

A QUESTION OF TRUST

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

SYNOPSIS:

*Set one week after the events on the TV episode “**Winger Assassin**”. The new improved Captain Scarlet had proven his loyalty to Earth and Spectrum by giving his life in an attempt to save the Asian Director General's life. But it's not everybody in the Spectrum organisation who trusted him just yet. Captain Ochre and Destiny Angel each have their reasons to distrust him. Following a new Mysteron threat, and while a sick Captain Blue is confined to sickbay, Scarlet is assigned to the protection of the Aerial Exposition in Los Angeles, and boards the prototype of a new Passenger Jet, along with Captains Ochre, Grey, and Destiny Angel.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This story is based on characters created by Gerry And Sylvia Anderson for the TV series “Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons

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Some events and characters created by Kimberly Murphy and Mary J. Rudy in their own fan fiction stories, are referred to, and the fact that Destiny Angel had identified the ORIGINAL body of Scarlet (although I had put up a second identification, that of the cloned one, which could be taken as the scene depicted in the first TV episode. Also taken from Kimberly Murphy and Mary J. Rudy are the important fact that Captain Scarlet and Destiny have known each other's romantically before actually joining Spectrum. Some hints at Rhapsody Angel already in love with Scarlet, but keeping that to herself, are also present.

*I also used some referring points to events happening in my first fan fiction story “**All the colours of the Rainbow**”.*

Flashback sections reported to some “missing scenes” from the first and second episodes of the series, where reactions from diverse characters (Colonel White, Captain Ochre, Captain Grey and Destiny Angel) over Scarlet's actions in those episodes are further developed.

*The Aero Special One described in this story has been developed from an idea taken in the second “**Captain Scarlet Annual**” (1968), where “updates” of the Spectrum Passenger Jet are designed. I took some liberties here and there and used the designs as part of a prototype from Universal Aero Engineering, the firm who developed the SPJs exclusively for Spectrum.*

This story serves the purposes of explaining some important questions. I have wondered HOW the Spectrum organization had come to the conclusion that Mysteron agents were all difficult, if not impossible, to kill. Aside from the reconstruction of the Mysteron complex on Mars in the first episode and Scarlet's own indestructibility, they had no further indications of that before some

episodes later in the TV series. As far as it seems, maybe only Captain Scarlet, due to the particular events surrounding his own revival, could have retain the powers of retrometabolism. In fact, about all the people and objects the Mysterons had reconstructed seemed fairly easy to destroy (For example, in the first episode, Captain Brown was actually blown to pieces and NEVER came back afterward.).

Second question: what do Spectrum members understand of Captain Scarlet's powers? Did they actually believe, right from the start, that he simply cannot be killed, or die from his wounds? Could they even envision him coming back from death itself after being killed?

Lastly: since the second TV episode, Scarlet had shown some spells that originate his hability to – in some cases – detect Mysteron's presence or danger. As it will be explained in that story, neither Captain Scarlet nor Doctor Fawn will take this as a "sixth sense" demonstration from the start, but are actually concerned that the Mysterons are trying to regain control on Scarlet (well, maybe they could be right, I won't tell!).

As all these events take place, there is not any Mysteron Detector, nor Mysteron gun yet conceived by Spectrum Research Centre.

Apologies to the fans of Captain Blue out there. For the purposes of the story, I had to somehow get rid of him, so the reason for stranding him in Sickbay with the flu. He will be back, though, with problems of his own in a story I'm actually working on.

Added note: REVISION COMPLETED! *Hazel Kolher had offered me, very graciously to be the beta-reader of this story. Each chapter is now entirely revised and has replaced the original version. So I have to thank Hazel – along with Mary J. Rudy – who, with their efforts and advises, had been a great help for the revised version of this story that you're about to read.*

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Chapter 1

Captain Blue was feeling miserable.

Alone, in one of Cloudbase Sickbay's numerous rooms, he was sick with a severe case of flu. Rather common, by Blue's own standard, but Doctor Fawn had judged him unfit for duty, and a health hazard for other Cloudbase personnel. In the closed environment of the flying Spectrum headquarters, Blue's condition could be the beginning of a spreading epidemic that would have reduced the effectiveness of the entire base.

Knowing that Colonel White, Spectrum's commander-in-chief, would have none of that, Doctor Fawn had quickly put Blue into quarantine - much to the young American Captain's dismay.

There was only so much sport a man could watch on the television, Blue thought bitterly as he zapped through channels, successively moving from base-ball to basket-ball, soccer and American football... An active guy like Blue wasn't really used to staying in bed doing nothing but while the time away. He would rather be out there, chasing after terrorists... or even Mysterons, for that matter.

As he tried to figure out the final score of the tennis match he had stumbled on, Blue saw the door of his room slide open. A dark head discreetly peered inside and looked expectantly at Blue. Recognizing the familiar grinning face, Blue let out a heavy sigh of relief and sat up straight on his bed.

"Well, are you a sight for sore eyes! I was beginning to think I hadn't a friend left in the world!"

"Mind if I come in?" Captain Scarlet said entering, his cap in hands. "I thought you could use some friendly company."

"PLEASE come in!" Blue almost implored him. "Before Doctor Fawn sees you and throws you out on your rear."

"Actually," Scarlet replied with an amused glitter in his blue eyes, "he gave me permission to come and see you. Said your morale was way down."

"I hate being confined to bed," Blue mumbled. "Who said I was sick, anyway? I don't feel sick!"

"Don't lie, Adam."

Scarlet came nearer and touched his friend's forehead. He frowned, taking on an alarming resemblance to Doctor Fawn when he was busy examining a difficult patient. "Fever still high, I see." He glanced at Blue's puzzled face, trying to sound and look very serious. "Pallid complexion, red eyes, runny nose... Yes, I'd say you're still very sick, my friend."

"Would you stop with the act?" Blue protested, torn between anger and amusement. "If Fawn came in right now, you'd have hell to pay next time you came to him as a patient. How come he's let you visit me, anyway? I thought I was in complete quarantine, since we got back from London."

"Well, you are," Scarlet agreed, smiling and pulling up the only chair in the room to sit next to the bed. "And don't expect to see anybody else but me." He scratched his ear, looking a little

embarrassed. "It seems I have a ... ah... natural immunity to all Earth viruses, now. I can't catch flu anymore, and therefore won't spread it around Cloudbase."

Blue scowled. "Some guys have all the luck," he muttered. "How come I caught flu, anyhow? I thought Cloudbase had a controlled environment."

"That's why you caught it. That 'controlled environment' isn't always very good for the immune system. Remember when we went to London... It was chilly down there, even with our warm uniforms."

"Typical British weather," Blue retorted with a devilish smile. He glanced at his friend, a bit perplexed. "You said you have a natural immunity against Earthly viruses now? What about London? I still remember how bad you looked in the International Airport Control Tower. I swear, Paul, you were about to faint."

"I know." Scarlet replied, thoughtfully. "I told Doctor Fawn about that incident four days ago, when I... er..."

"Revived?" Blue suggested, lifting an eyebrow.

Scarlet shrugged. "I'll have a hard time adjusting to this 'coming back from the dead' stuff," he said gloomily.

"I think EVERYBODY here will have a difficult time adjusting." Blue sneezed loudly. "Understandably, you more than anybody else. Excuse me."

"Bless you," Scarlet smiled as Blue drew a handkerchief from the box next to his bed. "You know, you really look awful."

"Thank you," Blue sniffed. "Now what was it Doctor Fawn said about what happened to you in the Airport Tower?"

"Well, it's definitely not due to the flu. I didn't catch the same virus as you, he's pretty sure of it."

"Then what was wrong with you?"

"Fawn has a theory..." Scarlet hesitated and Blue sneezed again, this time right into the handkerchief.

"What is this theory of his?" the American asked.

"He thinks it has to do with the Mysterons. Since I was a strategic part of the Asian Director General's protection... Fawn thinks they might have tried to regain control of me to get to him."

Blue stared at his friend in concern.

"That's bull!" he protested vehemently. "Seeing how you acted afterward, I hope Fawn was quick to admit he was wrong!"

"He said the Mysterons TRIED, Adam. He didn't say they'd succeeded."

"I sure hope so!" Blue sneezed again and took a new handkerchief. "I swear, I'm becoming allergic to this place! Paul... you DIED trying to save the Director General."

"And failed," Scarlet responded sombrely.

"Well, that couldn't be helped. War is war, and unfortunately, there are victims in war. And I wouldn't be too quick to say you failed... At least, not entirely."

As Scarlet gave him a puzzled look, Blue smiled quietly. "Remember, dying for the cause proved you were still loyal to Spectrum."

"A rather poor consolation," Scarlet grumbled.

"Not for everybody, it isn't." Blue sneezed again, much to his dismay. Scarlet smiled, somewhat amused by his friend's misfortune. He then reached for his tunic pocket and opened it, producing a small envelope that he put into Blue's lap.

"What's that?" his friend asked, eyeing the piece of paper.

"Something that should improve your morale a bit," Scarlet answered, standing up. "It's from Symphony."

Blue's eyes lit up at the mere mention of that name. Since the very beginning of the Spectrum organisation, Captain Blue and Symphony, one of the female pilots of the Angel jettifighters, had been pursuing a romantic relationship that only a few were aware of. Colonel White was not of those. Not that the commander-in-chief of Spectrum was a heartless man. At one point, he had even allowed marriage between Captain Brown and Becky Evershaw, a Spectrum communications operator ... and Brown's recent death at the hands of the Mysterons had left his young wife a widow, with a child on the way. Colonel White had blamed himself for

this dreadful situation. Now, nobody knew for sure how he would react if he found out about the relationship between one of his best staff officers and one of his Angel pilots.

"I'll leave you alone to savour that," Scarlet smiled as Blue took the envelope. I'm sure you'll feel much better afterward."

"Thanks, Paul," Blue said with a broad grin. "I owe you one."

"Don't mention it. Do you have a message for your lady friend?"

"Tell her I love her."

"Are you sure you want me to use those exact words?"

"Just tell her to call me. I may not be able to see her personally, but I sure can answer the intercom or the phone."

"Won't it be a bit risky? Somebody else might intercept it and hear you..."

"That depends on what you say and how you say it. Karen and I have our ways..."

"I'm sure you do," Scarlet grinned. "I'm out of here. Take care of yourself. I'd like to see you fit for duty very soon."

He moved to the door and opened it, putting on his cap, as Blue was opening the envelope. "Don't be a stranger. Come back to visit me soon," the blond American called out to his British counterpart.

Scarlet nodded his agreement and departed from the room. He smiled with amusement as the door closed behind him, at the very moment Captain Blue let out one last sneeze.

* * *

The Amber Room was situated at the far end of Cloudbase Deck E, just beneath the Angel craft positioned on the higher flight deck. Angel One, always ready for take-off, was at all times manned by one of the female Angel pilots, on four-hour rotating shifts. At the present time, Melody Angel was stationed in the craft, and Symphony and Rhapsody, ready to respond to any emergency, were occupying the Amber Room.

Rhapsody was busy preparing herself a cup of tea over at the counter, all the while trying desperately not to yawn. About four hours earlier, she had returned from her own shift on board Angel One. Just before that, she had finished eighteen hours straight, replacing one or another of her fellow Angel pilots, who had other duties to perform. She couldn't wait to get to her personal quarters to get a few hours of sleep, right now. *You're too accommodating, Dianne,* she told herself. *People are beginning to rely a little too much on you. Better be careful, or you'll man Angel One all alone one of these days.*

Symphony, comfortably seated in one of the Amber Room's many chairs, raised her eyes from the book she was reading and looked toward her British counterpart, with a compassionate, but slightly bemused glance. She consulted her watch.

"About ten minutes to go, now, honey," the blonde American Angel said. "And you'll be able to hit the bunk."

"That would be a real pleasure," replied the redhead with a heavy sigh, stirring her tea. "I mean, I've rarely felt so exhausted before... I really need that rest."

At that precise moment, Captain Scarlet entered the room in time to hear his compatriot's words. He gave her a roguish grin. "That's because you don't know how to manage your time properly, m'dear. I'll bet you didn't sleep much last night... Couldn't put down one of those trashy novels you ladies are so fond of?"

"Look what the cat dragged in!" retorted Rhapsody with a mocking smile. "I'll have you know, Captain Scarlet, that I've been on duty for twenty-four hours now, dividing my time between standby here and in Angel One... which is where I was last night."

"What kind of a schedule is that?"

"I'm too much of a good sport. Destiny and Harmony had other business to attend to. So I volunteered to take their places."

On seeing Scarlet, Symphony had quickly got up from her seat. The British Captain came to her with an amused twinkle in his eye.

"Rhapsody," Symphony said, addressing the other girl, "would you mind giving us a minute or two?"

"What... him too?" Rhapsody replied with a devilish smile that took Scarlet by surprise. "You're very busy, Karen... I wonder what Adam would say about that."

"Come on, Dianne..."

"Is the far end of the room far enough for you?" Rhapsody turned her back on the pair and walked toward the elevator leading to the Angel craft. "Don't mind me, I'm not here."

Scarlet stared at her back for a few seconds before looking back at Symphony. "Does she know anything about you and Adam... or is she just kidding you?"

"With Rhapsody, you can never tell," Symphony said. "With her background as a detective... And if she knows something, she didn't learn it from me."

"Well, not from me either."

"Did you see him?"

Scarlet smiled. "Yeah, I saw him."

"How is he doing?"

"He's miserable and hating every minute of it. Can't wait to be out of quarantine."

"Poor thing!" Symphony sighed heavily. "Maybe I should go visit him."

"I wouldn't advise it. He's very sick, you know. And it won't do any good if you catch the flu too." Scarlet gave an amused smile. "Don't you think the Colonel would be suspicious if that happened?"

"You're right, of course. Did you give Adam my message?"

"Yes... He was about to read it when I left him. Oh! And he has his own message for you. He asked me to say he loves you."

Symphony's face seemed to glow on hearing these words. "Thanks, Paul," she said warmly. "I could just kiss you!"

"Well," Scarlet smiled, opening his arms to her, "there's no risk of catching the flu from me!"

He hugged her, like he would have the kid sister he never had. Symphony let out a heavy sigh.

"You're a real friend, you know that?"

"I'm just trying my best," Scarlet responded. "You've got a good thing going with Blue. I just feel good helping you..."

"Are you finished yet?" Rhapsody, at the other end of the room, had turned to look at them. The mischievous smile on her face was proof enough that she wasn't to be fooled by the appearance of the scene. Scarlet gave her an odd look.

"I thought you weren't supposed to be here."

"I'm doing both of you a favour by pointing out that Melody will be coming off duty..." she consulted her watch, "...in less than five minutes. Now maybe you don't care if anyone sees you like this..."

Exchanging embarrassed glances, Scarlet and Symphony broke apart. The British Captain cast a thankful look at his red haired compatriot and cleared his throat. "Right," he stated, turning toward the exit. "I should be going, anyway. I feel rather restless right now... Maybe I'll go to the gym and do a few laps of the track..."

"Sounds like fun," Rhapsody smiled back. "I'd be tempted to join you..." she suppressed a yawn. "...if I weren't so tired."

"Go and get some rest, girl," Scarlet responded, laughing. "You look like you could do with it."

The door slid open before him and, as he turned toward it, he nearly bumped into a newcomer who stopped dead in the doorway upon seeing him. Scarlet stopped too, then looked back at the young blonde woman who was now staring at him with bewildered eyes.

"Well, hello there!" Scarlet said warmly with a broad smile. "It's been a long time since we've seen each other, hasn't it?"

Destiny Angel, her crash helmet tucked under her left arm, blinked blankly at Scarlet's words. She straightened up in front of him and cleared her throat. "Hello, Captain," she said evenly.

"How are you doing these days, Destiny?"

"Very well, thank you," the Angel pilot responded in her heavy French accent. "I've just come to relieve Melody in Angel One."

"She's not down yet. We have a few minutes to ourselves to talk". Scarlet smiled again. "Did you have your hair cut?"

"Yes, a bit. I didn't think you would notice, Captain."

"Come on, Juliette, don't be so formal." Scarlet looked at her thoughtfully. "Listen, I should be due for a furlough in a few days, in London. I seem to recall I promised you a night on the town, several weeks ago..."

"You did?" Destiny's voice had a cold edge to it, almost icy. Scarlet noticed it, but dismissed the thought almost right away.

"Yes," he said, trying to smile kindly. "So, what do you say? Maybe if you ask the Colonel, you could join me... for old times' sake."

"For old times' sake," Destiny repeated absentmindedly, lowering her eyes to the floor. Scarlet, along with Rhapsody and Symphony, who were following the conversation, could see she was somehow uneasy. "I'm sorry, Captain. I'm afraid I have to decline."

Scarlet frowned, perplexed. "What? Why?" He looked straight at her, trying to read her feelings in her face. He could see none. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked her.

Destiny looked up at him. "Yes," she replied, a bit too sharply for Scarlet's taste. "Why do you ask that question?"

Scarlet shrugged. "I don't know... You don't seem like yourself, actually."

"I am quite myself, thank you," Destiny retorted curtly. She looked him squarely in the eyes, before adding: "Are you?"

The icy tone of her voice took Scarlet aback. From her seat, where she had reopened her book without really reading it, Symphony suddenly raised her head and exchanged concerned glances with Rhapsody, who seemed almost as astounded as she was.

"What's the matter, Destiny?" Scarlet asked. As she tried to get by him, he reached to grab her gently by the shoulders, wondering what she could have against him. She drew back, and the almost disgusted look he saw in her eyes startled Scarlet.

"What do you think is the matter?"

Upon hearing Destiny's icy response, Rhapsody stared at her with unbelieving surprise. "Juliette!" she started in protest.

Scarlet had instantly let go of Destiny, still looking quizzically into her face. He saw not only disgust in her defiant glance, but also a mixture of mistrust... and horror.

And he did know why. It just never occurred to him that of all the people in Cloudbase, SHE would react to him that way.

"I see what it is," he said, with a catch in his voice. "It's all too obvious..." He could only stare at her blankly, unable to say more. And she was staring back at him, determined not to avert her eyes this time. The coldness in them was more than Scarlet could stand. "Excuse me, ladies," he muttered over his shoulder, addressing Symphony and Rhapsody, "I really must be going..."

"Captain..." Rhapsody tried to call him back.

"Paul, wait!" Symphony jumped to her feet, throwing down her book, but Scarlet was already on his way out. He didn't even look back at a still cold Destiny as he went past her and strode out of the Amber room.

"Of all the unfeeling things to do!" Rhapsody slammed her cup down on the counter, almost breaking it in the process. "Juliette, what IS the matter with you?"

"What did you do that for?" Symphony added, frowning. "He was trying to be kind to you..."

"Well, I don't want his kindness!" snapped an angry Destiny to her fellow pilots. "In fact, I don't want ANYTHING to do with HIM!"

She started to move toward the elevator leading to the Angel craft. Symphony moved quickly in front of her, cutting off her way out. Rhapsody drew nearer.

"I don't think you realize what you have just done!" the British pilot said. "You've hurt him, Destiny!"

"Hurt him real bad," Symphony added. "Why did you behave like that?"

"Do you have to ask?"

"Really, Destiny," Rhapsody protested, "you don't really believe that crap about..."

"You forget," Destiny interrupted her abruptly. "I saw Paul's body. I identified him in Sickbay, a month ago when..." Her voice caught in her throat and she had difficulty in continuing "... when his car crashed."

Rhapsody and Symphony looked at her in dismay, not knowing what to say. At that moment, they heard the elevator; Melody was coming down from her shift on Angel One. Destiny looked over the closed transparent amber door. Her expression indicated that she wanted nothing more than to escape further discussion with her friends. She looked at them with embarrassment. "Look, I have to go... You shouldn't concern yourselves about what just happened."

"Shouldn't concern ourselves?" Symphony repeated, not believing her ears.

The door of the elevator slid open and Melody appeared before their eyes, unstrapping herself from the elevating pilot seat which had just come to a halt. She stood up, removing her helmet, as Destiny, turning her back on Rhapsody and Symphony, went to take her place on the seat.

"Destiny!"

Destiny sat down and strapped herself in, glancing over at an angry Rhapsody, who came closer to the elevator door to address her.

"Listen, I sympathise with what you've been through, but that's no reason to take it out on Scarlet, He's not responsible for what happened."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Destiny replied dryly. "There's so much we don't know about these Mysterons..."

"That's exactly why you should give Paul an even break. I thought you'd been in love with him, in the past..."

"That's just the point," Destiny snapped back. "I was in love with Paul. Not... HIM."

The door slid down on her, before Rhapsody could add anything else. Through the semi-transparent door, the British Angel could see the seat rising to take Destiny up to Angel One. Angrily, Rhapsody turned around, swearing in a most unladylike fashion. She went past a perplexed Melody, without even seeming to see her.

"Did I miss something?" the young Black American pilot asked, frowning.

"I think Rhapsody and Destiny have just started the age-old British-French rivalry all over again," Symphony said, shaking her head.

"I can't believe she could be so insensitive!" Rhapsody raged on, striding across the Amber Room toward the exit.

"Where are you going?" Symphony called to her.

"I've got to make sure a friend of mine is all right," Rhapsody responded, opening the door. It slid closed behind her, and Symphony was left shaking her head thoughtfully, while a puzzled Melody was still looking quizzically at her.

"I thought you were tired," Symphony murmured to the closed door.

* * *

Upon leaving the Amber Room, Captain Scarlet went directly to the Cloudbase sports centre, situated on Deck C, just next to Sickbay.

He wasn't really angry about what had just happened. Annoyed, certainly. And most definitely shaken.

Destiny was his oldest friend in the Spectrum organisation. They had worked together a few years back, when they were both in the World Army Air Force. As captain Paul Metcalfe, Scarlet had been superior officer to Flight Lieutenant Juliette Pontoin for a period of two years. They had become friends quickly. In fact, they had been much more than friends. They had been lovers, even engaged to be married, much to the dismay of Scarlet's father, General Charles Metcalfe, who didn't seem to trust the young French pilot's true feelings toward his only son. Eventually, though, the pair received different assignments and went their separate ways, on good terms. Upon seeing each other again when recruited by Spectrum, they had formed an everlasting friendship. Nothing romantic was ever involved, nor even hinted at. They just remained very good friends, relying on each other.

Well, not anymore, thought a gloomy Captain Scarlet. And if the initial discovery of Destiny's new feelings toward him had startled him at first, he now saw that maybe it was all too understandable that she should react that way. She knew him too well, was too much attached to him NOT to dismiss the new man the Mysterons had made of him. After all, Scarlet's present body was not his original one. It was some kind of a cloned copy, with some new, radical improvements now encoded into its genetic structure. He could heal from any wound, Doctor Fawn had told him. Even a fatal one.

The fact that the Mysterons had killed him, some weeks ago, and then used this cloned copy of himself to try to kill the World President didn't help much in how some people would regard him. For six hours he had been in the Mysterons' power, he'd been told. He didn't remember anything about that, but even while he found it rather difficult to swallow, he had no cause to doubt it. There were too many people reporting the incident to him. And it explained all too well why, when he had awakened in Cloudbase Sickbay, apparently free from the Mysterons' influence, he was kept closely under guard, even restrained to his bed at one point. He had truthfully answered the many questions of Spectrum Intelligence agents, who were trying to find out if he was the real Paul Metcalfe or the Mysterion impostor. At first, Scarlet, to whom nothing had been explained, didn't understand much of what was happening to him. He was just dreadfully aware that he was accused of something terribly wrong. Then, when Colonel White, Captain Blue and Doctor Fawn had finally informed him of what had happened, he was badly shaken. It was taking him time to adapt to what they had told him. Killed once, reborn into a new body, not in control of his own actions and thoughts, killed again... by Captain Blue, no less. And then brought back to life anew, with this new power to rebuild himself. A MYSTERON power...

