shallow certainly, but it was definitely there. Gray felt the young man's neck for a pulse; was it his imagination? It seemed now slightly stronger than it was before...

It was an impossibility, and yet, there was no denying the evidence.

"You're a really tough fellow, Captain," Gray declared, shaking his head. "I'd say you're getting better... You're still a long way off, but..." He stopped, his fingers having grazed something small and cold. Looking closely, he saw, partly hidden under the bare shoulder, three metallic items hanging on the slim chain the British officer had around his neck. Out of curiosity, Gray brought it out in full view to examine them in more detail.

The pieces were two apparently regular dog tags, and, with them, some kind of very small coin with an image representing St. Michael the Archangel. *Well, that's natural*, Gray mused, *since*

he's the patron saint of soldiers... But he had to admit that Scarlet didn't strike him as the religious or even superstitious kind...

Casually, Gray turned the charm in his hand and caught sight of another design on the other side. A halo on a pair of wings... Now, that was familiar. Where had he seen that before? It was quite recently, he was sure of it.

However, something else caught Charles Gray's attention, which was equally familiar to him.

The dog tags.

At first glance, they seemed to be ordinary-looking dog tags, but there was something peculiar about them. They were metallic, plastic-laminated pieces, with a very small holographic 'S' logo, the insignia of the Spectrum organisation. *Looks like a chip, or something*, Gray noted. *Must be carrying I.D. information on the wearer...*

Underneath it, the name 'SCARLET' was engraved in capital letters, along with an identification number: S-11241S04.

Puzzled, Gray narrowed his eyes at the series of numbers. That looked exactly like the one he had himself blurted out, while being interrogated by Spectrum. And those dog tags...

Similar to the ones he was wearing himself.

A doubt suddenly imposed itself into Charles Gray's mind. He swiftly reached for the chain around his neck and brought his own dog tags out from under his T-shirt. He tensely scrutinized them, bringing them close to Scarlet's, to compare the two sets, and read the inscription on his own:

WHITE - S-00498W01

And the Spectrum logo was also present on it.

"Oh, Lord... it can't be..." His legs suddenly weakening, Gray sat back on his stool. He stared in disbelief at the still-unconscious Scarlet. "So what you said... It was true. All of it was true."

For a quick, fleeting moment, he entertained the notion that THESE tags had been put around his neck by Spectrum, at one time or another, to replace his own. He dismissed this idea right away. No, these WERE his dog tags. He had them on him when he had awakened after that dreadful *Dream Spinner* treatment... He even remembered that he had them during the whole process... They never had left him. He was wearing them all the time he had been fighting Spectrum agents, when he tried to escape them, when they captured him... and during all those long hours they were attempting to convince him, to make him regain his senses and see the truth.

Gray wondered if he would have believed them even if he had discovered the dog tags sooner.

Probably not, he added bitterly, well aware of the intensity of his mistrust of Spectrum.

At that moment, a violent flash seared through his mind. He grabbed his head, grunting.

For the umpteenth time, he saw himself strapped onto that table; he had the distinct and highly unpleasant impression of the awful pain going through him again. Will there never be an end to this? he thought savagely. Every time he was close to making a breakthrough, the pain came back, clouding his mind and his judgement, bringing him distorted and confusing memories.

It's a failsafe for that damned treatment! he realised, dumbfounded. They planted it in my mind, along with those false memories, to stop me remembering too much! They wanted me to stay under pressure, to stay in their clutches!

"Damn you!" he hissed laboriously between his teeth. "You think you have broken me, don't you? You've caused me enough pain... I won't let you get to me! I won't let you win!"

He still didn't remember much, was still uncertain about a lot of things, but there was one dominating thought.

The people he believed to be his own men were in league with those who had captured him and tortured him, and put his mind in such a sorry state.

They were part of the Network.

And they were manipulating him into doing the Mysterons' work.

That realisation brought a new wave of pain inside Gray's head. He fell to his knees and let out a cry, in which there was a fair amount of anger, as well as pain and anguish.

The door slid open.

Gray raised his head to see the mercenary who had been standing guard on the other side of the door, staring down at him with a mix of curiosity and suspicion in his eyes. He had his gun trained on him.

"What's going on here?" The man gave a quick look around, and stopped at the motionless figure on the bed. Captain Scarlet was apparently still unconscious. The commando turned his attention on Gray. "Did the prisoner try to attack you, sir?"

Bloody hypocrite, Gray thought dully, narrowing his eyes at the man. *I'm as much a prisoner as Scarlet...*

"Does he look in any shape to do that?" the former admiral asked with a rough enough edge to his voice. He started to rise uneasily to his feet. The commando tensed and apprehensively took a step back, his handgun still on the older man.

"Stand up slowly," he advised.

Gray stared at him straight in the eyes; he complied, carefully showing his empty hands. "It's all right," he told the man. "I just had a small... discomfort."

"Discomfort?"

"Headache. I've had a lot of those lately. You know about that, don't you?"

The man sighed. He still felt uneasy, and it was fairly apparent. "Right, sir. I know. Are you feeling better now?"

"MUCH better," Gray responded, with a sinister glitter in his eyes.

The commando gave another look toward Scarlet. "If you're done here, I think it would be time for you to go back to your cabin, now."

My cabin... My cell, you mean. "YOU think?"

"You've done all you can for the Spectrum officer. Doesn't look like you can do any more." He shook his head. "Beside, he's seriously injured..."

"Meaning...?"

"I don't think it was worth the effort. I've seen his kind of injuries before..."

"So according to you, I've wasted my time?"

"He's an enemy, sir."

"I see. Why bother then?" Gray frowned deeply. "I'm not like you, mister. I can't turn my back on a fallen soldier, if I can do something about it. EVEN if he's an enemy."

"I'm sorry, sir." The mercenary levelled his gun at Gray, who was staring coldly at him. "I still think you should go back to your cabin."

"Under whose orders?"

"Mister Shelby." The man gave an evil grin. "Considering your... present state, he deemed it necessary to take over. Until you feel better, of course."

"Of course," Gray repeated sarcastically.

"Should you refuse to obey, I've been authorised to use force, Colonel."

Gray twitched, almost imperceptibly. "I thought we were all on the same side, here."

"Mister Shelby IS concerned about you, sir. You must admit that you've been rather... difficult to deal with, since we freed you from that *Dream Spinner*, two days ago."

Yes, *I know*, Gray told himself inwardly. He did not voice that. He narrowed his eyes at the mercenary, scrutinizing him. *He's quite capable of shooting me down, and he'll do it without hesitation. I've got to be careful...*

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Mendez, sir."

Gray nodded slowly. "You're right, Mister Mendez. I've finished here. I'll follow you to my cabin. I need some rest."

"That's a wise decision." Mendez stepped aside from the door. With his gun still trained on Gray, he motioned him to go first. "After you, sir..."

Gray eyed the commando for a very brief instant; the man was not letting his guard down. It was to be expected of him. "Of course," the former admiral said, taking a quiet tone. He walked toward the open door.

Right after he had stepped into the walkway, Gray stopped, lingering, deliberately keeping Mendez, right behind him, in the doorway. He quickly checked to each side of the walkway, making sure nobody was there. For the moment, he was all alone with the other man.

But not for long. He had to act quickly.

"Tell me something, Mister Mendez," he said over his shoulder, "from what you said just now... I take it you were there when I was freed from that hellish contraption?"

"That's right, sir, I was."

"Then can you tell me," Gray continued, "if you were there as well when I was put onto it?"

The icy tone the older man had taken instantly told Mendez something was wrong. He frowned. "Sir?"

"Why did you call me 'Colonel', just then?"

Mendez tensed, hearing those harsh words. Growing impatient, he extended the hand holding the gun, with the intention of pushing Gray onward.

The instant the Spectrum commander felt the weapon touching his back, he reacted swiftly. With one hand, he grabbed the other man's, and with the other, he reached for the handle of the sliding door; he violently slammed it against the mercenary's wrist. Mendez let out a yelp of pain. Not letting go of the arm, Gray reopened the door, pushed the man inward, and stepped back inside the cabin. He shut the door, and engaged the lock.

The gun had fallen to the floor, dropping from Mendez' injured hand. With his good hand, the commando swung a mean hook towards Gray's face, but the latter easily evaded it and landed a punch to the man's stomach, before hitting his face, sending him against the wall.

Gray stepped toward his opponent. But the mercenary, though surprised and shaken, wasn't finished yet. There was a metallic "click" as he whipped out a switchblade from his pocket.

The blade flashed in Gray's direction, making him stop in his approach. There was murder in Mendez' eyes, as he wiped away the blood gushing from a cut on the corner of his mouth.

"You definitely lost it, old man," he growled with fury.

"No," Gray replied in a chilling tone, keeping himself ready. "On the contrary."

Mendez smiled wickedly, playing with his knife as he taunted Gray. "It's obvious we can't control you anymore," he noted. "I may as well kill you now, 'Admiral!'"

He tried to strike at his opponent, but the knife encountered nothing but empty space; Gray had swiftly stepped aside to avoid the blade, which simply whistled dangerously close to his ear. He then struck in turn, palm first, aiming straight at the commando's nose. It was the same attack he had used against Captain Magenta, the day before. But this time, he had more success.

The blow drove the nasal bone right into Mendez' brain. The mercenary fell heavily onto the floor.

Charles Gray stood over the man he had just killed, staring down at him with a look of disgust. Mendez had left him no other choice. He was trying to kill him, Gray had just defended himself. *Scum, like the others.* All these men, they were nothing more than violent criminals, mercenaries. Worst still, they were humans, collaborating with alien invaders, who were a 'worldwide threat to humanity', as Captain Scarlet had put it.

"You can call me 'Colonel,'" Gray spat bitterly, addressing the dead man.

He bent down to take the gun; he checked the amount of rounds in it, and tucked it into his belt. He also took the knife, closed it, and pocketed it. Mendez had no other weapon on him. No matter. Those would suffice. He had work to do.

With a renewed assurance and resolution upon his features, Charles Gray came back to the bed where Scarlet was lying, still unconscious and unaware of what had happened.

"I know you can't hear me, Captain," he said, standing next to him. "I told you earlier that when I knew what was going on, I'd follow my conscience and do my duty. I'll be true to my word." From his neck, he removed the chain with his dog tags and bent to put them into the injured man's hand as it hung from the bed, close to the floor. "If you wake up and find this, you'll understand that I've made the right decision."

He stood up and turned to walk towards the door, his face grim with determination. He knew he was now the only one able to stop the Mysterons, whatever their intended target may be. They wanted to use him, along with his old ship, to carry out their vile actions. He would not allow that. Neither he nor the *Sir Francis Drake* would lose their reputations and go down with infamy upon their names.

Nobody knew better than he the way round this ship and it was a definite advantage to him.

Stepping out of sickbay and cautiously closing the door behind him, he turned left down the narrow walkway, straight towards an access staircase going further down into the belly of the *Drake*.

The Mysterons won't succeed. I'll stop them. Even if I have to die to bring them down with me, I'll stop them.

I'll make Spectrum proud.

They'll know their colonel has not let them down.

Chapter 14

Captain Magenta entered the sickbay room that had been assigned to Captain Ochre to find his colleague seemingly sound asleep in his bed, a portable computer on his lap. Intrigued and somewhat worried, he approached him and carefully prodded him on his uninjured shoulder.

"Hey, Rick," he called out with some concern in his tone. "Are you feeling okay, buddy?"

Magenta was relieved when he saw his friend tiredly opening his eyes. He rubbed them with his fingers and stared at the Irish-born captain.

"Hi, Pat," he said with a thick voice. "What are you doing here?"
"Checking up on you, that's what I'm doing. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I guess I am... Feel a bit sleepy, but..." Ochre frowned. A sudden suspicion had just come to his mind; he stretched out his hand for the empty glass standing on the small table next to his bed. He sniffed it and then groaned with disgust. "Drat! That damned nurse! She tried it again, and this time, she succeeded!" He glowered at the perplexed-looking Magenta. "She slipped a sleeping pill into my glass of water!"

Magenta chuckled; he gave his friend an encouraging thump on his good arm. "So I guess the great detective Richard Fraser isn't as infallible as he thought he was, eh? He's just been had by a nurse!"

"A devil disguised as a nurse!" Ochre muttered, shaking off the rest of his drowsiness to come back to his portable computer. "That woman doesn't seem to understand that I have work to do!"

"Don't be so hard on her, Ochre. I bet she's just following Doctor Fawn's orders."

Ochre scowled. "Somehow, that wouldn't surprise me one bit!"

"He did tell you to take it easy and to get some rest so you'll heal faster."

"But we're on red alert, with a missing commander and we need all available hands... and I still have one left." Ochre paused a few seconds, tapping on a couple of keys. "How are things going, anyway, with Special Agent Conners on board Cloudbase?"

"Not too bad," Magenta answered with a large grin, sitting down on the chair beside the bed. "You should have seen his face when he saw me in the Control Room, when he arrived here! He

was totally livid! It was priceless, I tell you! It would have been a prank worthy of you!”

“I see Scarlet has been taking notes,” Ochre said with a smile, still typing. “Conners must have been upset when he was told that neither Rhapsody nor I was available to talk to him.”

“Not really. He didn’t even seem surprised. Neither was he surprised when he learned the colonel was away, ‘otherwise occupied on an affair that requires his personal attention’.” Magenta shook his head. “The guy’s a total creep, Rick. He’s on to something, I’m sure of it. We’ve got to be careful with him.”

“What’s he doing right now?”

“Some research on the computer databank.” Seeing Ochre raising his eyes to him, with an enquiring look, Magenta added quickly: “Lieutenant Green and I made sure he doesn’t have access to any incriminating data, concerning the present situation. Like your report and Rhapsody’s. And I assigned a security guard to keep a close eye on him.”

“Good. I hope he’ll stay out of our hair long enough for us to do some work and see this thing through. You heard anything from Scarlet and Blue yet?”

“No, not yet... We’re still waiting for their signal. I hope Scarlet’s plan will work. Still seems risky to me. But I guess we had no choice. Green is keeping watch for them in the Control Room.”

“In the meantime, we’ve got to continue searching from our end, to find out what the Mysterons’ target is.” Ochre frowned. “Devil of a nurse...” he muttered again. “She made me lose so much time...”

Magenta sighed. “Rick, we have entire teams checking out every angle on the database – and elsewhere. You don’t need to push yourself that hard.”

“I’ve got to help any way I can, Pat. And since I’m stuck here, I might as well do some research.” Ochre looked up at his friend. “Got any bright ideas, in that thick Irish skull of yours?”

Magenta rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful. “Blue is convinced that this target we’re looking for is British...”

“That seems logical,” Ochre admitted, nodding. “A British warship, a British admiral...”

“The king...?”

“He’s quite safe where he is. And considering the content of the Mysterons’ threat, and since they seem to plan using the torpedoes they stole from the Naval Depot, I don’t see how they could harm him in any way. He’s nowhere near any place where the *Sir Francis Drake* could strike at him.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes, quite sure. He’s obviously not the target.”

"What else but a king – or a queen – could be a 'crowned head'?"

"That's what we've been trying to figure out for the few last days, Magenta," Ochre sighed. "I mean, there are other possibilities, of course. Things and places bearing monarchs' names, for example... Restaurants, hotels, companies, cities... entire lands, for Heaven's sake..."

"Ships?" Magenta suggested tentatively. "The Mysterons plan to use an old British warship... along with a retired admiral. Are there any British Navy ships bearing the name of a monarch?"

Ochre gave him a look. "So you think they're pulling another *President Roberts*?"

"There's nothing to say they can't use the same trick more than once, Captain."

Ochre tapped a series of keys on his computer. He nodded when information appeared on the screen. "The *Victoria* and the *King Edward VII*," he answered. "But Spectrum had already checked that avenue. The *King Edward* destroyer was put in dry dock in the Azores more than six months ago, after sustaining major damage in an accident. Since it's an old ship, the proper authorities don't seem in any hurry to put it back to sea, and the ship is still out of active duty. That's not much of a target, obviously... As for the *Victoria* carrier, it's sailing off the coast of Australia as we speak now. Even going full speed, I can't see the *Drake* reaching it in time to destroy it before the Mysterons' deadline!"

"Well," Magenta insisted, "if it's not a Navy ship, then what about a civilian one?"

Ochre gave him an odd look. He typed another command, and a new list appeared on the screen. He grumbled. "That's what I thought; that's already been checked. There are a number of civilian ships using monarchs' names. Most notably, cruise liners. For example, the *Queen Elizabeth II*..."

"Ochre, you know that's not a liner anymore. It's a high class restaurant now, permanently docked in the Pool of London."

"...Where it's been since 2025, when she stopped cruising," Ochre added, reading the information on his computer.

"I don't see WHY the Mysterons would want to destroy a restaurant, even one with the QE2's reputation."

"Nevertheless, it has been viewed as a possibility. So it's been closed by Spectrum for the last few hours. It won't open its doors again until after the Mysterons' deadline has passed and we're sure there's no more danger."

"I still think that's not it. What about the other ships?"

"There's just so many... They're either out of reach or stuck in drydock, or..." Ochre stopped, frowning deeply. "Crowned head..." he murmured. He pointed to a line on his screen. "Hello... what's that?"

"What did you find?" Magenta asked curiously. He got up from his chair and moved closer to Ochre, leaning toward the screen, to get a look at it.

"That's a list of every British cruise liner using the name of a monarch, or of any related word that might make reference to a king, queen, crowned head... you get the idea." Ochre pointed to the first column, where the names of the ships appeared. He then showed the next. "Here's the name of the ship owner," he explained. Then his finger slid to the third column. "Here's the construction company, with the date the ship was built." He got down directly to the fifth name on that last column. See that: the '*Crown Ship Builders Incorporated*'..."

"Builder of the *King William IV*, for the *Caribbean Cruise Company*." Magenta read on. "Could it be...?"

Ochre asked his computer for further references on the ship and its builder. The screen shortly came up with information on the *King William IV*, which the two captains read expectantly.

It was disappointing.

The S.S. *King William IV*, built in 2012, had been wrecked ten years before after an encounter with a tropical storm in the Bahamas. Fortunately, there had been minimal casualties during the incident, but the ship had sustained so much damage that it could not be repaired. It had been dismantled and its parts sent to the breakers soon after.

"False alarm," Magenta sighed heavily. "We're going nowhere!"

"You see why I feel so frustrated about that?" Ochre grumbled. "It's been like this since I began these searches!"

"Has *Crown* built any other ships bearing monarchs' names?"

Ochre shook his head; asking the computer for the list of ships built by the *Crown Ship Builders Incorporated*, he consulted it quickly. "Doesn't seem like it," he murmured.

"Think it could be the company itself?" Magenta suggested.

Ochre scowled. "Seems unlikely. That wouldn't fit the Mysterons' riddle... Hold it!" Ochre pointed his computer screen again. "The *de Brus*... Lord, I've seen that name somewhere... In a newspaper, quite recently." He typed again on his keyboard, watched by a perplexed Magenta.

"What's the *de Brus*?"

"The latest construction from the *Crown* company. Their..." Ochre stopped. A news article had appeared on the screen. "...Their 'crowning achievement', as the publicity calls it," he finally said, gesturing toward the article. "It's supposed to be the finest, fastest, safest, most beautiful cruise liner ever to come off their assembly line. In fact, it wasn't constructed on an assembly line... A lot of it has been built by hand, the old-fashioned way."

Magenta grumbled, reading the article. "Seems like a load of hype. Doesn't it remind you an awful lot of the *Titanic*? And we all know how that ended up..." He shook his head. "But I don't get it. *De Brus*... That's not the name of a king."

"How wrong can you be, Magenta. Robert the Bruce. Or Robert *de Brus*. He was crowned King of Scotland in the 14th Century, after he had united the Scottish clans around him to throw the English out of his country. He was a short-lived king, but a king nevertheless... And so he fits the Mysterons' description of a crowned head."

"So the target could be that boat named after him?"

"SHIP, Pat. It's called a ship. Don't let Brad or the colonel hear you call it a boat."

"I certainly would NOT be inclined to get on the colonel's bad side," Magenta mumbled, reaching for the cast covering his nose. "And certainly not in his present state."

"Tell me about it," Ochre added, with a sigh. "Now let's see what more we can learn about the *S.S. de Brus*..." He typed a new command and soon, new information appeared on the screen. Magenta saw his friend's features becoming suddenly grim. "Pat, this ship is making its maiden voyage tomorrow morning."

"What?"

"It will be leaving Edinburgh for New York, with a capacity two thousand passengers, at exactly seven o'clock. One hour before the Mysterons' deadline... God! That may be it!"

"Well, looks like it anyway, but..." Magenta stopped, seeing Ochre putting his computer aside, and pushing the blankets away from him to swing his legs over the side of the bed.

Magenta stood up straight, frowning. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm outta here," Ochre declared. "I can't stay lying on this bed while the Mysterons prepare to destroy a ship full of innocent people! Give me my clothes, Captain!"

"You can't be serious!" Magenta protested. "You know what Doctor Fawn said..."

“Right now, I don’t care about Fawn,” Ochre replied harshly. He went to a nearby cabinet and opened it to look inside for his clothes. Finding it empty, he violently slammed the door. “Damn! Magenta, please, go to my quarters and bring me back my uniform.”

“Rick, be reasonable... You’ve been hurt!”
“I’m not THAT hurt!”

At precisely the moment Ochre said those words, the door slid open. Both Spectrum officers’ jaws dropped when they saw Special Agent Martin Conners stride in; he was closely followed by a security guard who stole a rather embarrassed glance toward Captain Magenta.

“Is that so, Captain Ochre?” Conners declared, walking directly toward the dismayed Ochre. “Then it appears I’ve arrived just in time!”

“What are YOU doing here?” an annoyed Ochre demanded aggressively.

“I’m trying to have a talk with you, Captain.” Conners gave a sideways look toward Magenta. “But it seems there are some people here who are intended to stop me from doing that!”

The security guard had approached the grim-looking Magenta. “I’m sorry, Captain,” he murmured, apologizing. “I tried to stop him, but...”

“That’s all right, Corbin,” Magenta said, nodding. “I guess there was no way to avoid it.”

“You better believe it!” Conners snapped, addressing the Irish-born captain. He turned back to Ochre. “You know, going by what I’ve been told, I fully expected to find you dying... or at the very least, plunged into a deep coma!”

“Are you trying to be funny, Mister Conners?” Ochre asked with a frown. “Because if you are, you’re not succeeding.”

“What is it you’re all trying to keep from me?”

“What makes you think we’re keeping something from you?” Magenta asked innocently.

“I would have thought that was obvious!” Conners countered. “I’m tired of playing hide and seek with you Cloudbase people! Can you explain about Captain Ochre, here? Or about Rhapsody Angel? You know full well that I needed to talk to them concerning that ambush at Quartermaster Dooley’s house. Why are you trying to stop me from seeing them?”

“Mister Conners,” Ochre said, sighing with annoyance, “we’re on red alert, in case you didn’t notice, and we’ve got some very pressing business to attend to...”

“If you’re well enough to work, Captain Ochre, then you’re well enough to answer my questions!”

“What IS this?” Ochre exploded with irritation. “An inquisition? Why not bring out the whip and the branding iron, while you’re at it, Conners?”

“Don’t mock me, Captain!” Conners jabbed a finger into Ochre’s chest. “I want to know what happened during that ambush!”

“You don’t have the authority to give me orders,” Ochre hissed between his teeth. “Without a formal order from my superior, I don’t think I have to tell you ANYTHING, if I don’t want to!”

“Where IS your superior, then?” Conners retorted. “Where’s Colonel White?”

“I told you already,” Magenta answered. “He’s gone on business that needs his personal input.”

“Official business?” Conners insisted. “Which has something to do with the present situation?”

“We’re not at liberty to tell you.”

“Don’t give me that, Captain Magenta! The only truth I’ve been able to get from you is that the colonel is not onboard Cloudbase! That much I’m certain of, just as I am certain he’s not gone on ‘official business!’”

“Are you suspecting us of lying?” Ochre asked with a deep frown.

“I’m suspecting the whole lot of you of conspiracy, Captain!”

“Conspiracy?” Magenta snorted. “Don’t you think you’re pushing it a little far?”

“Am I?” Conners replied coldly. “You’re covering up the fact that Colonel White has been Mysteronised!”

“Are you completely nuts?” Magenta snapped almost instantly.

“Where did you get an idea like that?” Ochre asked with the same angry tone.

“You’re not the only one with investigative skills, Captain Ochre,” Conners answered dully. “I did some research of my own. I learned that Colonel White usually stays at his friend Dooley’s home whenever he’s on furlough in London. It was probably to fetch him or to search for him that you went there two days ago with Rhapsody Angel, where you fell victim to that ambush. I asked around: I was told that nobody – inside or outside Spectrum – has had any contact with the colonel – or even heard of him – for quite some time, and especially not for the past three days. Since prior to the present Mysteron threat, to be exact. So, I feel quite certain that it’s Colonel White himself who trapped you at Dooley’s...”

“I was right,” Magenta sighed. “You ARE nuts.”

“Don’t make your case worse, Magenta!” Conners growled at him. “Considering your criminal past, it wouldn’t look good for you!”

It's bad enough that you've been left with the responsibility of Cloudbase right now."

"Hey!" Magenta protested, bristling under the insult.

"That was uncalled for," Ochre said suddenly, in defence of his companion. "Captain Magenta's past is not an issue anymore. I would think that the last three years he spent with Spectrum would be more than enough to prove he's reformed!"

Magenta had trouble hiding a grin of satisfaction. That Ochre, of all people, would be the one to speak up for him would have been unheard of a couple of years ago. In those early days with Spectrum, former police detective Richard Fraser didn't trust mobster Patrick Donaghue as far as he could throw him.

Things had changed considerably since then, it seemed.

"As for this preposterous little theory of yours," Ochre continued, addressing Conners, "let me tell you that you'd better not let the colonel EVER hear you say that! You could regret it bitterly."

"Is that so, now?" Conners replied icily. "I'd say you're bluffing..."

"I've heard enough." Ochre made to step round Conners, who was blocking the way to the door, when the Intelligence man stopped him with a very firm hand.

"You're still trying to avoid me," Conners noted.

Ochre looked down at the hand on his chest, then with a smirk on his face returned his attention to Conners. "Well, you're right about THAT assumption," he retorted. "We're ALL trying to avoid you. Now remove that hand from me, before I remove it myself!"

"Is that a threat, Captain?"

Before a very angry Ochre could answer the question in his own fashion, Magenta's epaulettes beeped and flashed white. The Irish captain flipped down his cap mic to answer the call he knew came from the Control Room. He was hoping it was good news.

"Yes, Lieutenant Green?"