He could very well understand why Spectrum had to make sure he was really free of the Mysterons' influence. It was no wonder that, even after he had proved his loyalty by giving his life trying to save the Asian Director General, some people should still distrust him. Realizing this didn't make it hurt any less, though.

For a minute, Scarlet entertained the notion of talking to Adam about this. Blue had been a good friend, a confidante and a supporter from the very beginning of Spectrum, and even more so since the incident that had changed Scarlet's life forever. The British Captain dismissed the thought. Sick as he was, Blue didn't need to worry about his friend on top of it. What Captain Scarlet presently needed more than anything else was to let off some steam. And the best way he knew of doing that was still by doing some physical exercise. Anyway, he was going to the gym to do a few laps before this whole mess with Destiny started out.

He entered the locker room and changed quickly into sport clothing in the colour of his codename. Then he went to the door of the gym, pushed the button to open it and it slid open before him.

He was rather surprised to find it already occupied. Two other members of the Spectrum command staff were using the boxing ring set in the middle of the gym, while a third, standing by it, was apparently acting as both spectator and referee. Scarlet frowned. It was somewhat rare to find almost every member of the senior staff off-duty all at once. He approached the ring to find out more. Captain Grey, the one standing next to the ring, looking at the friendly sparring match between Captain Ochre and Captain Magenta, acknowledged Scarlet's presence with a welcoming nod.

"Hi," Scarlet, said glancing toward the two fighters dancing around each other and trying to hit one another. "How come you're all down here?"

"Since it's so quiet right now, Colonel White thought it wise to give us all a few hours off," Grey explained with a big grin. "To get to know each other again, so to speak... I wonder what he'd say about these two beating up on each other."

"Friendly competition?"

"Exactly. And a wager of some sort. Ochre said he was a much better boxer now and Magenta challenged him to prove it." Grey paused a second. "How's Blue?"

"In about as bad a mood as you can imagine," Scarlet responded. "He can't wait to get out of Sickbay!"

"I can sympathize with him."

Scarlet smiled. He patted Grey's shoulder and moved away from the ring to go to the running machine. He climbed onto it, set a fast pace, and began running.

He was paying little attention to the fight continuing to his right. He could however hear very well the different sounds of it; gloves hitting protective gear, fast-moving feet on the mat, heavy breathing, Grey's encouragement to one opponent or the other... One glance at the fight told Scarlet Ochre had a distinct advantage over Magenta, who was getting repeatedly hit over his well-protected head. Apparently, Scarlet thought, the lessons he had given Ochre over the past year had paid off.

Scarlet changed the setting of the belt so it would increase its speed gradually until it reached its maximum pace in about ten minutes. He then quickly dismissed all distracting thoughts and concentrated on his running.

He was going full speed some minutes later. He noticed that his muscles weren't straining much. It had been this way since he had escaped the Mysterons' clutches. His body had always had good physical endurance before that, and even more so now. He could still feel fatigue, yes, but he was able to hold on far longer now.

The fight was still going on after fifteen minutes. Almost without really thinking of it, Scarlet gave it a glance. Poor Magenta was getting the pants beaten off him. Finding he had had enough of the punishing treatment, Magenta held up his hands and gave up.

"All right!" he said in his slightly Irish accent. "I'll throw in the towel. You're too strong for me!"

"Good!" Ochre let his defence down, smiling with satisfaction. "Told you you'd be no match for me!"

"Maybe you should get some practice until next time," Grey remarked quietly to Magenta. "Then maybe you'll get a fair chance."

"Well, he's welcome to try anytime he wants," Ochre replied. "How 'bout you, Grey? Want to try it too?"

"No, thank you. I already know I have absolutely no chance in that field. Now if you want to try some judo..."

"Yeah, right!" Ochre laughed. "Coming from the guy who takes regular private lessons from Harmony, our resident black belt!"

Magenta, taking off his gloves, was looking toward Scarlet, who was still going fast on the running machine, apparently oblivious to the discussion taking place not far from him. Ochre followed the direction of his colleague's glance and saw Scarlet too.

"How about it, Scarlet?" he called to him.

Scarlet glanced over his shoulder, without even slowing down. "No, thanks," he said between two breaths.

"Come on, Scarlet," Magenta encouraged him. "This bully needs a lesson."

"You're the only one able to give it to him," Grey added.

"That wouldn't be a good idea," replied Scarlet, shaking his head.

"What is it, Scarlet?" Ochre taunted him. "Afraid I'll hurt you?"

That was really the least of Scarlet's worries. He just didn't feel like getting into a fight, even a friendly one. Not after what had happened in the Amber Room.

"Hell, Scarlet, why do we have to beg you for it?" Magenta said. "I would like to see you kicking that loudmouth's butt."

"Imagine, a shanty Irishman like *you* calling *me* a loudmouth," Ochre murmured to Magenta. "And you could very well be surprised..."

"All right!" Scarlet sighed. He stopped the machine before stepping down from it, and came toward the ring. "If you want, I'm in."

"Good!" The smile on Ochre's face had a strange look to it. "It will be my pleasure!"

Scarlet stepped into the ring and Magenta put his gloves and headgear on him. Grey took a new gumshield that he handed to his British colleague.

"Go get him, sport!" he encouraged him. Scarlet smiled and put the gumshield in. Magenta patted him on the shoulder and jumped out of the ring.

When Scarlet turned to Ochre, he found him ready for the fight. Ochre started rather quickly, trying a couple of jabs that Scarlet deflected easily. He was a bit surprised by the

strength behind Ochre's blows. Apparently, his American counterpart didn't want to go easy on him.

They danced around each other for a while, exchanging blows. Neither one of them seemed to have an advantage over the other, but it was however pretty obvious that Scarlet had no difficulty holding his own, while Ochre was struggling to keep up with him.

Still, Scarlet thought, *Ochre has improved quite a bit lately.*

"All right," Grey said after several minutes. "End of round one. Time to stop a bit."

The two fighters broke it up. Letting out a sigh, Ochre shook his head, looking at Scarlet, his feelings well hidden on his face. Then he turned his back on him and went to his corner, to take a few seconds to breathe.

Scarlet spat out the gumshield into one of his gloves and walked to Ochre, smiling broadly.

"You've become a tough customer there, Rick. Seems like you learned well from me."

It was like his words had triggered something in Ochre's mind. Scarlet didn't see at all what came next.

Ochre suddenly spun around and his gloved fist brutally hit Scarlet in the stomach. His breath knocked out of him, the Brit went down on one knee. The next thing he knew, Ochre was swinging a mean cross to his face, sending him flat on the mat.

"Ochre! Stop it!" An astounded Grey climbed into the ring, closely followed by Magenta. The two men pushed Ochre aside from a half-stunned Scarlet, who was trying to regain his senses. Seeing that a furious Ochre was still attempting to get at his opponent, Grey restrained him, while Magenta stepped in front of his fallen comrade.

"Ochre, snap out of it!" Magenta called out angrily. "What's the matter with you?"

Ochre shook Grey off and jumped out of the ring. He furiously removed his gloves and headgear and threw them on the floor, while going straight to the door. Magenta was helping a perplexed Scarlet, still out of breath, to his feet.

"You okay, Paul?" Scarlet didn't even hear Magenta's concerned question. His eyes were focused only toward the departing Ochre. He was still trying to figure out the reason for his vicious and unexpected assault.

Scarlet shook off Magenta's helping hands and jumped down from the ring. He was vaguely aware that Grey and Magenta were following him as he raced toward the door behind which Ochre had just disappeared. He quickly removed gloves and headgear and got out of the gym.

They were in the main corridor of the sport centre when Scarlet caught up with Ochre. He reached out to him, taking him by the shoulder.

"Rick, wait..."

Ochre turned quickly. Scarlet stepped back, almost dreading another attack. But the look in Ochre's eyes was even more aggressive than any physical blow.

It was fearfully similar to the one he had seen earlier on Destiny's face.

"Don't call me 'Rick'!" Ochre shouted back at Scarlet. "Don't ever call me that again! Only my friends can. And you are not my friend!"

"Rick, stop it!" It was Grey, stepping between the two men, fully expecting some kind of a showdown between them and quite determined not to let it happen. "What is going on with you, anyway? I thought Scarlet WAS your friend!"

"Well, he's not!" Ochre spat out the words with a disgust that stabbed into Scarlet's heart. Ochre pointed to him. "Paul Metcalfe was my friend! Not that... freak!"

"Please, Ochre," Scarlet said with a tired sigh, "let's talk about this..."

"I don't want to talk to you!" Ochre exploded angrily. "Every time I look at you, it reminds me of how your masters killed my friend so YOU could live!"

"The Mysterons are not my masters, Ochre," Scarlet replied, his voice bleak. "Not any more!"

"That's what YOU say!" Ochre came back sharply.

"That's quite enough, Rick!" Grey snapped. "You better stop right now. You've gone too far already!"

"Not far enough for me!" Ochre gave Scarlet an icy look. "You may be using the name 'Captain Scarlet', but you'll never take Paul Metcalfe's. You don't have the right to take it. It's HIS, not YOURS. You are not Paul Metcalfe... You NEVER will be."

"Rick..." Scarlet tried again.

"I said to stop calling me that!" Ochre bellowed. He pointed an accusing finger toward Scarlet. "Be careful. Be VERY careful. I'll be watching you every step of the way. Make just ONE mistake, and I'll bring you down."

The cold tone of his voice was almost unbearable for Scarlet to listen to. Yet, he didn't move, didn't even talk back. "It's the least I can do for my friend," Ochre added evenly.

A shiver ran down Scarlet's spine. It was exactly like somebody had just walked over his grave.

Having said all he had to say, Ochre shrugged away from Grey's hands and turned quickly to depart. He didn't even look back. If he had, he would have seen a very pale and shaken Scarlet staring blankly at him.

"Gee, Scarlet," Magenta said behind the British Captain. "I had no idea it would turn out that way... If I'd known, I would never have asked you to fight with him."

"It's not your fault," Scarlet replied in a murmur. "It would have come out, sooner or later."

Grey turned to him, a concerned look upon his face. "We don't all think the same as Ochre, Paul," he said. For using that name, and for the worried tone in his voice, Scarlet thought he would be eternally grateful to him.

"Unfortunately, he's not alone in his attitude," Scarlet said, shaking his head. He was trying his very best to regain his composure, but found he couldn't do it. He had the feeling he was going to break down any second now, before Grey's and Magenta's very eyes. He would not have it. It was bad enough that they had witnessed Ochre's outburst.

Scarlet turned his back on them, without saying one more word and went directly to the door of the locker room, where he had left his uniform. Magenta called after him, but Scarlet didn't even acknowledge him. He disappeared behind the sliding door.

"Oh, God!" whispered Magenta, looking at the closed door. "I had no idea Ochre was entertaining those kind of thoughts..."

"What happened here?" The soft English voice behind them made Magenta and Grey turn quickly around. Rhapsody was standing there, looking as concerned as them. She shook her head. "I heard a lot of what was said. What started it?"

"Let's just say what we thought was a friendly boxing match got ugly," Grey responded with a heavy sigh.

"How ugly?" Rhapsody asked again.

"Aside from the verbal abuse you've just heard," Magenta explained dryly, "Ochre physically attacked Scarlet."

"Good Lord!" Rhapsody muttered. "And he's still smarting from the first one..."

"First one?" Grey repeated with a frown.

"Before coming here, Captain Scarlet was in the Amber Room," Rhapsody said. "Destiny froze him out, and if her attack was not physical, it was at least as violent as Ochre's."

"Her too?" Magenta whispered. "But I thought Scarlet and her were... you know... old friends..."

"I'm afraid that's exactly part of the problem."

"Well, we can't let that go on," a determined Grey said. "We can't work under these conditions. We have to do something before the Colonel hears about it."

"I'm more concerned about Captain Scarlet's welfare," Rhapsody replied.

"Believe me, it's my concern too. I'll try to get a word with Ochre. He's got to calm down and give Scarlet a break."

"That's exactly what I said to Destiny, but I'm not sure she even listened to me," Rhapsody sighed. "I'll have to give it another try when she come off her shift on Angel One."

"I'll go talk to Scarlet," Magenta said. "Poor guy needs a friend right now, and since Blue's not on hand..."

"Let me do it," Rhapsody interrupted suddenly. "No offence, Captain Magenta, but while you're full of good intentions, I'm sorry to say you're not the most subtle person on Cloudbase. That kind of situation requires a gentler touch..."

"A feminine touch?" Grey suggested, lifting an eyebrow.

"Nothing gets by you, does it, Captain Grey?" Rhapsody's smile was a sad one. "He's my friend too, you know. And regardless of what Destiny and Ochre say about him, I won't turn my back on him and let him down."

Grey shook his head. "Neither of us will, Rhapsody. I think he's suffered enough at the Mysterons' hands without us adding to it. Think you can handle the mission?"

"I will. Don't worry about it. I'll take care of Scarlet. See to Ochre."

"You better be sure I will," Grey muttered, going on his way.

Chapter 2

It took about a half hour for Captain Grey to find out where Ochre had gone to. It wasn't often that his friend secluded himself in his personal quarters, and it didn't occur to him that he would be there. Grey had to visit the other rooms of the sport centre, then the officers' rest room and finally the Amber Room to discover that. In fact, Grey wasn't even sure Ochre would be in his quarters. He was relieved when he knocked on his door and heard the invitation to enter.

When the door slid open, Grey stepped into Ochre's quarters. His hangar, he often teased him. Ochre's taste for model building was well known throughout Cloudbase. His quarters were full of miniature planes that he had carefully built from scratch. Ochre often annoyed his fellow officers by working on his planes in the officers' rest room... the smell of glue and fresh paint never was a pleasant one. But since Ochre was such a skilled craftsman and as he often gave his works away as gifts, everyone tolerated it. Even Colonel White, who was often dismayed by Ochre's 'childish habits'. However, he had found himself pleasantly surprised when, on his last birthday, Ochre had offered him a beautifully crafted plastic-built British destroyer. To the World Navy Admiral Colonel White had been in the past, it was a gift that was worthy of a place of honour in his own quarters. Especially since he knew very well that Captain Ochre specialised in building only aerial models.

When Grey entered, Ochre didn't raise his eyes. He was sitting at a low table, working on a new, half-completed model. Grey eyed him sternly.

"You're a bastard, you know that?" Grey said evenly.

"If you've got nothing else to say to me, you can get out of here," Ochre responded.

"You're also very lucky Blue wasn't around to hear you talk to Scarlet the way you did," Grey continued.

"I'm not afraid of Blue."

"You should be. He can take on any one of us, without even breaking a sweat." Grey paused, looking at Ochre, hoping to see a reaction. There was none. "And you should also be afraid of the Colonel. If he ever heard about what you said to Scarlet..."

"Well, go and tell him!" Ochre suddenly shouted at him.

"Maybe I should, but that wouldn't set anything straight!" Grey shouted back angrily. "Why did you have to go and say all those terrible things to him?"

Ochre did not respond. *Well, at least he's stopped working on his damned model,* thought Grey.

"You should have seen his face, Rick," Grey added quietly. "It was like you put a knife into him and twisted it..."

"See if I care," Ochre muttered bluntly.

"I don't understand you, Ochre," Grey said with a frown. "I remember how you were, in those first days when you were training with Magenta. You didn't seem to trust the guy... never wanted to give him a break..."

"I had my reasons, back then," Ochre replied. "I didn't trust him because he was a well-known mobster."

"And you, as an ex-cop, felt like you had to keep your eyes on him," Grey added sarcastically. "You were wrong then, Rick."

"Yeah, I know," Ochre sighed. "Pat turned out to be a very decent guy, on the level."

"Rick, even with Magenta, you never were so aggressive, so insulting, like you were today with Scarlet."

"It's different." Ochre looked up at Grey with blazing eyes. "And don't tell me I'm as wrong about him as I was about Magenta."

"What's wrong with you, Rick?" Grey asked him again. "Why did you assault Scarlet like that?"

"You know why."

Ochre's voice had a catch in it, as if he was remembering a very difficult memory. Grey, who knew exactly what his friend was thinking about, looked straight at him, clearly waiting for him to open up. When he saw that Ochre had no intention of elaborating on the subject, Grey sighed.

"Yes, I know," he said very quietly. "But, Rick, whatever happened, Scarlet is not responsible. If anything, he was a victim..."

"A victim?" Ochre scoffed. "Don't give me that!"

"He's not at all what you think. You know what he did at the Airport last week, to save the Director General..."

"The Director General died!"

"So did Scarlet, that day."

Ochre stared blankly at Grey. "You know that guy can't really die," he said evenly. "What happened that day, the way it looked, doesn't prove anything."

"Don't give me that!" Grey snapped angrily. "You weren't the one who stepped into that SPV and found him. I was!"

"Yes... and I was the one who found the bodies of the real Scarlet and Brown over at New York." Ochre said in response. "So don't tell me THIS guy's a victim. THOSE were the victims, Brad. Steve Blackburn and Paul Metcalfe... the REAL Paul Metcalfe."

Grey looked blankly at his stubborn friend. He shook his head. "I'm not going to be able to make you see reason on this, am I?"

Ochre didn't respond. Grey shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you should cool off a little. Maybe I'll be able to talk to you after that."

"Don't hold your breath, Grey," Ochre muttered.

"I'd better go, now... before I lose my patience. I'll start throwing you round the room if I stay a minute longer."

Grey turned his back and left the room. Ochre looked up as the door slid closed behind his friend. Then he tried to get back to his model. He found out he couldn't concentrate anymore. Grey had found a way to upset him.

"No, not Grey," he mumbled to himself. "That phoney Scarlet..."

No, it wasn't that either, he had to admit to himself. It was those damned memories of what had happened nearly a month ago. Ochre reached into his trouser pocket and produced a shiny object he had kept ever since. A Swiss Army knife, with the initials C.S. engraved on its handle. It belonged to Captain Scarlet. The real one, who died in that car crash. Ochre remembered that Paul's father had given it to his son, when he received his Spectrum commission, about a year before. *Well, thought the American officer with bitterness, that's one thing that phoney won't get. He already has all the rest... And on top of this, Paul's parents don't even know what had happened to their son... They think that impostor really is Paul...*

Enraged by that thought of flagrant injustice, Ochre smashed his model and swept it off the table. He then held his head in his hands and closed his eyes, trying desperately not to sob.

If only the memories would go away! But he knew very well that they would never go, that they would follow him to the end of his days...

* * *

Ochre was posted at Spectrum New York Headquarters when that first Mysteron threat came literally out of the blue. He didn't know much about it, exactly who these Mysterons were, and why they were vowing revenge on Earth. He only knew it had something to do with Captain Black, and the fact that he could have been the cause of the destruction of the Mysterons' complex on Mars. Nevertheless, it was Spectrum's job to thwart the Mysterons... and their present threat was directed against the life of World President James T. Younger.

The Mysterons had failed a first time, Ochre had learned. They had blown up the entire Security Building in New York to get to the President, who had been taken there for his protection by Captain Brown. Somehow, the President had escaped, but everybody else in the building had died... including Brown, who had stayed there to guard the President's life.

Ochre was puzzled. How on Earth had the Mysterons succeeded in getting a bomb into the Security Building, to begin with? The security there was so tight he could have sworn even a mouse couldn't get in or out. Then he was even more perplexed when Colonel White had asked him to go check a car crash site, just outside the city. Ochre did know that, prior to the Security Building explosion, Captains Brown and Scarlet had been in a car accident, while en route to meet the President. That they both had escaped with their lives was a miracle, as he understood

it. Ochre didn't see Brown after that, since Scarlet had left him with the President, but he did meet with Scarlet. He didn't even have a scratch. "Just lucky, I guess," Scarlet had simply said with a smile. And then, following orders, he had gone back to Cloudbase, without Ochre having the chance to ask him more questions.

The car crash site wasn't difficult to find. Getting to it was another matter, though. The car was way down a ravine, reduced to a burned-out shell by an explosion. Ochre's perplexity then changed to amazement. For Scarlet and Brown to have survived without getting hurt in any way wasn't a miracle... it was plainly impossible.

An officer from New York Spectrum Headquarters, Lieutenant Tan, was with him when Captain Ochre investigated the crash site. What they discovered there shook Ochre pretty strongly.

They found the body of Captain Brown. Nearly intact, bruised, with a broken neck, hastily hidden under some bushes, a few feet from the wreckage of the car. The crash had obviously killed him.

The first thing that came into Captain Ochre's mind was sadness. Brown had been a good friend. They had trained together, when they were first selected to join Spectrum as senior staff officers. Steve Blackburn was so full of life, never afraid of anything. His eagerness to serve had more than compensated for his lack of experience in the field, and he had become such a good agent. Then, Ochre's thoughts went to Brown's wife, Becky. She was about to give birth to their first child... How would she ever be able to handle the death of her beloved husband? Why did that have to happen to them? It was so unfair, to them and to the child, who would never have the chance to discover how wonderful his father would have been to him.

And then, the professional side of Ochre took over. If Brown had died in that crash, who was with President Younger, then? Who had died as Captain Brown in the explosion of the Security Building? And stranger still, why hadn't Captain Scarlet told him about Brown's demise?

Putting these considerations aside, Ochre reported his discovery back to Cloudbase. Oddly, when he told Colonel White that he had found Captain Brown's body at the crash site, his commander-in-chief simply thanked him. He didn't seem quite as surprised as Ochre had thought he would be.

"What does that mean?" a puzzled Lieutenant Tan asked Ochre. "Doesn't he even care that one of his staff officers is dead?"

"Don't ever let him hear you say that, Lieutenant," Ochre advised the young man. "I know he must care. There must be something he's aware of that we aren't."

Ochre looked around at the site of the car crash. Something was nagging him about this. And nagging him big time. He gave one last look at Captain Brown's body, fighting emotions that were threatening to overwhelm him.

"He was a friend of yours, wasn't he?" Lieutenant Tan asked him.

"Yes," Ochre said, trying to make his voice as firm as possible. "A very good friend." He shrugged, in order to regain his composure. "We should take his body back to New York HQ. But before that, I want to have another look around."

"To find out how this accident happened?" Tan asked.

"Maybe. I don't know." Ochre sighed heavily. "I've got a bad feeling about this, Lieutenant. Something strange happened here. Strange and frightening."

Tan nodded his acknowledgement. The two men spread out to look around. While doing so, Captain Ochre called a helijet to collect his friend's body. He glanced over at Tan who was going further down the ravine, toward the burned remains of the car. He saw him turning some wreckage over and then turned his back to pursue his own investigations on his side.

A sudden cry from downhill made him jump.

"Captain Ochre! Over here!"

Tan was standing very close to what was left of the main body of the car, looking down at the ground, obviously stunned. Ochre almost slid down the slope separating him from the Lieutenant. The feeling he was having about all this was beginning to take the form of a dreadful reality.

When he arrived, Lieutenant Tan, his face very pale, showed him what he had found.

Almost hidden under what was left of a car door, a half burned hand was protruding from the ground. Ochre saw the black sleeve with the rainbow Spectrum logo upon it and his heart skipped a beat.

"Give me a hand!" he ordered Tan.

Together, they heaved at the door and flung it aside. Half buried under it was a body. Ochre got on his knees and started digging frenziedly with his bare hands. The first thing he uncovered was the red tunic of a Spectrum uniform. Even if he already knew by then what he would find, Ochre continued to throw the dirt aside. He just had to be sure.

He almost crumbled when he finally uncovered the handsome face of Captain Scarlet, now rendered pallid, almost grey, by the cold touch of death.

"God!" Ochre gasped, not wanting to believe it. "Paul... Not you too!"

His worst fears had become almost too real. Not one, but two of his colleagues and friends were now dead. Killed in a car crash. And probably not by a simple accident. All of this had the feel of a cold, well-calculated murder.

If Brown's body was almost intact, it was unfortunately not the case with Scarlet's. Ochre didn't need to dig much further to know his friend had had a very ugly death. Part of his uniform was burned, the skin beneath blackened... there were burn marks on the back of his head. Ochre didn't want to think about how badly the rest of the buried body might look.

"Captain..." It was Lieutenant Tan's voice, trying to shake Ochre out of his shock. "Captain, I'm sorry... but you gotta snap out of it..."

"Leave me alone, Lieutenant," Ochre responded brusquely.

"I can't, Captain. Think, sir: how is it possible for Captain Scarlet to be here... when we saw him taking an SPJ back to Cloudbase, a few hours ago? The accident happened BEFORE..."

It hit Ochre right in the face. His friends' bodies had been hidden in a hurry. Probably by their killers... Killers who had taken their respective identities to carry out some deadly mission.

"Look-alikes," Ochre murmured, astonished. "Oh, my God... the Mysterons!"

He called Colonel White on Cloudbase right away with his radio cap. He was surprised to hear the urgency in his commander's voice.

"I'm busy, Captain Ochre. Make it quick."

"Sir," Ochre said with a catch in his voice. "I don't quite know how to say it... We've found Captain Scarlet's dead body."

There was a silence over the communicator. Then Colonel White's voice came in again, sounding even more urgent than before. "You have a positive identification?"

"I found him myself, sir," Ochre said tiredly. "Sir, I must warn you..."

"Have the bodies flown here to Cloudbase," Colonel White interrupted abruptly. "And come with them. We may need you here."

Ochre frowned. Talk about a cold reaction! He knew Colonel White was all work and professionalism, but he had thought that, at least, he regarded his senior staff more highly than that! And Scarlet was a compatriot of his...

"Yes, sir," Ochre answered back to his commander. "But you've got to hear me out... There's a phoney Scarlet on Cloudbase, an impostor, and he's bound to do something against President Younger!"

"We already know that, Captain," Colonel White sighed in response. "Your report has just confirmed what we were suspecting..."

"You were suspecting..." Captain Ochre's voice broke out. "You've arrested him?"

"We're actually after him. I'm afraid we reacted too slowly. Captain Scarlet has already kidnapped the World President..."

** * **

Captain Ochre remembered that, upon his arrival on Cloudbase with his two friends' dead bodies, a few hours later, he had gone to the Control Room to find that everything was already over. Ejecting from a SPJ not far from London, with the World President, Scarlet had stolen a car in order to evade capture with his prisoner. His car was forced by an air attack from the Angel Interceptors to follow a road leading to the London Car-Vu. He drove his car directly to the top of it. Captain Blue was following close behind in a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle, and along with the

Angel flight, a Spectrum Helicopter was providing air support. As Ochre understood it, the Helicopter seemed to be a part of the Mysterons' plan, probably intended to take Scarlet and the World President away from Spectrum. The helicopter attacked Blue, and was in turn destroyed by the Angels; it fell into the Car-Vu supporting pylon, damaging it badly. As desperate as his situation was, the renegade Scarlet had continued to fight on, firing several shots at Captain Blue. Blue had returned his fire and Scarlet was shot through the heart. The impact pushed him off the top of the Car-Vu and he fell 800 feet to the ground. Blue had just had the time to retrieve the World President and fly off with him with a hover pack, seconds before the Car-Vu finally collapsed.

What followed afterward was pretty confusing. Spectrum Intelligence had investigated the final events. Doctor Fawn, along with other specialists, had examined the bodies of Captains Scarlet and Brown and their respective impostors. It turned out they weren't really impostors. Somehow, the Mysterons had produced clones of the original Scarlet and Brown. And these clones, these 'reconstructs' as Doctor Fawn was referring to them, were totally devoted to their masters... a devotion bordering fanaticism. It was Brown's reconstruct who had brought the bomb which destroyed the New York Security Building... It was hidden on his person and he set it off in some sort of kamikaze attack on the World President's life. As for Scarlet, if the reports of both the President and Captain Blue were to be believed, he acted exactly as if he didn't care about his life. In fact, he was totally oblivious to anything that didn't involve his 'mission'. He didn't say a single word, a shaken President Younger said, save for a very frightening phrase that he seemed to address at some point toward nobody in particular: "The Mysterons' instructions will be carried out."

That had sent a shiver down Ochre's spine. If the Mysterons could choose anybody, kill him or her and then make a clone out of this person to do as they willed, then how could Spectrum think it had any chance of thwarting their plans?

And then, Captain Scarlet came back to life. Not the Captain Scarlet he knew so very well, not Paul Metcalfe. The cloned one. The Mysteron reconstruct. And he was supposedly free of the Mysterons' influence. He claimed he didn't even remember what happened. That was rather convenient, Ochre thought cynically. They were all to believe that this Scarlet had been in some sort of hypnotic trance and that he didn't have any idea, any control over what he had done? Ochre couldn't believe that Colonel White would accept so easily that kind of explanation. He was really astounded that his commander-in-chief should put back on duty a man who had kidnapped the World President and even tried to kill Captain Blue... Even less understandable was Blue's reaction to all this. Aside from Destiny Angel, Blue had been Paul Metcalfe's closest friend in the Spectrum organisation. And then, he didn't even seem to think twice about considering the cloned Scarlet as his original friend... regardless of the fact he had taken several shots at him.

As for Colonel White, perhaps he was only thinking about the practical side of things. That Captain Scarlet had retained the power to recover from any wound. Very seductive for Colonel White to have under his orders an agent that could be sent on deadly assignments, where no other would even dare think of going. Many lives could be saved that way, and Spectrum would suffer the minimum of loss.

Well, that's all crap, Ochre thought angrily. Why didn't anybody else but him see the potential danger in all this? What if it was only an elaborate plot on the part of the Mysterons to bring Spectrum down from within? Scarlet could be an inside agent, awaiting only the proper moment to bring about the downfall of them all...

He seemed on the level enough... Aside from the Spectrum scientists' and Intelligence people's evaluation stating that Captain Scarlet was his old self again, there was that incident at London International Airport, with the Asian Director General... and Ochre had to admit he had acted exactly like the original Scarlet would have. But Captain Ochre wasn't about to let his guard down just yet. There were too many unresolved feelings within him for the moment.

Ochre looked down at the Swiss knife he was turning in his hands. He had found it, not far from Scarlet's dead body. Perhaps he should have sent it to Paul's father, but that would have jeopardized Spectrum security... And if nothing else, Ochre believed in Spectrum, and would never have risked its integrity. Beside, this knife was his only reminder of his dead friend; he was reluctant to part from it.

He stared blankly at his destroyed model, strewn across the floor of his quarters... A strange feeling came upon him... as if that model was somehow a premonition of something dreadful about to happen.

Someone had to keep an eye on Captain Scarlet, he thought grimly. And it seemed that someone should be him... since there obviously was nobody else willing to do that job.

* * *

In the cockpit of Angel One, on the upper runway of Cloudbase, Destiny Angel was feeling rather down. There was really nothing much to do, while standing ready for emergency take-off. Destiny had found herself reminiscing about the past. Mostly recent, painful memories had come to her mind, and she would have preferred to forget about them altogether. She couldn't really evade them, though. And it was the surprising presence of Captain Scarlet in the Amber Room that had brought them about.

Nobody could really understand what she was feeling toward Scarlet. She had difficulty explaining that even to herself. Did she mistrust him, because of what he had done under the Mysterons' control? Right now, at least, he seemed free from them. Was she upset that he was wearing the face of a very close friend who had to die so he could live? He wasn't really responsible for that. Was she angry with him because he was using a name that wasn't his own? That was definitely the case.

She was uneasy with him, that was for sure. He looked like Paul, acted like Paul, even claimed to have his memories... and probably did have his feelings as well. Knowing what he was, how he came to be, the extraordinary recuperative power he now had... Destiny had difficulty considering him as a human being. And she certainly couldn't bring herself to think of him as Paul. That was beyond her capacity.

Paul Metcalfe was dead. There was no question about that. Destiny had seen his body, a month ago, right after the operation to rescue the World President...

President Younger had apparently been hijacked by Captain Scarlet. Her old friend's strange behaviour in this affair had astounded Destiny. She wasn't really aware of all the details, in fact. She had thought that, somehow, Scarlet had been brainwashed into doing what he had done. Never would Paul Metcalfe, in his right mind, have done all those things. Of that, she was absolutely certain.

She had seen the World President's kidnapper fall from the Car-Vu, to his death 800 feet below. The sight had literally turned her stomach. She had hoped that Captain Blue would have captured Scarlet without doing him any harm. She knew Adam had tried. Paul was his friend; he would never have killed him if the circumstances had allowed otherwise.

Destiny and the other Angels hadn't stayed around the wreckage of the fallen Car-Vu, after the end of the mission. Blue had received orders to arrange for President Younger's further security, and then take Captain Scarlet's body back to Cloudbase. There was no need for the Angels' air support anymore. So the fighters went back immediately to base, without waiting for Blue.

Upon her arrival, Destiny had gone directly to Sickbay, for she had sprained her wrist during the mission. She wasn't feeling very well, but she was going strictly on adrenaline right now. The realisation of all that had happened during the last hours hadn't fully dawned on her yet.

Oddly enough, there was an abnormal amount of security surrounding the Sickbay. She virtually had to fight her way in, just to see someone to take care of her wrist. She was already on edge after that dreadful mission; she didn't need anybody to pick on her right now. Fortunately, Doctor Fawn heard the commotion outside Sickbay's main door and pleaded on her behalf to let her in.

He treated Destiny personally. And while he was bandaging her wounded wrist, she was looking around, wondering why there were so many security agents and orderlies around. One of them pushed open the door to the operating room. Despite Fawn's much too obvious efforts to distract her, she saw what was behind that door and went stiff.

There were two shrouded bodies lying each on a table.

"Who are they?" Destiny asked Doctor Fawn faintly.

He shook his head, hesitating. "I'd rather not tell you," he almost whispered. "Security is so tight..."

"About these bodies?" Destiny turned a confused look toward Fawn. "Please, Doctor, all that is happening right now with these Mysterons is driving everybody nuts... I'm about to lose it, right now. I don't think I can bear any more of this..." Her voice broke. "Please, tell me... Are they some of our own?"

Doctor Fawn hesitated anew. But seeing Destiny's pleading features, he gave in. "Yes," he muttered. "They are."

"Captain Brown?" Destiny asked more specifically. She knew of the explosion of the Security Building in New York. She was the one who had reported it to Cloudbase. Fawn nodded in acknowledgement and sighed heavily. "Who's the other one?" Destiny asked again.

"Captain Scarlet." Fawn answered in a murmur.

Destiny was absolutely stunned. She looked blankly at the closed door. "Already here?" she whispered. "That does not seem possible..." She glanced back at Doctor Fawn. "It IS impossible! Doctor, I just saw him, about an hour ago... He had just fallen from the Car-Vu. He was still under all that wreckage..."

Her voice caught in her throat. She closed her eyes, trying to dismiss the vision of her friend falling to his death. "You are sure it is really him?" she asked Fawn.

"Captain Ochre brought him in," Fawn said hesitantly. "I think he knew Scarlet well. And myself, I..."

Fawn's voice trailed off. His remark had sunk just a little into Destiny's mind. Captain Ochre had brought him? But Ochre was nowhere near London during the Car-Vu incident. He was still in New York, investigating the explosion at the Security Building...

"Did you make a positive identification?" she insisted, looking Fawn in the eyes.

"Destiny, I..." Fawn could see what she had in mind. He shook his head in negation. "I couldn't let you do that. You were his oldest friend..."

"That's exactly why I have to do it," replied Destiny.

"You don't WANT to."

"Yes, I do." Destiny spoke out with the most assured voice she could produce under the circumstances. "It seems so impossible for me, Doctor. I have to make sure. Please, let me... identify the body."

The Doctor gave in again. He nodded and took Destiny to the operating room. It was cold in there, she thought as she entered, following Fawn. They must have lowered the temperature to... preserve the bodies. She was looking at them, covered head to toe in white shrouds. Carefully, Doctor Fawn guided her toward one of the tables. He stood over the body, looking at her expectantly.

"You're sure you can do this?" He obviously wished she'd say no. She nodded. Sighing, Fawn raised part of the shroud, uncovering only the face.

It was Paul. And Destiny had to call on all her strength not to break down at that very moment. She glanced over the handsome face, now nearly as white as the sheet covering his body. She noticed black marks on the back of his neck. Burn marks, she realized, shivering, wondering how he had been burned. She didn't recall any fire or explosion as the Car-Vu collapsed on him.

"Destiny, are you all right?"

The young French woman nodded again. She fought back tears that threatened to overcome her. "I'm all right," she muttered. "Yes... It is him. It is Captain Scarlet." She raised her eyes to Doctor Fawn. "Can... can I go now?"

Fawn covered the face, looking straight at Destiny. "I'll need your signature on the death certificate..."

"I'll sign anything you want, Doctor. Just let me get out of here as soon as possible."

Doctor Fawn made it quick. Upon guiding Destiny back to the other room, he presented her with a paper that she signed blindly. He asked her again if she was all right. She answered that she would need time to accept all this and then left the Sickbay, oblivious to anything else surrounding her, except her own pain.

She was aware that the security guards in front of Sickbay's main door were staring at her as she walked quickly away. Then she bumped right into Symphony, who had come to reassure herself that her friend was okay.

"Hey! Where are you going like that?" Symphony stopped Destiny right in her tracks and took her by the shoulders. She tried to look at her face. Destiny, for her part, was averting her eyes.

"Juliette?" Symphony called softly. She gently lifted Destiny's chin and saw the tears filling her eyes. "What is it?" she asked with a concerned frown.

"I'm about to crumble, Karen," Destiny answered with a shaky voice. "Take me away from here, please."

For Destiny, crying was not an habitual thing. She was probably one of the strongest people Symphony had ever known. Something was terribly wrong... and Symphony had a feeling she knew exactly what it was.

"You want to go to your quarters?" the blonde American asked.

"Yes... Yes, my quarters would be fine."

"I'm not leaving you there alone, Juliette."

"I..." Destiny look back at Symphony and sighed heavily. "Thank you... I need a friend, right now... and a shoulder to cry on."

* * *

It took Symphony a good hour to get me to calm down, thought Destiny, staring at the blue sky beyond the Angel fighter cockpit. The young American pilot had proven to be a good listener... a friend anybody could count on. It was no wonder that she would join Rhapsody in Scarlet's defence like they did today. For Rhapsody, Destiny had the feeling there was something personal about her own intervention. Some weeks ago, that would have amused Destiny a great deal. Now, she didn't even care enough to be angry about it. She was just feeling sick, about her own feelings toward the apparent return from the grave of a man she had once been very much in love with.

How had these feelings started out, anyway? When exactly? Well, from the very beginnings, Destiny grimly remembered. From the first time she had laid her eyes on him, AFTER she had learned the truth about his origins. That was after Captain Blue had returned from London, after the Car-Vu incident. Destiny, who was still wondering about the fact that Scarlet's dead body was already in Sickbay BEFORE Blue's official arrival with it, had come to a very satisfactory conclusion about that mystery. The longer she had pondered it, the more she was convinced it was the only logical explanation. An explanation that also shed some light on the strange behaviour of the man who had kidnapped the World President.

He wasn't Captain Scarlet at all, but an impostor. A perfect look-alike, who had killed the real one in New York and taken his place. That would explain everything, including why there was so much security in Sickbay. Destiny was quite relieved to have come to that realisation. She knew her old friend would never have acted the way this impostor did.

When Colonel White called a staff meeting just after the mission, what he said just confirmed her suspicions... with some rather unusual aspects about it. The Mysterons had indeed put up a look-alike instead of Captain Scarlet AND Captain Brown... The fantastic thing about it was that they were CLONES of the original ones. Exact replicas, down to the last molecule... No wonder nobody had realised! Impostors of that kind could fool anybody, closest friends, family... If the Mysterons had this capacity to recreate people – and objects, since the helicopter that had attacked Captain Blue at the Car-Vu was ALSO discovered to be a Mysteron reconstruction – surely, they could be successful in their threat to ultimately destroy all life on Earth...

That was frightening... and sickening at the same time. After the meeting, Destiny felt a desperate need to relax. She was due for duty in the Amber Room with Harmony Angel. Work would take her mind off all this nonsense. But as she found very soon after, her ordeal wasn't exactly over yet. Captain Blue came to fetch her, about an hour after she had begun her shift. It wasn't so rare that one of the senior staff officers should come in, but there was something peculiar about Blue's visit. He seemed somewhat official – and rather uneasy – when he asked Destiny to follow him to Sickbay, where her presence was requested by agent Wade of Spectrum

Intelligence. Destiny was not sure why she was needed. She soon found out when, after presenting herself to Agent Wade, she was asked to make another identification. She followed Doctor Fawn who, oddly enough, didn't guide her this time to the operating theatre, but into a recovery room where a patient, surrounded by machines, lay on a bed. Destiny then had the shock of her life when she recognized Captain Scarlet, bandaged, unconscious... but definitely alive, if she could believe the readings on the machines he was hooked to. When asked if she recognized him, she said yes, without even thinking about it. Then it hit her, and she had turned to Fawn and Blue, almost accusing them.

"This is the impostor, isn't it?" she had asked them angrily.

"We don't really know for certain, yet," Blue had said apologetically.

"What do you mean, you don't know? This is the man you brought back from the Car-Vu, isn't it? How come he is even alive, after that fall? I thought he was dead for sure!"

"We thought that, too," said a hesitant Captain Blue. He had asked Destiny to calm down, tried to justify himself by telling her it wasn't his idea to have her come there to make the identification. In fact, he had been against it, but Agent Wade had insisted that the same witness who had signed the death certificate should also be the one to identify this man. Blue then had explained to a very confused Destiny that Captain Scarlet's body had begun repairing itself in Sickbay, until the man finally woke up, a few minutes ago... asking if Captain Brown had survived the car crash.

"He doesn't seem aware of what happened between the crash and his awakening here..." Blue said in conclusion. *"Like we faced two different men, in the same body. The other, the Mysteron agent who had kidnapped the President... and this one. Who seems to be the real Captain Scarlet."*

Thinking about all this now, Destiny couldn't explain to herself why she didn't react more harshly right away to the very idea that the Mysteron reconstruct could be considered as the real Paul Metcalfe. As it was, she was so shocked that she didn't react to it at all. Ever since that day, she had tried to repress her feelings... of mistrust, doubts, resentment, even betrayal. When 'Captain Scarlet' had returned to active duty on Cloudbase, after having been sent to the ground as a non-active agent for a few days, Destiny had done her best to avoid him. It wasn't always possible, however. For example, during that last mission against the Mysterons in London, Destiny was in the Angel Flight that had been assigned to the protection of the Asian Director General. She was at the International Airport when Captain Scarlet had 'risked his life', so to speak, in trying to stop a Mysteronised plane from crashing into the Asian Director's personal jet. She had found Scarlet's actions rather impressive, even if it was desperately in vain. In any case, his attempt had served to prove he was on the level...

Apparently.

Destiny didn't really know what to think about this. The only thing she was certain about right now was that she couldn't keep her feelings to herself any more. It had come as a total surprise to her as much as anybody else present in the Amber Room when she drew back from Scarlet the way she did. He was the most surprised of all. Surprised and hurt.

"Guess he didn't expect that kind of reaction coming from me," thought Destiny. *"Well, he's not the man I knew. That man is dead. Nobody can come back from the dead. No tricks from the Mysterons could ever convince me of that."*

Destiny really wasn't feeling very well. Not enough, in any case, for deck duty. That could prove a very volatile situation in case of emergency. She used her radio helmet to call Lieutenant Green in the Control Room.

"Request permission to be relieved of duty," she said to him.

Destiny could almost hear the puzzled hesitation as Lieutenant Green took a moment before responding. *"Are you all right, Destiny?"*

"I'm feeling sick, Lieutenant," Destiny said. *"Must be something I ate today."*

It was rather rare that one of the Angel pilots had to ask to be replaced on deck. For Destiny to make such a request, she must have been really under the weather, thought Lieutenant Green.

"Request granted," he said. *"Go get some rest, Destiny Angel. Hope you didn't catch Captain Blue's flu..."*

Destiny smiled sadly. *"I don't think that's the case, Lieutenant,"* she sighed. *"I don't really see how that would have been possible..."*

* * *

When Captain Scarlet wanted to find some peace and quiet, away from the rush and troubles of the rest of the world – or at least of Cloudbase – he usually went to the Promenade Deck. It was the only strictly recreational area of the entire military base. Even the sport hall had its functional purpose, by keeping all the base personnel fit and healthy. The officers' lounge had often served for official and non-official staff meetings. Here, on the Promenade Deck, there was nothing 'official'. The ceiling and walls were of reinforced glass, totally unbreakable, and specially treated to lessen the effect of the dangerous ultraviolet rays of the sun, so they wouldn't burn up anything alive in there... be it humans or the exotic plants that thrived in there. Some Spectrum members even found the time to do some gardening there during their spare time... as was the case with Colonel White, who was culturing various kinds of plants and flowers. He was particularly fond of a special variety of white rose tree, magnificent when in full bloom. So proud was the commander of that tree, than he had strictly forbidden anyone to touch it. Everybody knew the Colonel well enough to be aware that he didn't make idle threats... so nobody would even dare to go near the rose tree.

The Promenade Deck had a view of the flight deck of Cloudbase. From there, Scarlet could see Angel One stationed at its usual place, on the upper runway, waiting for immediate launch, if Lieutenant Green should give the order. Scarlet could see the pilot through the canopy, but couldn't quite make out her features; he knew it had to be Destiny in there. She had told that to him herself, just before she gave him the cold shoulder.

First Destiny, and then Ochre... generally easy-going Captain Ochre. Scarlet didn't remember ever seeing him so aggressive toward anybody. He had shown some mistrust toward Captain Magenta, in the early days of Spectrum – their respective pasts had been between them – but since then, they had become good friends, exceptionally loyal to each other... as Ochre was to all of his fellow officers, in fact. Lately, however, he was merely polite toward Scarlet, and had always stayed civil... But his violent reaction to him had completely taken Scarlet by surprise. He hadn't known that his colleague had so much repressed resentment that he would so totally blow up at him that way.

Scarlet heaved a deep sigh. He realized that both Destiny and Ochre must each have their reasons for rejecting him. But they had both been his friend before his dreadful Mysteron experience. He didn't think himself as responsible for what had happened; the whole affair with World President Younger and all that... In retrospect, Scarlet even thought of himself as one of the Mysterons' first victims in this 'war of nerves' of theirs.