"*Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue's deadline just expired, Captain Magenta,*" came the communication officer's voice. "*We have received no news from either of them.*"

Next phase of the plan, then, Magenta mused. "I'm on my way," he told Green. He cast a quick glance toward Ochre who was staring back at him expectantly, having temporarily forgotten about Conners, who was now silent, waiting. "Captain Ochre may have found some important information concerning our 'crowned head'," Magenta continued into his mic. "Call Captain Grey. Tell him to go to Edinburgh and check on the S.S. *de Brus*, which is

supposed to leave port tomorrow morning, for New York. It may be the Mysterons' intended target."

"S.I.G., sir."

"In the meantime, find any available data on that ship. That may be useful to us. Keep me informed, please." The mic returned to its place on the visor.

"Any news yet?" Ochre asked.

"I'm afraid not," Magenta replied, shaking his head. "Our team's deadline is up. Time to move on." He hesitated a second, giving a sideways look in Conners' direction, before addressing Ochre anew: "If you think you're well enough to come back to active duty, we can sure make good use of your help."

Ochre answered his friend with a grateful grin. "I'll go get dressed," he announced. He was already hurrying out of the room, followed by the intense stare of Conners, who made a move to go after him. Magenta stopped him right away.

"I'm not finished yet," Conners protested, addressing the Irish captain. "I've STILL got to talk to Captain Ochre..."

"Concerning that little theory of yours?" Magenta was adamant. He shook his head. "And WE still are on red alert. How can we spell it out so you would understand? We've got a very difficult Mysteron situation we're desperately trying to counter. THAT takes priority over your own ridiculous assumption, Mister Conners. You're in the way. So leave us alone, and let us do our job."

He brushed the man away and strode quickly toward the door. Conners turned to him with anger.

"Go do your job, then," he called out sharply. "Time is on my side on this. You and your friends won't be able to hide from me much longer. We shall see then if my 'assumption' is so ridiculous, Captain!"

Magenta stopped at the door to turn on his heel. "In the meantime, I'd suggest you keep it to yourself." His tone carried serious warning. "I swear to you, if I hear rumour of this on Cloudbase, or if you obstruct us in any way, I'll have you thrown into the brig!"

Conners scoffed loudly. "You don't have the authority!"

"Don't think I don't!" Magenta retorted sharply. "As I see it, you would be posing a threat to security on this base, with that kind of defamatory accusation. Are you deliberately TRYING to hinder our work by instilling doubt and mistrust, Agent Conners? We certainly can't allow that, now can we?"

"You got some nerve..."

"I don't think there would be a soul on Cloudbase to blame me or to cry over you if I order that you should be locked up. Now unless you want me to do just that, keep away from us until all this

is resolved." Magenta addressed the most polite of smiles to Conners. "Have a nice day, Mister Conners!"

That said, Magenta turned and quickly walked out of the room, leaving a glum-looking and silent Conners standing behind, obviously baffled that the Spectrum captain should talk to him in such a way.

As the door slid closed behind him, Magenta felt a hand falling heavily on his shoulder and turned around; Ochre was there beside the door, a mischievous smirk on his face.

"You're a mean guy when you want, Magenta," Ochre said with a nod of approval. "You really put that creep in his place!"

"My pleasure," Magenta replied with a deep sigh. "I had to call on every ounce of authority I once had when I was the head of... er... that other organisation, you know?"

"You still got it, I see."

"Appearances can be deceiving." Upon seeing the quizzical look Ochre then gave him, Magenta answered with a somewhat embarrassed smile. "My knees were shaking all the time in there. I was wondering how long I would be able to keep that bluff up. It was time I got out!"

Ochre's grin broadened. "Let's hope you impressed that creep enough for us to do our job... and show him how wrong he is about the colonel."

"The worst part is... he's not THAT wrong!" Magenta pointed out. "We thought the same, remember? And if that weasel continues to dig in that direction, it could mean trouble for all of us. Not to mention the whole of Spectrum."

"But he IS wrong, anyway," Ochre insisted. "And we just have to see this thing through to prove it to him. So we'd better start moving, now."

"Right," Magenta said with a nod. "So go get yourself dressed, Captain. Meet me in the Control Room for a quick briefing, and then we'll move on!"

There was a determination in Magenta's tone that greatly amused Ochre; it was obvious the Irish-born captain was taking his charge of Cloudbase very seriously.

"Yessir!" Ochre responded eagerly, breaking into a run toward the nurses' station.

Magenta briefly watched him go, telling himself that his colleague's help, for the remainder of the mission, would indeed be needed. Then he turned away, and went the other way down the corridor, directing his steps toward the nearest elevator, putting aside all thoughts of the worry Conners' accusations had brought and could still represent.

The mission ahead needed all their attention now. There was no place for any distracting thoughts.

He was just hoping that it would be a complete success.

* * *

Up until now, Colonel White had avoided any encounters with the crew, since he had left the *Sir Francis Drake's* sickbay.

It was fairly easy. Only the minimum of personnel had boarded the destroyer. A skeleton crew of about ten men; a dozen at the maximum. That meant that everybody was assigned to a specific station and that there couldn't be many people patrolling the decks looking for possible intruders. Anyway, as far as the crew was concerned, the only possible threat onboard was from the two men they were keeping confined to sickbay. They were supposed to be closely guarded, with one of them seriously wounded, possibly dying, and the other too confused to decide what to do.

How wrong could they be...

As easy as his progress had been so far, White was certain he would find some resistance when he reached his goal.

The torpedo room. There was no way Shelby would have left it unguarded. There would be two, maybe three men there, getting the ordnance ready to strike whatever target they intended to destroy.

It was situated at the extreme tip of the bow, far below the waterline. From the path he had taken, White could only access it through a narrow hatch, down a ladder, which led to a walkway. The door accessing the torpedo room was near that ladder.

White arrived at the hatch, still with no problem at all. It was open; carefully, without a sound, he went down the ladder. He could see the door to the torpedo room below, on his right. Voices were coming from there. He cautiously closed and sealed the hatch, and then climbed down the ladder. He took from his belt the gun he had taken from Mendez, and approached the opening, keeping close to the wall. He was feeling nervous enough. Easy, now... *Better take your time here, Charlie old boy... You don't want somebody to find you out before you have the time to act.*

Reaching the door, he managed a peek inside. Two men, one working on the mechanism of one of the torpedoes, the other leaning on a wall, his arms crossed, his rifle next to him. The other, too, was armed, a gun in the holster at his side.

"Come on now, Harris, let's get moving!" the man leaning on the wall was telling his companion impatiently. "Shelby will have our guts, if this thing isn't ready in time!"

"How much time we have left before we reach the objective?" the other asked.

The first man consulted his watch. "The ship will have left port by now. We should intercept it in an hour tops."

"It'll be ready, don't worry."

A *ship*, White mused, wondering. They planned to sink a ship. What kind of ship, exactly? And which port had it left?

Edinburgh. That was the closest major seaport to Liberty Base.

"How come those torpedoes don't work, anyway?" the impatient man continued with annoyance.

"Hey, they're oldies, Crandall!" the other answered, sighing. "Don't ask too much from them. And by the way, eight out of twenty are working perfectly. They just needed some modifications for them to work as we want them to." With a smile, he closed the plate of the mechanism he was working on. "That makes nine, now. That should be quite sufficient for what we need."

"They'll detonate on impact?"

"That's what they're supposed to do, yes."

"I'll be glad when this is over. That Shelby guy gives me the creeps."

"Yeah. And I'm not too sure about the admiral either." Harris began screwing the plate in place, using an electric screwdriver. "We're hardly able to keep him in line. He's going to lose it for sure."

Crandall chuckled. "Fortunately, we won't have to put up with him much longer. When this mission is over, I'm pretty sure Shelby will get rid of him."

"Hopefully with a bullet through his thick head."

White was not missing a single word. If he was troubled by what he was hearing, it also confirmed his suspicions about these men and dispelled his last doubts about the righteousness of what he was about to do.

They wanted to destroy a ship; innocent lives would be lost. He had to stop them.

By any means necessary.

He stepped into the opening, aiming his gun in the direction of the two men. "Don't move, you two!"

At first, they were startled to see him there. But then Crandall, shrugging away his surprise, made a very foolish attempt to grab his rifle and aim it toward White; the latter didn't waste any time in

hesitation; he pulled the trigger once. Hit in the chest, Crandall was thrown backward against the wall, and then slid to the floor.

Harris had his hand on the handle of his own pistol; he stopped in the act of drawing it when he saw the smoking barrel aimed directly at him.

"Don't try it!" White hissed between his teeth.

Harris carefully let go of his weapon, while White approached him. The mercenary cast a dumbfounded look toward his companion, now lying on the floor, motionless. He swallowed hard.

"You killed him," he croaked.

White relieved him of his weapon, tucking it into his belt. He pushed his own gun under the man's nose, staring him straight in the eyes. "Yes, I did," he answered, a very sinister edge to his voice. "And I'm quite ready to do the same to you." He saw the fear in the mercenary's eyes and gave him an ominous grin. "What was it you said earlier?" he growled. "You wanted to see me with a bullet in the head?"

"The others will have heard..."

"Nobody could hear anything of what's going down here!" White snapped angrily. "I know that... Remember? This was my ship. I know all there is to know about her. I sealed the access hatch. And when it's closed, this room is absolutely soundproof." He shoved his gun in the man's face again. "Now, if you want to do something stupid, be my guest: it will be my pleasure to put a bullet in YOUR head!"

Harris swallowed hard again. Nervously, he shook his head. "What is it you want from me?"

White nodded toward the torpedo the man had been working on just a few minutes ago. "You're an expert with this kind of ordnance, aren't you?"

Harris nodded hastily. "Yeah, I know my stuff with detonators..."

White's features hardened. "Perfect. That will make it easier for me. You will give me some help."

"What do you plan to do?" Harris asked, with worry in his tone.

The grim smile White gave him did nothing to reassure him. "I expect you would like to know that, would you?"

* * *

Captain Blue gave a low grunt as he was roughly thrown onto a dilapidated, dusty chair. Wincing at the pain in the back of his skull, he addressed a murderous look toward the two armed men standing on either side of him.

"Take it easy, guys," he told them grimly. "You have the advantage... I don't have any intention of resisting you." *For now*, he added inwardly.

Blue felt rather frustrated, though he was trying very hard to keep that to himself. When he had awakened only minutes ago, it was with a violent headache, and to discover that he was lying on the pier, a couple of mercenaries aiming their weapons at him. The *Drake* was gone, with Colonel White and Captain Scarlet probably onboard. They certainly were in deep trouble, and he wasn't faring much better.

The men had roughly hauled him to his feet. Then they half pushed, half dragged him through the base courtyard where he saw the transport helicopter he had seen earlier in the hangar. It had been brought out, and was being hurriedly loaded by a group of commandos, along with two other, smaller helicopters sitting next to it. Blue had been brought to a large construction behind the helicopters, and then into this room that looked like a disused conference room, if he was to judge by the large oak table in the middle of it, and at the end of which he was seated. He had no illusions about what would become of him... Unless he could play for time long enough.

Blue reached for the back of his hurting head with his right hand and felt the rather large bump he had there. He gave another grunt and brought his hand back in front of his eyes to see his fingers stained with his own blood. "You guys sure made it hard on me," he grumbled. "What were you trying to do, break my neck?"

"They're not responsible for what happened to you, Captain Blue."

Blue looked toward the far end of the long table. There was a man, in his mid-forties, standing there, staring at him intensely. He was not dressed as a commando like the others, but was wearing simple, casual, civilian clothing. The captain had not noticed him before this moment.

"I don't think I know who you are, sir," he told the man with the most polite tone he could produce.

The other answered with a cold smile. Quietly, he walked around the table to come nearer to the Spectrum officer. "My name, Captain, is of no importance to you."

"Oh, I don't know," Blue replied matter-of-factly. "I think Spectrum would be VERY interested to find out who YOU are."

The man didn't answer. Another commando had come into the room to give him Blue's radiocap. The man stared at it for a

moment, before addressing the newcomer: "How's the evacuation proceeding?"

"Smoothly. All remaining material and personnel are nearly ready to go... We could be on our way in about fifteen minutes."

"Inform me when it's time, then."

"Yes, Doctor."

Blue pricked up his ears at the title. He looked on as the commando left the room.

"So you're a doctor?" the Spectrum captain asked, staring at the man dressed in civvies. "What kind of a doctor, exactly?"

"I think I am... a very skilful one, Captain," the doctor replied coolly.

Blue narrowed his eyes at him. "I bet," he hissed. "I think I can get a pretty good idea of your handiwork, judging by what you did to Colonel White."

There was barely contained anger in Blue's voice and the doctor noticed it. He smiled icily and approached nearer still, putting the radiocap on the table, in front of Blue. Just out of reach, as if intending to taunt him with it. It was obvious the captain was tempted, but it would have been impossible for him to reach it and use it, before being stopped.

"Working on your commander was a very interesting experience, Captain. It's not every day I am given the chance to have a subject like him!"

Blue bristled; he made a move, as if he had the intention of going for the doctor's throat. The barrel of a rifle pressing heavily on his chest stopped him instantly. He glanced furiously toward the two men guarding him; trying his very best to keep his fury in check, he returned his attention to the doctor.

"If you think you'll get away with what you've done to him," he growled, "you're badly mistaken, 'Doctor'!"

The man smiled. "You think you'll... how would you put it, exactly? – Right... Make me pay, Captain?"

"I have every intention of doing just that," Blue promised dully. "And we'll find a way to help the colonel get through this."

The doctor laughed softly. He sat down on the corner of the table. "Your capture of him was a surprising enough development," he noted. "You know, I would have presumed that he would have died before letting himself be taken alive by 'the enemy'."

"He was trying to get himself killed," Blue declared bitterly. He stared intensely at the doctor. "I know about the *Dream Spinner's* side effects."

The doctor didn't bat an eyelid. If he was surprised that Blue was aware of the method he had used to subvert Colonel White's mind, he didn't show it even for a second.

"I know how that... thing uses memories of traumatic events and weaves a false reality around them," Blue pursued. "You must be very proud of yourself, Doctor. Are you the creator of that abomination?"

"Oh no..." the doctor replied quietly. "The *Dream Spinner* was invented many years ago... ironically, during this country's Militarist Regime. It made a reappearance some years ago. Me, I just... updated some parts of the treatment." He shook his head, blatantly ignoring the fury he could see in the Spectrum captain's blue eyes. "My part of the mission was supposed to be finished, after the treatment I gave your commander. But I was called here, after you took him in Bristol. I was to make sure he was still loyal to us, if he should ever return. I didn't have time to check that out, since the *Drake* had to leave in such a hurry."

Blue scoffed derisively. "Lucky for you you didn't have to see him. Judging by his recent behaviour, if he had recognized you... he would have killed you. Not that I would have been unhappy about THAT."

"You're really too kind, Captain." The doctor paused for a moment, before adding: "I'm sorry about your friend, by the way."

"My friend?" Blue carefully repeated.

"The one who was with Colonel White when he... came back to us. Captain Scarlet... He was brought onboard the *Drake*. I was told he was severely wounded and that he wasn't expected to survive... A pity, really."

Okay, Blue realized instantly. *These people don't seem to know about Scarlet's healing ability. Maybe that could be an advantage...*

"What are your intentions with the colonel?" Blue asked harshly.

"Exactly the same as before," the doctor answered, still very quietly. "He's gone off to execute his mission with the *Drake*." He stared Blue straight in the eyes. "Of course, you know of the Mysterons' threat..."

"Yeah, I know of it. But you're not a Mysteron." Blue waited for a reaction. He received none. He narrowed his eyes at the doctor. "Sure, you're cold enough... but you are human." He nodded toward his two guards. "Like those guys. Like the others preparing to leave outside."

"Very observant, Captain. But then, you're not one of Spectrum's finest for nothing." The doctor got to his feet and turned around, walking slowly back to the other end of the table.

There was a medical bag standing there. Blue followed the doctor's every movement with his eyes.

"You arrived here in the same SPJ as Colonel White, didn't you?"

"No," Blue answered. "I parachuted here straight from Cloudbase."

"I thought it was Captain Ochre who was the funny guy in your organisation."

Blue didn't blink. "It's obvious you know an awful lot about us," he noted dully.

"We have access to good, reliable information."

"I don't doubt it," Blue answered with coldness in his tone. "What is your angle with the Mysterons, anyway?"

The doctor didn't answer. He had opened his bag. Blue could easily imagine that what it contained could not be good for him.

I'm really in deep, he mused grimly. *And time is running out... I have to play for it.*

"Spectrum has good, reliable information too," he told the doctor. "I know about the 'Network'."

That caught the man's attention. However, he didn't seem to lose any of his coolness. "Colonel White told you about that?" he noted simply. He was searching for something inside his bag. "What else did he tell you?"

"Enough for us to realise that you must be stopped."

"...But you don't know what our 'angle' with the Mysterons is..."

"I'll take a wild guess," Blue retorted in disgust. "You're collaborators. What is it, you're expecting them to be grateful to you for having betrayed us all, when this war is over? If that's the case, you've chosen the wrong side, Mister!"

The doctor nodded quietly. He reached inside his bag. "I suppose it was to be expected that Spectrum would find out about us, someday. But as for stopping us..." He took a very small bottle out of the bag and put it down on the table, before staring again at Blue. "Don't think it will be an easy task, Captain."

"Spectrum won't stop until you're through."

"Perhaps. But there's a sure bet you won't be amongst its ranks to see that day."

Blue's features became hard. "You're going to kill me?"

The doctor's smile was a cold one. "You're more intelligent than that, Captain. You'd be dead already, if we had wanted to kill you." He took a small metal box out of his bag and put it onto the table, opening it carefully. "You're more precious to us alive..."

From where he was seated, Captain Blue could see a full set of syringes and needles inside the box. He vigilantly watched as the doctor took a needle to insert into one of the syringes.

"What do you want from me? Information?"

The doctor didn't answer. He had just driven the needle through the cap of a very small bottle, containing a liquid of yellowish colour; he carefully filled his syringe with it. He then addressed a scrutinizing gaze toward the Spectrum captain, with all the attention of a scientist keeping a close watch on an interesting guinea pig.

That's what I must be to him, Blue realized.

"What's that stuff you're obviously preparing for me?" he asked with a concerned frown.

"It's nothing for you to be afraid of, Captain," the doctor answered. "Just a very strong sedative. With that, you'll be asleep in a matter of seconds."

"You'll excuse me if I don't feel reassured."

"As you know, we're leaving. We don't want to wait to see if Spectrum will arrive here, searching for you or the others... We intend to bring you along."

"Why?"

The doctor gave Blue an even colder stare. "I want to take my sweet time to... work on you."

Blue let the information sink in. "You want to do to me what you've done to Colonel White," he stated, keeping his face expressionless.

"I KNEW you were an intelligent man," the doctor replied with another icy smile. "I'm sure you'll be a perfect recruit. Imagine if we were to send you back to Spectrum, after having 'convinced' you to become one of our own. You'd be the perfect spy amongst Cloudbase senior staff. Not Mysterionised. Completely undetectable."

"Is that what you had in mind for Colonel White after his mission with the *Drake* was over?" Blue asked, frowning.

"The particular treatment your colonel received was not conducted with that aim in view. It has left him paranoid, violent, too difficult to control... too unpredictable for a mission that subtle." The doctor shook his head. "Besides, he's not coming back from this mission with the *Drake*."

"Why, you creep..."

"I'll have enough time to work PROPERLY on you, Captain. The result won't be the same as with Colonel White."

Blue's face became hard. He remembered what Doctor Fawn had said about the *Dream Spinner*, and what it was used for. He already understood that this doctor wanted to use on him that long, dreadful treatment, that planted in the mind of its victim a permanent false reality, which he would be totally convinced was the absolute truth.

A fantasy from which, according to Fawn, there was no hope of escape.

“Spectrum KNOWS of the effect of the *Dream Spinner*,” Blue retorted. “If I disappear for too long, they’ll be suspicious of me, if you ever want to use me the way you describe.”

“Then we’ll find another use for you,” the doctor replied icily. He narrowed his eyes at Blue. “I wonder what traumatic memory you have that we’ll be able to use against you, Captain... I’m quite eager to find out. I’m sure it will be interesting to learn what it is that haunts you...”

“You’ll be wasting your time,” Blue answered, between his teeth.

The doctor scoffed. “Don’t tell me there’s NOTHING in that eventful life of yours that could have left its mark on you, Captain! I wouldn’t believe it.”

“I will die before I let you subvert my mind like you did my commander’s,” Blue challenged.

The doctor chuckled softly. “You Spectrum officers are all the same,” he stated, moving quietly toward Blue, his syringe in his right hand. “You think you’re so strong. Your Colonel White said roughly the same to me before I started working on him... But within minutes, he was writhing and screaming. The pain the treatment inflicted him was too much for him to bear. He wasn’t able to resist the *Dream Spinner*. Nobody is. You’d be foolish enough to think you would be more successful than he was!”

Hearing his mocking remarks, Blue became livid with anger. Unable to control himself much longer, he sprang from his seat, with the obvious intention of jumping at the doctor, but he didn’t get very far. The two mercenaries guarding him caught him almost right away, and they forced him back to his chair, using brute strength. The Spectrum captain struggled desperately, but was unable to escape from the two strong pairs of arms restraining him. He watched with worry in his eyes, as the doctor approached more closely, his needle ready for use.

“Keep him still,” the doctor coldly instructed the two commandos. “This shouldn’t take long.”

He was a couple of feet from the still struggling Blue when a violent explosion made itself heard from outside. The room shook, and everybody froze. The doctor and the two commandos looked at each other in concern, wondering what had just happened.

There was a shrieking sound, shortly followed by a second explosion. Blue’s face then lit up with a satisfied grin.

“What was that?” the doctor murmured.

“I’m surprised you haven’t already guessed,” Blue retorted pleasantly.

The doctor cast an icy look at his prisoner before striding quickly to the nearest window. He was just in time to see one of

the helicopters in the courtyard exploding in a huge ball of fire. The commandos outside scattered in every direction.

Three sleek screaming white fighter jets suddenly appeared overhead and swept over the courtyard; the doctor blanched.

"Spectrum Angels!" he croaked. He turned toward Blue, with an incredulous look. "How the Hell..."

"Did you really expect we'd walk straight into an obvious trap without taking out some insurance?" Blue asked between clenched teeth.

There was murder in the doctor's eyes, as he turned toward the two men still maintaining their hold on Blue. "Did you check if he had a tracker on him?" he asked them accusingly.

"Wrong place to look, doc," Blue replied. "I'm not bugged. You should realise that every Spectrum craft is equipped with its own beacon device." He gave a faint smile. "So well hidden that your men would never find it, without dismantling the plane entirely!"

Another explosion outside, making the building shake once more, compelled the doctor to look again through the window. Another helicopter had just exploded, hit with deadly accuracy by a powerful missile. Hearing the sputtering sound of machine guns, the doctor then saw that the Angel fighters were not alone in attacking Liberty Base: four Spectrum helijets were flying low, shooting at the mercenaries outside, forcing them to hide behind anything that could provide good enough cover. Some of the men tried to retaliate, firing at the Spectrum craft, but their firepower was simply no match; the doctor saw three of them falling, mown down by fire from one of the helicopters.

The doctor turned away from the window, throwing his syringe onto the table behind him. "We don't have time for this anymore," he stated quickly. He gave a cold look toward Blue and then strode toward a door at the other side of the room. "We must leave this place without delay. Kill him."

Before either of the two men restraining Blue could obey the order, the Spectrum officer quickly acted. Since the Angels' appearance, his guards had relaxed their grip on him. Slightly, but enough for him to take matters into his own hands. He jerked his head back, striking the man behind him right on the nose. The mercenary grunted in pain and completely let go. Blue's booted foot caught the second commando in the groin. The man's knees buckled under him and his finger instinctively squeezed the trigger of his rifle. Blue threw himself to the floor, getting out of the line of fire; the bullets meant for him instead hit the man behind him, wounding him mortally.

Dumbfounded by how quickly things were now happening, the doctor looked on as Blue violently threw the chair he had previously occupied against the legs of his last opponent. The Spectrum officer pressed his attack against the unbalanced commando and jumped him, slamming him into the wall. The doctor was dismayed as he saw Blue snatch the rifle and knock the man down with it; he didn't wait much longer, and quickly ran the distance separating him from the door.

Captain Blue let the second mercenary slide unconscious to the floor, and turned the barrel of his newly acquired weapon in the doctor's direction, ready to fire. "Stop where you are!"

But the doctor didn't heed his call; he already had opened the door and was stepping out of the room. Blue fired a shot that destroyed part of the door frame, but did not stop the fleeing man. Muttering a curse, the captain set after him, grabbing his cap from the table on the fly.

He arrived at the door just in time to find the doctor, now in another, smaller room, opening another door leading directly outside. Blue could see the last of the enemy helicopters, waiting outside. The Spectrum agent aimed at the fugitive. "I said STOP, Doctor!"

The echo of his words had not disappeared when the helicopter suddenly blew up, sending a huge ball of fire straight into the wall against which the doctor was standing. The wall exploded violently. The blast knocked Blue off his feet and threw him back into the conference room. He just had time to see the man he was trying to capture being caught by the explosion.

Stunned for a short moment, Blue finally got up, staggering to his feet, his weapon carefully aimed at the open door through which he could now only see smoke, fire, and rubble in the other room. *Sometimes, the girls are a little bit too trigger-happy*, he mused, realizing that it could only be a missile from one of the Angel fighters that had destroyed the helicopter and hit the building at the same time.

He carefully made his way toward the door and took a look inside the half-destroyed room. At first, he couldn't see much; the choking smoke was much too dense. Gradually, though, it cleared away, and Blue saw that the wall where the exit door previously was had completely disappeared and that a huge hole now opened to the outside. Blue searched through the rubble, and found the body of the doctor, lying motionless in the middle of it. He felt for a pulse; although apparently seriously injured and unconscious, the man was still alive.

Couldn't happen to a nicer guy, Captain Blue thought grimly. It was a hollow victory, though. The doctor might not live long

enough to face justice and to provide information on this Network organisation he was a part of.

Sighing, Blue rose to his feet and went out through the hole in the wall. Outside, he could see the Angels still sweeping over the area, while three of the five Spectrum helicopters were landing, each disgorging a group of heavily armed ground agents, who then went in search of the enemy forces on the ground.

A sound coming from his left made Blue raise his head just in time to see two enemy commandos running at him with weapons at the ready. The Spectrum officer hit the ground and fired his rifle at the same time as the two men. His fire caught one of his opponents, who fell to the ground. Blue aimed at the other man, still standing, and squeezed the trigger. To his utmost horror, his weapon refused to fire.

The commando gave a satisfied grin when he realised the Spectrum captain was now at his mercy. He levelled his gun, and Blue thought, for a brief instant, that it was all over.

A crackling sound made itself heard. Cut down by a hail of bullets, the mercenary dropped. Behind the falling man, a surprised but relieved Captain Blue saw a Spectrum helicopter descending toward the ground. The barrel of the machine gun under its belly was smoking, and Blue could see a grim-looking Melody Angel at the helm, staring down at the dead man she just had stopped from killing one of Spectrum's own.