Scarlet hated thinking of himself as a victim. He shook his head. *That's self-pity, Paul. Don't dwell on it or you'll be good for nothing. There's a problem here, and you won't solve it that way...* The base of the problem was that Destiny and Ochre didn't accept him. Ochre never really tried to conceal his mistrust... well, perhaps he was more careful in front of Colonel White, for he should know that the commander-in-chief of Spectrum would never accept such destructive behaviour within the ranks of his organisation... let alone amongst his senior staff officers. Scarlet knew that Ochre was the one who had investigated his car accident about a month ago, in New York. So, he had a hunch that Ochre's feelings toward him originated from what he had found during that investigation.

As for Destiny, she had kept her thoughts to herself. It had never occurred to Scarlet that she was avoiding him all those weeks. Now, it had become painfully clear that she didn't want anything to do with him.

And if Ochre and Destiny were just the tip of the iceberg? thought a moody Scarlet. *If there were other Spectrum agents, here in Cloudbase, who were thinking the same and, like Destiny, were keeping it bottled up inside?*

Captain Scarlet turned away from the glass bay, going slowly toward an assembly of chairs and tables installed nearby. There was a number of such groups of furniture, in strategic places around the Promenade Deck, for the visitors' comfort. Scarlet settled himself heavily on one of the chairs and put his cap on the table. He took his head in his hands and sighed. As hurt as he was, he was also bitterly angry. He didn't know how to react or what to do... and not being in control upset him even more.

"Oh, come on, now!" he growled furiously to himself. "Snap out of it!"

He stood up suddenly and almost sent the chair toppling backward. He reached out for it and stopped it from falling just in time, but his sudden movement knocked down a nearby flowerpot that went crashing down into another plant, breaking fragile branches, crushing early buds, and squashing flowers...

With horror, Scarlet saw white petals spread on the ground.

"Oh, God!" he muttered to himself. "Now I've done it."

The unfortunate plant he had just damaged was Colonel White's rose tree. *Now I'm REALLY dead*, he thought as he crouched beside the tree, looking grimly at it. It was covered with soil from the broken pot, with the other plant – whatever it was – tangled in it. Pieces of pottery were everywhere. Scarlet frowned. Maybe if he acted fast enough, he would be able to save the roses... well, at least some of them. That could save him from being thrown into the void by his very upset commander-in-chief.

"The Colonel will be very annoyed with you."

Captain Scarlet, who was trying to get some pieces of the broken pot out from the rose tree, jumped, hearing this voice, like a thief disturbed doing his guilty work. Had somebody witnessed his mishap? Standing up too fast, he scratched his hand deeply on the thorns of the rose tree. He just had time to muffle a loud curse on discovering who was standing there, looking at him. Quickly, he hid his scratched hand behind him, hoping she hadn't seen him getting hurt.

Rhapsody smiled when she saw the embarrassment on Scarlet's face. She pointed to the damaged roses, walking toward her compatriot.

"Knowing how he is with his prize roses, he'll demand your head for this," she joked.

Scarlet smiled faintly. "I know a few people who would gladly hand it to him on a silver platter," he said with false humour.

"Not everybody here is like that, you know, Captain," Rhapsody answered back. She had noticed how he was keeping his right hand behind him. She tilted her head to the side, trying to get a glance at it. "What is it you're hiding from me?"

"Nothing," he lied uneasily.

She saw little droplets of blood dripping to the ground. She gently took Scarlet's forearm. "You're bleeding," she stated matter-of-factly, pulling his injured hand in front of him.

"Really, it's nothing," he insisted. "I only scratched my hand on some thorns..."

"Rather nasty ones," Rhapsody noticed. The back of Scarlet's hand was covered with blood. "Must be a deep cut."

"I tell you, it's nothing..."

Scarlet sighed when he saw Rhapsody taking a handkerchief from her uniform pocket. "Let me have a look at it."

"Don't bother," Scarlet muttered, frowning deeply. "It doesn't even hurt anymore. You'll just ruin your handkerchief."

"I swear, Captain," Rhapsody sighed heavily, carefully wiping out the blood off his hand, "If I didn't know better, I'd think that you were trying to stop me from tending..."

She stopped right in the middle of her sentence. The hand, now nearly clean of blood, appeared to her unscathed. Her jaw dropped. She cleared her throat and looked up at Scarlet's face, trying not to look or sound too uneasy.

"Well," she said, "that's pretty impressive..."

Scarlet looked back at her, grateful that she, at least, tried to take it so naturally. But there was nothing natural about his condition and they both knew it. Taking the handkerchief in order to finish cleaning up his hand himself, he turned his back on her and took a few steps toward the glass bay.

"Tell me about it," he muttered. He looked at his hand, clean, uninjured. He frowned. "What are you doing here, Rhapsody? I thought you were so exhausted that you only had sleep on your mind..."

"Well, a priority came in." Rhapsody approached him, looking at his profile. He did not even turn to face her. "I thought a very good friend of mine needed some company."

"Oh?" Scarlet frowned again. "Was it my imagination, or did I see you in the gym, not an hour ago?"

"Yes, I was there."

"So you know what happened?"

"With Captain Ochre? Yes, I heard." Rhapsody put a hand on Scarlet's shoulder. "If you want to talk about it, I'm here."

Scarlet snorted. "What is there to talk about?" He drew away from her touch, stepped away from her, again turning his back on her, and then stopped.

"Maybe Ochre is right," Rhapsody heard him say in a low voice.

"Right about what?" the puzzled Angel pilot asked.

"About me being a freak."

"Oh! Now that's really nonsense!"

Scarlet spun around and presented his hand to Rhapsody. "Is it?" he asked her. "You've just seen it, Rhapsody. You saw what happened with my hand!"

"So you heal fast, now," Rhapsody replied quietly. "That doesn't prove you're a freak."

"Heal fast?" Scarlet threw up his hands. "That's an understatement if I ever heard one!" He looked back at the Angel pilot and shook his head. "There's much more to it than that, Rhapsody."

"So I've heard."

"Well, you certainly don't know everything about it. I'm just starting to find out myself, with Doctor Fawn." He paused, then continued: "Just a little example, to begin with: I've just discovered that I only need to sleep a couple of hours a night, now. Seems my body doesn't need much more than that, except when I... er... regenerate."

"Lucky guy!" Rhapsody sighed with a faint smile. She suppressed a yawn. "I know I certainly would be happy if I only needed that amount of sleep."

"Don't say that, Rhapsody," Scarlet pleaded, coming back to her. "You don't know how it is..." He looked at her tired features and gave a faint smile. "You DO look exhausted, though. You should go and get some rest."

"I'm not leaving you here alone."

"Stubborn girl. Then at least sit down."

Scarlet guided her to the table and chairs and she sat down. He pulled up a seat for himself. She glanced at him thoughtfully. "I imagine you don't have that problem anymore," the female pilot remarked.

"Excuse me?" Scarlet asked her, frowning.

"Being tired. Since you don't need much sleep..."

"No. You're right. I usually feel restless, now. Don't try any endurance races with me. You'll tire well before me."

"At the moment, I'd tire before anybody."

"I was talking in the general sense, Rhapsody."

"I know that!" the young woman scoffed. "I'm not THAT tired, you know, Captain!"

Scarlet smiled slightly. He thought carefully of what to say next. He surprised himself – and Rhapsody as well – when he took her hand in his.

"What do you know about the main aspect of my... condition, Rhapsody?"

"What Colonel White told us," she answered quietly. "That you are... indestructible."

"And what does that tell you EXACTLY?" Scarlet insisted.

"That you cannot be killed anymore..."

"That's where you're wrong, Angel. I CAN be killed... I just come back afterward." Scarlet's voice took on a morose note. "In fact, according to Doctor Fawn, I've already died a number of times."

Rhapsody glanced at him blankly. "That's rather hard to swallow," she said, "But after seeing you fall from the top of the Car-Vu..."

She stopped suddenly, realizing that what she had just said might have hurt him. He simply shrugged it off.

"That's right," he said thoughtfully. "You were there."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Don't fret over it, Angel. It's quite all right. I don't remember any of it, you know. But I've been thoroughly briefed about it." He cleared his throat. "I died that time, Rhapsody."

"You died?" The Angel pilot repeated, frowning. "But... I heard them say that they THOUGHT you were dead... and that they then discovered you were alive, when they brought you back here, to Cloudbase."

"No, that's not it. That's what EVERYBODY assumes, I guess, but they're all wrong. I really died, Doctor Fawn confirmed it." Scarlet got to his feet and started pacing in front of a disbelieving Rhapsody. *Well, she thought, it's true he is restless...*

"Blue's bullet should have killed me at the Car-Vu," he explained. "According to him, it didn't. But the impact knocked me off the observatory... THAT's what killed me." He sighed, stopping in his tracks. "Doctor Fawn thinks the fall broke the Mysterons' spell over me..." He looked at Rhapsody, frowning. "If I'm not mistaken, you were at London International Airport last week, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was," Rhapsody nodded. "You gave me quite a scare there, you know!"

Scarlet looked perplexed and came back toward her. "I did? What do you mean?"

"You have to ask?" Rhapsody scoffed. "After what you did? I swear, I thought you had gone mad when you ordered us to continue our aerial attack on that plane... Your SPV was right UNDER it... trying to ram its wheels."

"Don't you think I was scared, too?"

"I should think so! What were you trying to do, anyway? You could have got yourself killed with a stunt like that!"

"Actually, Rhapsody..."

Scarlet did not continue; Rhapsody immediately understood what he was implying. She looked at him, with horror in her eyes, and he felt his heart sink. But then, she put her hand to his heart and he understood that it was not what he had become that horrified her, but what she had just said.

"I should have realized," she almost whispered. "You died that time too?"

He nodded. The young woman sighed. "That's what you meant when you said you can come back afterward," she murmured. Then she added, this time more carefully: "I'll ask you again: why did you do it?"

"You shouldn't ask that," Scarlet said, shaking his dark head.

"Because I know the answer? Yes. You wanted to prove yourself."

"Still the detective, I see," Scarlet muttered. He let out a sigh. "Colonel White had enough faith in me to put me back on duty so soon. I had to make it count."

"Nobody, not even the Colonel, ever asked you to risk your life so blindly," Rhapsody replied. "And were you even SURE you would come out of this ALIVE?"

"There were other lives at risk!" Scarlet said, more roughly than he would have really wanted. "I HAD to try..." He looked away from her. "For what it was worth ... Everybody died. I failed."

Rhapsody gently touched his cheek to force him to look at her. She was smiling softly.

"Did anybody ever blame you for that?" she asked him.

"No," he admitted.

"And I'm sure EVERYBODY has told you, again and again, that it couldn't be helped," Rhapsody continued. "You did all that was humanly possible to try to save the Director General and his staff..."

"Humanly possible?" Scarlet replied dryly. "Rhapsody, I'm not sure I'm even human anymore."

Oh no! Rhapsody thought. He's in an even worse state than I thought...

"Don't say that," she admonished him. "Because you know that's not true."

"Oh, isn't it?" Scarlet's gaze hardened. "Do you know why my body can rebuild itself this way, Rhapsody? Do you know WHY I can die and come back again?"

"Paul, stop it. You're doing nothing but hurting yourself."

It was the first time, Scarlet noticed, that Rhapsody had called him by his first name. If it was an indication of anything, at least it told him she was accepting him for the real thing. When he looked into her blue eyes, he could see the sadness in them. *How much does she actually know of the truth?* he asked himself. He swallowed hard.

"Do you know exactly what the Mysterons did to me, Dianne?" he asked her softly. When Rhapsody didn't respond, he looked her straight in the eyes. "They killed me..."

"So they could recreate you and use you for their own ends," Rhapsody continued. "I already know that..."

"Do you know that they, in fact, DESTROYED my real body?" Scarlet interrupted her in a low voice. "This is not my real body..." He motioned to himself. "It's just... a copy of the original one."

Rhapsody stared at him blankly. "I've heard rumours," she said. "But I didn't really know for sure..."

"Well, now you know," Scarlet sighed. "I'm not the real Paul Metcalfe. I'm just... a clone of him."

"No. THAT, I will never believe."

"Some people believe it. Look at Ochre... and Destiny. Ochre, I know why. I've been told he was the one who found my real body in New York."

"You don't know the reason behind Destiny's behaviour toward you?" Rhapsody shook her head. Well, she knew, but she wasn't about to tell Scarlet. That wouldn't solve the problem between him and Destiny. "Maybe you should ask her," she suggested.

Scarlet snorted dryly. "If she ever lets me get near enough to ask her!"

"She'll come around. And Ochre too, I'm sure. After all, they're both reasonable people."

"Well, I don't know about Ochre. And since Destiny is French..."

"Oh! That's terrible, Captain!" Rhapsody laughed, and he smiled. "Well, your sense of humour hasn't changed much. It's still as bad as it was before!"

"I don't FEEL different," Scarlet said, shrugging. "Aside from these... powers I've retained from my encounter with the Mysterons, I feel the same. My memories... my feelings, my personality, so to speak, they haven't changed. All that came back after my fall from the Car-Vu. I'm the same person... Except now, I have this alien body, which happens to be indestructible."

"*The Machine to Kill*," Rhapsody said thoughtfully.

Scarlet frowned. "What is that?"

"*The Machine to Kill*," Rhapsody repeated. "It's an old Gaston Leroux novel... You know, the guy who wrote '*Phantom of the Opera*'? I think the original French title of that one was '*La Poupée Sanglante*'..."

"*The Bleeding Doll*," Scarlet translated. "I don't see any relation between the two titles... What's it about?"

"Well, it's about an honest man, named Benedict, some kind of outsider, who's framed for murder... The woman he loves finds him trying to get rid of a dead body planted in his house by the real murderer. It is her testimony which sends him to the guillotine."

"Rather heavy stuff," Scarlet murmured. "But what..."

"The story doesn't end there, though," Rhapsody added quickly. "The woman Benedict loved has a fiancé, who's something of a scientist. He's constructing some sort of automaton of flesh and blood... In order for his creation to work, he needs a brain. So he takes Benedict's..."

"A variation to the Frankenstein's theme," Scarlet noted. "I love it already."

"Well, while the Frankenstein creature was ugly and even repulsive, Gabriel – that is the automaton's name – is a rather handsome man. Only, he needs to be wound up."

"Wound up? With a key? Like an old clock?" Scarlet shrugged. "All right, I'm confused now. What's that got to do with me?"

"Benedict's brain took control of the automaton's body... Like you, his feelings, his personality, even his voice were the same. He just changed his name, because his appearance was different. The first thing that 'Gabriel' did when he came back to life was to prove himself, prove his innocence... and try to save his love who was to be the real murderer's next victim." Rhapsody paused a second. Scarlet seemed to be all ears, eager to hear the remainder of the story. "There was another thing Gabriel had in common with you. He was virtually indestructible... But in his case, it was mainly because, aside from his brain, he didn't have any vital organs to begin with..."

"Quite a story," Scarlet mused. "How does it end?"

Rhapsody hesitated, remembering suddenly HOW, indeed, the novel ended. She waved her hand.

"It's not really important," she said.

"That bad, huh?" Scarlet replied with a frown. "He didn't save the girl?"

"Oh yes, he did save the girl." How was she to tell him that, upon being rejected by the woman he loved, the main character of the novel committed suicide by throwing himself off a cliff? *Good going, Dianne*, she thought, angry with herself. *You really know how to find GOOD examples to lift the morale of your friends!*

"Look, it's a French novel," Rhapsody sighed. You know how the French are at concocting love stories... They are always sad, mixed up with blood, tragedy, destiny..." She stopped and frowned. She saw Scarlet's amused smile. "Did I just make a bad pun?" she asked him.

"I guess your sense of humour is as bad as mine," Scarlet sniggered.

The two laughed together, but their good humour didn't last long. Scarlet suddenly swayed, seeming to lose his balance. Rhapsody reached out to him, helping him to keep stable. She saw his face, suddenly pale, covered with sweat. He was obviously dizzy.

"What is it, Paul?" the concerned Angel pilot asked. "You look ill..."

"I'll be all right," Scarlet responded. "I..."

He tried to get up and staggered. He almost fell down on the chair he had left earlier. His head felt like it would split open when he took it between his hands.

"You're obviously not feeling well," Rhapsody nodded with a frown. "Maybe you caught the same bug as Captain Blue has..."

"It doesn't feel like the flu," Scarlet replied between gritted teeth. He had felt like this before... in the tower, at London International Airport. It was exactly the same thing... except this time, it seemed to him it was more vivid, more painful.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped and Scarlet felt much better. He let out a sigh.

"It's gone, now," he muttered, raising his head. "I'm okay."

He was relieved. Not because the sickness he had just felt was nearly unbearable, but because of what it could represent.

The last time he had experienced that dizzy spell, the Mysterons were involved...

"You're sure you're okay?" Rhapsody asked him again. "You still look very pale..."

Captain Scarlet was feeling all right, at least physically. But he couldn't admit to Rhapsody Angel that he was afraid – terribly afraid that Doctor Fawn might be right about these spells.

And if the Mysterons should really regain control over him and use him again to hurt those close to him, he would never get over it.

"Captain, what is it?"

Rhapsody tried again to reach to him, but he shied away from her, much to her surprise and dismay. She frowned.

"Something is wrong," she stated decisively.

"It's really nothing, Angel," Scarlet replied, shrugging.

"I don't believe it. Something's troubling you big time, I can see it. Do you want me to go with you to Doctor Fawn..."

"No." Scarlet's response came rather swiftly. He smiled apologetically, seeing Rhapsody's surprise. "Sorry, I didn't mean to jump at you. It's just that it's not necessary that you should come with me to see Doctor Fawn." He smiled again, this time roguishly. "People might begin to talk about the two of us..."

"You won't go to Doctor Fawn?" Rhapsody replied, feigning not to hear his bad joke.

"I didn't say that," Scarlet sighed. "Don't worry. I'll go and see him. Maybe he could find out this time what it's all about."

"You mean it's happened before?"

"Yes," Scarlet answered. He sighed again. Was there no way to escape the girl's questions?

"Yes, it's happened before. But last time, it involved the Mysterons..."

"What do the Mysterons have to do with it?" Rhapsody asked sharply.

"Well, I don't know exactly, but this time they don't seem to..."

At about that exact moment, the loudspeaker of the Promenade Deck gave out a burst of static, soon replaced by a familiar, ominous voice, that neither of the two Spectrum agents would ever grow accustomed to:

"This is the voice of the Mysterons. We know you can hear us, Earthmen..."

Rhapsody let out an angry sigh.

"That voice!" she muttered. "It sends shivers down my spine..."

One look at Scarlet told her that he felt the same way; but he was looking expectantly, attentively, toward the loudspeaker.

"Our next act of retaliation will be to destroy the pride of the Aeronautics Exhibition and to take the lives of members of the Spectrum organisation in the same fateful blow..."

"Oh, blast!" Rhapsody muttered. Scarlet motioned her to stay calm. But the voice was silent now. The Mysterons had obviously finished.

"Do you realize that's a direct threat to us?" Rhapsody remarked.

Scarlet didn't respond. Another voice was coming out of the speaker, calling with a tone of urgency. "Attention to all personnel! Spectrum is now on yellow alert! All senior staff field agents on duty report to the Control Room at once!"

Scarlet got up on his feet. "That's my cue to go," he said.

"You're sure you're all right?" Rhapsody insisted.

"You just heard Lieutenant Green... I just have to put up with it." He smiled. "Don't worry. I'm quite all right. Talking to you helped me. A lot."

"I'm glad I was helpful, if even just a little."

"It was more than that," Scarlet interjected. He bent down in front of her and gently planted a kiss on her cheek, before smiling again. "Thanks, Angel. You're a very good friend."

He took his cap from the table and strode quickly to the door. Rhapsody suddenly stood up.

"Captain Scarlet?"

He stopped and turned a puzzled look on her.

"Be careful," she simply said.

He smiled. "Always. Go and get your rest now. You've earned it."

He left. Rhapsody sat down, thoughtfully. She touched her cheek, where he had kissed her.

"Who can rest, now?" she muttered to herself. She caught a glimpse of the damaged rose tree, standing not far from her. She groaned in dismay. "With all that, we've forgotten all about that tree! What am I going to do now?"

Chapter 3

Colonel White sat at his round control desk, pondering the new Mysteron threat he had just heard. Saying that he wasn't personally concerned would be a lie. This time, the Mysterons had threatened to kill members of Spectrum. It was a first. And a perplexing turn of events. Last time the alien enemies actually DID take the lives of Spectrum agents, they were not so considerate as to give any warning of it.

Captain Scarlet strode into the Control Room and came to attention.

"Captain Scarlet reporting as ordered, sir," the younger man announced.

"At ease, Captain. Please take a seat."

Scarlet nodded and sat down, putting his cap on his knees. Colonel White gazed at him, wondering what could possibly be going through his mind. Scarlet seemed rather nervous. He had actually been the first victim on Earth of the Mysterons, White realised. No doubt, this threat was also troubling him.

"Is something the matter, sir?" Scarlet asked, seeing his superior so thoughtful.

"Just wondering, Captain," White replied, shaking his head. "You arrived rather quickly. I take it you weren't very far away."

"No, sir, I wasn't."

"I heard you paid Captain Blue a visit in Sickbay, earlier."

"Yes, sir. He's still quite ill. Will he be joining us anyway?"

"No." Colonel White nodded toward his aide, Lieutenant Green, who was seated behind Scarlet, in front of the huge computerized console that enabled him to control all Spectrum activities, in Cloudbase and around the world. "The lieutenant has just spoken with Sickbay about him."

"Doctor Fawn reported that Captain Blue was sleeping like a babe, when I talked to him," the young Caribbean lieutenant said to Scarlet with a smile. "And since there is no loudspeaker in Sickbay, he hasn't heard the Mysterons' threat."

"He needs his rest," White added. "So I instructed Doctor Fawn not to wake him up. He will learn about this soon enough."

"He'll be annoyed to find out he's been sidelined on this one, sir," Scarlet remarked, smiling a little.

"Well, I'd rather see him resting and getting well quickly than dragging that flu of his around and giving it to other Cloudbase personnel," the colonel replied. "Besides, I don't think he would dare question MY decision on that matter."

Captain Scarlet had his doubts about that one. And he wasn't fooled either by the colonel's apparently harsh statement about Blue's sickness; his superior was concerned about the American captain, that much Scarlet was certain of.

"Something on YOUR mind, Captain?" Colonel White asked his officer, seeing his distracted expression.

"No, sir. Nothing of importance."

"We'll wait for the others..."

White had just finished his sentence when the door opened wide. Captains Ochre, Grey and Magenta entered and came toward their superior's desk. Grey reported for them all, and White invited them to sit down. As they did, Scarlet tried not to stare at Ochre, whose icy glare he could almost feel. Scarlet was aware that there was still some unfinished business between them, and they would have to talk it through at some point. That, however, would have to wait.

"Where were you, Captain Scarlet?" he suddenly heard Grey ask him. "I was looking all over for you."

Scarlet looked at Grey and saw his look of concern. Magenta seemed anxious too. At least, Scarlet thought, these two appeared to be on his side. "Later," he replied to Grey with a faint smile. "Right now, we have business to attend to."

"Quite right," Colonel White observed quietly. "As I was saying to Captain Scarlet, gentlemen, Captain Blue won't be joining us. So, let us begin. You've all heard this new threat of the Mysterons'."