Blue was rising to his feet as the helicopter touched down; its side door was wide open, revealing both Captain Magenta and Captain Ochre kneeling in the opening, looking expectantly at Blue. After a quick look around to make sure all was now safe for him, the blond officer broke into a run toward the craft. He was quite distressed when he saw Ochre pulling a gun on him, with his left, uninjured hand.

"Stay where you are, Blue!" Ochre called out over the sound of the helicopter rotor.

Blue stopped on the spot, wondering what was going on in the mind of his colleague. He understood instantly when he saw Magenta using a Mysteron detector on him, and was quite relieved when, a moment later, he saw the broad grin on the Irish captain's face after he had checked the photograph he pulled out from the detector.

"It's all right, Captain! You're clean!"

Blue blew out a sigh and approached. "I've never been so happy to see you, folks," he shouted, "but you sure just gave me a scare!"

"Considering what we've been through lately," Ochre noted, shrugging, "I don't think it was an unnecessary precaution."

"You're right, of course. What are YOU doing here, Ochre?"

"It was either coming here, or fighting off Conners' attempts to question me. Considering the alternative..."

Four ground agents were now jumping out of the craft in order to join their colleagues who had begun rounding up the remaining mercenaries. Blue caught hold of one of them as he passed, and thumbed toward the half-destroyed building he had just left.

"There's a seriously wounded man in there. Have a medic take a look at him and have him flown to the nearest medical facility. He won't cause you any trouble, but keep him under close guard."

The man nodded his acknowledgment and headed toward the building. Magenta, who had heard Blue's instructions to the Spectrum commando, looked at his colleague curiously.

"Friend of yours?"

"Hardly," Blue replied. "That's that 'doctor' who performed the brainwashing session on the colonel."

The others looked at him blankly. Blue shook his head.

"He's been hurt badly during the attack. I hope he'll survive long enough for him to provide us with useful information."

"Well, anyway," Ochre remarked, "he's out of the equation now. That's good news."

Melody had left her station in the helicopter to find out what was going on. Seeing her, Blue gave her a cheerful smile. "Good shot there, Melody. You've just saved my life."

"Don't mention it, Captain," the young Black pilot replied with a broad smile. "It was obvious you were in trouble."

"Well... Thanks, anyway!"

Blue looked thoughtfully at the three agents in front of him, staring back at him expectantly. They noticed he seemed somehow embarrassed.

"I've got some bad news as well," Blue said, hesitantly. "I lost Scarlet and the colonel."

There was a stunned silence from the others. Blue sighed.

"The *Drake's* already sailed, with them on it. According to what the 'doctor' told me, the colonel is to carry out the Mysterons' threat. As for Scarlet, he's been shot. At this moment, he must be under guard on that ship."

"The old man shot him?" Magenta asked with a frown.

"I don't know that for sure. I just hope he will be all right. No matter that he's indestructible, he's vulnerable enough when he's wounded. Enough for the enemy to find a way to get rid of him permanently."

Blue was looking grim; the others could see that he felt as if he had failed and was responsible for what was happening now. Ochre flipped down his cap mic and called the Angels, ordering them to stop the aerial attack over Liberty Base and to spread out in search of the *Sir Francis Drake*. "You are not to attack the ship,"

Ochre specified over the radio. "Just find it, as quickly as possible, and report its position. You'll get further orders then."

He received the acknowledgment call from Destiny, who presently was at the helm of Angel One. The three interceptors made a last sweep over the base and then headed off in three different directions, over the sea. Magenta patted the gloomy Blue's broad shoulder, comfortingly.

"Don't worry, Captain. That ship can't have got very far. We'll find it." He noticed the blood on the back of Blue's neck, matting the blond hair. He frowned, worriedly. "You been hurt, buddy?"

Blue ran his hand on the recent wound and grimaced. "Somebody blindsided me the moment I was getting ready to call for back-up," he explained. "Never saw him coming. But I could swear I was alone on that pier the second before it happened."

"Think they've moved that ship out of here because they suspected Spectrum was on its way?" Magenta asked.

"I don't know. As I said, that doctor said it had gone to carry out the Mysterons' threat... Now if only we knew what it could be..."

"We may have a possibility," Ochre intervened. "A cruise liner, the S.S. *de Brus*, is to leave Edinburgh tomorrow morning at seven o'clock. Exactly one hour before the Mysterons' deadline."

"We thought the *Drake* might intend to attack shortly after departure," Magenta added.

"*De Brus*?" Blue repeated.

"Named after a famous Scottish king, Robert the Bruce," Magenta explained.

"You impress me, Magenta. I didn't know you knew that much about British history."

"That's culture for you. And good education. I keep telling that to Ochre, but you know him: he never listens."

Ochre opened his mouth with the intention of protesting; then he realised the futility of even trying to respond to Magenta's obvious tease, and chose to keep quiet. He contented himself with looking daggers at his Irish colleague, who was smiling mischievously at him.

Ochre cleared his throat. "If the *de Brus* is the Mysterons' intended target, then why has the *Drake* gone so early?"

"The doctor could have lied and the *Drake* could simply have gone to another hiding place," Magenta observed.

"Or maybe the *de Brus* isn't the target, after all," Blue replied.

"Or maybe it will be attacked while it's still in port," Ochre suggested.

Blue gave it some thought. "I trust a Spectrum security team has been dispatched to Edinburgh?" he asked.

"Grey's gone there. He's supposed to give us a full report..." Captain Magenta was interrupted right in the middle of his sentence when his epaulettes flashed grey. "Speak of the devil..." he muttered, flipping his mic down. "Go ahead, Captain Grey."

"*We have a problem, Magenta,*" he heard his colleague say. "*I just arrived in Edinburgh by helicopter. The de Brus left port about thirty minutes ago.*"

Magenta's features became glum. "Say that again?"

"*I know it was supposed to leave tomorrow morning, but the departure was brought forward, to accommodate the schedule of some Scottish diplomat. It was a last minute decision. As I speak right now, the de Brus is heading down the Scottish coast.*"

"Oh, great!" Magenta reported to Ochre and Blue what Grey had told him.

Blue shook his head in understanding. "So, maybe you were right after all about the *de Brus* being the *Drake's* target. We'd better find both of those ships very soon, before it's too late. Call the Angels, and inform them of this new development, Magenta. Get the chopper ready to go, Melody."

"S.I.G., Captain," the Angel pilot replied, before swiftly returning at her place in the pilot's seat.

Ochre jumped out of the helicopter, as Blue was climbing into it.

"You go with Magenta," Ochre told his blond compatriot. "I'd better stay here to supervise cleaning out this wasps' nest."

"This 'wasps' nest' was once a famous stronghold for liberty in Britain, Captain," Blue reminded him with a stern edge to his tone.

"All the more reason to clean out all the scum occupying it," Ochre retorted.

Blue nodded, and then indicated the arm Ochre still had in a sling. "Be careful, then. I don't have to remind you you're not in the best of shape."

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. Worry about finding Scarlet and the colonel. And stopping the Mysterons." Ochre addressed a nod toward Magenta. "Don't forget to tell him about Conners."

"What about Conners?" Blue asked, frowning. "What did that weasel do?"

"I'll let Magenta fill you in while you're on your way. Go on, now! You'd better not lose any more time!"

Blue gave his colleague a quick salute and pulled the door closed. A second later, the Spectrum helicopter took off, and gained altitude. Ochre stepped back and watched as the craft

climbed into the sky, heading toward the sea. Then he flipped down his cap mic.

“Sergeant Webber,” he called decidedly, “I want a quick report on how the clean-up operation is going right now. We’d better be thorough. I want all the enemy forces rounded up as soon as possible... And I don’t want anybody to escape us.”

* * *

On the bridge of the *Sir Francis Drake*, Lieutenant Commander Jason Shelby’s Mysteron double was coldly contemplating the situation’s most recent developments. Darrow, stationed at the radio control, had just told him that they had lost contact with Liberty Base, about fifteen minutes after the radar had shown several dots converging straight toward it. It was obvious to Shelby that Spectrum had come to retrieve its missing commander from the Network’s clutches, and that the men who had stayed behind, preparing to evacuate the base, had been trapped there.

The *Drake* had not left a moment too soon, Shelby mused.

Hopefully, there was nobody in Liberty Base aware of the destroyer’s destination. All those who were there were simple mercenaries, hired hands. Of course, there was the doctor; but even he didn’t know the exact scope of the mission. However, Shelby was certain that Spectrum would eventually find the *Drake*, and would stop at nothing to prevent it from carrying out the Mysterons’ threat.

They would not succeed, a confident Shelby silently vowed to himself. Whatever Spectrum did, it would be too late. The Mysterons would not fail this time.

Spectrum’s impending efforts to find and stop the *Drake* didn’t worry him at all. In fact, he was a little more concerned by the other call he had just received from sickbay. It concerned Colonel White, who, he had found out minutes earlier, was not in the captain’s quarters, as he was supposed to be. Having called sickbay, and not receiving any answer from there, Shelby had ordered three commandos to go down there, to check things out. He suspected something had gone wrong.

He had confirmation of that when one of the men called him back, to report that Mendez, the commando assigned to guard the Spectrum commander, had been killed, and that Colonel White had disappeared.

“What about the other Spectrum agent, Mister MacBride?” Shelby asked.

"He's still there, sir," the heavy Scottish-accented voice of MacBride answered over the radio. *"He's still alive, but unconscious. He doesn't seem to have moved. Of course, that's not surprising, considering how badly he has been injured..."*

"Of course," Shelby coldly repeated. "So it would appear that it was Colonel White who killed Mendez, and that he's now somewhere on the ship... up to something to stop us, undoubtedly."

"Yes, sir. And he's armed. Mendez' weapon has also disappeared. The colonel must have taken it."

"That old man never ceases to amaze me. The least we can say about him is that he doesn't give up easily." Shelby let out an annoyed sigh. "Right. If he wants us to play his game, so be it. Send every available man after him, Mister MacBride. Find him quickly, and have him brought to me, in the wheelhouse. And I want him ALIVE. Make sure everybody understands that perfectly, do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, sir." There was a pause at the other end of the radio, as MacBride pondered something else. *"What about the other Spectrum agent?"* he finally asked.

An evil smile crossed Shelby's face. Captain Scarlet had been a thorn in the Mysterons' side for far too long. Now he was at his mercy, temporarily wounded, unable to defend himself. Now was the occasion to settle the score with him, permanently.

And he knew of a way to do it.

"Kill him," he instructed MacBride over the radio. "And dispose of the body. Weigh it down and throw it overboard." His smile broadened ever more. "Let's see how he gets out of this one..."

"Sir?" MacBride replied, apparently confused by the Mysteron's last remark.

"Don't question my orders, man. Just do as I say. And do it NOW!"

"Yes, sir."

Shelby heard MacBride cut the communication, and did the same at his end. Thoughtful, he went to the glass window, which enabled him to peer down at the lower bridge, below.

That should take care of Captain Scarlet, he reflected. *He won't be seen or heard from again.*

As for Colonel White, the Mysterons weren't done with him yet.

* * *

In sickbay, MacBride radioed the other commandos to give them Shelby's orders concerning Colonel White. Then he turned to the two men with him to tell them of the last instructions he had received regarding Captain Scarlet, before sending them to join

the others in the search for the Spectrum commander. He found himself alone in sickbay. He was confident that he wouldn't need anyone else to carry out Shelby's orders. One look at the wounded Scarlet, still lying unconscious on the bed, was enough to convince him that he couldn't possibly cause him any problem.

MacBride couldn't figure out, however, why Shelby seemed in such a hurry to get rid of the Spectrum officer. The way the mercenary saw it, and judging by the seriousness of Scarlet's injuries, there was no need for urgency in disposing of him. He shrugged it off, thinking that maybe Shelby was just eager to see the man dead, thus having one enemy less to worry about. There couldn't be a better, more logical explanation.

MacBride looked down in contempt at Mendez, lying where he had fallen, his nose broken. Colonel White obviously had done a quick and efficient job on him. It was more than probable that Mendez had not been careful enough with his charge and that he had let himself be surprised by him. MacBride had always regarded Mendez as a negligent and careless fool. Always getting into trouble. Something like that was bound to happen to him sooner or later.

A grin curved MacBride's lips. It had just occurred to him that, while Mendez was definitely an idiot, he always had a lot of money on him. He remembered that he even carried up to a thousand pounds in his pockets at a time. He wondered how much he had today. He certainly wouldn't mind departing with that...

I certainly have the time to check it out... Might as well help myself. Nobody will ever know.

MacBride crouched in front of the dead man and began searching him. As he had hoped, he found some banknotes stashed in various pockets. And they were BIG notes. He emitted a grunt of satisfaction and his smile broadened.

"Why, Mendez, you sneaky devil!" he muttered under his breath. "That's quite a bundle you have here! Wonder what you planned to do with that..."

He began to count slowly; he had reached about one thousand two hundred pounds when he began to rise to his feet. He shook his head, chuckling, almost not believing his luck.

"I can't thank you enough, Mendez, old pal," he said joyfully. "This is great! You carrying so much money during a mission... You were even more a fool than I thought!"

He didn't even sense the presence behind him before it was too late. A very strong arm suddenly seized him under the throat, strangling his cry of surprise before he could utter it. MacBride lost hold of the money when a hand caught his right arm to twist it behind his back.

"It's true what they say then," he heard an English voice say in his ear, with an ominous ring to it. "There's no honour among thieves..."

Panic crept into MacBride's heart. From the corner of his eye, he had seen the stern face of the Spectrum officer he thought was still lying on the bed behind him. But that was impossible; the man was seriously injured. He couldn't even move a muscle; he would even less be able to stand to sneak up on him and attack from behind. But as he struggled to try to free himself, MacBride realised with growing terror that the arms holding him were more than strong enough to resist his efforts. He was brutally pushed face first against the wall.

In desperation, MacBride nervously reached for the handle of his gun with his left hand. He had only half got it out of the holster when Captain Scarlet put his hand onto his, letting go of his right arm.

"You're welcome to try!" the Spectrum agent hissed between his teeth.

On the other side of the door, one of the two men who had earlier entered the sickbay with MacBride heard the cracking sounds of two shots. He looked at the closed door for a short moment and then smiled knowingly.

MacBride had carried out his orders concerning the Spectrum officer.

* * *

Colonel White climbed out from torpedo tube number four. That was the last one. He consulted his watch. It had taken twenty minutes to get all his work done. That was fast enough, and easier than he had previously anticipated. Now everything was set and ready.

Blowing out a sigh, he looked down at the bound and gagged man sitting on the floor, not far from him. Harris was rolling furious eyes at him; he knew what the colonel had been doing, and the latter was now considering what to do with his prisoner. He was an unwanted witness; it was important that the others did not discover what he had prepared. With that in mind, he had already disposed of Crandall's body, putting it into an unused, small cabinet, under a large pile of dirty blankets.

But killing a helpless captive wasn't a solution the Spectrum commander would even think about.

I'd better lock him somewhere safe, White mused. A place where the others won't find him. Not until it's too late, anyway.

Using Mendez' knife, he cut the ropes binding the concerned Harris' ankles and helped him to stand up. "All right, then. You're coming with me. Do as I say, and nothing bad will happen to you."

But Harris, afraid for his life, had nothing further from his mind than co-operation. The second he was on his feet, he rammed into White's stomach, knocking him aside. Taken by surprise, White lost his balance, and fell against the wall behind him. Harris scrambled out of the torpedo room.

It didn't take too long, however, for White to regain his footing, and he set out in pursuit of his fleeing prisoner. He had not gone far, and White reached him in the walkway, just a few yards away from the room they had left. White grabbed the man from behind and furiously tossed him face first against a wall. The commando let out a grunt of pain and struggled to get free, but the colonel kept him pinned down, preventing his escape.

"Damn it!" White grumbled with impatience. "You're really trying to anger me, aren't you? Keep quiet, you —"

White stopped right in the middle of his sentence, as the sound of hurrying feet caught his ear. He turned his head to his left, to see two other commandos, armed with rifles, quickly coming his way. Seeing them too, Harris struggled even more and succeeded in disengaging from the colonel's strong hold, pushing himself off the wall. His timing couldn't have been worse, as he suddenly found himself right in the middle of the passageway, directly in the others' line of fire, at the precise moment they chose to shoot. He received the bullets meant for White, unwillingly shielding him from any harm.

As Harris fell heavily to the floor, White didn't lose any time in taking advantage of the small respite he had been given, and headed toward the other end of the passageway, where he could see another access door, wide open. He cracked a couple of shots over his shoulder, in direction of the two commandos, forcing them to take cover.

White reached the door; he closed and sealed the hatch behind him. Finding a rusted wrench lying on the floor, he used it to jam the door. He was hoping it would hold long enough for him to put some distance between him and his pursuers. He had no illusions, however; the two men must have radioed to alert the others about him, and backup was surely on its way. It would only be a matter of minutes before they succeeded in trapping and capturing him.

He had no intention whatsoever of making it easy for them.

White took a look around. He was in the ordnance storage room. Empty, of course, as the *Drake* had been decommissioned

for years. All the torpedoes stolen by Shelby were in the torpedo room; there was no other weapon onboard, aside from the handguns, rifles, and machine guns carried by the commandos.

There was another way out of here, Colonel White recalled. At the other end of the room. He could see it from where he stood. Now, to reach it before the enemy could figure it out and cut off his way out. He quickly crossed the room, looking around for any enemies who might already be in there, hidden somewhere, ready to surprise him. But there was nowhere to hide properly in this place. As it was, White found that he was himself dangerously out in the open.

He heard banging behind him and looked back; somebody was trying to force down the access door he had jammed. It was holding for now, and White, not waiting to find out for how long that would be the case, hurried toward the other door. Reaching it, he found himself in another passageway, right at the foot of an iron stairway. He climbed it, swiftly, and reached another, smaller room, on the upper deck.

That was when he distinctly heard a clicking sound: it was the hammer of a revolver being cocked, not far to his right. He turned around quickly, raising his gun, and ready to shoot.

A thundering sound echoed in the room. Colonel White felt the bullet hitting him in the right shoulder; his arm went numb, and he lost his gun. The impact drove him back; he nearly fell down the stair he had just climbed and dropped heavily on the floor. Moaning in pain, he reached for his wounded shoulder.

He heard footsteps and raised his head. Coming out of the shadows, his smoking gun levelled at the colonel, a man was approaching, with a casual, but heavy, step. White looked with incredulity upon the face of the man who had nailed him. He shivered suddenly, a feeling of instant panic threatening to take him over, and he had to call upon all of his inner strength not to give in to it.

What he was seeing wasn't possible.

"I think you forgot, Admiral, that I know this ship as well as you do. Once I knew where you were, it was easy for me to guess HOW you would try to escape..."

"Greg," White murmured, dumbfounded. "Greg Dooley... But it can't be! I saw you dead..."

The older man gave a wry smile, hearing those words, keeping his gun trained on the Spectrum commander. There was an unusual, cold expression upon the familiar, elderly face looking down at Colonel White, such as he never had seen upon it.

"Yes, *Earthman*," the other man said with loathing in his voice, bending down next to White, his gun still aimed at him. "Greg

Dooley IS dead... As you shall be yourself, when the Mysterons have finished with you!"

White swallowed hard. "You're not Greg," he muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're one of those Mysterons..." He shuddered anew, as pain reverberated through his head, making him temporarily forget about his wounded shoulder. Images flashed quickly in his mind; there was an uncomfortable feeling of déjà-vu, as he stared incredulously into Dooley's icy eyes. "YOU were the one who trapped me," he murmured. "I... I remember now..."

"So you do," Dooley deadpanned. "A little too late for you, I'm afraid, Admiral."

Three armed commandos entered the room to stand behind the crouching Mysteron agent; lying there, grasping his wounded shoulder, White understood that there was no chance to escape, now. He kept staring at Dooley; he couldn't see any mercy in those cold eyes implacably fixed on him.

If he had hoped to see any trace of his friend in those eyes, he was deeply disappointed. Greg Dooley was surely dead. And this... reconstruct of him, this Mysteron, was nothing more than an inhuman, unearthly creature set on his destruction...

He could almost feel the hate emanating from him.

Seeing how desperate his situation was now, White felt anger taking the place of fear in him; surmounting the pain from his wounded and bleeding shoulder, he lashed out furiously at the Mysteron, even trying to rise from where he was lying.

"Whatever you want to use me for, I won't let you do it! So you'd better use that gun and kill me now, damn you! And be done with it!"

"Not now," Dooley answered quietly, standing up and staring down at the defiant-looking Colonel White... "Yes, we still have plans for you... You're still an important part of this mission. And whether you like it or not, you'll help us."

He motioned to the men standing behind him and two of them stepped forward on either side of White to brusquely drag him to his feet, without any consideration for his wounded shoulder. The Spectrum commander bit his lip to muffle a grunt of pain, and didn't resist, as he knew there was little point in even trying. Dooley nodded his satisfaction, and gave him another, even icier smile.

"You'll die in the service of the Mysterons, Admiral. I'm sure you can appreciate that..."

"You haven't won this game yet," White challenged him.

Dooley stood there, impassively, without the slightest emotion apparent on his face.

“Take him to Mister Shelby,” he ordered the mercenaries. “I know he’s eager to see him... And this time, you’d better not let him escape!”

Chapter 15

Spectrum helicopter A-31 reached the *de Brus* twenty minutes after leaving Edinburgh. The pilot circled over the liner, while Captain Grey made radio contact with her captain, to inform him of his intention to come aboard with Captain Forest. At first, the *de Brus* skipper wasn't really sure how the Spectrum officers would actually do that. The liner wasn't equipped with a helicopter pad, like a warship, and so they wouldn't be able to land on it. He thought that maybe they would come down a line, or something like that. Grey told him not to worry about it.

The skipper and his first officer were standing on the ship's Promenade Deck, with the majority of passengers, who had already been attracted there by the helicopter flying low over the ship. Obviously, they were curious about what was going on. The skipper too was curious, for he hadn't been told anything yet. He just knew that if Spectrum was there, it had to be something serious.

The skipper was rather surprised when he saw two men slowly descending toward the Promenade Deck using what looked like jetpacks. Cheers and applause broke out from the delighted passengers, in appreciation of the unexpected entertainment.

As the two men set foot on deck, quickly relieving themselves of their power packs, the skipper approached them, himself applauding, a large grin on his face. He extended his hand to Grey. He introduced himself.

"Captain John Theodore. Nice to have you onboard, sirs."

"Captain Grey and Captain Forest, from Spectrum," Grey answered, shaking hands with the older man.

"Those devices are really impressive," the skipper said, gesturing toward the power packs. "That's quite a show you just put on!"

"Thank you," Grey answered, with a faint smile. "But it wasn't intended as a show, skipper."

"I had a feeling it wasn't," Captain Theodore said, nodding gravely. "What brings Spectrum to the *de Brus*, on her maiden voyage?"

Grey looked around at the passengers surrounding them. Their arrival had drawn too much attention. If not for the urgency of the situation, Grey would never have used the power pack to come aboard. "Can we go somewhere more private first?"

Theodore nodded again. So, it was as serious as he thought. He motioned toward the nearest door. "This way, if you please, gentlemen..."

Captain Grey thanked him with a nod, and followed the skipper, Captain Forest close behind him.

* * *

Closely guarded by the two commandos, Colonel White was brought to the bridge. His wounded shoulder, left untended, was hurting him like crazy, and he pressed his left hand against it to minimize the loss of blood. In spite of this, he felt well enough. No headache had struck him, as he now had a clear understanding of exactly where he stood. Now he knew who his enemies really were; there was not the slightest doubt in his mind, even though there were still a lot of things he didn't remember of his life.

Upon entering, White looked around, assessing the room. Shelby was in front of the central controls, his back to him, and was looking up at a monitor screen set high over it, just above the large bay window that permitted an outside view. Not far from him, about four feet away from the central controls, was the console upon which were the various remote controls for the ship's armaments. Only one set of them – the torpedo launch controls – were of interest to him, and anyway, they were the only ones functional at present.

Next to the helm, a man sat in front of a radar screen, which was beeping regularly.

"Target still on screen, sir. We will be in visual range in less than ten minutes."

White saw Shelby nodding thoughtfully, not taking his eyes off the monitor. "Thank you, Mister Darrow. Let me know as soon as it's in sight."

"Aye, sir."

There was a short moment of silence, before Shelby turned around to finally acknowledge Colonel White's presence.

"I'll be glad when this mission is over... You're becoming quite an annoyance, Admiral."

"Don't call me that," White swiftly and harshly replied. "Only those who knew me back then, and those who are my friends have the right to do so."

"Like Quartermaster Dooley, you mean?" Shelby gave White an ironic smile.

The Spectrum commander-in-chief responded with an icy stare. "You killed him," he stated in a low tone.

"Captain Black killed him," Shelby answered, walking toward the older man. "But maybe you don't remember that correctly."

"That's just a technicality," White replied, his anger growing. "Your Mysteron masters engineered his death." He paused a second, trying to calm down, aware that he was still feeling the side effects of the *Dream Spinner* treatment. "He was a peaceful, elderly man, who cared only for his gardening. He didn't pose any threat to you. You transformed him into one of your kind. Why?"

"To get to you, that's why, Colonel White."

Shelby stopped right in front of White and waited for a reaction. The colonel's stare became nothing less than murderous.

"You remember that, don't you? You remember your Spectrum rank... I suppose the time you spent in Spectrum's custody was enough for your men to convince you."

"So much for the so-called effectiveness of the *Dream Spinner*," White replied bitterly.

Shelby shook his head. He turned back to the monitor. "How unfortunate for you that you came to your senses too late to stop this mission."

He had returned his attention to the screen. White raised his eyes to it; he knew about this monitor. It had been his observation post for many years. Cameras around the ship were connected to it, so he would be aware of what was going on onboard. It was currently showing the upper stern deck. What could possibly interest him there? White wondered. *It's as if he's waiting for something...* He would have thought Shelby would be more inclined to use the camera set at the very tip of the ship's bow. He would then have had a clear view of the *Drake's* intended target, the moment it was sighted.

"Don't be so sure you will succeed," White answered between his teeth, in answer to Shelby's last remark.

The other man scoffed loudly. "And who's going to stop us? Spectrum? They don't even know where we are at this moment. You?" He gave an evil grin, showing the full contempt he had for the colonel. "Or your much-vaunted Captain Scarlet?"

White narrowed his eyes with suspicion. What could Shelby be up to? He had said these words without taking his eyes off the monitor screen. White turned his attention back to it.

He saw one of the commandos coming out from an open door to step onto the stern deck. He was carrying on his shoulders a very large canvas bag, obviously containing something heavy. The man walked toward the bulwark, and leaned down to drop his burden unceremoniously onto the floor, next to a big rusted chain hooked to an equally rusted anchor. White went cold inside when he suddenly realized the bag contained a human body. He could

see the commando tightly securing the chain to red-booted feet protruding from one end of the bag.