"Yes, they want to sabotage the airshow which starts in Los Angeles in three days," Magenta answered. "Aren't we already on hand for security there, sir?"

"Yes, Spectrum ground agents are already checking things out, along with the American military," Colonel White nodded. "But that was even BEFORE the Mysterons."

"Which bring us to the second part of their threat," Scarlet mused.

"That's the one I'm more worried about," White said. "It's the first time the Mysterons have threatened to strike at Spectrum directly."

"They must have known we've been put in charge of security in L.A.," Captain Ochre noted. "Do you think they plan on using Spectrum personnel to carry out their threat, sir? Like they did with the World President?"

White looked sternly at Ochre. He would have thought that the ex-policeman had much more tact than that. Knowing Scarlet's involvement in the affair, he should have been aware that such a statement could be unsettling for him. Even Grey and Magenta were turning furious stares toward Ochre. Only Scarlet himself didn't seem to care.

"It is a possibility, sir," noted the young British captain, nodding thoughtfully. White refrained from smiling. Scarlet's diplomacy was more than a match for Ochre's lack of it.

"Yes, it is," the commander of Spectrum agreed. "It is possible that some of our ground personnel already involved with the airshow security have been targeted by the Mysterons."

"If you'll pardon me for disagreeing with you, sir," Grey said at that moment, "it seems to me that the Mysterons should have a bigger target in mind than ground agents... Not ignoring the fact that they're doing a great job."

"I understand what you mean, Captain. We must not, however, let that kind of threat interfere with our job. And since the Mysterons have also threatened the airshow, it is our job to see that it is not sabotaged." He cleared his throat. "Just before this threat came in, a pilot from Universal Aero Engineering had just landed here on Cloudbase. He has arrived with a prototype aircraft that should be the star of the Los Angeles show, a new class of Passenger Jet built by UAE."

"I've heard of that one," Ochre mused. He looked at his fellow officers. Along with his taste for building model planes, Captain Ochre was also well known for his interest in aeronautics in general. "The cabin and the cockpit has been conceived as a built-in capsule. It should come in handy in case of a crash. The crew and the passengers should then be able to effect an emergency escape."

"An ejecting cabin?" Magenta repeated. "With a 'chute to slow down the descent, I suppose?"

"Something like the FB-111 Aardvark, that was built in the 1960's by General Dynamics?" Grey added in turn. "Or the EF-111 Raven, perhaps?"

Ochre stared at his colleague in disbelief. "Very good, Captain Grey! You're actually improving your knowledge of aircraft! I'm impressed!"

Grey smiled mockingly. While Ochre was the resident expert on classic aircraft and prided himself on knowing all there was to know on the subject, Grey was more of a Navy man. "Blame Captain Blue. He's the one who's been briefing me on those crates you're so fond of... Figures somebody should put you in your place, once in a while... Or at least, be able to follow you when you're babbling on about them, when nobody really cares."

"Well, anyway, I can tell you that the principle behind that new UAE Passenger Jet is much more ingenious than what General Dynamics came up with for the Aardvark..."

"Oh, thank you VERY MUCH, Grey!" Magenta hissed. "Now you've done it!"

"The Aardvark ejecting cockpit was just conceived as some kind of escape pod," Ochre continued, feigning not to hear Magenta's protests. "It could be used as a shelter or even as a rescue boat, but that was about as far as it went. The capsule of the new Passenger Jet should be able to fly under its own power, with a limited amount of fuel."

"Which could allow it time to land safely," Grey remarked.

"Right," Ochre nodded. He turned excitedly toward the colonel. "Don't you think it could be a good idea for Spectrum to equip itself with that kind of Passenger Jet, sir?"

"Why do you think this prototype is here today?" Scarlet retorted in an amused voice.

Ochre stiffened and suddenly turned to him, finally seeming to notice his presence. "How do you know that?" he demanded.

Scarlet grinned widely. "I heard about it the last time I was at London Headquarters," he answered.

"Right," Ochre responded with bad humour. "That would be last week, then. How come the news hasn't reached Cloudbase yet?"

"Because there is nothing official about it," White responded. "The prototype is still in its test period. It should be tested thoroughly by one of our personnel before being added to our fleet... IF that ever happens."

Magenta looked puzzled. "But our resident test pilot is down with the flu," he noted quietly.

Ochre scoffed. "Blue isn't the only one who can test that craft!"

"It's easy to see you're more than willing to take his place!" Magenta replied ironically.

"I'm more than qualified. Why shouldn't I fly it?"

"We all have our pilot's licence, Ochre," Grey said dryly. "That doesn't make test pilots out of us."

"All right, now, stop bickering!" White called out. He turned to Ochre. "You won't test that plane. None of you captains will. Since Captain Blue is out of action, I intend to assign an Angel pilot to it."

"Melody Angel, sir?" Scarlet asked. He remembered the well-deserved reputation of the young Black American woman when she was a test pilot for the WAAF. She had been considered a master of her field. But White shook his head.

"Melody Angel is scheduled for active duty in the next few hours. I thought of one of the Angels who's currently off-duty, since she would have to go to Los Angeles to perform the tests."

"Sir?" Scarlet asked with a quizzical frown. "The tests will be performed in public, during the airshow?"

"The initial safety tests have all been completed by UAE, Captain. These are only flight tests. While Spectrum has a potential interest in acquiring the craft, other buyers are also interested and will be in Los Angeles to evaluate the jet's performance. As with the last model of Passenger Jet, if this one should be acquired by Spectrum, it will be modified for our specific needs. That's one of the reasons why one of our own pilots should perform the flight tests."

"So that's why Spectrum is responsible for security at the airshow in the first place," Scarlet nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, Captain, that's why," Colonel White agreed.

"Nothing gets by you, does it?" Ochre mumbled under his breath for Scarlet's exclusive attention.

White did hear him muttering and cast a stern look at him; he also noticed Scarlet feigning not to have heard anything, so he did the same. For the time being. There was something going on here, he thought, but he really didn't have the time right now to concern himself with it. Nevertheless, he took a mental note of the incident. He would have to come back to it later on.

Captain Grey too had heard Ochre's acerbic remark to Scarlet. He was hoping Colonel White had been unaware of it, but the quick but icy glance he saw his commander casting at Ochre told him that wasn't the case.

"The flight tests on the Passenger Jet would also provide a good cover for explaining Spectrum's extended presence at the show," Grey said, hoping to divert everyone's attention.

White nodded. "Here's your course of action, gentlemen: Captains Scarlet, Ochre and Grey, you will board the prototype with the UAE representative and our Angel test pilot and go directly to Los Angeles Airport."

"S.I.G., sir," the three officers responded.

"Captain Scarlet, you'll act as field commander."

Scarlet seemed startled, hearing that order. "Me, sir?"

White looked up at him. It was indeed the first time he had assigned Scarlet as field commander since his return to duty after the first Mysteron incident. Scarlet was the best man for the job, the most experienced of his officers in that aspect. Security surveillance was second nature to him; he never left anything to chance, always acted quickly and with determination and assurance. So why did he sound so uncertain right now?

"Yes, Captain," White confirmed. "Is there a problem with that?"

"No, sir." Scarlet's voice didn't seem as assured as White would have liked to hear it. "No problem at all."

Ochre wasn't very pleased about the decision, though; that was pretty obvious by the way he was trying not to look at Scarlet. *Would probably have preferred me to choose him to be field commander*, White thought, *since he's so versed in aeronautics*. However, jealousy was not a personality trait he would have suspected in Ochre. There was something else.

"Lieutenant Green," White asked, turning to his aide, "which of the Angels are currently off-duty?"

Green consulted his computer screen. "Rhapsody Angel came off duty an hour ago," he announced. "She's scheduled for eight hours rest."

"If I may say so, sir," Scarlet interjected, "Rhapsody has been on duty for the past twenty-four hours. The last I saw of her, she was exhausted."

"Yes, she wouldn't make a good test pilot under those conditions," White agreed. "Who's left then, Lieutenant?"

"Destiny Angel, sir."

Scarlet refrained from scowling. He succeeded in hiding his reaction behind a puzzled expression. "Isn't she supposed to be on duty in Angel One?"

Colonel White gave him a curious look. "Why do I have the feeling you know all the Angels' schedules by heart, Captain?"

There was unaccustomed humour in the Colonel's voice. Scarlet felt himself reddening violently. Seeing him suddenly so embarrassed, Grey chuckled. "You devil! Now we know why you always seem so busy!"

Scarlet shot him a murderous glance. A bemused Magenta elbowed Grey in the side. "Leave him alone, Grey. What is it with you, jealous or something? Those judo lessons with Harmony are suddenly not enough for you?"

"That's all they are, Magenta: judo lessons."

Scarlet snorted. "Where I come from, a gentleman never mentions a lady's name in that context."

"Hey! I'm taking your side here!" Magenta protested.

"Well, you're not helping."

"All right, enough now!" Colonel White called loudly. "We've all had our fun. We're not in a school playground, gentlemen, but on a military base and we have business to attend to. Lieutenant Green?"

"Sir?"

"Is Destiny Angel supposed to be in Angel One, as Captain Scarlet said?"

"Yes, sir. But she asked to be released. She wasn't feeling well. Symphony replaced her."

"She wasn't feeling well?" Colonel White repeated, frowning. "Odd. I hope she hasn't caught that dreadful bug Captain Blue brought back from London..."

"I don't think so, sir," Lieutenant Green stated. "She said it was probably something she ate."

"Well, I hope she's well enough to perform the flight tests in Los Angeles," White remarked.

"I'll go check on her, sir," Captain Magenta proposed quickly.

White nodded his agreement. "All right, do it. Tell her to report to the duty hangar immediately. If she doesn't seem well enough, we'll have to rely on Rhapsody."

"Yes, sir," Magenta nodded. "Since I'm obviously not going to L.A., what are my orders?"

"You'll stay here on Cloudbase, as back up, in case of emergency. If it comes to that, I'll ask Captain Blue to join you."

"Keep your distance," Ochre muttered ironically, addressing Magenta.

"I'll keep that in mind when YOU get the flu," Magenta told him rather dryly.

"The rest of you, gentlemen, will go to the duty hangar, where the prototype and pilot await you. You'll leave as soon as the Jet has finished refuelling."

"Yes, sir," responded Grey for Ochre, Scarlet and himself.

"Captain Scarlet, I'll await your report on the situation in Los Angeles upon your arrival there."

"S.I.G., sir," Scarlet responded.

"All right, now. Dismissed, gentlemen."

The four officers stood up and moved to the door. Almost as they were about to leave, White raised his head and called out: "Captain Scarlet... A last word with you, before you go."

Scarlet acknowledged him; he turned to Grey. "I'll join you in the hangar shortly."

Grey nodded. He could see his fellow officer was somewhat downcast, and he thought he knew why. He patted his shoulder in a reassuring way and smiled at him. "Don't worry, sport," he muttered. "You know you can count on me, at least."

Scarlet thanked him with a faint smile, then left him to return to Colonel White, who didn't seem to have noticed the exchange between the two men. The young British captain stood in front of his commander who was consulting some details on the document upon his desk.

"Captain," the colonel said carefully, "I couldn't help but notice earlier how uneasy you seemed when I assigned you as field commander..." He looked up at the younger man. "Despite your affirmation that there was no problem, I'm quite sure I heard some. What is it exactly?"

"Well, sir..." Scarlet hesitated. "I'm not really sure I'm ready for it right now," he said finally.

White didn't bat an eyelid. "Sit down," he invited Scarlet quietly.

As Scarlet obeyed, White cleared his throat. "I, for one, think you're ready for field command, Captain," he told him. "Why would you disagree with me on the matter?"

"That should be evident, sir," Scarlet replied carefully.

White eyed him with attention. Of course, he had a pretty good idea what the young officer was referring to. He shook his head. "You shouldn't doubt yourself, Scarlet," he said. "Before that dreadful incident with the World President, you were one of the finest field agents this organisation has. You still are. What happened then is behind you."

"Are you so sure about that?" Scarlet stared blankly at his commander. "Sir, you know as well as I do that I'm not really the same as before. For better or worse, the Mysterons have left their mark on me..."

"We've already discussed this, Captain," White said, shaking his head. "This new ability of yours..."

"Sir, I accept the responsibility that brings," Scarlet sighed. "I know the opportunities it represents. If it means saving lives... I'll gladly put mine on the line."

"I won't ask you to risk yourself needlessly."

"I URGE you to make use of it if necessary... sir."

White sighed. "That's not what's troubling you right now, though."

"No, sir."

"Then what is it?"

Scarlet hesitated a brief moment. "Have you received Doctor Fawn's report about that dizzy spell I had during my last mission in London, sir?"

White nodded his understanding. "Ah! Now I see what's on your mind. Do you really think the Mysterons tried to regain control of you?"

"That's what Doctor Fawn thinks. And frankly, the thought of it terrifies me."

"It's just a theory, Captain," White remarked. "It's also quite possible your dizzy spell has nothing whatsoever to do with the Mysterons."

"It happened just before the DT19 made its move toward the Director-General's plane, sir. I remember clearly hearing the operator behind me trying to contact the crew of the liner..."

"Well, in any case, if Doctor Fawn's theory is right, and the Mysterons really did try to bring you back under their control, they failed."

"And if they try AGAIN?"

"Captain, why dwell on these morbid thoughts..."

"Sir... I had another attack today."

White frowned. "Really? When was that?"

"A few minutes ago," Scarlet sighed. "Just before we heard the Mysterons' threat, actually."

"Same symptoms?"

"Yes. But stronger, this time."

"Did you talk to Doctor Fawn about this?"

"I didn't have the time. I had to report here."

"Mmm." White kept silent for a few moments, pondering this new turn of events. Scarlet looked expectantly at his commander.

"Under the circumstances, do you think I should stay on Cloudbase? At least until Doctor Fawn can find out what these attacks are?"

"No, I'll stick to my decision," Colonel White replied. "You'll go to the Los Angeles Airshow and you'll be field commander for the mission."

"You're willing to take the risk, sir?"

"I already took it, Captain. Last month, when you first revived and seemed to be yourself again. I gave you the benefit of the doubt then. And again, last week, I took a greater risk, by putting you back on active duty during the threat against the Asian Director." Colonel White sighed heavily. "Our senior staff is short-handed right now, with Captain Black's disappearance and Captain Brown's untimely demise. And now, with Captain Blue ill, I need every available agent. I know I can trust you to do what you must. You have proved it, to your great credit."

"I'm always ready to serve, sir. I just felt you should know about the dizzy spells and the doubts I have about them."

"They are cause for concern, yes, but I don't think they should make you doubt your loyalty to us, Captain. I don't doubt it, so neither should you." White stared at the younger man for a moment. "However," he added firmly, "if you think you can't bring yourself to surmount those doubts, to work efficiently, I'll agree to let you off the hook and assign Captain Magenta to take your place in Los Angeles."

"That won't be necessary, sir." Scarlet stood up and put his cap back on. "You know I work well under pressure," he added with a smile.

"I knew I could count on you," White said with a satisfied glimmer in his blue eyes. "Don't talk about those spells of yours to the others... At least until we learn exactly what they're all about."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, if there's no other problem..."

"No, sir." There wasn't the slightest hesitation in Scarlet's voice. However, the thought that he would have to put up with Ochre and Destiny's behaviour toward him was very present in his mind. "No problem at all."

White looked up at his young compatriot, with a thoughtful glance. *Does he suspect something is afoot?* Scarlet mused. *The old man isn't anybody's fool...*

"All right, Captain. Dismissed. Join the others and leave for Los Angeles as soon as possible. And be careful out there. Do remember the Mysterons have threatened to kill some of us this time."

"I'm not about to forget that, sir. And... thank you."

"Whatever for?" White asked with a puzzled look.

"For trusting me. Believe me, it means a lot."

Scarlet saluted his commander and turned on his heel to depart. A thoughtful White watched as he strode toward the exit. "Paul."

It was almost unheard of for White to call one of his officers by his first name. In fact, when on duty, it was forbidden for anyone to do so. It was one of Spectrum's strictest rules, for the real identities of its personnel were its most jealously guarded secret, for security reasons. So, it always came as a surprise when the Spectrum commander himself broke that rule. Now was no different, as Scarlet stopped dead in his tracks to turn a puzzled look on his commander.

"You're sure there isn't anything else?" the older man insisted.

Scarlet shook his head, smiling. "Nothing I can't take care of personally, sir. But thank you for asking." He turned and left the room, nodding at Lieutenant Green as he went.

The young Black communication officer turned an inquisitive glance at Colonel White, who, noticing it, sighed slightly.

"What's on your mind, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Sir?" Green asked with surprise.

"I know that look, Green. You're about to ask me something."

"I was just wondering, sir... After what Captain Scarlet told you, about those attacks he has... You're not worried about what might happen?"

"I trust the man to prevail, Lieutenant," White replied dryly. "I don't think the Mysterons will ever be able to take control of him again. IF they're really trying to do that."

"If that's not the case, then what is it?" Green asked, wondering about that himself.

"I'm not sure... But I'm developing a theory of my own. I have to talk to Doctor Fawn about it."

White stood up from his desk and walked to the observation tube, where he often found himself standing to gaze outside. The sky was blue and clear of clouds. "Captain Scarlet has one of the strongest wills I've ever encountered in a human being," he said to Green. "You should know that, I've collided with it quite a few times already."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Green replied with a bemused smile. "He can be as stubborn as you..." The words had left his mouth before he could actually stop them. White was now shooting a stern look at him. The young man stuttered an uneasy apology. "I'm sorry, sir... I didn't mean it that way... I meant..."

"Oh, I know EXACTLY what you meant, Lieutenant," White cut him off promptly. "You'd better be careful what you say in future."

"Er... Yes, sir. I will." Green blew out a sigh of relief, and Colonel White had to turn his back on him, so the young man wouldn't see him smile.

"I believe that Scarlet's will has permitted him to survive his initial encounter with the Mysterons," the Spectrum commander continued, as if the little incident hadn't occurred. "And that it has also helped him to regain control of this new body of his. The Mysterons have unwittingly given us an invaluable weapon, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," Green agreed quietly. "I still can't get over the fact that he actually died and now he can recover from any injury."

White cast him a quick glance before returning to his thoughtful posture in front of the observation tube. "Neither can I," he muttered. "And I have seen it."

Five days ago, he remembered, Doctor Fawn had produced his final report on the young Mysteron survivor's new abilities. Colonel White was quite taken by the possibility presented by the use of an unkillable agent. But still, he was unsure if he should take that opportunity right away. Certainly, his staff was short-handed, two of his best agents being unaccounted for – three with Scarlet, who was then still officially off-duty. And then the Mysterons had threatened the life of the Director-General of the Asian Republic, and White had to make a quick and vital decision.

He put Scarlet back on duty, and put him in charge of the Director-General's protection, along with Captains Blue and Grey. There were risks involved, for sure, but Scarlet wasn't in direct contact with the Director. Instead, he was stationed with field commander Blue in the Control Tower of London International Airport, where the Director was to take a private jet to get back to his people. And Blue, being Scarlet's best friend, had orders to keep an eye on him, to make sure he behaved properly. Sure, Colonel White was willing to give Scarlet a chance, but he was also very aware that something could go wrong by doing so.

Something DID go wrong, but it was not due to Captain Scarlet at all.

Things got confused in a matter of minutes at the Airport, when the Mysteronised jet liner threw itself into the take-off path of the Asian Director's jet. The Spectrum agents involved were too busy to be able to report a step-by-step account of the operation to Colonel White. When the commander finally learned what happened, all was done and finished. In spite of everybody's best efforts, the Asian Director-General was dead, along with his staff cabinet. Spectrum had succeeded in destroying the DT19, but the wreckage was still in the path of the Director-General's private jet, which collided with its tail. And it was just by a fluke that Captain Grey, due to a last minute change of plan, was not in the private jet when it exploded. It was Grey who reported to his commander that Captain Scarlet, aboard a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle, had desperately tried to ram the wheels of the jetliner...

"Of all the crazy things to do!" barked a furious Colonel White upon hearing that. "Why did he have to do that, risking his and Captain Blue's lives that way..."

"He almost succeeded, sir," Captain Grey told him in a tired voice. "And Captain Blue wasn't in the SPV... Scarlet ejected him before trying to push the liner off course."

"Is Scarlet nearby?" White asked. "I want to give him a piece of my mind."

"I'm sorry, sir... The SPV crashed into a reinforced concrete wall. Scarlet..."

"He's hurt?" Concern had taken the place of anger in White's voice.

"Sir... He's dead."

"What?"

The surprise in Colonel White's tone was all too evident. Dead? How could that be possible? According to Doctor Fawn's last report, Scarlet could not die; his wounds, even fatal ones, would

heal in a matter of hours. Could the medical officer of Cloudbase have made a terrible mistake in his diagnosis? Then it would also have been a grievous error on the Colonel's part to have put Scarlet so quickly back on active duty. He remembered how Scarlet, when he reported to him a few hours before, was eager to come back, but at the same time, the young man seemed confused. And with good reason. Just two weeks had gone by since he had learned his original body had been destroyed, and that THIS one was actually a cloned copy of it, made by the Mysterons. Scarlet certainly knew he could heal fast now and that he would survive most critical injuries, but to be actually indestructible? That would have been a hard one to swallow.

Was Scarlet so willing to put that to the test? Colonel White asked himself if he had not sent another fine young officer to his death under the assumption that he could survive anything.

Scarlet was not ready to face that. And White came to the conclusion he had made a terrible mistake. And so had Doctor Fawn.

"Colonel White, are you still there?"

That was Captain Grey's voice, calling him. White snapped out of his fugue. "Yes, Captain, I'm here," he answered heavily. "Have Captain Scarlet's body sent back to Cloudbase."

"Sir? Wouldn't it be better to send him to London Headquarters?" a puzzled Grey asked him. "His family is here in England, and..."

"No," White replied abruptly. "I want him here. And you and Captain Blue should come back with him. I want to hear a complete report on what happened down there."

"S.I.G., sir," Grey sighed heavily. "Sir?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"He asked me to tell you he tried... And he really did."

White nodded thoughtfully. "Understood, Grey," he said, in a gentler tone. "Cloudbase out."

Upon cutting the radio contact, White had angrily smashed his fist onto his desk, making Lieutenant Green jump at his station, surprised at his commander's unusual outburst.

"Damn it!" White lashed out furiously. "I thought we finally had something going for us!"

He heard Lieutenant Green's voice, with a dubious tone to it. "I thought Doctor Fawn said that Captain Scarlet couldn't be killed any more..."

White turned to him, ready to snap. But he calmed down instantly. The kid at his station was looking rather shaky. "I know, Lieutenant," the Colonel said with a sigh. "I know. The outcome doesn't look good now. This is our second mission against the Mysterons, it failed, and we lost another fine officer... one in whom I had put too much hope, I'm afraid."

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Green muttered faintly.

"Steady now. I need everybody to stay strong, Lieutenant."

"I know, sir. I'll hang on."

"I'm sure you will."

White was depressed by the whole situation; if he were to lose one officer at every encounter with the Mysterons, the entire Spectrum staff would be completely wiped out very soon. That was why he had placed so much hope in Scarlet's supposed new-found abilities. That was why he felt so disappointed now. But he wasn't ready yet to lie down and die. Colonel White had always been a fighter and always would be to the end. Captain Scarlet was too. The man never gave up, and now had even sacrificed his life for the cause. If nothing else, after his terrible ordeal with the Mysterons, his death could provide an inspiration to the others.

But about an hour later, a new stone was turned...

The helicopter bringing Captains Blue and Grey, along with Captain Scarlet, had touched down on the landing pad, and Colonel White was waiting, pacing restlessly in the access corridor to Sickbay when he saw them coming his way, looking very anxious. There were Blue and Grey, of course, and two medics, hurriedly pushing a rolling stretcher forward. Scarlet lay on that stretcher, with one of the medics holding a dressing against the right side of his bloodied head. White rushed out to them; he saw the respirator tube hooked up to the young officer's nose, noticed a slight rise and fall of his bare, crushed chest. The Colonel then realized with stunned surprise that the man was breathing, if only just. He looked at Grey in annoyance.

"I thought you said he was dead!" he exclaimed, following the stretcher with them.

"He was," a very pale Grey responded nervously. He shook his head, looking down at the unconscious man on the stretcher. "I'm sure he was... He wasn't breathing any more. He began showing signs of life in the 'copter, about ten minutes ago..."

"It happened just like before, sir," Captain Blue remarked. "Just like when we brought him here after his fall from the Car-Vu... he wasn't just APPARENTLY dead that time, he WAS dead. And he came back... just like he's doing now."

"But how is it possible?" White muttered. Doctor Fawn's assumption was right, then. The colonel was astonished. "I didn't realize it would go THAT far," he added, almost to himself.

It was fascinating, and yet terrifying at the same time. White was unsure how Scarlet would react, once he recovered his senses... Would he still be his old self? Or would he have reverted to his Mysteron-controlled persona?

"How is he doing?" White asked, looking at one of the medics.

The man responded with a shake of his head. "Open fracture of the skull and a very severe concussion. Ribcage was crushed in the collision and the lungs were badly damaged. Breathing's shallow, but at least he's breathing NOW..."

"Has he regained consciousness yet?" White asked, without very much hope.

The medic sighed. "With that fractured skull, he won't anytime soon. If he's not a total vegetable by now..."

Blue snorted at the remark and shot an angry stare at the man. "He'll come out of it sooner than you think. And he will be perfectly all right..."

He had hardly finished speaking when Scarlet moaned. Everybody stopped, even the medics pushing the trolley, and looked down at the wounded man.

"Good Heavens," White murmured. He saw Scarlet opening his eyes and trying to clear his vision; he saw the young man's troubled blue eyes focusing on him and apparently recognizing him. Scarlet raised a bloodied hand in his direction.

"Colonel White..." The voice was weak, filled with pain, but still very clear. "I'm sorry, I failed..."

White reached for the extended hand and clasped it between his, gazing down at the very pale face looking expectantly up at him. "Failed?" he repeated in a soothing voice. "I hardly think so, son. Quite the contrary."

Scarlet's eyelids fluttered, as if he didn't understand what his commander was telling him. Colonel White gently lowered the hand onto the younger man's chest. "Get your rest, now. You've earned it. We'll talk about this later."

Scarlet nodded slightly; his eyes closed and he seemed to lose consciousness once more. White stepped away to let the medics through with the stretcher. "Go with him, Captain Blue. See that Doctor Fawn takes good care of him."

"S.I.G., sir!" The blond American hurried to join the stretcher before the medics took it through the door leading to Sickbay. Colonel White looked thoughtful as the door slid closed, while Captain Grey, still at his side, was apparently very shaken by what he had just witnessed.

"I could have sworn that arm was broken," Grey whispered. "How can he do that?"

"I don't know, Captain," White answered, breathing out a sigh of relief. "All I know is that having Scarlet on our side could very well turn the tide of this war."

"Things were looking pretty grim, weren't they, sir?"

White turned away, taking the way back to the Control Room, with a new determination upon his features. "Yes, they were," he quietly said. "But not so much anymore."

Scarlet had taken about four hours more to recover completely. When Colonel White saw him next, he would never have believed what he had been through earlier. His body was whole, he didn't even have a scar, and he wanted nothing more than to get out of Sickbay. The only thing was that he was blaming himself for not having succeeded in his attempt to save the Asian Director-General's life. And nothing anybody could say on the matter seemed to be sufficient to ease his feelings on the subject.

At least, Captain Scarlet's actions in this affair had served to regain the trust of almost everybody in the Spectrum organisation, as well as out of it. Even World President Younger, while still a little unsure since his abduction some weeks earlier by a Mysteron-controlled Scarlet, had nothing but praise for him now... Well, maybe the President wouldn't be ready to meet with Scarlet anytime soon, but at least he would stop demanding that Spectrum revoke the young officer's commission.

Now five days had passed and Colonel White had no doubts about Scarlet's loyalty. Yet the Spectrum commander was very aware that there were still a few mixed feelings about Scarlet, even here on Cloudbase, perhaps even among the senior staff officers – although White had not had any confirmation of this yet. He would not permit such behaviour. But in any case, he knew that as long as Scarlet continued to act the way he already did, he would eventually dispel any doubts anyone might still entertain against him.

"I hope everything will go smoothly," the Colonel said, going back to his desk. "This new Mysterion threat has got me more worried than the others."

Lieutenant Green shot him an inquiring glance. "Because it threatened Spectrum directly, sir?"

White shrugged. "Because there's NOTHING direct in that threat, Lieutenant," he replied. "And it's a double take. The World Airshow and Spectrum agents' lives."

"The question would be now... what agents?" Lieutenant Green mused.

White nodded. "Yes, the threat is so cryptic now... That's what's bothering me." He paused a second, before adding, with a thoughtful frown: "Lieutenant, taking into account the circumstances of the airshow... which type of agent do you think would be the most obvious target?"

"The ones whose loss would cause the worst possible damage to Spectrum," Lieutenant Green responded. He looked at his commander. "Senior staff officers."

"Yes," White agreed. "That would be the obvious choice. That's why I told Captain Scarlet to be careful." His stare became grim and somehow distant as he looked away from Green. "I hope he listened..." he added in a murmur.

* * *

Destiny Angel was not very happy.

When she had left her station in Angel One to Symphony – who had looked at her in anything but a friendly way – she had gone directly to her personal quarters, with every intention of getting a few hours' sleep. She hadn't even had the chance to get out of her uniform for a quick shower before somebody came buzzing at her door. She was unpleasantly surprised when it slid open and revealed Rhapsody, who stepped in.

"What are you doing here?" Destiny asked her British counterpart in annoyance. "Symphony told me you were tired, and were going to get some sleep."

"I was, when a stubborn friend of mine started acting stupidly," Rhapsody replied sharply.

"Please, Dianne!" Destiny warned her. "I don't feel like discussing what happened earlier in the Amber Room."

"Too bad. Because that's exactly why I'm here."

Rhapsody sat down on Destiny's armchair. The French woman looked at her and suddenly felt sorry for her. She sighed. "Go get some rest, Rhapsody. You really look awful."

"I look awful?" Rhapsody scoffed derisively at the remark. "That's nothing compared to how Paul looked when you gave him the cold shoulder!"

"Would you stop calling him that?" Destiny snapped. "He's not Paul! Paul is..."

"Dead? Are you so sure of that?"

"Oh, please, Dianne! Don't do this to me. I saw his body... He was dead all right. And he had a nasty death." Destiny shivered at the thought of it. "I only saw his face... He had burn marks on his neck." She looked at Rhapsody, and her expression suddenly went blank. "I hacked the medical databanks afterwards, you know. And there I found Doctor Fawn's report..."

"You shouldn't have done such a thing to yourself, Juliette," Rhapsody said softly.

"Well, I DID. I had to know. Dianne... He was alive when the fire got to him. Do you understand this? He burned alive..." Her voice had faded away. Tears were threatening to overflow her eyes. She turned away from her fellow pilot. "He didn't deserve such an ugly death. Not Paul... He was a good man. Good men don't die that way."

Rhapsody stood up; she approached her friend and put a hand on her shoulder. Destiny obstinately kept her back turned.

"Juliette... Look at me."

Rhapsody practically had to force the French girl to turn around and look straight at her. Then she saw the tears in her beautiful golden eyes, the anguish on her face. A wave of compassion washed over the younger British pilot and she hugged her friend, who then leaned against her. "You're not over this yet, are you?"

"Why did he have to die that way?" Destiny sobbed on her shoulder.

Rhapsody frowned. "There's something else I don't know," she noted. "What is it?" She looked at Destiny's face. "Were you still in love with him?"

"No... Yes... I don't know." The French girl brushed her tears away with the tips of her fingers. "We could be no more than friends, Dianne. That's as far as he wanted to go. We would never be what we were once... I understood that the first time we encountered each other again, in Koala Base, two years ago, when we were contacted to join Spectrum. His work was all to him. Yes, he had feelings for me... but the kind of feelings he would have for a sister, or a very close friend. As for me, well... I guess I was still quite taken by him."

"Who wouldn't be?" Rhapsody replied with a sympathetic smile. "All the Angels had a soft spot for him... He was devilishly handsome." She saw a faint smile cross Destiny's face. She carefully weighed what she was about to say next. "He still is, Juliette."

The French pilot scowled and broke away. She turned her back on her friend again, throwing her hands in the air. "Will you stop with that? He's not the same man!"

"Well, on that point, we're in agreement."

Destiny turned suddenly, with a surprised look. "We are?"

"Yes," Rhapsody said, nodding. "You're absolutely right: he's not the same man. And you're right about another thing: he did die. But he got better."

"That's not funny, Rhapsody."

"I didn't mean it to be funny."

"Do you know what a clone is, Dianne? That's what this guy is!"

"Juliette, I'm fully aware of what he is. He explained it to me."

"Oh, he did now, did he?" Destiny scoffed dryly.

Rhapsody nodded quietly. "I don't pretend to understand any of this, you know. Scarlet doesn't understand it fully himself. But he's so much more than a clone, Destiny."

"Right. He's a clone who cannot die," Destiny replied sharply. "Do you realize what it means, Dianne? He can't be killed. Does that even sound human to you?"

"You're wrong there. He's human, all right. With all the mixed feelings, all the traits of any human being. And these feelings, these traits he has are those of Paul Metcalfe. Maybe the body he has now is a clone of his original one, but I recognize the man inside. And even if I don't know him as well as you do, I did see he was pretty confused. Confused and frustrated by what's happened to him, and by what he's become. He's trying to get his life back, Juliette. To do that, he needs the help of all his friends... not their contempt. ALL his friends, Juliette. And that means especially the more important ones. Like you."

Destiny stared at her British counterpart, dumbfounded by her extended plea. She could not think of anything to say against it. If anything, she was now the one who was feeling confused.

"You should have been a lawyer," she muttered.

Rhapsody smiled slightly. "I studied law, remember? And Father is a diplomat. I think I may have inherited that from him."

"Me, I have inherited MY father's stubbornness..." Destiny sighed and turned away again. "I don't know, Dianne. It is difficult to absorb all this at once... You must give me time."

"Fair enough," Rhapsody nodded thoughtfully. "I know it's hard, Juliette, but at least, until you think it over, you should give Paul a break." She noticed that this time around, Destiny did not say anything against Scarlet being called 'Paul'. *Maybe I'm finally reaching her*, the young British woman thought.

"I can't promise you anything, Dianne," Destiny responded faintly. "But I'll give it a try."

"I'm glad to hear that," Rhapsody sighed. "Because despite what they say about Captain Scarlet being indestructible... I don't believe he is, totally. His heart can be broken... and anybody could die of that."

Destiny spun round to stare at her friend again. Just then, she thought she had heard something in Rhapsody's voice. A hint of concern, and of another feeling altogether. Until that moment, Destiny had just suspected it, even if in the past she had teased her friend about it,

although never seriously. But now... The way she was talking about Scarlet, the loyalty she was showing toward him, by defending him with such passion...

Could it be that Rhapsody Angel was actually in love with Captain Scarlet?

If Destiny intended asking her British friend about this, she did not have the time to do so. Someone came buzzing at her door, interrupting her. This annoyed her, and she wondered if she would ever find out the truth of her suspicions about Rhapsody's feelings. "Enter!" she called. The door slid open and Captain Magenta stepped in. He smiled, seeing the two girls.

"Boy!" he said. "Am I in luck! Here I am with my two favourite Angels."

"I'll bet you say that to the others as well, Captain," Rhapsody retorted with a faint smile.

"Actually, it's true that I'm in luck. I had to see the two of you."

"Really?" Destiny asked him with a curious frown.

Magenta turned to her, nodding. "A team is preparing to leave Cloudbase shortly, to provide security at the World Airshow in L.A. We may need you there, Destiny."

"At the airshow?"

"Yes. There are some flight tests to perform with a new model of the Passenger Jet... modified with some new features."

"I've heard of it," Rhapsody said. "The one with the ejectable capsule."

"Yes, that's the one," Magenta nodded. "Seems Spectrum is thinking about equipping itself with this new model. That's why one of our own pilots should carry out the tests. Since Captain Blue is off-duty due to the flu, the Colonel wants Destiny to do it... That is, if you're up to it." He looked at her keenly. "How are you now?"

"Excuse me?"

"We heard you left your station in Angel One because you weren't feeling very well. You need to be in shape for those tests, you know."

"I know. Who's the alternative?"

"Rhapsody." Magenta glanced at the British Angel and gave her a faint smile of compassion. "You look busted."

"I've had worse days," the young woman replied with a sigh. "Of course, I've also had better..."

Destiny was frowning, thoughtful. "Who is part of the team, Captain? You?"

"No. I'm staying here, as back up in case of emergency. With Blue if need be. Ochre and Grey are going... and Scarlet will be field commander."

There was suddenly a heavy silence in the room, with Rhapsody and Magenta looking expectantly at Destiny. The French pilot realized then, almost right away, that the Irish-born Captain knew something of her difficult feelings about Scarlet. It didn't take much time for the news to get around, she thought glumly. Now what should she do? There was work to do here. It wouldn't be very professional on her part if she were unable to put her personal feelings aside and perform her duty. On the other hand, she was unsure if she would indeed be able to cope with all this.

"I'll get my things," she heard Rhapsody say tiredly.

That snapped her out of her thoughts instantly. "No," she said to the British girl. "I'll go."

The other Angel frowned. "You're sure?"

"Listen, it would not be fair to you if I let you do this. Look at you: you're about half-dead from exhaustion." Destiny produced a smile. "I wouldn't want you to plough yourself into the ground with that plane."

"Ditto. You're REALLY sure you can handle it?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Don't you worry about a thing. I promise I will behave." Destiny turned toward Magenta. "Give me a minute to prepare, will you?"

Magenta nodded. "I'll wait outside." He gave an almost imperceptible look toward Rhapsody who, understanding his message, excused herself to Destiny and followed him out of her friend's quarters. Magenta waited until the door had slid closed before addressing the female pilot. "I see you had a talk with her."

"Yes, I did," Rhapsody said. "I think she'll come around. She just needs some time. What about Ochre?"

"Ochre isn't too thrilled about Scarlet being field commander, to put it mildly. Grey tried to talk to him. But he's as stubborn as – as –" Magenta smiled. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear Ochre has a bit of Irish drunkard in him."

Rhapsody laughed softly at the comment. "Maybe he has. I'm sure you've met enough Irish-American policemen in your lifetime, Pat."

He smiled in return and shrugged. "I just hope there won't be any problems between those two during this mission."

"I wouldn't have thought so. But maybe this mission will help smooth things over."

"Yeah," Magenta muttered gloomily. "Don't hold your breath, though. You know how Ochre can be when he's like this."

"Yes, I know." Rhapsody smiled. "But I'm not too worried. Captain Scarlet will know how to take care of things..."

* * *

When Captain Scarlet arrived at the door leading to the duty hangar, he saw Destiny Angel coming down the corridor toward him, alone, her crash helmet under her arm. He stopped, his finger on the 'open' button, and waited for her. When she arrived in front of him, she saluted him smartly and almost came to attention.

"Destiny Angel reporting as ordered, sir."

Her all-too-official behaviour would have amused Scarlet under other circumstances. As it was right now, it only annoyed him. He repressed a sigh and shook his head. At least, he thought, the coldness he had seen in her eyes during their earlier meeting wasn't there anymore... and her tone was certainly less brusque.

"At ease, Destiny. Don't be so formal. At least, not when we're alone."

She relaxed, if just a bit. Scarlet looked straight at her. He was feeling rather uneasy. "I... er... heard you weren't feeling too well, earlier today. Are you all right now?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm ready to perform my duty."

"Frankly, I didn't think you'd join us on this mission."

She stared at him blankly. "If I had not come, Rhapsody would have been assigned to it. I could not let her do this, right now."

Scarlet felt a bit nervous; he shrugged. "There are still a lot of unresolved feelings between us."

"Yes, there are." Destiny's statement was very straightforward; still, she lowered her eyes, feeling uneasy about it. Scarlet cleared his throat.

"Do you suppose we could talk about it sometime?" he asked her carefully.

"Maybe sometime." Destiny looked up at him. It was difficult for her just to look at him, and Scarlet realized that instantly. "But not today, okay? That's still... a lot to ask from me."

"Okay. In the meantime, do you think you can stand being with me for the duration of this mission?"

She nodded. "Don't worry. I wouldn't be here if that were the case."

Scarlet thanked her with a nod of his own and pressed the button to open the sliding door. "Shall we join the others?" he invited the French pilot. She entered first and he followed.

It was in the duty hangar, below the lower flightdeck, that Spectrum Passenger Jets were stored and maintained. The Angel craft had their own hangar, just the other side of the fuel tanks, and each of the fighter jets was taken care of by its own team of mechanics and maintenance personnel, making sure they'd always be ready in case of emergency. By comparison, two teams of mechanics, working around the clock, were in charge of the SPJs.

On landing on Cloudbase, the new Passenger Jet from Universal Aero Engineering – dubbed Aero Special One – had been brought down on the flight deck lift for refuelling and maintenance checks. Captain Grey was now looking thoughtfully at the jet when Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel entered the hangar. Grey acknowledged their presence and indicated the craft. "Doesn't look much different from our own," he said.

"Yes, except for the colour," Scarlet nodded. Spectrum Passenger Jets were silver and blue, while this Aero Special One was all silver. With his finger, Scarlet traced a dividing line just below

the canopy window, and going almost all the way to the tail. "That must be the joining point for the ejecting cabin," he noted.

"Too bad we won't be able to see that particular feature in action," Grey remarked.

"Bite your tongue," Scarlet murmured. "The Mysterons might hear you. Where's Ochre?"

"Inside the cabin, taking a look around. You know how he is with those overgrown gadgets. Loves them as much as those antique replicas he builds."

"And the pilot from UAE?"

"Haven't seen him yet. One of the maintenance people told me he was inspecting the landing gear. One of the wheels seemed to have nearly jammed when the jet landed earlier on."

"I hope that'll be our only problem."

"Who needs to bite his tongue now?"

Captain Ochre poked his head out of the Jet. The sight of Scarlet didn't erase the broad grin of contentment on his face. He seemed to be enjoying himself too much to let anything deter him. "Here you are!" he said, stepping down from the craft. "Where were you, anyway? Getting chewed out by the old man, I hope?"

"You would have loved that, wouldn't you?" Scarlet replied dryly. "You're out of luck. He didn't ground me. I'm still leading this mission."

"That's what I was afraid of," Ochre said.

"Ochre..." Grey warned.

"Lay off me, Grey," Ochre told his compatriot. "Don't worry, I'll keep in line." He looked Scarlet squarely in the eye. "I'm professional enough not to let my personal feelings get in the way of my duties."

"Glad to hear it," Scarlet retorted coolly.

Destiny was staring curiously at Scarlet and Ochre, trying her best not to look too puzzled. Obviously, by the sound of that conversation, there was some problem between the two men. She wondered what it could be. Right now, anyway, there seemed to be some sort of cease-fire between them. Scarlet waved a hand at the Passenger Jet. "So what do you think of it?"

"Well, this baby looks a lot like our SPJs... The control panel is about the same, 'cept for the controls of the new features." Ochre looked toward Destiny. "You shouldn't have trouble flying it."

Destiny was scrutinizing the Aero Special One with an experienced eye. "The wings are designed differently," she noticed. "The tail too."

"Probably for more manoeuvrability, to compensate for the extra weight of the cabin," Scarlet remarked. His right hand thoughtfully rubbed the polished silver finish of the craft. This new feature could be very useful, he mused. The concept could save lives in an emergency.

Scarlet's head suddenly began to throb; a sudden wave of nausea hit him in the stomach. He felt his legs weakening under him, and leaned on the canopy to keep his balance. *Oh no!* he thought. *Not another one of those dizzy spells!* His three colleagues noticed his discomfort and how pale he had become.

"Captain? Are you all right?"

That was Destiny's voice, Scarlet realized. Was she just being polite, or was she really concerned about his well-being? Grey came to him and gently put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay, sport?"

Scarlet nodded. He removed his cap to rub his temple. "Headache, nausea... It's okay, it'll go in a minute."

"What is it?" Grey asked. "Caught Blue's bug?"

"I can't get ill," Scarlet replied.

"Right!" Ochre scoffed behind him. "So how come you're about to faint right now? Maybe you're finally getting air sick from living on Cloudbase..."

"Shut up, Ochre," Grey told him, annoyed. He was really worried about Scarlet's health right now. He turned to address him anew: "You really look bad, Paul. Maybe you should stay here and see Doctor Fawn about it."

Scarlet smiled faintly; he was beginning to get his balance back. "Wouldn't that make Ochre's day!" he remarked.

He heard Ochre snort derisively behind him. Grey shot his compatriot a quelling look, before turning to Scarlet again. "I mean it, Scarlet: you should go see Doctor Fawn."

"Won't do any good. He already knows about it, anyway."

"Already knows?" Grey repeated. "It's not the first time?"

"It's nothing, really. Don't concern yourself about it," Scarlet muttered.

How could he tell them about the nature of these spells and what Fawn actually thought about them? Ochre would be quick to point out that the mission could be in jeopardy because of that.

Anyway, his dizziness was dispersing now, so maybe there was no cause to worry.

"Word has it... you were dead."

Scarlet froze upon hearing those words spoken behind him. He wasn't the only one. His fellow officers and Destiny Angel had stiffened as well. Scarlet exchanged a worried glance with Grey before carefully turning with him to face the man who had spoken.

The culprit, wearing a pilot's uniform with commander's insignia on its sleeves, was standing there, just below the port wing of the jet, a wide grin on his face, and a glimmering eye laid on the group who looked expectantly at him. He took a few steps forward and glanced attentively at them.

"That's really you, isn't it, Rick?"

Ochre frowned. He, too, stared at the man, not really sure how to react. "Jim?" he exclaimed. "Jim Torey? Is that you?"

"So, YOU ARE Richard Fraser!" the commander said, laughing. "What a marvellous surprise! I wouldn't have recognized you without your beard!"

A delighted Ochre came toward the commander and excitedly clasped hands with him. Grey and Scarlet blew out a sigh of relief, watching the two men who were acting exactly as old friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time, laughing and patting each other's shoulders.

"I thought for a minute..." Grey left the whispered sentence hanging in the air. Scarlet shook his head, musing.

"Yes, me too," he responded in the same tone. "I almost forgot about Ochre's situation with his identity."

"Him and his taste for melodramatics," Grey muttered. "That just about gave me a heart attack!"