No doubt of the identity of the person who was in there...

"Wait a minute!" White protested with anger in his tone. "You can't be serious about this... The man isn't even dead!"

"Are you sure of that?" Shelby replied coldly.

White hesitated, suddenly unsure. At least, the last time he had seen Scarlet, he WAS alive. Seeing his hesitation, Shelby gave him an ominous stare.

"Anyway, if he's not now, he will be very soon," he continued icily.

White blanched. "That's murder!"

"Call it what you want. Too long has Captain Scarlet interfered with the Mysterons' plans. Now we have the opportunity to stop him, once and for all. I'm not about to let it pass."

Outraged, White made a threatening step toward Shelby, apparently intended to jump at him. One of the two men still standing on either side of him hit him in the stomach with the butt of his rifle. He collapsed heavily on the floor, with a painful grunt. Shelby had not moved from his spot; he hadn't shown the slightest reaction. Impassively, he stared down at the colonel, lying at his feet.

"That was stupid, sir. Not to mention absolutely useless." He raised his eyes to address the two commandos. "Shackle him to the helm."

White blinked, hearing these words. He felt strong hands grabbing him and dragging him to his feet. He tried to break free and made a move, this time not toward Shelby, but to reach the armaments console. He felt a blow again, this time to the side of his head, right on the dressing covering the wound Rhapsody had caused him. His head reeled, and his knees buckled under him. Half-conscious, he was dragged over to the helm, and dropped in front of it. Somebody took his right hand, and snapped the end of a handcuff around his wrist, before extending his arm and securing the other end to the helm. That sent a wave of pain down to his injured shoulder and forced a cry from his lips.

"That will be all, men. The colonel won't be any trouble from now on. You can return to your duties."

White heard the footsteps of the two mercenaries as they left the room. Lying on his back at the foot of the helm, he was fighting hard not to lose consciousness. His sight was blurred, as he peered up under the control panel. He thought he saw a weapon stashed underneath it. He shook his pounding head, tried to focus his eyesight, wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him again.

His vision cleared enough for him to realize the weapon was only the emergency flare gun.

"Target in view, sir!"

That call from Darrow at the radar screen drew both Shelby's and the half-stunned White's attention. The Mysteron smiled faintly and looked through the window onto the open sea. He could indeed see the target, coming their way, unaware of the danger hanging over it. "Hold this course. Let them have a good look at us, before we send them to the bottom of the sea..." He stared down at White. The latter was dragging himself to his feet, supporting himself on the control board and the helm, and gritting his teeth against the pain from his injured shoulder and his throbbing head.

"Should I give you the bow camera on the monitor screen, sir?" Darrow asked Shelby.

"One minute, please, Mister Darrow. There is still business to attend to on the stern deck."

White raised his head to look at the screen. On it, he could see the commando on the stern deck; he had dragged his charge closer to the bulwark, now straining to get it over the metal railing. He left it hanging there to pick up the heavy anchor. He heaved it over the railing.

The anchor dropped overboard toward the sea, dragging along the body that was tied to its chain. It took only a few seconds before it splashed into the water and quickly disappeared.

White had become absolutely livid. He turned a furious gaze toward Shelby, who was still looking up at the screen with a very cold stare.

"I won't let you get away with this!" Colonel White promised in a low growl.

"Won't you, now?" Shelby quietly responded. "Think about who's really responsible for your man's death, Colonel."

White didn't answer. He didn't need the Mysteron agent to remind him that he had brought this fate to Captain Scarlet. Seeing him keeping silent, Shelby shrugged and addressed the man at the radar: "Give me the bow camera, Mister Darrow. Business is now finished on the stern deck. We can concentrate on our main mission now."

* * *

Captain Scarlet took one last look down at the sea. The bag, weighed down by the heavy anchor, had sunk like a rock. He then stood up slowly, pulling the cap down over his eyes to conceal his

features. Good thing that MacBride was about the same build as himself; the mercenary's clothes fitted him so well that nobody who had seen him so far had realised the substitution. Good thing also that he had awakened soon enough in the sickbay to hear MacBride passing on his orders to the other mercenaries, before sending them in search of Colonel White. And more importantly, he had been very fortunate that the man had been foolish enough to turn his back on the prisoner he was supposed to dispose of, thus enabling the latter to surprise him.

Scarlet had been forced to kill him. He had been given no choice when MacBride had tried to use his gun on him. But Scarlet had been quicker, stronger. He had forced the barrel into MacBride's side and the man was shot by the bullets intended for Scarlet. The Spectrum officer had to act quickly after that. He had taken the man's black uniform, dressed him in his own, and put him into a large canvas bag. Then he had disposed of him, the way MacBride himself was supposed to get rid of Scarlet.

Now the enemy would believe him dead. He would be free to investigate what they were preparing and where Colonel White had disappeared to. And he would have to do it quickly, for the new deadline was surely drawing near. While he was lying on that dirty hangar floor, with White tending him, Scarlet had heard Shelby's exchange over the radio, during which the *Mysteron* had mentioned the target leaving Edinburgh; he knew that the *Drake* had had to leave Liberty Base in a hurry to intercept its prey, as it was intended to do. That was already a few hours ago, and the target couldn't be very far now. The *Drake* would be within striking range very soon.

According to what he had heard of MacBride's instructions to the others, the colonel, when captured again, would be taken back to the bridge. Best place to start looking for him. And anyway, that was the strategic place to go to see what could be done to stop the enemy.

Scarlet turned around and was about to go back inside when he nearly collided with a tall man that was standing behind him. He stopped in time and looked up into the bright, icy eyes of the man who had approached him so quietly.

"Going somewhere, *Earthman*?"

Scarlet was so astonished to recognize Jonathan Dempsey that he didn't react soon enough to avoid the big fist coming right at his face. He was roughly sent sprawling on his back on the deck.

* * *

"Ship's in view, Captain!"

Lieutenant-Commander Clifford, Captain Theodore's first officer onboard the *de Brus*, handed a pair of binoculars to his commander who had quickly come to his side, upon hearing his call. Behind the two men were Captains Grey and Forest. Grey took a pair of binoculars from one of the *de Brus* crew, and looked with Theodore in the direction indicated by Clifford. He saw a warship rapidly coming in their direction.

"Damn," he muttered. He handed the binoculars to Forest. "Can you confirm it's the *Drake*, Captain?"

Forest took the binoculars and brought them to his eyes. He took just one look, before nodding to Captain Grey. "That is the *Drake*, sir."

Grey thanked him with a nod of his own. A few minutes ago, he had informed the *de Brus* captain of the danger that was looming over his ship. Theodore had reacted with all the calm befitting his rank. Before Grey could even propose it to him, he voiced his intention of changing course and going straight to the nearest port. He was about to do it, when Clifford had alerted them.

Grey flipped down his cap mic to make an urgent call. "Captain Grey to Angel pack. I'm presently onboard the *de Brus*. We can see the *Drake*. Request immediate support!"

"*We're already on our way, Captain,*" the voice of Destiny answered him almost right away.

"Thank you, Angel One. Make it quick, please!"

"*We'll be there in about two minutes.*"

"Lieutenant Green?" Grey called again, changing channels.

"*Green, here,*" came the Caribbean accented voice. "*I heard your call to the Angels, Captain.*"

"When will naval support arrive, Lieutenant?"

"*The Navy has sent ships in your area to provide help. A Clamshell submarine also is on its way, and should be there in about twenty minutes.*"

"I'm afraid that would be too late," Grey sighed. He knew that the World Navy had long since been alerted that one of their old ships had been stolen, and was intended to be used in a Mysteron threat. Up until a couple of hours ago, the problem was to actually determine what the exact content of that threat was, and so the Navy had not been called in until it became clear. Despite the Navy's efforts to be there in time, Grey just had the very bad feeling they would not be there to stop the *Drake* from sending the *de Brus* at the bottom of the sea.

The Angels should be here shortly, though, but would they be enough to stop the *Drake*? Grey had his doubts.

Well, I'm not giving up hope just yet, Grey thought with grim assurance.

"We'll be changing course, Lieutenant," he announced over the radio. "We'll try to put some distance between us and the *Drake*, to gain some time for help to arrive."

"S.I.G., Captain Grey. Captain Blue and Captain Ochre are also on their way to rendezvous with you, onboard a Spectrum helicopter. They should be arriving shortly."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

The mic returned to its place and Grey turned to Captain Theodore.

"What should we do, now, Captain Grey?" the skipper asked. Despite his vast experience, never before had he been faced with a situation like this. He thought it best to let it be handled by those who were obviously better trained in these matters than he.

"Change course, quickly," Grey instructed. "Full speed, away from that warship!"

"Shouldn't we alert the passengers, sir?" Clifford suddenly asked the Spectrum officer. "We could start an evacuation..."

Grey's features hardened. "Do you really think we could evacuate more than two thousand passengers in less than twenty minutes, Lieutenant-Commander? That's about all we've got before the *Drake* launches her attack against us!"

* * *

"There's a Spectrum helicopter flying over the target, sir."

On the *Drake's* bridge, the monitor had now switched to the bow camera, showing the target the old warship was to attack and destroy. Shelby, still standing in front of the screen, nodded thoughtfully.

"So," he said, "Spectrum has finally solved the riddle..."

"What should we do now, sir?" Darrow asked, turning toward the Mysteron agent. "That helicopter..."

Shelby dismissed the man's remark with a wave of his hand.

"Don't worry about it. It's no match for the *Drake*..." He turned around to face Colonel White, standing a few feet behind him, still shackled to the helm. "Wouldn't you agree, Admiral?"

White did not refute the 'admiral' title. His eyes were glued to the screen, with obvious perplexity. "That's a cruise liner," he said, gesturing toward the monitor with his free hand.

"That is correct, Colonel," Shelby answered quietly. "The *S.S. de Brus*, which has just left Edinburgh for its maiden voyage to New York."

"You plan to sink a cruise liner?" White asked in disbelief. "There must be thousands of civilians onboard..."

"Two thousand and twenty four passengers to be exact. Plus twelve hundred crew members..."

"You can't be serious," White murmured, shaking his head.

"And what makes you think I'm not serious?"

"You envision the death of these people so casually... My God... What do you hope to accomplish by slaughtering them all?"

"The Mysterons' will must be accomplished. Their instructions will be carried out."

"What kind of monsters are you?"

"The kind you *Earthmen* made of us," Shelby responded harshly. "Maybe you don't remember, but you were the ones who started this war..."

"And I seem to recall that it was all a terrible mistake," White replied. He frowned, obviously straining his memory, trying to remember what it was all about. "Captain Black," he murmured. "Yes, he... destroyed your complex on Mars... He thought you were about to attack him and his men..." He stared back at Shelby, who was watching him, still very coldly. "You took him over then..."

"Very good, Colonel," Shelby noted. "Your memory is making progress."

"It was a mistake," White repeated insistently, pulling against the shackle imprisoning his right wrist. "Why can't you believe that?"

"Oh, but we DO believe you, Colonel."

White was baffled by the Mysteron's too quiet tone. He felt his temper rising. "What? Why can't you accept it, then? Is it so difficult to forgive us? Why would you want to destroy an entire race for the fault of just one man?" Shelby didn't reply. White gave him a look of total disgust. "No wonder you never told me the precise objective of this mission!" he growled, his temper taking the place of his incredulity. "You knew that even in the state you had put me in, I would never have attacked a ship full of innocent people!"

"No human is innocent, Colonel White," Shelby replied icily. He smiled evilly at the older man. "And as far as you're concerned, we have you onboard. That's what counts."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Can't you figure it out by yourself? It's true the *Dream Spinner* treatment has somehow impaired your judgment..."

White frowned in anger. "This is directed at me, then?" Shelby didn't care to answer. "If you have a bone to pick with me," White

continued in a growling tone, "then kill me, and be done with it! Let these people go!"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't satisfy the Mysterons."

"Why?"

"That should be easy enough for you to understand. The *Drake* will sink the *de Brus*. When the proper authorities investigate this... incident, they will discover you were at the helm of your old ship. Your identity, of course, will become known throughout the world... That will be enough to discredit Spectrum, don't you think? And if it should be also found out that your people were aware of what had occurred..."

White grimly nodded his understanding. He remembered Captain Blue and Captain Scarlet telling him of this eventuality, while he was in Spectrum's custody. He didn't believe they could be speaking the truth then, thinking that they were trying to trick him and manipulate him, so he would give them precious information they needed for their investigation. While it was the case they did need information from him, it was now obvious they never had lied to him.

White was now wondering if they had the slightest idea, back then, that they could be so close to the truth.

"So you want to use me to bring about Spectrum's downfall," he said bitterly.

"Who better than Spectrum's own commander-in-chief to perform such a mission?" Shelby retorted. "Oh, don't worry, though... You won't be alive to witness it."

"I'd worked that out for myself. Tell me... why didn't you..." White searched for the word Scarlet had used earlier and found it. "Why didn't you Mysteronise me?"

"You were to fetch the *Drake* for us," Shelby answered. "I couldn't very well go to the Naval Depot myself..."

"You would have been spotted right away by the Mysteron detector."

Shelby nodded. "You were the ideal choice, Colonel. A former World Navy Admiral... a celebrated hero... and the *Sir Francis Drake* WAS your ship... Nobody would ever THINK of suspecting you."

"That's not the only reason," White noted dryly. "I still had to be human to be at the helm. If it was to be found that it was a Mysteron duplicate who was at the *Drake's* helm, that wouldn't have the same impact on the investigation, would it? Spectrum's responsibility could be minimized... although not totally erased."

"There is another thing, Colonel," Shelby added coldly. "My masters ordered that you witness the destruction of the *de Brus*, with your own eyes. They want you to know that nobody can long

escape the Mysterons' revenge... They want you to learn, and understand this perfectly..."

"And then you'll kill me." White didn't flinch away. He shook his head. "It takes more than that to frighten me, Mister," he said between clenched teeth. "Maybe I'm as good as dead, but you haven't won yet!"

"It doesn't look like we can lose now, *Earthman*."

"What about that Spectrum helicopter? If it's here, you can be sure the rest of Spectrum isn't far either!"

"Yes... But maybe it's still too far to stop us from performing our mission."

White was about to answer when he was suddenly interrupted by Darrow, still at his station, in front of the radar screen: "The *de Brus* is altering course, sir."

Shelby turned away from White and went to stand behind the man to check on the screen too. While the Mysteron agent had his back turned to Colonel White, a flicker of pain crossed the Spectrum commander's face. He was fighting so hard not to let it be apparent in front of Shelby and it was becoming very difficult. His bleeding shoulder was hurting him more and more, and his head was throbbing from where he had been struck. He could feel the blood running down his face, the stitches having popped under the blow.

He saw Shelby turning again, to look at the monitor. There was a smile of satisfaction on his face. "That's not really important," he declared quietly. "They can't hope to escape us. We'll just change course too and follow them, until we are ready to attack."

He turned toward White, who quickly got a hold of himself to present a strong façade.

"You have the helm, Admiral... Will you do us the honour?"

White gave him a perplexed look. "You don't really imagine that I would collaborate with you and..." He stopped suddenly and lowered his gaze toward the helm. He had felt it move.

Under his incredulous eyes, he SAW it turning, without him having to touch it.

"What the..." White tried to hold the helm with both hands, to stop it from turning. He wasn't able to. It was not because he was too weak from his present condition, although his injured arm was handicapping him heavily. It was as if the helm had a will of its own.

"It's no use, Colonel. You can't fight the power of the Mysterons." White turned a sceptical and horrified stare toward Shelby, who, still smiling with obvious contentment, had approached to stand very close to him. The Mysteron agent shook his head, seeing the inquisitive look upon White's face. "It was not

necessary to destroy and reconstruct the entire ship..." He pointed toward the helm. "Only THIS component was needed."

White let go of the helm, as if it was a branding iron. It was Mysteronised, he realised, completely dumbfounded. Tampered with, so the Mysterons would be able to do with it as they pleased. He watched as it slowly turned, to alter the ship's course. Then he raised his eyes and stared at the monitor screen.

He saw the *de Brus* sailing straight ahead, desperately trying to put some distance between herself and her pursuer. He knew it was a useless race; the *Drake* was, by far, the faster of the two ships.

"As you can see," Shelby said very quietly, "it will be all over soon. The *de Brus* can't escape us. Soon, it will be..." He stopped suddenly, and his stare became distant. White was glaring at him, wondering what was happening to him. It was as if the Mysteron's mind wasn't there anymore. He saw him suddenly frown deeply.

"I should have known this couldn't be so easily taken care of!" Shelby growled in irritation. He turned swiftly toward Darrow. "Send a team of men to the upper stern deck!"

"Sir?" the man asked with perplexity.

"Don't question my orders, Mister Darrow!" Shelby replied harshly. "Send some men there! Without delay!"

Darrow nodded, apparently uncomfortable with his leader's outburst, and turned toward his communication system. White was still staring at Shelby, puzzled by his apparently unexplainable behaviour. It was as if something had suddenly come to his attention, bothering him greatly. But the next second the Mysteron turned to face him, his features had become as cold and expressionless as before. As if nothing had ever occurred.

"Don't worry, Colonel," Shelby said with a very icy smile. "This is a small problem that won't even trouble our mission. In fact, I believe it will be resolved very soon..."

Colonel White couldn't even imagine what the alien agent could be talking about.

* * *

Captain Scarlet looked up to Dempsey, who had sent him flying onto his back on the floor of the stern deck. The Mysteron had thrown him a mean hook; he had literally knocked the wind out of him. Again, it was one of those times where Scarlet's sixth sense had failed him, and didn't tell him of the Mysteron's presence so near to him.

It was really annoying when that happened.

With a smirk of anticipatory satisfaction upon his face, Dempsey walked toward Scarlet.

“Never send a human to do a Mysteron’s work.” He took a dazed Scarlet by his shirt and pulled him up to look him in the eyes. “Don’t you agree, Captain?”

Before Scarlet could react, Dempsey landed another powerful punch on his jaw, before unceremoniously throwing him to the floor again. The captain gave a low grunt as he landed heavily on his back. Out of breath, he watched as Dempsey came in for another round.

“We should have known a simple hired-hand wouldn’t be able to handle you,” the Mysteron continued casually. He picked up a rusted chain lying on the deck, without pausing in his approach, and wrapped one end of it around his right hand. “That would have been too easy.”

Keeping a wary eye on the approaching enemy, Scarlet backed away from him, glancing furtively around, searching for a possible weapon. He saw a lead pipe, lying on the floor about four feet to his left.

“You were one of us, once,” Dempsey added. “You could have been the best of our agents.”

“I would rather be dead,” Scarlet replied.

“Your wish is my command, Captain.”

Dempsey swung the heavy chain toward Scarlet with all his strength. At the last possible second, the Spectrum officer rolled to his left, avoiding the blow, and the chain smacked violently onto the deck. He snatched up the pipe, and finding himself once more on his back, raised it at arms’ length. The chain that Dempsey was again swinging in his direction wrapped around the pipe and found itself caught there. Scarlet pulled hard, throwing the Mysteron off-balance, and kicked him in the stomach. Dempsey fell on his knees, losing his weapon. Scarlet lost hold of his, too.

Both were on their feet mere seconds later, facing each other a few feet apart.

They were still alone on deck, Scarlet realized, the other mercenaries being probably too busy with their duties. Keeping on his guard, he took a quick look behind him. He was only a foot away from the bulwark. That was a hazardous enough position. One false move, one push, and he would fall overboard to a watery grave.

Realising that, Dempsey gave an evil grin. “You’re going to die, *Earthman*. And it will be a pleasure for me to kill you.”

There was an ominous glow in Scarlet’s blue eyes, as he gauged his opponent. “Even as a human, you were a despicable character, Dempsey,” he growled with anger.

“I didn’t realize we had met before today,” Dempsey replied, giving Scarlet a quizzical look.

"We didn't meet," Scarlet retorted icily. "Remember Bristol? That woman you and your mates took prisoner?"

The Spectrum officer couldn't forget that dreadful episode during which the original Dempsey had attacked and tried to have his way with his beloved Rhapsody. He saw an evil smile spreading across the Mysteron's features. He, too, was recalling it. "I see. The girl. I believed I found her... very attractive, when I was still human. Is she something to you?"

"She's MINE!" Scarlet answered with anger.

"Really now? Surprising. One like us shouldn't normally have such human feelings. Of course there have been flaws now and then..."

"I am NOT like you!"

"Maybe you're more like us than you care to admit... because you wouldn't be standing there if you weren't, Captain."

It was obvious to Scarlet the Mysteron reconstruct was trying to anger him, to push him into making some mistake that he could take advantage of. It wouldn't take much for Dempsey to succeed, in fact, as old doubts that never really had left him came back to Scarlet's mind. He forced himself not to listen to any of this and shrugged it off, not giving in to the Mysteron's game.

"You're wrong," he answered softly. "My actions can speak for me. I'm still human enough to fight your kind, be it Mysteron... or human. I could NEVER be like you."

Dempsey shook his head. "Well," he replied between his teeth, "one thing you will be for sure is dead, at the bottom of the sea, *Earthman*."

Scarlet couldn't help but find the insult in itself comforting, thinking that the Mysteron wouldn't call him '*Earthman*' if he really did consider him one of his kind. He only had a second to dwell on it, however, as at the same instant, Dempsey threw himself at him, with the obvious intention of pushing the Spectrum captain overboard.

But Scarlet was ready and caught hold of him. Dempsey drove him off and together, they went over the metal guard. Scarlet let go of Dempsey and grabbed the railing with one firm hand. He hung there, and looked down, as the screaming Mysteron plunged into the water. He saw him instantly disappearing under the ship, sucked up by the powerful propeller.

That's for Rhapsody. And for shooting me in the back... Even so, Scarlet couldn't help a shiver running down his spine. That was a horrible death that had befallen the Mysteron agent. The kind of death he had planned for Scarlet himself.

The captain hauled himself over the railing, and then onto the deck. He had just set foot on it and was trying to regain his breath, when he saw a group of four armed men barging out from the

door about twenty feet from him, and coming his way. He heard gunshots, and felt bullets flying around him. He didn't wait much longer to jump behind the relative safety of a large and heavy canvas. Drawing the gun he had taken from MacBride, he responded to the mercenaries' fire, stopping one dead in his tracks, and forcing the others to take cover.

Scarlet took a quick look around. For now, he was safe, but he knew he couldn't stay there very long. He had to move on to do his job, namely to find Colonel White and stop the Mysterons from carrying out their threat. And he had little time to do so. He couldn't permit himself to waste it by staying here, blocked by these guys.

He had to find a way to escape them. And he had to do it fast. Or else, the Mysterons would have won this battle.

He was at this point in his reflections, and was contemplating his options, when a shrieking sound coming from overhead suddenly covered the gunshots from his attackers. He raised his head and looked up, already knowing what the sound heralded.

He saw the three Angel interceptors making a low reconnaissance pass over the *Sir Francis Drake*. A smile of gratitude spread across his face.

Thanks, girls! Your timing couldn't be better!

* * *

"The Spectrum Angels are on us, sir!"

Upon seeing the three fighters passing by through the bay window, Darrow had turned to Shelby, addressing him in an unnerved, worried tone. The Mysteron agent frowned at him, annoyed.

"I can see that for myself, Mister Darrow! Didn't you see their approach on the radar screen?"

"I... everything seemed normal, sir!"

"Spectrum must have a way to block our radar." Shelby glared toward Colonel White. Still shackled to the self-moving helm, the Spectrum commander was silently watching the two men, waiting. Because of his untended wounds and the resultant loss of blood, he was now feverish, sweat beading on his forehead. Still, he was his indomitable self, and was determined to keep a defiant appearance, despite his growing weakness. He shrugged at the mute question he could see in Shelby's stare.

"Don't ask me," he said in a peevish tone. "You know my memory's not working very well..." He shook his head. "You're going to lose, Shelby. I told you Spectrum would be here to stop you."

"They're here, all right," Shelby muttered. "But they're far from stopping us..." He glared in disgust at Darrow, who was now obviously very anxious. "Stop worrying, you fool! Those planes haven't fired on us yet, haven't they?"

"N-no, sir."

"But they will," Colonel White said with assurance. "They will stop at nothing until they have put an end to your threat."

"I'd rather doubt they will be willing to fire on us, Colonel," Shelby said coldly. "Those pilots know you're onboard."

"That won't stop them."

Shelby scoffed loudly. "You're underestimating your people's loyalty to you, Colonel."

No, I'm not, White told himself grimly. He knew all too well his people's loyalty to him. He had witnessed it personally, while he was onboard Cloudbase, in Spectrum's custody. Shelby figured he had made a point and gave the faintest of smiles.

Next to them, Darrow had answered a call on his radio, and turned toward his superior. "Sir, we have another problem," he announced. "There's exchange of gunfire on the upper stern deck. Seems one of our men has turned against us. He threw Mister Dempsey overboard and now he's shooting at..."

"Don't bother me with details, Mister Darrow," Shelby harshly interrupted him. "Have that man killed."

"Sir, what about the..."

An explosion came from outside at that moment, causing a shockwave that made the bridge shake. Shelby turned around, to look through the bay window, and saw the radar tower disintegrating in flames, under the impact of an airborne missile.

"The Angels have started their attack on us!" Darrow's voice had risen an octave, as worry mounted in him.

"So, they wouldn't be willing to shoot at us, would they?"

There was a sarcastic and satisfied enough tone to Colonel White's voice. For his remark, he received a violent slap across the face from Shelby, without being able to avoid it. It was so strong that it made him stagger. His head reeling, he caught hold of the console to keep himself from falling.

"They CAN'T stop us," the Mysteron declared. "They don't have enough firepower."

"But they still can do plenty of damage," White replied under his breath. He was regaining his footing, all the while dispersing from his mind the temporary daze Shelby's clout had brought about.

Next to them, Darrow was now rather busy at his radio station. He was receiving calls from all around the ship.

"The men want to know what to do now, Commander," he told Shelby. "They saw the Angels' attack and request instructions."

He turned around to find out that the Mysteron agent had turned his attention straight at the monitor screen, where they could see the image of the *de Brus* quickly growing as the *Drake* approached her.

"Tell them to keep their stations," Shelby ordered.

"Sir?" Darrow asked with perplexity.

"Those are my orders, Mister Darrow! This mission must continue!"

Shelby didn't turn his attention away from the monitor. White watched him closely, as Shelby now had his back turned to him, and then stole a glance in the direction of the armaments console. Curiously, the Mysteron agent didn't seem to be interested in it. But White knew the *Drake* was more than close enough now to strike at the *de Brus*, with one well-aimed torpedo that would send it to the bottom of the sea.

Why wasn't he doing it?