Scarlet smiled bemusedly, remembering how Ochre, almost two years earlier, had chosen to kill off his real identity of Commissioner Richard Fraser of the World Police to begin his life anew as Spectrum agent Captain Ochre. He had been the only one who had so cut all ties with his former life. Even Captain Magenta, a former mob boss, had simply chosen to 'disappear' from public life when Spectrum offered him a new challenge and a full pardon for his past misdeeds. No doubt, however, his former associates were wondering where he could have gone. But for Ochre, a simple disappearance wasn't nearly enough.

As far as Scarlet knew, Ochre had no real family of his own, no close friends, only colleagues in the Police Department and a ton of enemies amongst the criminal underworld, who would have wanted nothing more than to put a bullet in his head. So Richard Fraser 'died in a bomb attack'. Ochre changed his appearance, by simply shaving a well-trimmed beard he had kept for years – for the sole purpose of passing himself off as older as he really was – a purpose that was now obsolete. Apparently, Ochre's strategy had worked and everybody thought Richard Fraser was now dead. But then again, Ochre hadn't really had to move around his former turf since then.

"The last I heard of you, you supposedly died when your car blew up," Torey said, with his smile still wide. "Weren't you a victim of a mob hit, like the police reported to the press?"

"Not exactly," Ochre said hesitantly. "As you can see, I'm still very much alive."

"Yes, I see that. As a Spectrum Captain, no less. That uniform suits you."

"Yes. Er... It's Captain Ochre, now... and it's a secret."

"Hey! You know me: mum's the word."

"How long have you been with Aero Engineering?"

"Three years now... Shortly after we lost touch with each other, actually."

"And you said you'd never leave the US Air Force!"

"Well... UAE came up with a pretty interesting offer."

Ochre suddenly seemed to recall he wasn't alone with his old friend. He presented his fellow Spectrum agents to Torey. His tone had even lost his edge when he presented Scarlet as field commander. *Must be really happy to meet up with his friend*, thought the British captain.

Commander Torey was pleasant enough... even courteous, to a certain extent, especially when it came to meeting Destiny Angel. He bowed slightly to her, with the most polite of smiles.

"So," he said, turning to Ochre, "you finally found a way to fly planes officially. Are you to perform the tests in L.A.?"

Grey scoffed. "Wouldn't we be in trouble!"

Ochre shot him a dirty look. "No," he said to Torey. "Destiny's coming with us. She'll test the plane there."

"It'd be an even better idea if she was the one to fly it from here," Scarlet remarked.

"I agree," Destiny said, nodding. "It will then give me time to get used to it."

"Of course, if that's all right with you, Commander," Scarlet added quickly.

"I think it's a good idea too. When do you want to go?"

"Colonel White asked us to leave as soon as the plane's ready."

"Tank's been refilled, usual checks made..."

"I heard you had trouble with the landing gear," Grey noted.

"Nothing really serious. It's been taken care of. The bird's ready to fly whenever you are."

Scarlet nodded. "Good. So let's go without delay. I checked the weather down there. They've forecast a storm over the Rockies. Maybe we can avoid it if we leave immediately."

"This way, lady and gentlemen..."

Torey showed the group to the hatch leading inside the craft, Ochre keeping close to him, Scarlet bringing up the rear with Grey. The latter noticed how thoughtful his British counterpart seemed. "Are you okay?" he asked him.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Scarlet nodded. "I'm just concerned about this mission, that's all. I hope it will go smoothly."

"Don't worry. We'll see to it. We just have to be optimistic about it."

"Nothing concerning the Mysterons can bring out the optimist in me," Scarlet murmured.

He couldn't tell Grey that, although his nausea was now gone, his headache was still persisting, and that with it, he had the unnerving feeling that something was definitely going to go wrong with this mission. He didn't feel safe at all... as if a real catastrophe was about to fall on their heads. Gloomily, he shook his head. Of course there would be trouble, he mused. Mysterons always spelled trouble. The best they could do was to make sure they succeeded in bringing down their conspiracy... and stopping their threat at all costs.

Chapter 4

Escorted by Symphony at the helm of Angel One, the Aero Special One had been in the air for about an hour when it came within view of the Rockies... where the storm Scarlet had so hoped to avoid was actually raging. Destiny brought the jet higher, in order to overfly the bad weather. It seemed like a good idea: the craft did hit a few raindrops, but visibility was fairly good.

Captain Scarlet, standing right behind Commander James Torey, who was acting as co-pilot to Destiny, had sent Symphony ahead to scout the flight path. He didn't like the look of the storm and was sure the Passenger Jet would hit it very shortly, despite Destiny's efforts to avoid it. He couldn't shake the bad feeling he had that something would go wrong if they were to enter it. Torey noticed how worried the captain looked and shrugged the problem away, with a confident look.

"Don't worry, Captain!" he told him. "This craft is a sturdy one. Even better than the SPJs Aero Engineering built for Spectrum!"

"Yes, well, if you don't mind, I much prefer being inside a jet I know well than one that hasn't proven its worth yet," Scarlet murmured.

Ochre showed up behind Scarlet, coming from the passenger cabin. He snorted at that last remark. "What's the matter, Scarlet? Are you losing your nerve?"

Scarlet shot him an angry look. Torey just smiled.

"This plane has proven itself during the initial tests, believe me."

"She certainly has good manoeuvrability," Destiny agreed with a nod. "Certainly, it is not an Angel Fighter, but..."

"Can you still see Angel One?" Scarlet asked her suddenly.

"Still just in front of us, Captain. Visibility is still very good, though I expect it to worsen gradually."

"Keep in contact with her. If she hits bad weather, she'll call us."

"You think we will be able to avoid that storm?"

"I doubt it. What is the weather like down there?"

Destiny checked out the instruments and frowned. "Very bad. There's a blizzard at ground level. We had better stay over those clouds if we don't want to hit it."

"Keep us up, then." Scarlet looked up to Torey. "You have a lot of confidence in your Jet, Commander."

"She's my baby," Torey told him with a quiet nod. "I worked on it for two years with engineers and designers. I know all there is to know about it." He smiled. "There isn't a safer plane in the whole world. Aside from all its usual security features, like in Spectrum's own Passenger Jet, there's the escape capsule..."

"How does it work?" Scarlet asked.

"First, we have to push this," Torey explained, showing a big red button on the command board. "It opens the clamps which keep the capsule in place, and heats the capsule's engine." Torey then indicated a large red lever right next to the button. "That controls an explosive charge strategically placed to separate the capsule – composed of the cockpit and passenger cabin – from the rest of the fuselage. With it, the onboard computer transfers the controls of the jet to enable the pilot to fly the capsule only. It works on roughly the same principle as a glider, actually, as its weight doesn't permit it to gain too much altitude... But there is a small emergency fuel tank in each fin. Not much, because of the excess weight it would add, but enough to allow the pilot to find a safe spot to land."

"What about landing?" Scarlet asked. "Is there landing gear?"

"The hovers slow down the descent until touchdown. If that fails, the capsule can stand up to an emergency landing. The outer skin of the capsule is made of a very strong, flame retardant alloy. It'll even withstand the friction of sliding on the ground. Actually, fire would burn on its skin for a long time, before actually reaching the inside of the capsule. Which should give enough time for its occupants to get out."

"Provided smoke doesn't kill them first," Destiny remarked.

"And the fuel tanks?" Ochre added.

"The tanks for the capsule can be ejected, of course, just like the jet's bigger ones," Torey smiled again. "As you see, everything has been thought of... Including the smoke, miss. Like in any ordinary plane, respirators are available for all passengers and crew members."

"Yes, it looks like everything has been taken care of," Scarlet replied. "Too bad you won't be able to demonstrate those features during the tests."

"Don't be so sure we won't."

Scarlet glanced at Torey oddly. "What do you mean?"

"We have equipped the prototype with a remote control," Torey explained. "So the pilot performing the tests will actually be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of ejecting the cabin... while the main body of the Aero Special One will be brought down from the ground."

"Wait a minute!" Scarlet said suddenly, "Destiny will be performing the flight tests. She's not had any training for the ejection manoeuvre!"

"Don't worry about that, Captain. As I told you, the entire manoeuvre is automatic. Your pilot will be perfectly safe, along with her passengers."

"Passengers?" Destiny repeated, turning her head toward Torey.

"Passengers?" Ochre echoed.

"Why yes... Some prospective buyers of the Aero Special One want to take a ride and intend to try out the emergency ejection procedure."

"Out of the question," Scarlet said firmly.

"What?" Torey replied, opening his eyes wide.

"You heard the Mysterons' threat, Commander Torey?"

"Yes, I told you so earlier... I heard it over the radio after landing on Cloudbase. But surely, with all the security Spectrum is providing at the show, you don't think some terrorist group are going to succeed in sabotaging it!"

"The Mysterons are no typical terrorists, Jim," Ochre remarked.

"And when they make a threat, they DO carry it out," Scarlet added. "And I have no intention of giving them the opportunity of new victims by letting Destiny – or anybody else for that matter – try that ejection procedure."

"That 'procedure', Captain, is the main reason people are contemplating buying that craft. If we don't do it, there will be a lot of unhappy people... including my employers at UAE."

Commander Torey's tone was no less than threatening. Ochre and Destiny were keeping silent, wondering how Scarlet would react. Ochre noticed the twitch over his fellow officer's brow. *Exactly like the original one*, he thought. That twitch was a good indication that he was angry and about to lose his patience. He turned an icy blue stare at Torey.

"Frankly, Commander," he said with annoyance, "I don't much care about hurt feelings. If I say this procedure won't take place, you'd better believe it won't!"

Torey bristled at the statement. "Who are you to make a decision like that?" he exploded. "You have no authority to tell UAE how to conduct this demonstration. Spectrum doesn't own that craft yet!"

"Spectrum IS responsible for security at the air show, Commander," Scarlet replied curtly. "And I AM in charge of it. Furthermore, one of Spectrum's own pilots is conducting the tests... at your superiors' request, if I remember rightly. I won't risk her life as well as others needlessly." His eyes glittered, looking straight into Torey's. "And that's my last word on the matter."

"Colonel White will hear about this, Captain," Torey replied dryly.

Scarlet shrugged. "Feel free to tell him whatever you want. I just remind you that HE put me in charge."

For a few seconds, the two men stared at each other with anger in their eyes. Scarlet was the first to let go. He put a hand on Destiny's shoulder, drawing her attention. "Keep an eye out for the weather. And notify me if Symphony calls. I'll be in the passenger cabin for a while."

"S.I.G., Captain," the French pilot answered softly. She almost said "Thanks" for the obvious concern she had heard in his voice earlier about her safety, but caught herself in time before actually doing it. Scarlet nodded to Ochre and left the cockpit, under the watchful stare of his fellow officer and Commander Torey alike. The latter let out a sigh of annoyance.

"What's eating him?" he asked, addressing Ochre and Destiny. "Power trip or something?"

"I don't think so," Destiny replied. "I think he simply doesn't want to take too much risk." She surprised herself. *Is that ME, taking his defence now?* she mused.

"I thought Englishmen were supposed to be cool headed," Torey added mockingly. Ochre snorted. "Let's just say he's not quite himself these days." Destiny glanced at him. Her curious – and angry – stare was enough to silence him. Clearing his throat, Ochre crouched between her and Torey, and looked at his old friend. "So, Jim... you gonna tell me now how you ended up working for Aero Engineering?"

* * *

Captain Scarlet was obviously upset as he stepped into the passenger cabin where Captain Grey, who was reading a magazine, raised his head to look at him with curiosity. Without saying anything, Scarlet sat down in the seat across from his colleague and took off his cap, putting it on his lap. He blew out a sigh of contempt.

"I heard the ruckus in the cockpit," Grey told him quietly. "You took the right decision concerning that demonstration."

Scarlet gazed at him tiredly. "I'm not about to let a bunch of heedless bureaucrats jeopardize security at the show."

Grey looked thoughtfully at his friend. "You're all right now, though?"

"My headache's come back," Scarlet muttered. "Do you know if there's aspirin on board this damned plane?"

Grey nodded and got on his feet. He went to the last seat of the cabin and took out the first aid kit that was stashed in a cabinet, right behind it. Scarlet smiled slightly when his fellow officer produced a couple of headache tablets.

"Same place as in our own SPJs, eh?" the Brit remarked softly.

Grey answered with a grin. He poured some water from the cooler into a plastic glass and came back, handing the glass and the tablets to Scarlet. The latter thanked him with a nod and swallowed the lot in one gulp. Grey sat back in front of him.

"Hope it will help," he said, shaking his head.

"It can't get worse, anyway." Scarlet replied. He glanced toward the cockpit. "I hope everything will be all right at the airshow."

"You say that, but you don't really believe it."

Scarlet thought about that for a second, then nodded his agreement. "You're right, I don't. I've got a bad feeling about all this."

"Well, if anybody knows what the Mysterons can do, it's certainly you, Paul." Grey patted his friend's knee in a comforting gesture. "Don't worry, we'll win."

"I'd love to be so sure about that," Scarlet grumbled.

"Oh, come on now, Scarlet! That's defeatism. That's not like you. You can't be serious."

"But I am serious." Scarlet stared at the empty space, with a thoughtful, worried frown. "I've... encountered these monsters twice, Brad. And both times, I failed." He turned his gaze back to Grey. "Is it any wonder I worry?"

"I'd hardly say you failed."

Scarlet snorted. "During my first mission against the Mysterons, I DIED, Brad. Worse still, they took control over my mind and my body, making me do unspeakable things, and there was nothing I could do to stop them... or even myself, for that matter! Doesn't that sound like failure to you?"

"You just said it. They took control of you. They used you. You weren't responsible for your actions, then. Paul, no wonder you couldn't do anything to resist their control: it took a bullet and an 800-foot drop to stop you! You think you failed? You shook off the Mysterons' spell over you and regained control of yourself. Better yet: they killed you, but you actually overcame death itself and CAME BACK. That's no small success."

"Yes, well... I can't take any credit for that."

"Are you so sure about that?" Grey frowned. "I know you. You're a fighter. And a survivor to boot. Don't you think that might be THAT that brought you back to us?"

Scarlet kept silent a moment. He stared at his friend. "What about the Director-General? He and his staff fell victim to the Mysterons and I couldn't do anything to stop it!"

"Yes, I know that's eating at you." Scarlet was still looking depressed. Grey shook his head. "You know, actually I know exactly how you feel."

The statement seemed to startle Scarlet. He was now a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I forgot you were there when the Asian Director died..."

"Well, yes, he WAS under MY protection... but I'm not talking about that."

"No?"

"No." Grey sighed. "You know, I've had my share of failures, Paul. All of us have... We learn to live with them. After a while some don't feel so bad, but others..." Grey shook his head, frowning. "...Others we can't forget about."

"I have a feeling you're talking about one particular experience."

"I've never told you about that accident that put me on a desk job, about a year before I joined Spectrum."

Scarlet nodded. "The one where you hurt your back. No, you've never talked about that to ANYONE." Scarlet thought about it for a second. "Actually, it was Captain Black who mentioned it, and only once, if I recall."

"I was so angry at him for bringing it up," Grey said. "And I was quick to point that out to him, the first chance I had. Poor Conrad really felt bad that he had ever mentioned it!"

"I remember him saying you saved a man's life on that occasion," Scarlet noted.

"Yes, I saved a man... but I lost one as well." Scarlet stared as Grey let out a heavy sigh. "He was a young cadet fresh from the Naval Academy. A very talented diver, and a wonderful swimmer... a real fish in the sea. We were testing the Stingray prototype and... Well, something went wrong. Afterward, it turned out it was sabotage." Grey seemed lost in deep thought for a short moment. He cleared his throat and scratched his ear, apparently uneasy about telling the story. "I managed to save my hydrophone operator. As for Josh, he got himself to safety. But I was badly hit when the engine exploded... that's when I got my back injury. I was caught under some rubble and was in such pain, I couldn't move. I would surely have drowned there if the kid hadn't come back for me. But while he succeeded in freeing me, HE got stuck and sank with the prototype. He drowned before my eyes, without me being able to help him."

"He gave his life for yours," Scarlet remarked softly, shaking his head. "He was a diver, Brad. It was his job. He knew the risks..."

"That didn't make it any less hard," Grey replied. "The kid wasn't even twenty years old. The worst part was that I had to tell his older brother what had happened... and that, after I specifically told him I would take care of the kid."

"You were friends with his brother?"

Grey looked Scarlet in the eye. "The kid's name was Joshua Griffiths."

It took some time for the name to actually sink into Scarlet's mind. "Griffiths?" he said, frowning. "As in 'Seymour Griffiths'? Wait a minute, are you telling me it was..."

Grey nodded. "Yes. Josh was Lieutenant Green's brother."

Scarlet shook his head sadly. "I knew you and Green knew each other... He was in charge of communications at Marineville, when the two of you worked for the WASP. And I certainly knew one of his brothers had joined the WASPs too, and died in an accident. But to actually think..."

"I know. That's freaky, huh? Seymour had actually pulled some strings so his younger brother could join the Academy... and then be assigned to Marineville. I think he still blames himself today for what happened. I know I blame MYSELF..."

"You couldn't do anything, Brad, you were injured." Scarlet frowned again. "Did Green actually blame you for his brother's death?"

"No. He never said a word about it. As far as I know, he's always acted friendly toward me."

"Because he knows you're not to blame."

"That doesn't make it any easier... But then, I don't have to tell you that, do I?"

Scarlet snorted. "What are you trying to do, anyway?"

"I'm trying to prove to you you're not to blame for the Asian Director-General's death. You tried your best. Nobody is asking the impossible from you. Although you nearly DID do the impossible. You risked your life trying to save him and his staff."

"Stop it, Brad. You know it wasn't really a risk for me."

"Actually, at the time, I didn't know it. And YOU, did you really know it?"

Grey looked at his friend. Was it really five days ago, he thought, that that incident occurred at the London International Airport? It seemed so odd to think back about it now. Captain Grey himself was in the front row when it all happened...

Grey had just delivered the Asian Director-General to his private jet and, at the last minute, was ordered to stay put at the Airport, while the jet was on its way to take off. Grey was watching from a small distance when he saw the DT19 jetliner coming from the embarkation deck and going straight at the private jet. Close behind the liner, there was a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle, speeding to reach it. The Angels were flying over, bombarding the liner, trying to stop its advance, without any success. Grey was wondering why the SPV wasn't firing at the liner's landing gear when he saw a seat ejecting from it.

The rest seemed to come straight from a nightmare: while the Angels continued their attack, the SPV tried to ram the wheels of the liner... and actually succeeded in blowing out one of the tyres. But in trying to push the liner off-course, control over the SPV was lost, and the vehicle went crashing into a radar station nearby. The liner tipped to one side, fell and exploded. For a second there, Grey thought the Director-General had escaped the Mysterons' vengeance... But the private plane, upon take off, wasn't able to completely clear the wreckage blocking the runway. It collided with the tail of the liner and crashed down, in turn exploding in a ball of fire.

There could be no survivors, Grey thought, looking in horror at the inferno. And he himself, if he hadn't received countermanding orders, would be dead too, along with all those people.

A beeping sound brought Grey out of his thoughts and he noticed his epaulettes flashing blue, announcing that Captain Blue was trying to reach him. He dropped the mic from his cap in order to answer his fellow officer. He heard Blue's frantic voice ringing in his ears.

"...Grey, respond, please!"

"I'm here, Captain Blue," Grey answered back.

"Thank God for that, I thought you were on that jet!" The voice paused. "Where are you?"

"I'm... looking at the wreckage. The Asian Director-General is dead... His staff with him."

"Those poor people..."

"I saw it all, Blue. It was terrible! Where are you?"

"I've been ejected from the SPV..." Grey looked up in the direction where he had seen the seat thrown high in the air. Its parachute had opened and it was coming down slowly to the ground, the wind pushing it further away from the runway. Blue's voice over the radio took an angry, yet still unnerved tone. "That damned, crazy, stubborn fool! How could he be so reckless, trying a desperate thing like that? I swear, I..."

"What are you talking about?" Grey suddenly interrupted his colleague.

"He tried to ram the liner's wheels!" came the croaked answer.

"Yes, I saw that... Who...?"

"That bloody fool of a Brit, Scarlet!"

"Scarlet?" Grey looked over the SPV embedded in the radar station. His eyes opened with horror as a realisation came to his mind. "My God... He's still inside that thing!" he murmured.

"I can't reach him on the radio... Go check on him, Grey!" Blue's voice was filled with fear and worry. "I'll be with you as soon as this damned 'chute drops me!"

"S.I.G., Captain Blue. On my way..."

Grey wasn't far from the station. A quick sprint and he was there in a few seconds. He halted beside it, not sure what to do next. Almost the entire concrete wall had fallen on the vehicle, which had already been badly damaged during the attempt to stop the DT19. The nose was completely crushed under the rubble. Despite Blue's previous vain attempt, Grey tried to call Scarlet with his own radio cap. With no more success. Must be injured, he thought, and by the look of the SPV... it could be pretty bad.

Grey didn't want to use the usual door to enter the vehicle. The seats were attached to them and would slide out with them as well. If he moved the seat Scarlet was actually occupying, he feared he could worsen some existing injury. The hatches of the ejector seats were the only sure way in. Grey climbed on the roof, pried open one of the hatches, already damaged, and dropped inside the SPV.

It was like stepping into a tomb, he realized. More so since, landing in the exact spot where Blue's seat had been, he found himself right next to Captain Scarlet.

He was badly injured. The steering column was jammed into his chest, pinning him against his seat, where he was still strapped. His right arm, with blood dripping all the way down to his hand, was hanging loosely by his side, apparently broken, with an open fracture. He had an ugly head wound, his scalp and hair soaked with blood, which was running down his face. His eyes were closed, and for an awful moment, Grey thought his colleague was dead, until he heard a low moan coming from him. He knelt beside him and gently stroked his shoulder.

"Paul... Can you hear me?"

Another moan answered him and a surprised Grey saw the blue eyes opening tiredly, and bloodless lips moving, trying to say something; Scarlet coughed up some blood and Grey heard a louder moan. He cringed, hearing the rasping breathing, realizing instantly that his friend must have some serious internal injuries.

"Don't try to speak. Help is on its way," Grey told the injured man in a soothing voice. "Hang on, buddy."

"The Director-General..." Scarlet's voice was weak, and it seemed like a major effort for him to speak. "How... how is he?"

Grey shook his head in disbelief. This was the man who, a few weeks earlier, had tried to kidnap the World President and took several shots at Captain Blue? This was the man some were claiming was an impostor, even a traitor, and that he certainly was not worthy of trust? He was now dying and all he could think about was whether or not he had succeeded in saving his charge, another man's life. Unfortunately, Grey did not have any good news to help soothe his obvious pain.

"It will be okay, Paul," he said, simply.

"He's dead?"

Grey hesitated. The pain he heard in Paul's voice was hard to bear. Still, he couldn't lie to him. He nodded. "Yeah. He's dead."

"Any... survivors?"

"They're all dead. I'm sorry, Paul."

A sigh heaved at the wounded man's chest. Grey saw the handsome face of the British officer crease in pain. "It was useless..." Grey heard him say in a croak. Scarlet moved his left hand, which was still clutching the steering control. He let out a pained grunt. "I'm stuck..."

"Don't move, don't speak," Grey urged him. "We'll get you out of here."