As for Darrow, he was staring incredulously at his superior, after receiving that last order from him, unsure of what to do.

That was when a beeping sound from his radio station drew his attention. He checked on his controls. "We're being hailed, Commander." He turned to face Shelby again. "It's the Angel Leader."

The Mysteron agent hesitated slightly. His eyes were now fixed on Colonel White, watching his reactions. He saw interest and hope in his face, following Darrow's announcement. "Put it through," the Mysteron agent instructed.

Darrow nodded quickly; he pressed a button on his communication console. Immediately, a clear, accented female voice, with a stern determination to it, filled the bridge: "*This is Angel One, calling the Sir Francis Drake. That was a warning shot. Stop your engines, lower your weapons, and surrender. A World Navy warship will soon come to board you. Acknowledge this call, immediately.*"

White listened intently to that voice. He recalled having heard it before. He recognised that heavy French accent. There was a French woman among the Angel pilots. The one, he remembered, who was mostly regarded as their leader. Short, strikingly beautiful girl, with long flowing blonde hair. He knew her name...

Destiny Angel.

"What should we do now, sir?" White snapped out of his reverie to pay attention to what was going on at the present. Darrow's voice sounded rather alarmed, as he spoke to his field commander. Obviously, he was growing more and more worried.

"We maintain course," Shelby answered icily. "The Spectrum Angels won't be able to stop us before this mission is finished!"

Darrow was looking perplexed. "It may be that they don't have the firepower to stop us, but he's right, you know?" He nodded toward Colonel White. "Those aircraft can do us considerable damage. Eventually, a direct hit to the bridge..."

"We continue the mission," Shelby interrupted him abruptly. "I won't let anything – or anyone – stop us seeing it through!"

"Are you insane?" Darrow snapped, coming to his feet. "Spectrum will show us no mercy, if we torpedo that ship, right before their eyes!"

Best comment I heard today, White thought gloomily. It could be that Spectrum wouldn't have too much trouble stopping the *Drake*, after all... If Shelby kept on this way, it was possible that he would end up with a full-scale mutiny, and that the mercenaries under his command would gladly force him to surrender.

But then, Lieutenant-Commander Jason Shelby surprised both White and Darrow when he next spoke: "We're not sinking the *de Brus* with a torpedo, Mister Darrow."

"You're going to surrender?" White asked with unbelieving hope.

But he said that without really knowing to what lengths a Mysteron was able to go to see his mission through. And Shelby was no different from any other Mysteron agent, and kept true to nature.

"I WILL see this mission finished," he replied with an even colder stare set on the Spectrum commander. "Do you REALLY think me stupid, Colonel? You didn't really think you were going to get away with it?"

"What are you talking about?" White mumbled, frowning.

He was afraid to even think about what it was. Shelby came closer to him.

"I'm talking about the fact that you were captured not far from the torpedo room," he noted. "You had Harris bound and gagged. That man was assigned to prepare the torpedoes for launch. You did something in that torpedo room. What was it?"

White responded only with a cold glare of his own. There was another explosion outside, that didn't seem to bother Shelby. He was now narrowing his eyes at the colonel.

"Why did you try to reach for the torpedo launch command, when you broke free earlier?" Again, White kept silent. Shelby

nodded quietly. "I think I KNOW what it is. I bet that, if ever that button is pushed, we'd have an enormous surprise..."

"What kind of surprise?" Darrow asked, frowning.

"You rigged the torpedo tubes, didn't you?" Shelby continued, without hearing the man out and addressing a still impassive Colonel White. "You fixed them, so they would blow up if we were to use them."

"He did what?" a stunned Darrow murmured, his eyes wide. He stared at White incredulously. "But that would cause an major breach in the hull, and..."

"It would do much more than that," Shelby replied. "White Shark Mark 12 torpedoes may not be that big or look like much, but they're powerful enough. The initial explosion from one of them would set off the detonators of the others. That would destroy the entire ship within minutes." He gave a cold smile. "That's why you went for that launch button. You so wanted to stop us that you would have sacrificed your own life to do it. Am I right in my assumption, 'Admiral'?"

White didn't answer. There didn't seem to be much point; the Mysteron had found him out. Darrow was staring at him, open-mouthed, obviously unable to believe that he would do such a thing, knowing full well that he would die in the process, without leaving himself some means of escape. The mercenary made a sound of disgust, before turning toward Shelby.

"And you wanted to continue this mission," he noted. "I can't see how you can now!"

A third explosion shook the bridge and the three men had to hold on to the control board in front of them to keep on their feet. The voice of Destiny came again from the speaker, with an angry and ever sterner tone than before:

"This is our LAST warning shot! Surrender within the next two minutes, or we'll come in to attack!"

Darrow gave a last look at the apparently unmoved Shelby. He hesitated one last time; then walked toward the communication system.

"Where are you going?" Shelby asked him coldly.

"To call her," Darrow answered, turning around. "I don't know about you, but I certainly don't want to die in here. I'm giving up."

"You'll do no such thing."

Darrow gave a tired sigh. "Face it, Mister Shelby. This mission is finished."

He turned again toward the com. Behind him, Shelby took his revolver from its holster and pointed it toward the walking man, cocking the hammer. White watched him intently.

"Don't take another step," he warned Darrow.

The man stopped and slowly turned around; he looked with surprise at the gun aimed at him. Shelby's stare was icier than before.

"This mission will be finished when I say it is," the Mysteron said.

"Be reasonable, Shelby," White intervened. "You have no weapon to strike at the *de Brus*. Let it go!"

"I have a weapon left," Shelby retorted. "If you hadn't noticed, Colonel, this entire ship IS a weapon."

White frowned, unsure of what Shelby was implying. A doubt then came to his mind and he raised his eyes toward the monitor above the command console.

The *Drake* was still heading straight at the *de Brus*.

At full speed.

"Good God," whispered White. "We're on a collision course!"

Darrow raised his eyes too, to look in disbelief at the monitor. The distance separating the *Drake* from the *de Brus* was narrowing rapidly. He understood instantly that White was right. He also understood that Shelby was aiming to fulfil his mission, even if it meant killing them all in the process. Figuring that he had nothing to lose – that if the *Drake* should collide with the cruise liner, he would be dead anyway – he slammed his open palm down on a big red button set in the middle of the control board. It was the emergency button that commanded an immediate full stop for the ship's engines.

Normally, Darrow knew, a loud siren should have started howling all over the ship. He heard nothing. Nor did he feel the *Drake* slowing down. Looking up the monitor again he saw that the ship was still going straight at the *de Brus*, dangerously gaining on her.

"Do you truly believe that the Mysterons would have left any of you with the possibility of stopping this mission?" Shelby scoffed behind him. "This ship is under our command!"

Darrow turned back to stare at the Mysteron agent, who was keeping very cold and quiet, his gun still aimed at him.

"You ARE insane," he murmured, frowning.

"No, *Earthman*. I'm dedicated to my cause. Which is more than can be said for you."

Shelby implacably pulled the trigger. A detonation followed and Darrow, hit in the chest by the bullet, was pushed back against the control board, right next to Colonel White.

* * *

Standing on the bridge with Captain Theodore and Captain Forest, Captain Grey was keeping his binoculars trained on the *Sir Francis Drake*, in pursuit behind them. The warship was gaining on its prey. Grey was growing concerned. From his experience, he knew that the *Drake* had been within firing range for a long time, and yet, it didn't launch any of the torpedoes he knew it was armed with. Two well-aimed White Sharks would be more than sufficient to send the *de Brus* to the bottom of the sea. He'd ordered the Spectrum helicopter in position to launch electronic countermeasures in the event of torpedo attack, but even that wasn't guaranteed to stop them. Why weren't any already on their way? Captain Forest was scrutinising the water's surface, looking for any sign that would announce the coming of one of the dreadful torpedoes. So far, nothing.

What are they waiting for? Captain Grey thought gloomily. *They should have fired by now, but they haven't. They have us, and they know it. They're just taking their sweet time to finish us.* He was also surprised by the fact that he didn't think Admiral Charles Gray would be the kind of man to take pleasure in that sort of game.

No. It's definitely not his style, Captain Grey thought gloomily.

Something was wrong.

"What is it?" he grumbled, putting the binoculars down. "What's happening up there?"

He could see the Angels circling over the *Drake*; they had just fired a third warning shot at one of the decks, hoping to intimidate its crew into surrender. Grey knew the aircraft had little hope of actually stopping the warship. The *Sir Francis Drake* had been one of the most powerful warships of the British Navy. Its reputation had lasted even through to the present day. It was perfectly able to endure an air attack for a good amount of time... Long enough to carry out the Mysterons' threat and sink the *de Brus*, anyway.

And apparently, there was no counting on the Navy... None of their ships was in view, and the last call Grey had received had informed him that it was more than probable that they wouldn't be there in time.

We're on our own.

Right next to Grey, Captain Theodore was consulting with the sonar technician, looking over his shoulder onto his screen. He shook his head, addressing the Spectrum officer. "Still nothing in view, Captain Grey." Despite the situation, the likes of which he wasn't used to, the experienced skipper was keeping impressively calm. "When do you think they will launch those torpedoes, anyway?"

"I don't know, skipper," Grey said, looking over the surface of the water, expecting to see one of the powerful destructive engines to appear. "It may be that something is happening onboard that ship, that could turn the tide in our favour."

He knew about Captain Scarlet being on the *Drake*, of course. Blue had notified him of this over the radio. He was also aware that Scarlet had been wounded and was apparently a prisoner. Well, if he knew his British counterpart, Grey was nearly sure that he would now have recuperated from his injuries, and that it was possible that he was up to something on that ship.

Or it was also very possible that the enemy had taken advantage of his weakness to permanently dispose of him.

That was a dreadful thought, that sent shivers down Grey's spine.

And what about Colonel White in all this?

"Well, it doesn't look like it," Theodore replied to Grey's statement. "That ship is coming mightily fast toward us."

Then it hit Grey; he opened his eyes wide. "Oh, Lord..." He took back the binoculars and looked closely again at the rapidly-approaching warship. "They plan to ram us!"

* * *

Destiny, at the helm of *Angel One*, was most distraught.

She had had the slightest hope that her calls to the *Sir Francis Drake* would have been heard and listened to by Colonel White. Knowing that he was onboard the warship on its way to destroy a cruise liner full of innocent victims, she had entertained the idea that her commander would eventually shake off the state he was in and would put an end to all this nonsense. She had given him all the latitude she could under the circumstances, every possibility to do it. So far, there wasn't the faintest sign that her wishes would be answered, and so hope was rapidly vanishing toward a dreadful sense of desperation.

The *Drake* had launched no torpedo yet. They had had all the time in the world to do it, but they didn't. Perhaps something was wrong with the torpedo launch controls.

She had just given her last warning to the warship crew, when Captain Grey called her from the *de Brus* with some distressing news. According to him, the *Drake* was set on a collision course with the liner. Judging by the speed of both ships, the estimated time of the collision would be in about fifteen minutes, maybe twenty, but not much more. The *de Brus*, slower than the *Drake*, would not be able to evade her for long.

The Navy wouldn't be there in time. The Angels were all that were left to stop the *Drake*. But Destiny knew the Angels' missiles – although very powerful – would probably not be sufficient to do the job. Not in time to avoid the *de Brus* being destroyed, anyway.

But they had to try.

"Angels Two and Three," she called over her helmet mic. "Peel off and try to get a shot at the propeller. Maybe we can find a way to slow down that ship."

The acknowledgement from her fellow pilots came, and almost at the same instant, the formation was broken, both Angels going their separate ways. They made a wide turn to come directly behind the *Drake*, and then came in very low over the water, in a new formation, one behind the other.

Rhapsody in Angel Two launched a missile, which went underwater. As she pushed her aircraft to turn left of the warship, she saw the explosion of fire and a fountain of water behind it. There was another splash, not far from the first one, obviously coming from Harmony's missile. Rhapsody turned her craft around to view the damage both missiles might have done.

There was none apparent. The missiles had not even grazed the ship and had exploded without even scratching it.

"Negative hit," she reported to Destiny. "It appears the water is slowing down our missiles, Destiny."

"Which makes it difficult to shoot accurately," she heard Harmony say gloomily in return.

Destiny gave a sigh. That's what she was afraid of. The Angels missiles were not designed for underwater attack. Maybe that should be something Spectrum would have to work on in the near future.

"Try another shot, girls," she said to her fellow Angel pilots. "We have to find a way to stop that ship!" She kept herself from grumbling, as she turned her own interceptor around. "And I'll make a last attempt at contacting it. Just in case."

* * *

The shockwave from the explosion of the two air missiles made the stern deck vibrate. Still keeping to his precarious position, returning the enemy's fire, Captain Scarlet glanced about. He saw two Angels coming from behind, very low on each side of the ship. *Must have tried to stop us somehow*, he thought. He watched as both interceptors made a wide, fast turn around to take formation anew, far behind the ship.

Scarlet reached for the radio he had on his belt, that he had taken from MacBride. He was hoping to contact Spectrum with it, to inform the others of his exact situation. He was deeply disappointed. The radio was damaged. It had been hit by a bullet, most probably during the last exchange of fire. Scarlet swore in frustration. That was really bad luck...

The fire from the enemy seemed to have stopped; Scarlet risked a quick look. He saw the mercenaries, obviously in panic, gesticulating toward the two approaching craft. *Good. They're too afraid of the Angels' next attack to concern themselves with me.* He eyed the distance separating him from the nearest door that would permit him to get back inside. He would still be in full view, and an excellent target for the others if he were to try to reach it. But now, he didn't feel that he had any other choice.

He jumped to his feet and quickly ran the distance. A bullet sang past his ear. He was going through the door when he felt another one graze his arm. He gritted his teeth against the stinging pain but gave it no further thought. In a few minutes, he knew, the wound would be completely healed.

Inside the ship, he looked around. Now, to find the way to the bridge...

He went down a stair and headed along a walkway that went straight toward the bow.

* * *

Colonel White watched incredulously as Darrow slowly slid to the floor, right at his feet, and stayed sprawled there, motionless. A muffled explosion made the bridge tremble again, and the Spectrum commander had to hang on to the helm to keep his balance. He looked at the downed man and was about to crouch down to check on him, when Destiny's voice came again out of the speaker: *"This is Angel One. The time is up; we're giving you one last chance to surrender. What is your answer, Sir Francis Drake?"*

White felt the cold touch of a gun barrel against his neck and straightened up, startled. Shelby was very close to him, looking as implacable as when he had shot Darrow.

I'm next, thought Colonel White.

"Answer her," he heard the Mysteron say, ominously.

White didn't move, nor did he speak; he stared right into Shelby's eyes. The Mysteron agent pressed the gun harder against his neck, driving the barrel under his lower jaw. White grunted, gritting his teeth, his eyes still set on the man, flashing with anger and disgust.

“ANSWER HER!” Shelby repeated. He took the hand mic from the com system and thrust it towards White’s mouth. “Answer her, or I blow your brains out, here and now!” he promised.

White wondered what the Mysteron’s motivation could be now. He had the definite advantage. It occurred to the colonel that either he wanted to buy himself some time, so he could be totally sure nothing would prevent the mission from succeeding, or else he wanted the satisfaction of actually witnessing it himself.

Lives are at stake. Innocent lives. I must find a way to stop this maniac.

Have to gain some time...

Colonel White nodded his acknowledgement of the Mysteron’s order and took the microphone with his free, uninjured hand.

* * *

“Angel One... Can you hear me?”

Destiny Angel was almost startled when she heard the sound of that familiar English voice through her onboard speaker. She had all but abandoned hope of hearing any kind of answer, let alone THAT voice. Now she wasn’t even sure if she should feel relieved or concerned.

“Colonel White?” she murmured, as if still unsure that she was hearing correctly.

“Yes, Destiny. It’s me.”

Did he just say my name? the Angel pilot asked herself. According to what she had been told of the colonel’s present state, she wasn’t expecting him to even remember her. Was it an indication that he was getting better?

Could it be too late?

Destiny shook herself. Blowing a sigh, she took the most official tone she could produce when next she spoke to her commander: “Colonel, you’re on a collision course with the *de Brus*. Please, stop engines this instant and surrender the ship.”

Whether the colonel was better or not, the *Drake* had to be stopped. She was just hoping he would be willing to listen to her and be of help.

* * *

Colonel White had just heard the last order from Destiny Angel; he was still locking eyes with Shelby standing close in front of him. The Mysteron had lowered his gun, and was now aiming at his heart.

“Tell her that nothing will prevent you from carrying your orders,” Shelby instructed in a whisper.

White raised an eyebrow. So. This was what he was planning, he thought grimly. Shelby really wanted him to die with his name splattered with infamy and dishonour.

"Colonel White, do you hear me?" That was Destiny's voice again, over the speaker, with an urgent tone to it. Obviously, the girl was wondering why her commander wasn't speaking anymore.

"Tell her," Shelby whispered with a growling, threatening tone, his attention entirely focused on the set face of the Spectrum commander. "You will do as I say, *Earthman*. You know that I will shoot you. There's nothing to stop me now. The Mysterons' orders will be carried out!"

A low moan at his feet startled Shelby and made him look down, to check on Darrow, lying there, somehow concerned that the man would try something against him and his plans. But the mercenary was mortally wounded and had just drawn his last breath, before becoming motionless once again. But it was all the distraction Colonel White needed for a desperate attempt to give one last order:

"Destiny!" he barked into the mic. "Destroy this ship!"

A second later, before White could even receive any kind of response, Shelby had turned toward him, a flash of anger in his cold eyes. He violently backhanded him with the hand that was holding the gun, so quickly that the colonel didn't even see it coming. He was hit right on the spot where his head was already injured.

His legs buckling under him, White sank to his knees, and would have sprawled almost under the console if his still-shackled hand had not stopped him. He gave a low grunt, resulting as much from the pain in his head as that in his wounded shoulder.

Shelby looked down with obvious loathing at the man sprawled at his feet and temporarily unable to even raise his head.

"That was a very stupid thing to do, Colonel!" he spat with contempt.

He then took the mic White had let go, and brought it to his mouth. "Listen to me, *Earthwoman!*" he called into it, addressing the Angel pilot he knew was still on line. "The liner and all of her passengers are doomed, as is your precious commander! The Mysterons will have their revenge! You can't stop us!"

His words had not faded away when the ship shook from another explosion, coming somewhere near the stern, just like before. Then, he felt a sudden nudge against his abdomen. He looked down, to meet the icy but determined stare of Colonel

White, on his knees, looking up at him. In his left hand, he had a big gun, the barrel of which was pressed against the Mysterionised agent's body.

"Take this back to your masters!" White hissed between his teeth.

Shelby reflexively raised his gun; too late. Implacably, White pulled the trigger.

There was a muffled sound, and a brilliant flash of light and fire as the flare was propelled out of the gun to hammer home right into the Mysterion's abdomen. The tremendous shock threw Shelby away from White and across the room, his arms waving, his shirt torn, the flesh beneath catching fire. Letting go of his weapon, the Mysterion let out a brief scream of pain, which quickly transformed into a gurgling rattle. He fell to the floor.

The disgusting smell of burning flesh filled Colonel White's nostrils, but he was unable to look away from the now convulsing body. It looked as if Shelby was desperately trying to put out the fire on his clothes. The Spectrum commander was unsure, fully expecting the Mysterion to somehow get back on his feet, to take that gun of his and finish him off.

But no. Shelby stayed on the floor, motionless. The fire had extinguished, as quickly as it had appeared, and in its place on the Mysterion's body, there was a large, black spot, surrounding a very deep, smoking wound. The flare had burrowed deep into the Mysterion's flesh, and it was far too evident that it had done tremendous damage. White blew out a sigh of relief. He was grateful that the flare gun stashed under the consol was still functional after all these years. He was also grateful that it packed enough firepower to definitely put his enemy out of commission.

"Colonel White! Can you hear me? Please answer!"

That was Destiny Angel's voice again, with an alarmed tone to it. It wasn't surprising that she should be concerned, White reflected, as she probably had heard much of the ruckus that had happened. He rose to his feet, grunting under the effort. His shoulder, his whole arm, not to mention his head, hurt. He stared at the console on which were the weapons controls. There was only one button to push, he thought, and he would put an end to the threat hanging over the *de Brus*. But it was out of reach. He stretched as far as he could, his right arm still chained to the helm, his left hand trying to get to the console. The tips of his fingers only grazed it.

Too far. It's just too blasted far!

White let out a muffled grunt of both frustration and pain, as his left hand let go of the console and quickly reached for his sore shoulder. It felt like he had overstretched it.

"Colonel White! Answer me, please!"

White came back to the control board; he took the mic dropped by Shelby, which now hung from its cord. "Yes, Angel One," he said in as assured a voice as he was able to produce. "I can hear you."

"Merci Mon Dieu!" he heard the French accented voice replied in a faint murmur. *"What happened down there? What were those sounds all about?"*

White gave a last look toward the motionless body of Shelby. "Nothing of importance anymore," he answered. "Listen to me carefully: you and the other Angels must attack and destroy the *Drake*."

There was a silence; short but noticeable, as if the young pilot had been stunned by the order. White frowned deeply. "Did you hear me, Destiny Angel?"

"I heard you, sir. But we can't do that. You're onboard..."

"That must not stop you," White insisted. "There's more than three thousand people on the *de Brus*!"

"The Angels don't have enough firepower to stop a warship!"

"I'll tell you where to strike. Destiny, please, do as I say!"

Just at that moment, before Destiny could even utter an answer, another voice made itself heard over the loudspeaker; this time it was a male voice, giving a stern order that would not suffer any protest: *"Angel pack, ignore that order and wait for further instruction!"*

Colonel White recognised the voice; he was both relieved to hear it and, at the same time, displeased that it should interfere.

"Captain Blue!" he called over the mic. "Listen to me..."

"Admiral, stop engines, lay down your weapons and surrender," Blue cut in, not hearing him out.

White was frustrated; judging by the tone used by the Spectrum captain, it was obvious the man didn't trust him at all and was presently regarding him as an enemy.

"I wish I could do that," White answered with a sigh. "But I've got no control over the ship. I can't stop it!"

"Where are you?"

"On the bridge, shackled to the helm, but..."

*"You're heading straight for the *de Brus*. Can you alter course?"*

"No. The helm doesn't respond. It's under the power of the Mysterons. Listen, Captain, you've got to stop the *Drake* from ramming that liner. Send the Angels in. There're two vulnerable points they should try for: the torpedo room, in the bows, fifteen feet below the waterline. And the engine room, twenty feet from the stern, ten feet under the line. With luck, a combined attack from the three interceptors should..."

"They already tried to hit the propeller," Blue cut in. "And they kept missing. The Angel missiles aren't built to travel underwater. Beside, according to Captain Grey, the hull of the Drake would be able to endure even a direct hit from those missiles."

"I'm not so sure about that. The *Drake* is old, Captain. A combined attack should be enough to pierce her hull!"

There was a short pause. *"I'm on an Spectrum helicopter, nearing the Drake,"* Blue then announced. *"We're coming to get you."*

"No!" White replied forcefully. "There's no time... Forget about me..."

"How can I tell if you're even telling me the truth?" Blue interrupted him abruptly. *"As far as I know, you may be trying to deceive me. You may be trying to play for time."*

"Captain, I don't..."

"Where is Captain Scarlet, sir?"

Colonel White's heart sank. Captain Blue was doubtful of him, wasn't sure that he should trust him; which wasn't, in retrospect, so surprising, considering recent events. *I haven't given him any reason to trust me*, the colonel thought gloomily. Now Blue was wondering about his colleague. His friend. How could White tell him about what had happened, without further raising his suspicions against him?

White took a quick glance at the monitor. The distance separating the *Drake* from the *de Brus* was quickly shrinking. Soon, the colonel reflected, they would be too close to each other for the destroyer to be stopped by an aerial attack, without also causing the *de Brus* damage... *Those poor people... They won't stand a chance.*

How could he convince Captain Blue of his good faith?

The answer came to his mind in a flash, and White brought the mic to his mouth again.

"Adam, please, listen to me! There is no more time to argue! You must stop this ship at all costs!"

"What... did you call me?" There was a note of disbelief in Blue's voice now. The mention of his name had obviously taken him aback. And had certainly caught his attention.

"You heard me!" White continued, pressing on. "Innocent lives are at stake, Adam. Forget about me! Do your duty!"

He was suddenly aware of a presence behind him, almost as he sensed that there was a danger hanging over his head. He spun around quickly. A shot rang out and he felt a pain in his left thigh; his leg gave way under him and he fell heavily, his shackled hand keeping him once again from sprawling completely on the floor. A cry of pain escaped his lips. Through the pain threatening to overwhelm him, he heard the worry in Captain Blue's voice, as

he obviously had heard everything on the radio, and was calling up his name:

“Colonel White! Answer me, please!”

“Destroy this ship, Captain!” White shouted desperately.

A second detonation made itself heard, and a bullet hit the control board. The radio went silent with a fizzling sound, just as Captain Blue tried again to call his commander.

* * *

“Colonel White! Sir! What's happening?”

Inside Spectrum helicopter A-45, now hovering not far from the *Sir Francis Drake*, Captain Blue was desperately trying to get into contact again with Colonel White. The radio was now silent. More precisely, it was dead, as the Spectrum officer realized with dread that the loud sound he had heard just before he lost contact was the detonation of gunfire. In fact, he had heard two detonations, and a cry of pain, obviously from the colonel. Blue feared that his commander was now in a very perilous situation – if he was not dead already.

Blue slammed down his fist on the helicopter control board in frustration, nearly making Melody jump at the helm. “Damn! What’s going on down there?” He lowered his gaze toward the *Drake*. He could see the Angels getting into position once again behind it, waiting for his orders.

Blue’s mind was working quickly. *There’s no time*, White had said. True, time was running out for the *de Brus*. Spectrum had to act fast.

Could he dare trust Colonel White? What if his last order to attack the *Drake* was only yet another attempt to deceive him? Could he be playing the Mysterons’ hand by following that order? Yet, White seemed so desperately sincere, apparently ready to lay down his life to save others. And where was Captain Scarlet in all this? Why didn’t White answer Blue’s question, when he had asked about him? The captain felt there was something wrong.

And there was something else. Colonel White had called him by his real name. Despite Spectrum’s regulations forbidding the use of real names on duty, he had called him ‘Adam’. That was really puzzling Blue, as he knew the colonel was very strict concerning that rule.

But that was Colonel White when he was in his right mind. Not the paranoid, unstable ‘freedom fighter’ the *Dream Spinner* had made of him. That man wouldn’t even know Captain Blue’s real name.

“Good God,” Blue realized, “he remembers...”

That was the missing piece. The surprising thing wasn't that White himself went against the rules by calling Blue by his name. What really was surprising was the fact that he actually remembered that name. And by speaking it, maybe he was hoping Blue would understand that he really was on his side.

"What should we do now, Captain?"

That was Destiny Angel's voice over the radio; Blue shook himself. No more time to lose. Now or never, he had to make a decision.

"You heard the colonel's order, Destiny?" he asked with a decided tone.

"His order?" the French pilot repeated, puzzled. *"Why... yes, the channel was open."*

"Get into position, and ready to attack on my command. The engine room will be your target. You know the position."

"Twenty feet from the stern, ten feet under the waterline," Destiny agreed.

"Right. You'll have more chance of success by striking that point than the torpedo room. You'll have to take into consideration the fact that your missile speed is reduced underwater."

"S.I.G., Captain," Destiny acknowledged.

Blue gave a last look toward the two ships below. "I estimate point of no return for stopping the *Drake* at five minutes," he continued. "After that, even if we do stop it, the *de Brus* would sustain damage. Give us those five minutes. And then, come in to attack."

"Excuse me, Captain... But what are you going to do?"

"We'll try to make a last-minute rescue."

* * *

Colonel White tried to raise himself off the floor. He only succeeded in falling again; he grabbed his wounded leg with his free, uninjured hand; blood was flowing profusely from a bullet hole in his thigh. The pain was terrible, and he was gritting his teeth against crying out.

Raising his head, he saw a figure standing in the doorway of the bridge, across the room. It was Greg Dooley who had shot him again, his eyes as cold as before, and now levelling his gun squarely at his head. White locked eyes with him, and saw the man hesitate, something like recognition and compassion in his eyes.

"For God's sake, Greg," he murmured under his breath, almost pleading.

The hesitation only lasted an instant; and the *Mysteron*, his eyes becoming expressionless again, took aim.

"I am really sorry, Charles. But it is the will of the Mysterons that you should die today."

Colonel White's features became as hard as those of the man in front of him. He braced himself for the impact of the bullet that would kill him.

He heard two consecutive detonations, but felt nothing. Instead, he saw Dooley suddenly shake. The Mysteron then sank to his knees as a third shot rang out, spilling blood from his chest. Dooley fell down, face first on the floor, right in front of a surprised Colonel White, who had thought that he had seen his last moment, and was now wondering what had happened.

For a moment, he couldn't detach his eyes from the dead Mysteron now lying there and then heard running footsteps from the corridor, beyond the doorway in which Dooley had been standing a second ago. Another figure appeared there, a tall young man dressed in the mercenaries' black uniform, his gun smoking from the recent use he had made of it, cautiously levelled at the motionless Dooley. Colonel White stared at him in astonishment.

"Scarlet!" He couldn't believe it. How could the Spectrum captain be standing there, apparently in excellent health, without any trace of his recent ordeal, and wearing that uniform?

Scarlet's eyes left the motionless body of Dooley and discovered White, sitting there on the floor in that awkward position, bleeding. The colonel saw the gun raised toward him. For a brief instant, the memory of what the young man had told him about the Mysterons recreating people so they would act on their behalf crossed White's mind. The doubt showed in his eyes as Scarlet pulled the trigger twice.

The bullets destroyed part of the helm, where the handcuffs were fixed, and the now-released White slumped to the floor with a grunt. As he was making the effort to gather himself back into a sitting position, Captain Scarlet stepped over Dooley's body, and, carefully keeping him covered with the gun, took the radio from his belt before coming to help White. The latter gave him a faint but thankful smile.

"For a moment there, you had me worried, Captain," he said nodding toward the helm.

Scarlet quickly assessed his commander's leg injury; he put down his gun on the floor next to him, and then removed his belt from his waist.

"Sorry I took so long," he told him, fastening the belt around the thigh, just above the wound. "I was delayed..."

"I can believe that." White bit his lip and muffled another groan, as Scarlet proceeded to tightly secure the belt. He frowned. "Leave that. You have no time to waste..."

"It's done anyway," Scarlet replied, finishing up his job. "That should stop the bleeding until you see a medic."

"You don't understand." White was nearly out of breath. The pain and loss of blood were starting to get to him. He nodded toward the monitor, which was still showing the rapidly approaching *de Brus*. "The Mysterons want to ram the *Drake* into that cruise liner. There's over three thousand people onboard. They will all be killed."

"A liner?" Scarlet murmured, raising his eyes toward the monitor. "Good Lord..."

White tiredly gestured toward the weapons console he had tried to reach earlier. "There's a button there. A big red button. You've got to press it."

"What's it for?"

"It's the remote control for the torpedo launch."

Scarlet stared with bewilderment at White. The latter frowned deeply. "Stop looking at me as if I was crazy, Captain!" he said in an irate tone. "I'm not. Not anymore, that is." He paused, to regain his breath. "I rigged the tubes. The minute a torpedo enters one of them, it will trigger an explosion. It will start a chain reaction with the remaining torpedoes that will destroy the ship completely."

There was still some puzzlement in Scarlet's features, as he stared at his commander. But somehow, White could see, it was different. "How did you intend to escape?" the captain asked.

White nodded. "The original plan was to take the lifeboat with you and get as far away as possible from the *Drake* before somebody pushed that button." He was speaking very quickly. Again, he took a deep breath. "That was before I was handcuffed to that damned helm."

Scarlet nodded quietly. So, his commander intended sacrificing himself so lives would be saved. Coming from the man he knew, it wasn't surprising. That he should behave that way NOW, was a sure indication that he was coming back to normal.

"Where's that boat?" Scarlet asked.

White gestured toward the door. "Below the bridge. There's a stairway just outside that door leading to it..."

"Yes, I came up that way. Could we get to the boat in time to escape AFTER we push that button?"

White shook his head. "You'd have one minute, two... You may be able to get out before the explosion... But I don't know if you'll get far enough to escape the blast."

"We'll worry about that later."

"WE?"

"You're coming with me."

"Are you crazy? You just have the time to reach the boat and get away! I can't follow you..."

Scarlet gave the faintest of smiles. "Then I suppose I'll have to carry you."

White shook his head, staring with incredulity at the young man's determined face. "You'll lose precious seconds, Captain. You might get yourself killed..."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

"I'm not going to get you to change your mind, am I?"

"No. We better get moving right away. As you said yourself, we're losing time."

There was confusion again in the colonel's features. Scarlet could see he was now fighting just to stay conscious. His leg injury was bad, and the captain wasn't so sure about that still-bleeding head wound of his...

Then he saw the older man's blue eyes opening wide; Scarlet could see the sudden distress in them, and thought that his commander was losing it once again. He was shocked when he saw him quickly take the gun Scarlet had left on the floor earlier, raising it before the captain could stop him. He steeled himself, fully expecting to be shot at point-blank range.

The gun wasn't aimed at him, but slightly to his left. White pulled the trigger several times, and the bullets went by Scarlet, without doing him any harm. The Spectrum captain quickly twisted around. Just in time to see that Dooley, behind him, had risen up from the floor, his gun in his hand, ready to shoot him in the back. But this time, Colonel White had been faster, and emptied Scarlet's bullets into the Mysteron's body. Dooley fell on his back, without even having had the chance to fire.

Scarlet looked at the Mysteron, unsure whether he would try again to stand up. Then he turned to face his grim-looking, apparently unwell commander. "Now it's YOU who had ME worried, sir. Thank you."

White simply nodded; he, too, was still watching the Mysteron. The man he was created from had been his long-time friend. It was just as if he had killed his friend himself. Scarlet could see it was disturbing him and didn't pursue the subject. He took the radio he had relieved Dooley of a short moment ago and quickly searched for a frequency on it. White was watching him, wondering what he was up to now.

"I'm contacting Cloudbase," Scarlet explained, seeing the inquiring look in his commander's eyes. "If this ship is going to explode, the Angels had better be away from it..."

He was interrupted as a voice suddenly came out of the small receiver; Scarlet had made connection with Cloudbase, using his personal coded radio frequency; but instead of Lieutenant Green, it was another voice he was hearing, with a tone that was at the same time apprehensive and somehow upset:

"Captain Scarlet, where the hell have you been?" Captain Blue almost shouted over the radio.

Lieutenant Green must have received instructions to put me in direct link with him if I called, Scarlet mused. The first moment of surprise past, he answered the call quickly.

"No time for explanations now, Captain Blue. I'm on the bridge of the *Drake*, right now, and I'm contacting you to call the Angels off. The ship is rigged to explode and they must not be caught in the blast!"

"You're on the bridge? With Colonel White?"

"Yes. We're on our way to evacuate and..."

"Stay where you are! We're coming to get you!"

Scarlet frowned, hearing the insistence in his friend's voice. "Where are YOU?"

"Right in front of you!"

The surprise in Scarlet was now complete astonishment, as he instinctively raised his head. A Spectrum helicopter came hovering down in front of his eyes, right on the other side of the large glass bay. It was so close that he could even see Melody Angel at the helm, with Captain Blue at her side.

"Hit the deck and stay down!" Blue barked into his cap microphone.

Scarlet understood his intention when he saw the machine gun under the belly of the helicopter being levelled directly at the window. He didn't need to be told twice and pushed an astounded and speechless White flat on the floor, before covering him with his body. The second after, he heard the crackling sound of the machine gun, along with the shattering of the exploding window. Bullets whistled across the bridge, hitting the wall on the other side, sending splinters of glass raining down on his back, as he was trying to protect his commander from them. He could see, by the pain-contorted and flushed face of White, that he wasn't doing any good to his injured shoulder, which was supporting most of the captain's weight.

The firing stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and Scarlet got back to his feet. The glass window had been completely destroyed, offering an opening through which he and the colonel

would be able to get out. The helicopter had slightly turned around, and Scarlet could see the open hatch on its side. Captain Blue was standing there, wearing a power pack. One brief push on the handles, and he was just outside the window, hovering before the now large opening.

Scarlet gathered the half-conscious White up; the pressure put on his shoulder, the pain and the loss of blood he was suffering, all that had taken their toll of him; he could hardly move.

"Take him!" Scarlet shouted over the noise made by the rotor blades. He pushed White into Blue's hands, before the latter could ask for more explanation. As Blue carried the colonel into the waiting helijet, Scarlet turned toward the weapons console and looked down at it. He saw the red button the colonel had told him about. Without any hesitation, having absolutely no doubt about whether his commander had told him the truth about it or not, he pressed it down. He saw a green indicator light up, with the information 'Torpedoes entering tubes' flashing on it.

Scarlet didn't wait for the information to change and turned again toward the window. Blue had just come back after dropping the colonel into Magenta's helping hands. Again, Scarlet didn't give him the chance to ask for clarification. "Did you tell the Angels to get clear?"

"Everybody is pulling off, but..."

"Good! Let's do the same!"

He climbed through the shattered window and grabbed for the power pack's handles; it transported both him and Blue into the hovering helicopter. As soon as his feet touched the 'copter floor, Scarlet shot a brief, concerned glance toward a nearly unconscious Colonel White lying down on the floor, under the care of Magenta who knelt at his side; then, without further delay, he directed his attention to the pilot: "Step on it, Melody!"

The young woman's answer was a swift turn to the left achieved by the helicopter. Everybody hung on to anything they could, being knocked off their feet by the craft's too prompt takeoff. Looking through the canopy, Scarlet could see the *Drake* being left far behind. The Angels were keeping their distance too, flying high in the sky.

"Would you mind telling me what's going on?" Blue asked Scarlet. "You said the *Drake* was set to explode... What were you talking about?"

In answer, Scarlet simply nodded in direction of the *Drake*. Within seconds, a thunderous blast made itself heard, and a huge ball of fire appeared at the bow. The fire quickly spread over the entire ship, as other, consecutive explosions made themselves

heard, shooting large pieces of metal and fiery tongues into the sky and all over the sea.

“Good God...” Blue murmured, his eyes wide in astonishment at the scene. “Not a second too soon.”

“You can say that again.” Scarlet consulted his watch. A little more than a minute since he had pushed the button. The colonel had been right.

“Was the *de Brus* far enough to avoid any of the blast?” Blue asked, turning to Melody.

The young woman checked through the canopy. The cruise liner was sailing safely away, still at high speed, and was obviously unscathed by the threat that had been hanging over her head.

“Seems all clear, Captain,” Melody announced. “I’ll just contact Captain Grey to make sure.”

“Please, do that. Then head towards the nearest medical facility. The colonel is wounded.”

Along with Scarlet, Blue turned his attention toward Colonel White, who was still lying on the floor. Magenta had put a folded blanket under his head to make him more comfortable. He used another one to cover him, for he was shivering, as if he were cold. Now the Irish officer was carefully checking on his commander’s bleeding shoulder. He probably made an incautious movement, as the colonel’s sweating face suddenly creased with pain.

“Careful,” Blue urged the contrite-looking Magenta. “He’s not Scarlet, you know?”

“I know I’m not,” came the sudden, slurred reply of Colonel White. He tiredly opened his eyes and looked at the worried faces of the three officers surrounding him. He smiled faintly at Scarlet. “Now I remember,” he said. “Indestructible, right?”

Scarlet answered with a smile of his own.

“Well, I may not be indestructible,” White continued, “but I’m still tough enough.”

“There’s no doubt about that, sir,” Scarlet replied.

Magenta was checking on the colonel’s wounded leg, when a last explosion from the *Drake* drew everybody’s attention toward it. White watched as the ship he had commanded so long ago now fought her last battle, in an impressive display of explosion, fire, and the screeching sounds of tearing metal. Slowly, it began to sink.

There was an expression of infinite sadness in the colonel’s eyes; he couldn’t divert his sight. Noticing this, Captain Blue

slowly closed the hatch; that seemed to draw the colonel out of his thoughts.

"You're responsible for that?" Blue asked him, almost accusingly.

White nodded. The blond captain shook his head. "Good show." He frowned, staring his commander squarely in the eyes. "You called me by my name," he reminded him, falsely angry. "You know it's specifically forbidden by Spectrum's regulations?"

"So put me on report." White almost chuckled, but the laugh choked down with a grunt of pain. He didn't want to worry his officers. "Not that I want to complain but... I thought I ordered you not to come to my rescue earlier on," he continued quickly, addressing Blue.

"You didn't order me. And anyway, sir, without meaning any disrespect, you are in no position to give me ANY orders at the moment."

"So we're still on that, are we?" White murmured faintly. "I'm still your prisoner then?"

It was meant as a pleasant banter, but obviously, the spirit wasn't behind it, as the colonel seemed to grow weaker. Scarlet and Blue addressed a concerned look toward Magenta, who was still in the process of checking the severity of his leg injury. The Irish captain stared back at them.

"I think an artery has been hit," he said, with evident worry in his tone. "He's already lost a lot of blood. We've got to get him medical care as soon as possible."

"Melody?" Blue called to the pilot's station.

"I heard, Captain. We're already heading for Newcastle. I'm calling the Princess Margaret Memorial Hospital to inform them of our arrival."

"Call Spectrum for a security team to be waiting for us at the hospital," Blue added. "I want maximum security there for the colonel."

"S.I.G., Captain."

Blue turned with concern toward the weakening Colonel White. Scarlet was crouched next to him, and had put a reassuring hand on the older man's good shoulder. "Don't worry, sir. You'll be all right soon."

White's eyes fluttered; he knew he was about to lose consciousness, but he found the strength to reach for Scarlet's hand. He squeezed it in his own.

"You'd better believe it," he said between clenched teeth, with the same determined tone that his officers knew so very well. He

closed his eyes and gave a satisfied sigh, before letting himself be washed away by the comforting motion of the flying craft.

Epilogue

Colonel White extended his left arm to put the cup on the low table set next to the wheelchair. Giving a grunt of exasperation, he reached for his right shoulder, and irritably rubbed the bandage covering it, sliding his hand under the pyjama top.

"I wouldn't touch it if I were you."

White gave a sideways look toward the man quietly seated in front of him, his legs crossed and himself holding a cup of tea.

"I can't help it," the colonel replied grumpily. "It's itching like mad!"

"Which means it's healing, right?"

White gave the man a rueful smile, before turning to look thoughtfully through the Promenade Deck window. On the upper runway, down below, he could see the three Angel craft, waiting for take-off, with Angel One and her pilot at the helm. He was wondering which of the girls was there at the moment.

"Penny for your thoughts, sir?"

The colonel's attention came back to his visitor. Senior Agent Thomas Wade, of Spectrum Intelligence, had made the trip from London to Cloudbase especially to see him, and it wasn't to pay him a formal visit. White shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and reached again for his bandaged shoulder. Seeing the bemused smile on Wade's face, he stopped, and lowered his hand, resting it in his lap.

"I don't think you'd be making a very good investment, Thomas," he answered to Wade's comment.

"Oh, I don't know," Wade replied, narrowing his eyes at the older man. "I'm sure there's a lot going on in your mind at the moment..." He shook his head. "I'm glad you're feeling better now. You didn't look well at all in that hospital in Newcastle last week."

Colonel White nodded slowly. He didn't remember much about his arrival at The Princess Margaret Memorial Hospital in Newcastle, where he had been rushed right after the explosion on the *Sir Francis Drake*. He was unconscious, having lost a lot of blood. Not so much, he was told, as to put his life in danger, but enough to cause worry. The hospital staff had been wonderful with him – especially considering the fact that Spectrum had practically taken over the place. Everybody going in and out was thoroughly checked out, especially those who had to come into contact with the colonel. Spectrum was concerned about the safety of its commander and was taking no chances. All the while,

however, making sure that its presence didn't disturb the well-being of the other patients – who, White was sure, were certainly wondering what all that activity going on for just one person was all about. There had even been a couple of guards permanently assigned to keep their eyes on him. White was still wondering today – with a certain dry humour – if they had been there to protect him, or to make sure that he wouldn't get it into his head to escape Spectrum yet again. Most probably for both reasons.

Spectrum didn't need to worry. From the moment he woke up in that hospital, the memories had started flowing back into his mind, giving him so many migraines in the following days that Doctor Fawn – who had come directly from Cloudbase to consult with the hospital doctors – had to prescribe him a strong daily dose of painkillers. Fortunately, after four days, Fawn determined that White had responded well to this treatment, and he ordered him weaned off the medication. By that time, Colonel White's memory was back, and the disastrous effects – and side effects – of the *Dream Spinner* were mercifully gone. But it had left him with a certain bad taste about what he had done. Because he remembered it. There were admittedly a few confused details here and there – mainly about the moments that had been the most hectic in that entire incident – but most of it was clear enough for him not to like what he had recalled.

“How long before you're back in command, Colonel?”

White came out of his fugue, hearing Wade's voice addressing him. “At least another week,” he answered. “Maybe two.”

“Always the optimist, aren't you?”

White gestured toward his left leg, elevated in a brace. “This leg's keeping me down. I'm still convalescing until it's healed enough for me to put some weight on it. I can't wait to be out of this wheelchair, I can tell you!”

“Well, at least you're out of sickbay now,” Wade remarked.

White gave him a whimsical smile. “Maybe because I escaped?”

“You're not serious, are you?” Wade answered, laughing softly.

The colonel shook his head. No, of course he wasn't. Or it would be a sure bet all of Cloudbase would be on alert to find him right now! In reality, Doctor Fawn had thought it wise and healthy to let him be brought to the Promenade Deck. It was certainly a much more agreeable place to recuperate than the four, boring walls of a room in sickbay.

“You know, Colonel, in a way, seeing you like this, it's kind of a relief.”

Colonel White gave Agent Wade a withering look; the man quickly shrugged his shoulders. “What I mean is, the fact that

you're healing at a normal rate means that you weren't Mysterionised."

"Thank you," the colonel grumbled. "You're really too kind."

"You know that Agent Conners was convinced that you actually had been Mysterionised?"

"Conners," White repeated, musing. "Yes. I remember he paid me a visit in hospital."

It was the day after the Spectrum commander had been admitted. Special Agent Conners had arrived at the hospital and had asked – no, 'demanded' was more the word – to see him without delay. Captain Blue was already there, with Doctor Fawn. White didn't feel well enough at the time to receive visitors; he was only just starting to recover from his various wounds and the loss of blood he had suffered, and was right at the height of those awful headaches caused by his returning memory. Due to Conners' growing insistence, and perhaps to avoid him making a scene right in the middle of the hospital hallway, Fawn had reluctantly agreed that he could see his patient. But he had specifically forbidden him to ask any stressful questions for the moment. Conners was satisfied enough with that, and Blue entered with him, to make sure he would follow the doctor's orders. At least, that was the official reason.

The encounter was uneventful. To all appearances, anyway. White was still very weak, and was looking pale. He was nearly knocked out from medication and merely acknowledged the man's presence – probably the most civil encounter the two men had ever had. There was a nurse in there, removing the colonel's soiled bandages to check on his wounded shoulder. Under Blue's watchful eye, Conners did nothing more than look on, as the nurse tended to the wound and put a new dressing on it. He merely asked White how he felt now, if he would be so kind as to agree to see him when he recovered, to answer a few questions, and politely wished him a speedy recovery. Then he went quietly out the door. So much for his theory that the Spectrum commander had been taken over by the Mysterions.

White hadn't seen Conners since that moment. He had learned that Conners had questioned the hospital staff who were there when he had been admitted, and that he had consulted the files regarding his admission and the care he had received. But he hadn't come back to bother the colonel again. That was intriguing enough, in White's view. Conners wasn't the kind of man to let go that easily.

It occurred to White that Conners had been taken off the investigation. The fact that Wade was now in front of him was a good indication that he had been right.

“Sorry he disturbed you there,” Wade said with a rather apologetic smile. “But he was so sure of his theory that he convinced even me.”

White raised an eyebrow. The Intelligence agent shrugged again.

“I’ve got to admit, he had some valid points. That’s why I gave him permission to come to Cloudbase in the first place, while this latest affair with the Mysterons was happening.”

“I trust his suspicions – and yours at the same time – have been laid to rest?” White remarked, eyeing the other man carefully.

“Oh, certainly,” Wade agreed, sipping the last drop of tea from his cup.

“Mister Conners must have been disappointed,” White noted, for he knew the man didn’t like him at all.

Wade seemed surprised by his remark. He shook his head. “Disappointed? No... I wouldn’t say that. Upset that he was wrong, perhaps.”

“I bet.”

Wade poured some more tea into White’s cup and handed it to him. The colonel nodded his thanks.

“Colonel, I know Special Agent Conners didn’t have any real evidence to back up his accusations... But as I said, he had valid points. We couldn’t reach you, nobody had seen you or heard from you in days... And your Cloudbase officers weren’t helping any. They were so secretive about this affair... It was looking suspicious.”

“Enough to warrant an investigation?”

“Enough to look into it, anyway. I’m sorry. If I had been able to actually contact you...”

“But you WEREN’T able to contact me.”

“No. And that’s why I permitted Conners to go on with his investigation.” Wade sighed. “I think he went a bit far. Going to the extent of actually accusing Cloudbase officers...”

“Well, don’t be too hard on him,” White murmured, looking down into his cup. “He could have been right.”

“About you being Mysterionised?”

Colonel White nodded thoughtfully. Senior Agent Thomas Wade didn’t know the entire story. Not the full details, anyway. That was a difficult matter, and White didn’t know yet how to handle it, whether the truth should be brought out or not. Mainly because of Cloudbase officers’ involvement in hiding it in the first place. He realized that they had done this out of a sense of loyalty toward him, and to keep and protect Spectrum’s integrity – or so

they said. White had no reason to doubt them. And judging by what Shelby had told him, while he was on the *Drake*, it had turned out their suspicions about what could happen had been right. Besides, could he be less loyal to them than they had been to him? But keeping all this a secret from Intelligence didn't seem right to Colonel White. It made him uncomfortable.

At least, part of the truth was out. Wade knew about the real meaning behind the Mysterons' cryptic threat. He knew about their intention of using retired Admiral Charles Grey and the ship he had commanded twenty-five years ago to strike at a cruise liner full of innocent people. He knew about Colonel White having been kidnapped at some point, that they tried to drug him – but he wasn't aware of the full extent of what he had had to endure from those who had captured him.

As far as Wade knew, because of his personal involvement in this affair, Colonel White had simply joined in the ground operation to stop the Mysterons. And that it had turned out terribly wrong and nearly had deadly consequences for him.

"They could have done it," White responded to the Senior Agent's remark. "They probably would have done it, if their plan had not called for them to use me as a human to enter the Naval Armament Depot in Bristol... And to eventually make me witness the deaths of all those people onboard the *de Brus*. I suppose I was lucky, even considering... everything that happened."

"Well, the point is, Colonel, that they didn't do it. And I guess that's what really counts. For all of us. And more importantly, for you."

"Thank you, Thomas."

Wade frowned. "You didn't tell me exactly how you managed to convince them you were on their side."

White shrugged. "They drugged me. They thought they had me under their power."

"But you weren't."

"No."

"They tried to trick you into doing things for them, but YOU tricked THEM."

"That's about it, yes."

"How did you achieve that, exactly?"

White smiled slightly. "I suppose I proved stronger than they anticipated."

"I won't dispute that, Colonel." Wade stared at the older man for a few seconds. "And Spectrum had this operation under control all the time?"

There was a note of scepticism in Wade's tone. White grinned again, this time broadly. "Have you ever seen me leaving anything to chance, Thomas?"

"When you're out of options, sir, I would have to say yes."

"I knew what I was doing. I was a ground agent once."

"A LONG time ago."

"Now, that's not very tactful, Thomas! I'm still quite capable of handling that kind of situation myself. I'm not that old!"

"Which can only be a comforting thought for me. I turn forty-five next week..."

"Happy birthday."

"...And I'm sure I don't have half the energy you have yourself."

And certainly not half the bruises, White mused grimly. His muscles and bones would still be aching for weeks to come, he was sure of that.

"Anyway, Colonel, what I'm saying is: you're still Spectrum's supreme commander. We need you. You shouldn't take unnecessary risks like that."

"You know, I wasn't exactly given the choice to get involved or not!" White answered with a forced smile.

Wade gave a smile of his own; he shook his head.

"I do hope this experience will be enough for you and that you'll stay quiet for a while. You'd better leave that kind of activity to your men."

"I'll try to keep that in mind next time I'm kidnapped," White replied dryly. "Which, hopefully, will NOT happen again!"

"I hope so too, Colonel. But with the Mysterons..."

"I'm not ONLY concerned with the Mysterons, Thomas." White paused. His stare became cold and somewhat distant. "There's the Network as well, now. I don't much fancy the idea of having a group of human collaborators with the Mysterons running around. And who seem to have infiltrated world security organisations."

Wade nodded grimly.

Sounds coming from the access door, a few yards away from them, attracted the two men's attention, and made them raise their heads in the same instant. They saw Rhapsody and Destiny enter through the sliding door, closely followed by Harmony and Symphony; all of them were in animated conversation, and seemed in a good mood. Having spotted where Colonel White was sitting, they headed toward him. Wade smiled slightly and got to his feet, putting down his empty cup.

"It seems you have important visitors, sir," he said to White, before consulting his watch. "I should get going, anyway. I must be in London this afternoon."

"You're finished with your investigation, then?" White asked quietly.

"What 'investigation'?" Wade replied with an innocent expression on his face. "Nobody said anything about an investigation. It was just a courtesy visit, sir. To get your news..."

The tone used by Senior Agent Wade was enough for Colonel White to understand that the man knew much more about what had happened than he was letting on. But, for some reason, he was choosing to keep silent about it. The Spectrum commander nodded thoughtfully, thankful that, for his officers' sake, THIS man was, in any case, more understanding than Martin Conners.

"Do inform me if you have any new developments concerning the investigation into that Network organisation," White requested of him.

Following standard procedure, Spectrum Intelligence had been handed everything discovered about that organisation during the recent operation. That was Intelligence's role, anyway, to do that kind of job. To the colonel's surprise, Wade shook his head.

"Not yet, I won't." White addressed him a withering look, but Wade simply smiled again. "Sorry. But I shouldn't even have bothered you with it today. Doctor Fawn would have my guts if he finds out I mentioned it to you. Says it's a hazardous subject, as far as you're concerned. For now, anyway. And remember, you're convalescent. So no work for you for the time being." He watched, as the four Angel pilots approached. "I'll leave you in good company, for now."

"Have a good trip back home, then. And give my regards to your charming wife."

"Will do, Colonel. Take care of yourself."

Senior Agent Wade gave the colonel an encouraging pat on his good shoulder, and then turned away from him. He walked through the group of Angels, exchanging salutations with them in passing, before directing his steps toward the exit. He soon disappeared behind the sliding door.

The four Angel pilots had reached Colonel White and stood quietly in front of him. He stared at them, full of curiosity. Instinctively, he reached again for his itching shoulder, but stopped short. He dropped his hand down again, hoping nobody had noticed. He gave a shy smile around.

"Shouldn't at least two of you be in the Amber Room right now?"

His tone was civil enough, and very quiet, but the Angels thought they heard a certain note of disapproval in it. They exchanged discomfited glances, obviously unsure how to respond

to this remark. White regretted his words right away. *That wasn't very nice of you, Charlie. The girls have obviously come for a social visit.* He cleared his throat, uncomfortable, and tried to make amends.

"I'm sorry, ladies. I'm forgetting that I'm still convalescing and off-duty. I can't order you around for now." The smile he gave had something singularly mischievous about it. "So I suggest you take advantage of the situation while it lasts."

"We won't stay long, sir," Symphony assured him, speaking for them all. "We don't intend to jeopardize Cloudbase's security."

"I'm sure you don't." White shook his head, a puzzled twinkle in his eyes. "So, how can I help you?"

"Actually, sir," Harmony replied, "that should be our line."

"Sorry?"

"We appointed ourselves the welcoming committee," Symphony explained.

"Welcoming committee? You sound as if I'd been gone a very long time!"

"Well, you've certainly came a long way, sir," Rhapsody remarked. "And it felt like an eternity before you... er..."

"...came back to normal?" the colonel offered, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Rhapsody nodded. Destiny moved closer to White. "We wanted to welcome you back officially, sir," she said with her deep, accented voice. "And to tell you how good it is to see you back amongst us... Melody shares the thought too, but as you guess, she's currently on duty, in Angel One. She asked me to convey her good wishes on her behalf." She then bent down and kissed White on both cheeks. "*Bienvenue, mon Colonel,*" she said in a very official tone.

A totally startled White stared at Destiny, then at each of the other girls for a moment, not sure how to act. Then he gave a big, broad smile, one of those the Angels seldom saw from him. He was only known to smile like that when he was in a remarkably good mood, which wasn't too often.

"That's really very kind of you, Angels," he said gently. "Thank you."

"We really were concerned for you, sir," Harmony remarked.

"And still are a bit," Symphony added.

Her tone was betraying her discomfort. Looking around, Colonel White realised instantly that the sentiment was shared by the others.

"Well, there's no need for that, anymore," he answered, wanting to reassure them. "The nightmare is over now, and I should be back on duty very soon." He moved uneasily in his wheelchair, trying to find a more comfortable position, and then

ran his good hand over the back of his sore neck, grunting. "I'll really be glad to be out of this thing. I feel like I'm growing roots in here!"

The Angels exchanged glances again; then, they spread out around their colonel. He watched in perplexity, while Rhapsody took his cup to pour some more tea. Harmony moved behind him; he suddenly felt her small but strong and warm hands on his shoulders, starting to gently rub them. He was too startled to react right away.

"You just have to relax, sir," he heard the Chinese girl's quiet voice tell him. "A little massage is just what you need."

"Massage?" White repeated hesitantly. "I admit it's tempting but I don't think..."

"You are all knots in here. Relax. You will feel better afterwards."

He could already feel the heat through his neck muscles; he had to confess, it wasn't so bad at all; and he would probably had enjoyed himself much more if he didn't feel it was somehow unbecoming.

"Harmony, I really do think that you should..."

"Have some more tea, Colonel?" Rhapsody interrupted him, handing him back his cup.

"Would you like to come closer to the window?" Symphony asked in turn. She had firmly taken one handle of the wheelchair, while, at the same time, Destiny had done the same with the other one. White saw the two girls locking eyes with each other, in an almost challenging pose. He rolled his eyes in exasperation. While the girls' attention was very flattering, it was also becoming too overwhelming – and also quite embarrassing. But he didn't want to sound ungrateful, or lose patience with them. After all, they were only trying to be nice to him. And considering the recent events, if he were to get angry, there was a good chance that it would alarm them.

"Ladies, please," he tried with as even a voice he could produce. "I really, REALLY don't think I need all this fuss. While I find it very flattering, I'm quite capable of fending for myself."

"We're NOT fussing!" Destiny protested. She sounded offended at the thought.

"Yes, you are," Colonel White insisted between his teeth, keeping himself under control.

"But even so, sir," Symphony then replied, "we don't get the chance to do it too often."

White almost snorted hearing that. He considered himself too old to be the centre of such attention from young women... and at the same time, still much too young to accept being treated like an ageing and impotent old man.

The access door a few yards from the spot where they all were slid open, without anybody even noticing it. Captain Scarlet entered the Promenade Deck, a gift-wrapped package in his hands, and stopped in his tracks on seeing Colonel White surrounded by the four Angels. He tilted his head to one side and looked with perplexity at the scene. Then, understanding of what was happening dawned on him, and he smiled with amusement, seeing how unsettled his commander appeared to be.

Swiftly, before his presence became noticed, he slipped into the cover of a copse of high bushes near the door and kept watching what was going on. *The old man looks as if he needs some help*, he noticed, trying very hard not to laugh. He wondered how long he would be able to keep himself in check. Not long, if he were to bet on it. The best thing would be to intervene discreetly.

Scarlet dropped down his cap mic. "Captain Blue?" he called, almost in a whisper, so nobody would hear him. "Do you feel like mounting another rescue mission today?"

Meanwhile, Colonel White was really starting to get annoyed with all the attention he was getting. Impatiently, he tried to brush away Harmony's massaging hands, still working on his shoulders.

"Harmony, stop that," he said with apparent exasperation in his tone. "That will be enough, thank you very much."

"Are you sure, Colonel?" the Chinese girl asked, obviously disappointed. "You are still a little tense..."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. Your massage did me a lot of good." White sighed deeply. "I'm just... tired. I think I'd better go back to my room."

"Are you feeling all right, sir?" Destiny asked in concern.

"Yes, I'm all right. I'm JUST tired." White was distraught. He didn't want to get angry, so he wouldn't upset and frighten the girls, but if he was to say he was feeling tired, and judging by their worried expressions, he would alarm them all the same, but for a different reason. How could he get away from their attentions?

At about that desperate moment, the Promenade Deck speakers let out a loud whistle, and a stern voice made itself heard through it, startling almost everybody in the room:

"Attention all personnel! Routine exercise for all on-duty personnel. Report to stations immediately. Angel pilots, prepare to take-off for target practice. Off-duty personnel report to the conference room in ten minutes!"

That was the voice of Captain Blue; the Angels looked at each other with dismay upon their faces.

"Oh no!" Harmony murmured.

"Captain Bligh strikes again," Symphony murmured under her breath.

White gave her a curious look; he had enormous trouble not to let out a sigh of relief. He tried to hide his satisfaction behind a faint, somewhat shy smile. "You'd better go now, ladies. Before you catch hell from your acting commander."

"Right," Destiny agreed with a sigh. "Let's go, girls. You know Captain Blue does not like to wait."

The others reluctantly nodded their acknowledgment, before moving toward the access door, regretfully leaving the colonel behind. Symphony and Harmony were marching up front, very quickly, and the hidden Scarlet could see the intense dissatisfaction on their faces.

"I will be glad when the colonel is back in command," Harmony commented with a grumbling tone.

"Tell me about it!" Symphony replied between her teeth. "I've had about enough of Blue's power trips! Wait 'til I get my hands on him!"

Uh-oh! Adam's in trouble with his lady friend, Scarlet mused, not without a certain amusement. He wondered how his friend would get out of that one, and find a way to defuse Symphony's anger.

Not really a problem there, actually.

The two remaining Angels were about to follow their fellow pilots, when Colonel White suddenly caught hold of Rhapsody's forearm, stopping her in her tracks. She turned back toward him with an inquiring look. He exchanged a glance with her, before looking down, uncharacteristically hesitant when he next spoke:

"I... er... I would like to talk to you for a few minutes, if you please, Rhapsody."

She hesitated. Destiny was only three feet away from them, obviously wondering if she should wait or go.

"I'm... scheduled for duty in Angel Two, sir, and..."

"Oh, do stay!" Destiny suddenly interrupted. "I'll cover your shift for you this time, Rhapsody."

The English pilot shot a withering look at her grinning and departing friend.

"Thanks, Destiny," she said coolly, keeping herself from frowning. "Leaving me with the monkeys again, are you?"

Rhapsody could almost hear Destiny chuckle mischievously.

Scarlet was still hidden behind the bushes, unnoticed. He watched as the French woman strode out through the sliding door to get into the elevator. Then he turned his attention back to Colonel White and Rhapsody. He stayed where he was, and waited. Now was not the moment to show himself, as he had a feeling the colonel had some unfinished business to attend to with the Angel pilot.

Rhapsody was standing in front of her commander, waiting to know what he wanted from her. She could see the puzzled expression in his blue eyes, as he was staring at her.

"I hope I'm not the monkey?" he asked, unsure.

Rhapsody chuckled. The confusion in White was understandable, considering the exchange she just had with Destiny, but had absolutely no motivation. She smiled kindly.

"No, sir, that had nothing to do with you. It's an old story and, as they say: you had to be there." She paused a second, then cleared her throat. "Now... what can I do for you, sir?"

White was now looking rather sombre. He shook his head. "Sit down, please."

Rhapsody was really curious to know what this was all about; she obeyed his request, and sat on the chair in front of him. She waited for him to speak. The colonel seemed uncharacteristically shy, right now. He was avoiding looking her straight in the eye, and was staring, without really seeing, at the tip of his slipper, at the end of his injured, elevated leg. It took several seconds before he could bring himself to address the young woman.

"I... hem... I wanted to see you in private, Rhapsody. So I could offer you my most sincere apologies."

She frowned. "Whatever for?"

"Do you need to ask?" White finally raised his eyes to look at her. "My behaviour towards you... was inexcusable."

"You weren't yourself, sir. You don't need to apologise."

"Yes, I do. Rhapsody, I can't even BEGIN to forgive myself. The LEAST I can do now is ask for YOUR forgiveness." White's features became hard. "I kidnapped you. Mistreated you... Terrorised you. I... I hit you. And even held a knife against your throat." He shivered at the mere thought of that moment, and swallowed hard, before clearing his throat. "God knows what could have happened if you hadn't been able to contact Spectrum. Dear Lord, maybe I could have..."

He stopped; Rhapsody could only imagine what was going through his mind, by seeing the pain in his blue, suddenly distant eyes. She leaned toward him, gently reached for his hand, and smiled warmly.

"I really don't think you would have hurt me, sir."

"I wish I could be certain of that," he replied gloomily. "But I had so little control over myself at the time..." He shook his head, sighing. "I really never meant you to get hurt, Rhapsody. Not willingly, anyway. But... to think that because of me, you were almost raped..."

"Because of you?"

"I feel responsible. If I had not taken you prisoner, that scum Dempsey would NEVER have come near you."

"You can't know that. I could have been killed instead – and Captain Ochre with me – in your friend's house." White kept silent; apparently, he wasn't convinced. Rhapsody moved on: "Sir, that's the kind of risk that comes with our job. I wouldn't be in Spectrum if I didn't accept that. Or if I couldn't take care of myself."

A faint smile swept across the colonel's lips, at the memory of how he had found Dempsey, with a broken nose, sprawled at the feet of the young woman he had attempted to assault.

"Yes, I know you can take care of yourself," he said, nodding thoughtfully. He then pointed to the dressing put on his left temple. "I still have the wound to prove it."

Rhapsody scowled. "I hope it doesn't leave a scar."

"Don't worry, it won't. And you're not the only one responsible for that, you know: I got repeatedly hit over the head, during that dreadful adventure. I wish it would have brought me back to my senses before I made a mess of things!"

That was a pitiful attempt at a joke. Rhapsody shook her head, still feeling bad. "Nevertheless, I'm really sorry I hit you with that bottle."

"Don't be. I deserved it. Rhapsody, you were afraid for your life. You thought I was a Mysteron; I had become violent. How could you know I wasn't going to hurt you?"

"I could have killed you."

"You didn't kill me; in fact, I would say that you saved my life after that. I remember. YOU could have been killed when you pushed me away from that bullet. You could have been hit instead of me. But you didn't hesitate."

"I knew the truth by then. That you had been drugged, and were not really aware of what you were doing. I couldn't let you be killed. I HAD to do something."

"Regardless of everything I had done to you?"

"Really, sir... I can hardly hold that against you."

"Not even for the way I embarrassed you?"

Rhapsody stared at him; wondering what he could be referring to exactly. White sighed; he looked very uncomfortable. "You know... That question I asked you. About... you and me..."

He watched as understanding then dawned on her. He thought he saw some red coming to her cheeks, but it was just for a moment, as she slowly settled straight on her chair, and nodded thoughtfully.

"Oh, now I see. THAT question." She cleared her throat. "Well, yes... I must admit it WAS embarrassing."

"I don't know what possessed me to ask you that!" White said, with a bashful enough expression on his face. "I... my mind was in complete turmoil at the time. With huge gaps in my memory. I couldn't even remember most of my past, except through a thick haze. Let alone remember exactly what had happened the day before! I thought for certain that you were involved with... my capture by the enemy. So I..." He stopped, scratching his head in embarrassment. "I rather naturally assumed you had seduced me... in order to..."

The colonel stopped again, seeming at a loss for words. Rhapsody could see how unsettled he was by the whole situation. He had gone through enough, she reflected. No sense in dragging it out.

"I forgive you, sir," she said gently. "I accept your apologies. For everything."

White blew a deep sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"...But under ONE condition," Rhapsody added swiftly.

He stared at her, concern in his eyes, but was quickly reassured when next she spoke: "I still recall that I owe you that bottle of brandy I broke over your head..."

"Rhapsody..."

"I told you I would replace it," Rhapsody continued, without listening to the colonel's protests. "So, next time I go to my father's, I'll sneak into his cellar... and steal the best bottle of brandy he has, just for you."

White stared at her with perplexity. He frowned. "From your father's cellar?" He gave it some deep thought, then nodded slowly. "Would you make it a bottle of Cognac, instead?"

Rhapsody chuckled. "Whatever you want, sir."

"You'll drink it with me."

"Here on Cloudbase?"

That was a joke, of course; and White knew that perfectly well. "Of course not," he replied, with a frown of fake seriousness. "You know that drinking on duty..."

"...is a most serious offence," Rhapsody finished for him.

He nodded musingly. "I do tend to repeat myself, don't I?"

"Not that often, sir."

"You're trying to be nice to me, now." White shrugged. "I was thinking that, I owe you something myself; a musical, next time we're both in London..."

"That's not really necessary, Colonel."

"But I do insist. And I won't take no for an answer."

Rhapsody sighed. "All right, then. Since you put it that way."

"Although I'm not sure *Les Misérables* will still be on when we're next able to get down there," White remarked.

"It doesn't matter, sir. Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be fine."

"Then it's settled." Colonel White gave the young woman pilot a satisfied grin. He was looking as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "Well, that went better than I thought it would," he noted with a sigh. "I've got a lot of amends to make to a lot of people, you know. After all the things I did..."

Rhapsody nodded, understandingly. "That can't be easy for you," she noted, knowing her commander's pride, and how difficult it must be for him to apologise to so many people, even – or rather especially – when he wasn't really responsible for all that had happened.

"I know my failings, Rhapsody. And, no, it's not going to be easy. But I have to admit, it's going really well up so far. People have been so... understanding."

"They know what you've been through, sir. That shouldn't surprise you."

"Maybe so, but... I'm still feeling very bad about all this. I put everybody on edge, shot at people, threatened them... Doctor Fawn wasn't so sure I wouldn't attack him, the first day he visited me in that civilian hospital. And poor Captain Magenta... what I did to his nose..."

"He'll survive, sir," Rhapsody smiled. "You know he's tough. With his background, it's probably not the first time either."

"Well that doesn't minimize the fact that I nearly killed him," White grumbled. "He DID accept my apologies, quite gracefully, I might add. Despise his rather... chaotic background, he's also a very decent and nice person." White looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know, Captain Ochre surprised me most of all."

"Really?"

"Well, knowing him, I fully expected him to hold a grudge against me, considering I put a bullet in his shoulder."

"He doesn't?"

White shook his head. "No, quite the contrary, actually. He was really quite magnanimous. Said we were even, as I'd been shot through the shoulder too." White frowned, thoughtful. "He even recommended to me the nurse who took personal care of him during his convalescence."

Rhapsody gave him an odd look. "Nurse Lang?"

"Yes, that's the name. Ochre says she's extraordinarily caring. She should start this afternoon. You know her?"

"I've... heard of her." Rhapsody hesitated. She was trying her best not to openly chuckle at Ochre's far too obvious attempt at a practical joke at the colonel's expense. That he should even have the nerve to actually do it was disconcerting enough. Obviously, THIS was his way of really getting even with his commander.

Seeing the expression on the young pilot's face, Colonel White realised something was afoot. He narrowed his eyes at her, curious.

"What? Is something wrong? Or have I said something funny?"

"Funny, sir?" Rhapsody paused, pondering what to do or to say. She didn't want to blow the whistle on Ochre. On the other hand, keeping silent seemed awfully unfair to White.

"Have you ever read Virgil, sir?"

The colonel stared at her; *what an odd question...* "A long time ago, yes."

"Then, you must know what he said about Greeks bearing gifts?"

Rhapsody didn't elaborate; not that she would have the time to do so, if she had wanted too. The access door had just opened and they heard footsteps approaching; raising their heads to see who it was, they saw Doctor Fawn, in full uniform, approaching cheerfully, a smile on his face and a medical bag in his hand.

"Still here are you, Colonel?" he said, addressing White. "I thought I wouldn't have to search for you too long." He glanced at Rhapsody. "And you're in charming company, I see."

"Why, thank you, Doctor," Rhapsody replied, smiling.

Fawn nodded toward White, still addressing the young woman. "I trust he's been behaving himself?"

"Of course he has!" Rhapsody scoffed. "What a thing to say!"

"Well, I've got my reasons," Fawn deadpanned. "He's not the ideal patient, you know. I have all the trouble in the world persuading him to rest in sickbay."

"So that's why you sent me here now, is it?" White reflected. "To get some peace and quiet."

"Nothing gets by you, does it, sir?" Fawn removed his cap and put it on the table, along with his bag. "Mind if I borrow him for a few minutes, Rhapsody? I've got a few check-up tests to perform."

"Not again!" Colonel White moaned with obvious discontent. "I thought I was finished with those tests!"

"Not as long as you are under my responsibility and until I'm fully satisfied that you're all right," Fawn replied dryly. "You've been through a lot, sir, and I want to make sure you're completely recovered before I agree to release you from sickbay... and then back to active duty. I don't want you risking a relapse of any kind."

White scowled at those words. He didn't need Doctor Fawn to patronize him at all. But there was little point protesting; the chief medical officer was the one calling the shots in these circumstances, and even White had to follow his orders.

"Just be glad that I don't need you down in sickbay this time," Fawn continued, less harshly. "I'll do some simple routine check-ups right now, and you'll still be able to admire the view."

"Small consolation," White grumbled under his breath. He knew very well that Fawn had heard him, but the doctor acted as if he hadn't.

"He's all yours, Doctor," Rhapsody announced, getting to her feet. "I really must be going now. I should be in the Conference Room. You know Captain Blue doesn't joke about discipline."

"Not another one of those dreadful lectures?" Fawn said, lifting an eyebrow. "Well, at least this time, I don't have to give it." He smiled gently. "Do tell me what this one is all about."

"Are you sure you REALLY want to know?" Rhapsody leaned toward the colonel. "Get better soon, PLEASE, sir," she told him, almost in confidence. "We can't wait to have you back in command!"

"I'll do my best," White promised. "With the doctor's expert help."

Rhapsody answered with a smile and then, after nodding her goodbyes to Fawn, took her leave, striding toward the exit. Behind her, she could hear the doctor opening his bag, before asking Colonel White to give him his free arm, so he could take a blood sample. The grumble she heard coming from her commander told her he was reluctantly agreeing to the demand.

The Angel pilot had reached the door, but didn't have time to open it before she heard a rustling sound coming from behind the bushes to her right. Glancing that way, she saw Captain Scarlet emerging from them, a bashful and mischievous smile upon his handsome face. She frowned in perplexity.

"How long have you been hiding in there?" she asked, in a falsely accusatory tone.

"Long enough to wonder if I should get jealous," Scarlet answered with a faint laugh. He gave a quick glance in Colonel White and Doctor Fawn's direction; too involved with the medical check-up, neither were paying attention to what was going on around them, and hadn't seen him yet. Scarlet gently took his fiancée by the arm and pulled her behind the bushes, although not as far as he had previously been himself; he then permitted himself to kiss her cheek.

"Careful, now," she whispered, putting a hand on his chest, as if trying to stop him from going further, but obviously not really wanting to. "You're taking an enormous risk, here."

"I spend my entire life taking risks, Angel," he reminded her with a smile. "This is just one more... And one that's worth it, might I add."

"That's not the risk I was referring to," Rhapsody replied with a mischievous grin of her own. "If you start spying on me now..."

"What, frustrated that I might actually be better at it than you are?" Scarlet laughed. "Anyway, I wasn't spying on you." He glanced once more toward Colonel White, who, at the moment, was giving every appearance of a man who had really had enough, as Doctor Fawn listened to his heart rate with his stethoscope. "I just guessed that the colonel wanted to clear things between the two of you. So I kept out of the way, so he could have the opportunity."

Rhapsody nodded. "Thank you," she said. "He wanted to apologise. For the way he acted toward me. It seemed to be important to him."

"I can relate to that," Scarlet remarked, his eyes not leaving White. "He seems a lot better, now."

"He IS a lot better, Paul," Rhapsody replied with a smile. "It's really good to see him coming back to his old self."

"THAT I can also relate to." Scarlet stared at the young woman with a thoughtful glance. "Did he... mention anything yet about the ring?"

"Not a word as yet," she answered shaking her head. "Paul, I'm pretty sure that if he had intended to ask me about it, he would have done so just now."

"Unless Fawn interrupted him."

"I didn't get that impression." Rhapsody thought for a moment. "Could it be that he doesn't remember?"

"Doctor Fawn did mention him having some confused recollections," Scarlet nodded, wondering about that himself.

“Maybe that’s one of them.” He shrugged. “I expect we’ll find out soon enough.”

Meanwhile, Doctor Fawn was still doing his check-up on a morose Colonel White, who was placidly waiting for him to finish checking his blood pressure – hopefully as soon as possible, as he hated to go through these routines. He was looking about, trying to take his mind off it, and not to look as impatient as he was feeling. It was then that, turning his head in the direction of the door, he noticed that Rhapsody had not yet left. She was still there, standing next to the closed door, talking with Captain Scarlet. White could see both of them well, half hidden behind a copse of bushes. Their conversation seemed to be agreeable enough, judging by the way the young woman was smiling. And Scarlet was smiling back at her. Warmly... *affectionately, even...*

Seeing them there together reminded White of something. He frowned, searching in his mind for the memory. He knew it was something that had happened recently, when he was under the influence of that *Dream Spinner*, but it kept eluding him...

And suddenly, he remembered. The ring Rhapsody wore on the chain around her neck, with that small charm he had also seen on Scarlet. A halo on two wings on one side for both; St. Michael the Archangel on the other side for Scarlet. And it was a sure bet Rhapsody’s also had the same design.

It hit White like a ton of bricks, just as he saw Scarlet’s hand gently stroking Rhapsody’s cheek.

“I’ll be damned,” he muttered under his breath.

He couldn’t find anything more to say. All he could do was stare at the young couple in complete disbelief.

Everything he had witnessed recently concerning these two was falling into place in his mind. The charms, the ring – *a RED stone, for God’s sake, that should have been so obvious!* – the way Rhapsody had blurted Scarlet’s first name when he had jumped through that roof window in Bristol; the obvious concern and anger he had sensed in the captain when he had faced him, using the young woman as a shield.

Now everything was becoming clear.

White shuddered. He suddenly realised how close – how very close – Scarlet had really been to killing him, when White had attempted to goad him into finishing the job by telling that lie about how he had ‘had his way’ with Rhapsody. He was now feeling very lucky that Scarlet had stopped long enough to think rationally about it, before pulling the trigger. The temptation must have been very strong: the colonel was speaking about the woman he loved.

"If you ever say anything against them, I promise you, I'll find a way to keep you in Sickbay until next autumn."

Hearing that ominous threat coming from Fawn, Colonel White almost jumped and turned to face him, his incredulity fully apparent on his face. The doctor was glaring sternly back at him.

"YOU knew about this?" White said in a very low tone.

Fawn nodded. "Yes, I know about it. I've known for several months."

"Several months?" White repeated. "You mean to say it's been going on for that long?" He shook his head, obviously baffled, and eyed Fawn suspiciously. "And how do YOU know, anyway? Are you in their confidence?"

"Hardly. I found out by myself, quite simply. I started noticing that Rhapsody came over to Sickbay nearly every time Scarlet was brought in after serious injury. And then there's the obvious clues." He raised his eyebrows at White. "Haven't you noticed how they've been behaving towards each other during Sunday tea? The way they look at each other, the smiles... the way they're attentive to each other? It became quite obvious to me those two were in love."

White rolled his eyes. He let out a deep sigh. "I can't believe I've been so blind! Well now, yes, it's making sense!" He quickly looked toward the young couple he could still see through the bushes, making sure they weren't hearing his conversation with Fawn. Satisfied that they weren't, he turned a stern look toward the doctor.

"To think I didn't notice a thing and YOU did... Why didn't you tell me?"

Fawn snorted loudly. "Sorry, colonel, and without meaning any disrespect to you, it wasn't my secret. I'm not supposed to know myself. I didn't tell THEM I know." He smiled and added, half-jokingly, "Besides, all this went on in MY Sickbay, and as you well know what goes on in there is strictly confidential. Why would I have told YOU?"

White nodded in agreement with Fawn's observation. "I must look like a fool," he grumbled.

"Well, you don't look like a fool. Or you'd be in plenty of company. I don't think many people know about it, as I'm pretty sure they've kept it to themselves. It's probable they only told a chosen few."

"I can think who," White remarked sharply. "So they're keeping this their own personal secret... Why?"

"Maybe they view this as their 'secret garden', in this crazy life of ours?" Fawn suggested.

White scowled. "Are you sure it's ONLY that?"

This habit seemed to be spreading amongst his senior staff, he reflected inwardly. First, there was Captain Blue and Symphony Angel. He knew that they had been romantically involved with each other for a long time, although they were trying to keep a low profile, not wanting anybody to know about it. They weren't succeeding very well at it, and if they thought nobody had noticed, they were badly mistaken. Colonel White was certain that just about everybody on Cloudbase knew. It wasn't very difficult to find out, anyway, no matter how hard they were trying.

But Scarlet and RHAPSODY? White hadn't seen that one. If he had to bet on somebody, the colonel would have thought that more than anyone else, it would be Destiny who would be involved with him. After all, they already had been in the past, before Spectrum, even discussing marriage at one point.

They were certainly discreet about it, he mused, as he glanced once again toward the couple. But still, now that he knew, his eyes were opened to the obvious.

They loved each other.

Knowing that something was going on, and acting upon it, were two different things, though. Spectrum didn't really have specific regulations concerning those matters, but military rules were pretty strict on the subject. Not forbidding it completely, but keeping a close watch and control on it. Even going to such lengths as separating the people involved, and keeping them from being stationed at the same place. And Spectrum tended to follow military rules. The problem had never presented itself, except with Captain Brown's relationship with communications operator Becky Evershaw. But even then, it was different, as Evershaw was stationed in London Headquarters, and Brown on Cloudbase. There was no reason to oppose them seeing each other and eventually getting married. Now THIS was another matter, and White didn't know what to do about it yet, with any of those under his command. And since it hadn't affected anybody's work in any way up until now, he had simply looked the other way.

But he was wondering now if it would still be possible for him to continue acting that way. Between Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel, things were very serious.

The ring he had seen on Rhapsody... If he didn't miss his guess, it was an engagement ring.

As if he had guessed Colonel White's reflections on the situation, Doctor Fawn leaned toward him, to address him with a warning edge to his voice:

"I meant what I said earlier, Colonel. Don't oppose that relationship of theirs, or..."

"Give me some credit, Doctor!" White replied in annoyance, snapping out of his thoughts. "What make you think that I would oppose them, anyway?"

"You're angry."

"I'm not angry."

"Yes, you are. Your blood pressure blatantly says so."

White scowled. "I'm annoyed, Doctor. Not angry. And I find this very frustrating."

"Because you feel they should have told you? Well, they've been involved with each other for a long time, but maybe they don't consider it serious enough for..."

"It is serious. They're engaged."

Fawn frowned with perplexity. "For somebody who just found out about this relationship, you seem to know an awful lot more about it than I do!" he noted dryly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure. I saw it, when I saw her in... that state, you know, when her blouse was torn." He turned a somewhat embarrassed glance up to Fawn. "She was wearing a ring, on a chain round her neck... a RED stone, surrounded by diamonds." He paused and smiled slightly. "I didn't make the connection then, but of course it's rather obvious NOW, when you think about it."

"Engaged," Fawn repeated, pondering it. "Why yes, it is serious." He shook his head. "That's why you're so concerned."

"Yes, now you see I have reasons, Doctor. I don't know how to handle it. There could be complications concerning regulations..."

"Damn the regulations, Colonel! What about Scarlet's well-being?"

White frowned deeply, surprised by the doctor's sudden outburst. "What do you mean exactly?"

"That should be obvious. I mean his unique situation. Or doesn't it occur to you that this relationship could do him a lot of good?" White kept staring at him, still looking thoughtful, and Fawn sat down next to him. "Do you remember how it was in the beginning for him? How he would often withdraw from the others, feeling that he didn't fit in, and intensely aware of how different he was from any other human being?"

White nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I do remember how concerned you were about that," he said. "And you shared that concern with Doctor Weiss."

"Scarlet's come a long way since those early days," Fawn continued. "His acceptance by his peers was important to him. But I know he must still have doubts, worries, about his humanity. That incident with his father, not so long ago, was a good indication of that. He felt the blow very strongly."

“Fortunately for him, his father came around,” White reflected. He narrowed his eyes at Fawn. “Still... You think this relationship is a good thing?”

“I’m convinced of it. It’s the next logical step down the path of acceptance for him. It can only reconcile him with the rest of the human race.” Fawn paused a second, seeing the concerned look on the Spectrum commander’s features. “Just be thankful, sir, that it IS Rhapsody. Could you imagine the implications if the lucky girl were a civilian?”

“I’d never even thought about that,” the colonel muttered.

“Yes, I know there could be obstacles due to his... difference. But I sincerely think they can beat that. So, Colonel, I don’t think it would be wise to add other complications due to some military rubbish concerning...”

“Did I ever say I would oppose them?” White sharply cut in.

“But you said...”

“I only voiced my concerns about military regulations, Doctor. I never said I would act on it.” White was looking in the direction of Scarlet and Rhapsody. He noticed that the young woman was now on her way out, heading toward the exit door. The colonel nodded slowly. “I’ll reserve my judgement for now. See how this relationship develops. And give them a chance to tell me about it, in their own time.”

“I think that’s the best course of action for now, sir,” Fawn said, with obvious satisfaction.

“Then I’ll decide what to do,” White added. Rhapsody had just left the Promenade Deck, and as the door was closing, Captain Scarlet emerged from behind the bushes to walk toward the colonel and Fawn, with a flat gift-wrapped package tucked under his left arm. “Not a word about this,” White quickly muttered. “We never had this conversation.”

“Of course not, sir,” Fawn answered under his breath.

He greeted Captain Scarlet with a broad smile, while the latter nodded to him.

“Hi, Doc. How’s your patient today?”

“IM-patient,” Fawn deadpanned. “I swear, Captain, he’s even worse than you! I’m beginning to think I’m not really appreciated on Cloudbase.”

“You’re imagining things, Doctor,” White replied. “Of course you’re appreciated.”

“Yes,” Scarlet agreed. “Where would we be without you?”

“Yes, you say that NOW...”

Fawn saw the intense look Colonel White was aiming at him and understood clearly the message he was trying to pass. The doctor cleared his throat, put his instruments in his bag, and closed it. He took his cap from the table and put it back on.

"Okay, the tests are finished for now," he said quietly. "We'll finish this later on, in Sickbay, Colonel."

"Can't wait to get back there," White replied between his teeth; Scarlet grinned at that, but hastily wiped the smile off his face.

"I'll leave the two of you to chat alone," Fawn announced. "I'll see you later, sir."

White nodded and the doctor went his way toward the exit.

Scarlet sat down on the free chair in front of the colonel, putting the package at his feet and his cap on the table. A curious White gave a quick glance at the package, but Scarlet feigned not to notice it.

"You look a lot better today, sir," the captain said, clearing his throat.

"I feel better everyday, Captain," White nodded quietly. "I should think I'll be back at work shortly." He gave the faintest of smiles. "Of course, considering the circumstances, I wouldn't DARE say at the moment that I envy your healing ability... But it would be nice anyway, if just for a little while."

"Well, don't be in too much of a hurry," Scarlet said, chuckling. "You'd better make the best of the situation and take the time to rest before taking your command back."

"Why? Are you and Captain Blue making such a bad a job of command? Made such a mess of things that I'll have to clean up after you?"

"Well... no. At least, I don't think so. But we do realise that it's YOUR job. And let's face it, you do it better than we do."

"Cut the crap. The truth is that both of you hate riding a desk. Don't you think I don't know that by now?"

Captain Scarlet answered with a rather bashful smile.

White took a sip of his tea. "Which reminds me; you probably got Rhapsody into trouble."

He saw the younger man shudder slightly. *Serves you right*, he thought with satisfaction.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" Scarlet asked, apparently unsettled by the remark.

"Just now, I saw you chatting with her by the door." Scarlet seemed even more uncomfortable. White nodded slightly, enjoying himself tremendously, but trying not to show it. "She had to report to the Conference Room for a lecture or something like that. I'm afraid I kept her behind a little too long. And you delayed her even more."

"Oh!" The broad smile on Scarlet's face was one of relief. White noticed it, but said nothing. "I don't think she'll have problems, sir. The... hem... the summons to the Conference Room was my idea."

"YOUR idea?"

"When I arrived a moment ago, I saw you were quite... in distress in the Angels' company." Scarlet laughed. "I thought it best to ask Captain Blue to intervene to free you."

"And so he takes the plunge, and you come out of it smelling of roses, as the others don't know you were behind it," White said with a bemused tone. "Sneaky, Scarlet. But if I were you, I'd watch my back from now on. Captain Blue does not take kindly to being taken for a ride. I'm quite sure he'll get back at you for that." He grinned mischievously. "He let it slide last time, I don't think he will this time."

"Er... what time are you talking about, sir?"

White gave an exasperated sigh. "Come on now! I know all about it. I know about the time Captain Blue organised all those awful lectures and target practice, so nobody would notice YOU weren't on Cloudbase anymore... but had gone after ME, instead, to protect me against that death threat the Mysterons had pronounced against me."

Scarlet frowned, staring with perplexity at his commander. "How long have you known about that, sir?"

"Since the very beginning. I discovered it after my – our return from the *U.S.S. Panther II*." White scoffed loudly. "What, did you really think you could teach an old dog new tricks?"

"Why didn't you say anything at the time?"

"Because if I had, I would never been able to condemn you to death without doing the same for Blue." White smiled with amusement. "The results certainly would not have been the same. And it would have spoiled my fun."

Scarlet nodded. "You really meant to go easy on us."

"It would have been difficult to act differently, wouldn't you say? You DID save my life that time. Albeit in a rather unorthodox way." He took another sip from his cup. "And I wouldn't be too quick to say I went easy on you. Remember afterwards?"

Scarlet blew a sigh. "Right. The boxing match." He remembered it, all right. It was the night after Colonel White had 'sentenced him to death', but instead pretended it was a waste a time, since he was indestructible. Scarlet, unable to sleep, had gone to the gym, in order to let off some steam, hoping he would be able to sleep after. He had only been there for about an hour, laying into the punching bag, when Colonel White came in, and had determinedly shoved a pair of boxing gloves into his hands.

Scarlet had understood the meaning of that gesture, just by looking at his commander's grim and stern features. It was the colonel's way of getting even for that punch Scarlet had thrown at him. And there was no way he would have accepted no for an answer.

"You wiped the floor with me that night," the captain mused quietly.

White scoffed. "Nonsense! You let yourself be beaten! Frankly, I was disappointed. I expected more competition out of you."

"I couldn't very well hit you back after what had happened before, sir. I was in trouble enough as it was." Scarlet grinned, amused. "But if it's any consolation, you pack a mean left hook."

"You would say that now," White grumbled. "After that fight we had in the woods... THAT time, you didn't hold back."

"No, I didn't," Scarlet sighed. "Sorry. But you were quite a handful. You gave me a lot of trouble."

"Did I, really?" White mused, rubbing his chin.

Scarlet chuckled. "Oh yes, sir. You certainly did!"

White grinned broadly. "Not bad for a man of my age, eh?" There was some sort of satisfied glimmer in his eyes that amused Scarlet greatly.

"Your memory seems to be getting better as well, sir," the captain noted.

White shrugged. "I admit there are a lot of confused details." He looked over at Scarlet, watching his reactions, but couldn't see anything.

Instead, the young captain shook his head.

"Confused details, sir?"

"Yes, especially concerning the most hectic episodes. And those few times I lost control of my temper." The colonel scratched his ear, visibly unsettled. "It's a really strange feeling. My mind was a blur most of the time. It was as if my mind was telling me how to act, and I had no other choice but to comply. And at other times, it was the other way around: as if I was a totally different man doing all those things, but with my mind having no control over my body. I believe that's when I lost it, most of the time. It's difficult to explain. That must be really confusing to try to understand."

Scarlet shook his head. "Remember, sir?" he said quietly. "I've been through the same thing."

The Spectrum commander nodded, thoughtful. He was now staring intensely at the smiling young man seated in front of him.

He heaved a deep sigh. "What am I going to do with you?" he said almost in an undertone.

"Me, sir?" Scarlet asked, frowning in puzzlement.

"You. Captain Blue. Everyone." White shook his head. "I know what you all did for me. Keeping silent about my disappearance, the whole deal with the *Dream Spinner*... Not telling Spectrum Intelligence. Do you realise you've landed me in it? Tell me, how should I handle that?"

Scarlet knew that question would come. He had been dreading this moment from the very beginning; to tell the truth, he didn't know how to answer Colonel White. But he was determined to defend himself – and all the others. If need be, he would take full responsibility. He lowered his gaze, and cleared his throat.

"Sir, if I can say so myself, I..."

"No, you'd better stop right now." Scarlet looked back up into his superior's face. White was still staring straight at him, with as determined an expression as Scarlet had ever seen on him. "I know what you're going to tell me," White continued. "If I were to blame you, you'd insist on taking all this on yourself, saying it was your idea to start with. That you convinced Captain Blue and the others to follow your lead. On the other hand, if I were to thank you, and commend you on your actions, you'd say that you weren't alone in acting that way, that all the others contributed to help defuse a situation that have disrupted Spectrum's integrity." White sighed. "The situation was indeed difficult to handle. The Mysterons tried to deal Spectrum a blow from which it might never have been able to recover."

Scarlet frowned. "Are you saying we were right to act the way we did?"

"No," White said shaking his head again. "I'm saying that you were lucky it paid off. The Mysterons weren't able to carry out their threat by using me, and Spectrum came out of it unscathed." He paused a second, weighing what he was to say next. "And, if I may personally add, I was also very lucky, that you all stood by me to help me get through it." He nodded briefly, his eyes not leaving the young man, staring at him, waiting. "Thank you."

Scarlet shook his head slowly. White's reaction – while understandable – was somehow unexpected, in the sense that he hadn't expected him to voice it so directly.

"That was the least we could do for you, sir," the young British captain answered.

The Spectrum commander looked down. "I wonder... I know YOU are behind this. There's not a doubt in my mind about that."

I'd like to know... why did you PERSONALLY do it? Why did you take so much risk to help me that way?"

Scarlet sighed. "I had a personal debt toward you," he answered.

"About what happened two years ago?" White shrugged. "I couldn't act differently."

"I know it wasn't only a strategic move, sir," Scarlet interrupted. "You didn't know about my healing ability at the beginning, so you didn't do it to have an 'indestructible agent' who would eventually even the score with the Mysterons. When I escaped from their clutches, you believed in me and you didn't let me down." He shook his head. "You were in a similar situation. I couldn't do less for you than you did for me."

White sighed. He nodded slowly. "Yes," he admitted. "The situation was quite similar, wasn't it? Now I have a better understanding of what you've been through. And how frustrated you must have been knowing you'd done all that without being able to stop yourself."

"I try not to dwell upon that, now." Scarlet paused a second. "I feel like the lucky one: I don't remember any of the things I did. While YOU, on the other hand..."

"I admit, Captain, it's a bad feeling. But I'd rather think it's ME who's the lucky one." White carefully eyed his compatriot. "They didn't kill ME. Although they did try very hard. And I know I have to thank you, Paul, for their failure."

The use of his real name, in his commander's mouth, in those circumstances, made Scarlet smile with some contentment. Even more than the 'thank you' in itself. "Well, well, well," the captain murmured. "Are you mellowing, sir?"

White scoffed. "ME? Mellowing? Not on your life, Metcalfe! Don't be ridiculous!" He lowered his gaze and conspicuously eyed the gift-wrapped package at Scarlet's feet. "Now, when are you going to give me that present which is obviously for me?" Scarlet laughed, hearing the grumbling tone of his commander and the obviously impatient curiosity beneath it. He reached for the package, and put it on the colonel's lap, carefully avoiding his injured leg. "A welcome home gift, sir," he told him. "I would say it comes from all of us but... I have to give credit to Captain Blue and Captain Grey for retrieving it for you."

White stared inquisitively at the gift, wrapped in gold foil paper, and tied up with a large white ribbon. It rested heavily on his lap. Awkwardly, keeping it from falling with his right hand, still in its sling, he used his left to tear off the paper in large pieces. Scarlet watched him, a big grin on his face, waiting.

It wasn't long before White had removed enough of the paper to peer at what had been given him. It was a large, heavy, and thick brass plaque. He stared at the object with stunned astonishment. He knew it so very well. He stroked the words engraved on the burnished surface, a thoughtful look upon his face.

The inscription was short and simple:

"Sir Francis Drake - 2045"

White looked up at Scarlet; the latter couldn't define the expression upon his commander's face. There was confusion, and puzzlement, sadness and pride at the same time. What was absolutely sure was that he did not appear untouched.

"This plaque was on the bridge of the *Drake*," the colonel murmured.

Scarlet nodded. "I know. I saw it there."

"How... how in God's name did you get it? I thought it had sunk with the ship!"

"Well, yes, it did." Scarlet shook his head. "It was Grey and Blue's crazy idea to try and see if they could salvage it. My fault, I presume, since I mentioned it. They thought you would be glad to have it as a souvenir. Seeing how emotional you seemed when the *Drake* was destroyed..."

"I was emotional?" White repeated, frowning, ready to protest the insinuation.

Scarlet quickly held up his hands. "...Just a little, sir," he added swiftly.

White turned his attention to the plaque, filling his eyes with it. "I... This is really an overwhelming gift, Captain," he murmured. "Please, would you convey my thanks to..." He stopped and shrugged. "No. I'll personally thank Captain Blue and Captain Grey when I next see them."

Scarlet smiled again; he opened his vest pocket and fished something out of it. "And I have something for you, too."

He put into Colonel White's opened palm a small chain, weighted down by two laminated dog-tags, bearing the Spectrum logo. "I believe these are yours. Sorry. I didn't have time to give them back to you sooner."

White raised his hand, holding the chain, and looked at the dog-tags dangling in front of his eyes. "Thank you," he said, nodding to Scarlet. "I was wondering if you still had them."

"Of course I had them," Scarlet replied. "When I found them in my hand, after waking up in the *Drake's* Sickbay, I realised you had left them as some sort of message to me."

"I'd found them on me. A pity I didn't find them sooner! I wonder if it would have made a difference, anyway..." White cleared his throat. "I wanted to let you know that I believed you were telling me the truth."

"That's more or less what I worked out."

"Do you think I'm still worthy of these?" White asked, frowning with doubt.

Scarlet was perplexed by the remark. "I'd say you had more than EARNED them back, sir!" He sighed deeply. "Sir, you had it pretty bad down there, during this whole affair. You did so well, considering your situation. That *Dream Spinner* contraption..."

White shivered. The mere thought was still uncomfortable for him.

"It really screwed up your mind," Scarlet continued carefully. "It rendered you unstable. You were drugged, brainwashed... You didn't know who were your allies and who were the enemy. Looking at you now, it's easy to see that you've recovered pretty well... Or else we wouldn't even be able to have this conversation."

"You wouldn't take the risk of leaving me alone either, would you, Captain?" White asked, raising an eyebrow.

Scarlet smiled briefly. "According to Doctor Fawn, only two people ever succeeded in completely recovering from the *Dream Spinner* treatment," he said quietly. "Well, now I'd say we can add a third name to that list."

"A pity we weren't able to locate where that... thing is hidden," White grumbled. "Knowing that it could still be used to subvert other minds..." He shuddered again. "I'm glad Captain Blue escaped that fate. That isn't something I'd wish on anybody. The memory of what it did to me will haunt me 'til the day I die."

"We'll find it, sir," Scarlet promised. "We'll find that thing and the people operating it."

"The Network," White growled with disgust in his tone. "We CAN'T let them continue their coercive work, Scarlet. They could do a lot of damage. Especially if they have infiltrated world security organisations."

Scarlet nodded grimly. "And according to Captain Blue, considering what that 'doctor' told him, they could have infiltrated even Spectrum."

Colonel White scowled. "Yes, I know. I'm not too happy about that."

"Intelligence is already working to find these people. Unfortunately, for now, we don't have much to work on. Except for the few things that you, Captain Blue and I discovered."

"You're right," White mumbled. "That isn't much."

"Senior Agent Wade told me that we couldn't even get anything conclusive from the mercenaries who were captured at Liberty Base and the few survivors of the *Drake* explosion. It turns out they were simple hired hands, selling their services to the highest bidder. They can't tell us anything of importance. We have to assume those who were in the know were killed when the ship exploded."

Scarlet shook his head slowly, seeing his commander's grim-looking face. "Eventually, they'll make a move – a mistake – that will permit us to find them." He paused a short instant, before continuing: "They've made this personal. They WON'T escape us. It's only a question of time."

"The sooner the better," White continued, musingly. "And what about the 'doctor'?"

"He's still in a deep comatose state, since he was caught in that explosion at Liberty Base."

"Has he shown any signs of returning to life yet?"

"He has, actually. The doctors are hopeful he'll awaken, but unfortunately, it looks like it could be a long process."

"I really can't say I feel sorry for his present state," White remarked with a scowl. "Not after what he did to me. But still, it's a shame that he can't give us any information for now."

"Intelligence had him transferred to Spectrum Medical Centre, in Atlanta. If he ever wakes up, and is able to talk, you can be sure he will be questioned."

White grew sombre. "Let's hope we CAN get some information about this organisation he's a part of."

"The way I see it, sir, AT LEAST we've put him out of circulation." Scarlet slowly came to his feet, taking his cap from the table and putting it on. "In that state, he won't be able to brainwash anyone anymore. For A LONG time."

"Yes," White agreed, nodding. "Since you put it that way... It is a comforting thought." He eyed the young officer who was standing in front of him. "You're leaving me now, Captain?"

"As much as I'd like to stay and continue this talk, sir, I've got duties to attend to," Scarlet answered. "Or else I'll have to attend the lecture Captain Blue's organised in the Conference Room!"

White smiled in turn. He extended his left hand to the young man. The latter looked at it awkwardly for a short moment before

reaching for it. "Thank you, Captain Scarlet," the colonel said gravely. "I really owe you one this time."

"I only did my duty, sir."

"You did more than that, Paul. You did FAR more than that."

Scarlet's smile broadened. He squeezed the colonel's hand one last time before releasing it...

...And bringing his own hand to his brow in a smart and very military salute.

* * *

Night had fallen on the Spectrum Medical Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, where everything was quiet. It wasn't one of Spectrum most closely guarded facilities, but it had a handful of security guards on the premises and nobody was allowed in or out without going through a very thorough identity check. No documents or materials were to leave the Centre, not even the slightest bit of paper, as very sensitive issues were dealt with inside its walls.

The SMC didn't have a detention section, as it never had need for any, until that moment. The prisoner that had been brought here four days ago, from a military hospital in Scotland, had been put in a room in the psychiatric wing. Plunged in a deep coma, he was hooked to machinery intended to keep him alive, and to monitor his vital signs. He was closely watched over by doctors and nurses, who took observations at regular intervals, unable to do more at the moment for him.

He had stayed stable ever since his arrival. Nothing indicated whether he would soon wake up or whether, conversely, he would sink deeper into his coma.

There was a guard at the nurse's station, one block down the hall, keeping an eye on comings and goings; he knew everybody who worked there, civilians and military. He had no reason to assume there would be any wrongdoing on the part of any of these people.

The door leading to the comatose prisoner was out of the guard's view; busy checking on a young orderly coming out, he didn't even notice somebody going in that direction. Silently, the door was pulled shut, and the newcomer came near the bed, silently, to peer down on the sleeping patient. The monitor at the head of the bed was beeping regularly, all its readings normal.

The visitor stroked the prisoner's hair, in an almost apologetic way. "I'm sorry..." a voice murmured, "but you have become a security hazard. I hope you can understand... But I have no choice but to do this."

A hand took a syringe from the pocket of a white jacket and slid the fine needle into a tube connected to the man's arm. An injection was swiftly made. There was nothing inside the syringe but air. No trace would be left. Nobody would suspect anything; they would all believe the patient had died of natural causes.

The visitor put the syringe back in the jacket pocket and turned around; he went out through the door as quietly as he had come in, leaving it half open, listening to the regular beeping sound of the machinery, as he unhurriedly strode down the hallway towards the nurse's station.

It was only when the visitor had turned a corner to disappear behind a door that the beeping sound in the prisoner's room became suddenly irregular and the machinery emitted a warning signal to inform the medical personnel that something was wrong.

The beeping had stopped to change into a long wailing, by the time the visitor had left the SMC psychiatric wing...

THE END

Acknowledgments

This story explored some aspects of Colonel White's life, past and present. The colonel always has been one of my favourite characters and the few TV episodes which actually focus more on him ("*White as Snow*", to which some parts of this story refers to, "*Spectrum Strikes Back*") are amongst those I prefer.

The prologue of this story was based upon Colonel White's official biography, in which we learn that Charles Gray, who was the captain of a British ship in his youth, had chosen to disobey orders from the British Military Dictatorship of the time, and side with the rebels fighting it. We also learn that he had retired from the Navy after the civil war, enlisted in the Universal Secret Service, got married, and later became a widower.

Those aspects are used in this story, along with his relationship with some of his staff members (namely, his compatriots, Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel, and the American Captain Blue).

The story also allows me to introduce a new concept into the Captain Scarlet universe: *The Network* thus makes its first appearance, and will cause headaches to Spectrum in future stories.

Storylines of some fanfic stories have been used as references for some parts of this story:

"*Whose Heart the Blackest*", by Richard A. Spake and Kimberly Murphy;

"*Truth and Consequences*", by Kimberly Murphy;

"*Good Knight, Dear Lady*" and "*Mixed Doubles*", by Mary J. Rudy.

I acknowledge these authors' works and thank them for the inspiration they procured.

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Chris Bishop

About the author



Owner and webmaster of '*Spectrum Headquarters, the Unofficial Website of Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons*', Chris Bishop is a French Canadian, hailing from the province of Québec. She's been writing fiction (in French), since the age of 10, but only found out about fan fiction in her 30's, and then started writing '*Captain Scarlet*' stories in English. For several years, she has worked at improving both her use of the language and her writing skills, and hopes, with the help of her English-speaking friends and beta-readers, to get better still.

Her website is considered not only one of the largest on the internet, but certainly the most complete on the subject of Captain Scarlet.

Spectrum is White



www.spectrum-headquarters.com