There was another groan and Scarlet's body seemed to relax. His breathing became more labored, he was desperately trying to keep his eyes open. "Brad... tell... tell the Colonel... I really tried to make it count..."

"You'll tell him yourself, my friend."

There was no response. Instead, Scarlet let out a heavy sigh. His eyes closed, his head bowed lower on his chest and Grey heard nothing more from him.

Now he really had the impression of being inside a tomb. He blew out a sigh, looking at his now deceased friend. Sadness overcame him as he said a quick prayer for Scarlet's resting soul. Then he turned away and opened the door.

He was tiredly stepping out of the SPV when he saw Captain Blue running toward him. Oh no! he thought. Blue was one of Scarlet's closest friends. First to have been forced to shoot him down, nearly a month ago, and now this...

He grabbed Blue before he could enter the SPV.

"How is he?" the blond officer asked him frantically. "Is he badly hurt?"

"Blue, don't go in there. It's useless," Grey responded softly.

"What do you mean, useless?" a puzzled Blue retorted. "We have to get him out of there..."

"He's gone, Adam."

Blue blanched, and stared at him incredulously. "Gone? You mean he's dead?"

Grey nodded in silence. Blue protested vehemently: "But... that's impossible! You know what Doctor Fawn said about him. He said..."

"Fawn must have been wrong, Blue," Grey interrupted his compatriot. "Believe me, he is dead."

Blue angrily tried to tear himself out of Grey's helping hands. "That's what you think!" he hissed between clenched teeth. "He was in pretty bad shape when I brought him to Cloudbase, after the Car-Vu incident. He pulled through."

"Yes, Blue, but not this time."

"I've got to see for myself."

Grey shook his head and let his friend go. He looked sadly over his shoulder as Blue stepped into the SPV.

It was at about that moment Colonel White had succeeded in reaching him... Grey then left Blue to grieve over their fallen comrade, while he gave his report of the incident to their commander-in-chief...

* * *

"Would you mind telling me what you're thinking about right now?"

Grey snapped out of his reverie to find Scarlet gazing at him directly and curiously. The American shrugged. "Sorry. I was miles away, I'm afraid." He looked back at his fellow officer. "I was thinking about what happened last week, when you pulled that crazy stunt that apparently took your life... And how you scared the hell out of me when you 'revived' during the helicopter ride back to Cloudbase!"

"Oh!" A faint smile crossed Scarlet's face. "Sorry about that."

"And the man says 'sorry'!" Grey sighed, looking upward. Look, it's OK though... It's just that there's so much we don't know about HOW those new recuperative powers of yours actually work..."

"There is so much we don't know about the Mysterons, period."

Grey looked curiously at Scarlet who shrugged. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap. It's just... well, frustrating, you know?"

"I can imagine," Grey mused. "How's your headache?"

"No better, I'm afraid. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering WHEN you'd get around to telling me the connexion between your apparent illness and the Mysterons."

A shiver ran down Scarlet's spine upon hearing those words. He turned a bewildered look toward Grey, who was waiting. Neither of the two Spectrum officers noticed Captain Ochre standing in the doorway to the cockpit; he was about to enter the passenger cabin when he heard Grey's words. He quietly stepped out of view.

"How do you know it's got anything to do with the Mysterons?" Scarlet asked, almost whispering.

"A wild guess," Grey answered. "I didn't really know. But you just confirmed it."

"Oh, great!" Scarlet muttered. "I should have been more careful. Now, you keep quiet about this, will you? Colonel White doesn't want anybody to know about it right now."

"So, like Doctor Fawn, the Colonel knows too," Grey said shaking his head. "What's it about, Captain?"

"I've... had those spells for some time. Well, since I 'came back', actually. Nausea, headaches, vertigo... the whole box of tricks."

"And that's got to do with what the Mysterons did to you?"

"The first time it actually happened, it was at the Airport, just before the Mysterons' attack on the Director-General."

"And?"

"It didn't come back until today... just before we heard the Mysterons' threat against the airshow."

"And now you've got that headache..."

"...Which doesn't seem to want to end anytime soon. And that worries me. A lot."

"Scarlet, maybe I'm slow to understand, but I don't see..."

"It's Doctor Fawn's prognosis about the dizzy spells that bothers me, Grey: he thinks the Mysterons may be trying to reach me."

Silence followed. Grey, almost holding his breath, was now staring at his friend, who thought he saw a glimmer of worry – even horror – in his eyes. "I can see why Colonel White told you not to say anything to us," Grey murmured. He frowned. "And he let you in on this mission, with the responsibility of field command?"

"Do you find it scary?"

"Scary isn't the word. I would say odd. The old man's decision surprises me."

Scarlet shrugged. "He doesn't believe in Fawn's prognosis. Says it's only a theory, that there could be other explanations for the attacks..."

"He has faith in you, that's for sure!"

"I wonder if he would have assigned me if he knew of my problems with Ochre..."

"...And Destiny?" Grey added, seeing his fellow officer hesitate.

"You know about her?"

"A little Angel told me when she came to the gym looking for you. She stumbled on the scene between you and Ochre."

"Rhapsody," Scarlet remarked, frowning. "She shouldn't have told you."

"She was concerned about you," Grey replied. "I tell you, Paul, if all your friends are as supportive as her, you don't have to worry about the likes of Ochre and Destiny. She more than compensates for their behaviour."

"I know. She's quite the lady," Scarlet agreed with a fond smile. "Although we find ourselves bickering frequently..."

"Ow! You love that, admit it!"

"Maybe... But don't tell her that!"

"So... you haven't told the old man about what happened with Ochre and Destiny... Why?"

"Why would I have done anything like that? The only thing that would have accomplished would have been getting Ochre and Destiny into trouble with the colonel." Scarlet shrugged. "I don't need that kind of complication on top of everything else."

Grey sighed. "Well, it WOULD BE even more complicated if they found out what Fawn thinks about those spells of yours. Count on me, they won't find out from me."

Too late, a grim-looking Ochre thought from the doorway. *I already know, for one*. For a brief time, earlier in the cockpit, after seeing how Scarlet almost had a fit over the mere idea that Destiny would try the ejection manoeuvre – which he himself deemed pretty dangerous, under the circumstances – Ochre had thought he had been wrong in his suspicions of Scarlet. Now, after hearing that conversation, and learning about Scarlet's spells and what their cause might be, he was more than ever convinced that he should keep an eye on the man. Maybe he wouldn't truly be responsible for what might happen if the Mysterons actually regained control over him, but at least, Ochre would be ready to intervene if it should prove necessary. One thing was bothering him, though: how the Hell would he be able to control or stop a man who was supposed to be indestructible?

In the meantime, it'll be better if I don't let him guess what I know, Ochre noted to himself. He stepped inside the cabin and cleared his throat, willingly drawing attention to himself. "I thought you might want to know," he said to Scarlet, "Symphony has just radioed us. She gave Destiny a new course, so we can avoid the storm."

"Is it a long way round?" Scarlet asked him.

"Not really. But we will be one hour late on our E.T.A. in Los Angeles."

"That's not drastic. We better call Spectrum L.A. Headquarters to inform them, though."

"Way ahead of you. Destiny was about to do it when I left the..."

A sudden jolt of the plane interrupted Ochre and he had to catch himself on the doorway so as not to fall to the floor. Scarlet and Grey each grabbed the arms of their respective seats in a reflexive movement. The three Spectrum officers stared at each other, frowning.

"What was that about?" Grey exclaimed. He got to his feet, and Scarlet did the same to enter the cockpit, almost running Ochre down as he passed him.

The British Spectrum captain found Destiny struggling with the control column. Beside her, in his co-pilot seat, Torey was doing his best to help her.

"What's happening?" Scarlet asked impatiently. He saw a bolt of lightning cross the windshield of the canopy and understood the situation instantly. They were right inside that bad weather they had planned to avoid all this time!

"How could this have happened?" he asked Destiny, almost angrily. "What about Symphony's report?"

"I don't know how it happened!" the female pilot swiftly replied. "I was following Symphony's instructions in order to avoid those clouds of bad weather... and suddenly, we were right in the middle of it!"

"Maybe your Angel pilot made a mistake giving us directions," Torey noted dryly.

"That would surprise me very much!" Destiny retorted. "Maybe it's the instruments of this jet which are not very reliable!"

"They are... normally." Commander Torey tapped on the dashboard. Pointers and indicators were going wild. He shook his head. "Something is terribly wrong." He looked up to Scarlet. "This plane has NEVER behaved like this..."

"We're blind inside these clouds," Destiny said, still battling against the controls. "I cannot lift the plane..."

"If we can't go higher, how about lower?" Scarlet suggested.

"There's a blizzard under those clouds!" Torey interjected.

"Would you rather stay inside and risk taking a bolt of lightning?" Grey replied.

"Which is bound to happen sooner or later," Scarlet added. "Try to get us lower, Destiny."

"The controls are rather hard to handle," Destiny grumbled. She shrugged. "I will do my best."

She was nervous, Scarlet noticed. Understandably. Without thinking, he put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure you will," he told her. He was grateful she didn't shy away from him this time.

"I'll give you a hand," Torey announced. He pushed the column at the same time as Destiny, and the plane tilted down. Scarlet dropped down his cap microphone, with the intention of calling Symphony Angel. He didn't even have the time to use it: a loud burst of static came from the speakers.

"What the..." Scarlet frowned and turned to Ochre and Grey, who were just behind him. Both his fellow officers tried their radiocaps with the same result. Ochre even tried to call Cloudbase, but shook his head after three attempts. "Radio's dead," he reported.

Scarlet reached for the onboard transmitter and opened a channel. He called Angel One... the only response he got was a deafening, screeching sound that made everybody cringe. He cut the radio.

"We're not only blind, we're deaf and dumb," he muttered, worriedly.

The craft had come out of the clouds; strong, snowy wind had replaced lightning bolts. Destiny and Torey pulled at the controls, trying to level the jet...

...which didn't seem to respond.

"We're still descending!" an unnerved Ochre cried out.

"Pull up, Destiny!" Scarlet told the pilot.

"I'm trying!" Destiny croaked. "She's not responding..."

"It's like we're fighting against a force pulling on the controls," Torey added.

"The Mysterons..." Scarlet murmured bleakly.

He checked out the instruments. They weren't saying anything conclusive.

"What is our actual direction?" he asked Destiny.

"Last time I check, we were going full west," she answered. She tapped the compass dial... The pivot and the edge were going crazy. "Now, I don't know... I'm not even sure of our speed... and we keep descending. Slowly, but surely."

"Those damned aliens have sure taken their time," Ochre muttered. "We're trapped and they know it."

"Our level is good, that's about all we can be sure of," Torey remarked.

"Well, there is another thing we can be sure of," Grey said with dry humour. "If we are over the Rockies, we're bound to hit a mountain soon."

"Did you open the flaps to slow us down?" Scarlet asked Destiny.

"I did." Destiny pushed down the flap levels once again, then checked the indicators. She shook her head. "I don't seem to receive any response... I don't even know if the flaps are actually opened."

"Oh, my Lord..." All heads turned to Torey who just had muttered those words. He pointed to the engine instruments. "According to this, our turbos are losing power. That means that even if we regain control of the craft..."

"...we'll hit the ground like a brick," Ochre finished dryly.

"A little more constructive thought here, please," Scarlet said in response. "I'm not about to lie down and play dead." He mused a second over what he had just said then shook his head. "No pun intended, folks."

"I fail to see the joke here, Captain," Torey grumbled.

"It's between us Spectrum agents, Commander," Grey said with a faint smile.

"Must be a good one..."

Scarlet was looking through the windshield, trying to see if there was any obstacle – such as a mountain – in front of them. "The way seems clear for now," he muttered.

Destiny agreed. "Yes, the view is bad, but we can still see a little."

"Do you still have enough control to avoid the top of a mountain, if necessary?"

Destiny grumbled. "Not by much, I'm afraid. And even then, it won't be long before we'll hit the ground."

"And we'll go up in flames since the fuel tanks are loaded," Ochre remarked.

"Empty the tanks," Scarlet ordered. "Now! If this jet hits, at least it won't explode."

"But we won't have any more fuel, and we won't be able to pull out if we regain control..."

"Commander Torey, by now you should have realized that we will never regain control of this plane," Scarlet nodded toward Destiny. "Jettison the fuel. Now. Don't wait."

Destiny gave a nod of her own and pressed a button. A yellow indicator lit up. "At least, something is working on board this plane," the female pilot murmured. "Ejection of the fuel proceeding, Captain..." A red indicator came on next to the yellow one. "Fuel tanks empty. We're running on reserve now. For about ten minutes... if we don't hit the ground before that."

"And when we do, we'll be in itsy bitsy pieces," Ochre said.

"Have faith, Ochre," Scarlet told him.

"Easy for you to say. You're the only one who's sure to come out of it alive."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Torey asked with surprise.

"Nobody will die if I have any say in the matter," Scarlet cut in abruptly. "Ochre, Grey, go strap yourselves down. Commander Torey... it seems you will have your ejection manoeuvre after all."

"Here? Out in the wild?"

"Wasn't the feature designed exactly for this?"

"Yes, but it hasn't been tested yet under these conditions. Until now, the manoeuvre has only been done on runways, under simulated, but controlled conditions. There was nothing even resembling what you're planning to try!"

"Destiny?" Scarlet asked the young French pilot. "Do you think you're up to it?"

She shrugged, looking out of the windshield, trying to focus on the view... and on the job that was awaiting her. "I already flew gliders," she said. "And I made my share of emergency landings... I shouldn't have much difficulty getting the capsule down."

"Are you insane?" Torey looked up angrily at Scarlet. "A few minutes ago, you said she didn't have enough experience to take on the ejecting manoeuvre, even with remote control to back her up. And now, suddenly, she's an expert?"

"The difference, sir, is that NOW we don't have any choice but to try it," Scarlet said coldly. "No matter how risky it seems..."

"Sounds like fun," Grey sighed. "Come on, Ochre, we better get back there."

"I hope we come out of this in one piece," Ochre replied, following Grey into the passenger cabin, "because it really looks like the Mysterons are going to make toothpicks out of us and this plane..."

Scarlet motioned to Torey. "You too, Commander. Get back with them. I'm taking your place."

"This plane is my responsibility, Captain."

"Your life is mine."

"You'll need my help."

"We'll manage. Go on! Time's running out!"

Torey unstrapped and extricated himself from the co-pilot's seat. He disappeared into the cabin, while Captain Scarlet took his place next to Destiny. The young female pilot was concentrating on keeping the plane levelled and her eyes were fixed on the view dead ahead.

"Wish I knew if we're approaching mountains," Scarlet heard her mumbling as he buckled up.

"How are we doing on the reserve fuel?" the British officer asked.

"Six minutes..."

Scarlet nodded and grabbed the control column. "Look, maybe you should go back with the others... I'll handle the manoeuvre by myself."

"I wouldn't pass this chance up, Captain," she replied.

"But I stand a better chance at surviving the shock of landing..."

"And WE ALL stand a better chance of surviving with me at the helm. I'm a better pilot than you are."

"There's no denying that," Scarlet said with a faint smile.

"Thanks for asking, anyway." Destiny hesitated before adding, almost in a murmur: "And sorry... about earlier."

Scarlet shook his head. "No hard feelings. But we'll talk about this later. Let's land this bird."

"S.I.G., Captain. Ready when you are."

"Okay. Let's try this. In 3... 2... 1... 0."

Scarlet pushed the button that Torey previously showed him on the control board. He felt a small jolt through the column and heard a dull sound, like air escaping from a valve. An indicator on the board announced that the clamps were about to release the capsule.

Then he saw a warning indicator beeping next to the button he had just pushed.

Malfunction.

"Oh, damn it!" Scarlet unbuckled himself and got to his feet, going to the doorway accessing the cabin. He saw Ochre, Grey and Torey, seated and strapped down, all ready for the procedure. "The ejector control is jammed!" Scarlet barked, looking straight at Torey.

"What? That's impossible!"

"Yes, it is! The clamps won't release the capsule. Now, quickly! Is there another way to cut the capsule loose from the plane?"

Torey seemed to think it over. "There is a way, but it is rather dangerous..."

"We're beyond that, Commander!"

"If the electric control is jammed... we can open the clamps by hand. There are two handles, in the lower hold. Right next to the duct conduit, next to the maintenance board. We can access it from the baggage hold, and then through a sealed hatch, near the tail."

"What do these handles look like?"

"Big red hand levers, one on each side of the fuselage. They are activated by pushing them down one after the other. The left, then the right. The clamps then should open instantly."

"Will the pilot know if the clamps are opened?"

"The green indicator on the control board will light up. But..."

"Right." Scarlet turned to Destiny. "Keep the plane level. I'll go and activate the clamps by hand. Keep your eyes peeled on that indicator. The second it lights up, begin the ejection procedure."

"What about you?" Destiny protested. "If I understood clearly..."

"Don't concern yourself about me. Worry about getting the capsule down!"

He left the female pilot and strode to the back of the passenger cabin. He opened the emergency cabinet and took an electric torch from it. The others unstrapped themselves to go join him as he crouched to open a small sealed hatch in the floor. That was the only onboard access to the baggage hold; there was just enough space to let him through.

"Are you crazy?" Ochre snapped angrily at him. "If Destiny begins the ejection process as soon as you open the clamps, you'll be trapped in the plane!"

"Not exactly," Torey replied, "he will have a thirty second delay to get back here, and close that hatch before the capsule is actually ejected."

"Plenty of time," Scarlet mused with a faint smile.

"There is a risk, anyway," Grey said, shaking his head.

"Let me go, Captain," Torey then said. "I know this craft. I stand a better chance at making it back in time..."

"Out of the question. I'm going, and that's that."

"You have to go and play hero again, don't you?" Ochre remarked angrily.

"There's no more time to argue," Scarlet replied in the same tone. He lowered his body into the opening and glanced back at the three men who were looking anxiously at him. "One of you will guard that hatch, until twenty seconds after the clamps actually open," he told them. "If you don't see me coming back, close it, and get quickly to your seat."

"I'll do it," Grey announced.

"And I'll go help Destiny in the cockpit," Ochre announced.

Scarlet hesitated, and then nodded his agreement. "Commander Torey, you'd better go strap yourself down. This may be a bumpy ride."

He was about to disappear into the hole when Grey called to him: "Paul."

Scarlet looked up at his friend who quickly nodded at him. "Good luck, sport."

Scarlet nodded in turn. "We'll all need it, Brad," he stated.

Then he went through the hatch.

Chapter 5

Once inside the baggage hold, Scarlet looked at his watch; less than four minutes before the reserve fuel would be exhausted... provided the plane didn't crash before that.

In the feeble light of the low-ceilinged compartment, Scarlet struggled between multiple equipment cases and pouches, pushing them aside to reach the back. He found the hatch Torey had described to him; it was even narrower than the one he just used to get inside the baggage hold. He opened it and slipped inside the new compartment, which was only four feet high.

It was in the lower part of the aircraft, inside which large fuel tanks were stored so the plane would have a longer range of flight. Scarlet was lying on one of those tanks, now actually empty. He switched on the torch, looked again at his watch.

Two minutes... Slow, too slow, he mused grimly. He had lost too much time struggling through the baggage hold. Then again, if he was sure of the deadline... He tried his radiocap transmitter to call Destiny, hoping she would give him some indication of what was actually going on in the cockpit; only loud static answered him. He winced grimly. Damned Mysteron tricks, which were about to plunge them all to their deaths and even prevented them from calling for help...

Forget the Mysterons, you fool. Concentrate on the job ahead. Four lives depend on you right now. Scarlet flashed the torch over the compartment's walls, looking for the red handles Commander Torey had told him about.

There they were, a good ten feet ahead of him. Scarlet got to his feet. He had to walk in a crouching position to get to those handles. *I've got to have a talk with the designers,* he thought savagely. *The idea of putting emergency levers in such a place...*

He stopped in front of the levers. *Number two*, he read on the one on his right. There was an indicator just over it, flashing "*Clamps not opened*".

"All right", he muttered, "here we go now..."

He pushed down the number one lever, then number two.

A violent jolt almost knocked him flat on his back. He heard the hatch slam behind him, probably due to the violence of the shock. The two indicators over the levers lit up. "*Clamps opened*". A grin crossed Captain Scarlet's face. *Now*, he thought, *less than thirty seconds to get back to the cabin.*

He hurried toward the hatch and grasped the handle.

It refused to turn.

Scarlet blanched. The hatch was stuck!

And in less than twenty seconds, the capsule would eject, leaving him trapped inside the jet's main body, plunging to the ground...

* * *

A few seconds after Scarlet had disappeared into the hatch, Captain Ochre entered the cockpit and strapped himself into the co-pilot's seat. Destiny acknowledged his presence with a nod.

"He's gone down?" she asked.

Ochre nodded in turn. "Hope he'll succeed," he muttered. "If I didn't know better, I would be worried about his safety."

"Would you really, now?"

There was some doubt in Destiny's voice and Ochre noticed it. "You know about the problem there is between us?" he asked the young female pilot.

"No. I just noticed how you acted toward each other, that's all."

"What about you? Are you worried?"

"About him?" Destiny shrugged. "Yes, despite myself. But right now, I should not let that deter me..." She broke off suddenly and her eyes opened wide. "*Mon Dieu!* Look!"

Ochre looked up. With horror, he saw a white, sharp-edged ridge appearing through the snowy wind... and they were heading right toward it!

"Dear Lord!" he muttered. "We'll crash into that mountain... Pull the nose up, girl!"

"I'm trying!"

As the two of them were struggling against their respective control sticks, in the back, Commander James Torey, who had been sent to his seat, was unbuckling his seatbelt and getting to his feet. Crouched over the hatch, Captain Grey stared at him with concern. "What are you doing? Sit back right there, before the capsule ejects!"

"Sorry, Captain!" Torey replied, approaching the hatch. "I've got my orders concerning this plane..."

Grey jumped to his feet and strode toward him. "And I've got mine concerning you. You can't help Scarlet... Get back in your seat, right now!"

He didn't count on Torey smashing his fist into his face. Stunned, Grey fell on his back.

"Again, I'm sorry, Captain," he heard Torey say to him. "This is something I must do." Grey saw the commander lowering himself in the hole and then he disappeared from view...

In the cockpit, Destiny and Ochre had succeeded in avoiding collision with the spur... The bottom of the plane did brush the snow off its top, however, causing the entire plane to shake violently.

Once the aircraft had passed the mountain, Destiny and Ochre finally saw the ground... A series of peaks and crests, covered with snow, extended before them.

"We're going to hit hard," Destiny said, gritting her teeth. She then saw the green light on the board. "The clamps are opened!" she cried out. "Proceeding with ejection manoeuvre now!"

She pushed the ejector control. A counter appeared, marking thirty seconds.

"Hang on, back there!" Ochre shouted over his shoulder toward the passenger cabin. "We're ejecting in twenty-five seconds!"

Grey looked over at the doorway to the cockpit, distraught. There was no time to go after Torey. "Hurry up, guys!" he barked down the hatch. "About fifteen seconds before ejection!"

There was no response. Wherever Torey and Scarlet were down there, they didn't hear him – or wouldn't acknowledge him.

"Ten seconds!" Grey heard Ochre calling out.

"Damn it!" Grey swore under his breath. Still no sign of the two missing men. Reluctantly following his orders, he closed and sealed the hatch. *Sorry Scarlet... Sorry Torey. But there's simply no choice.* Having no time to get back to his seat, he stayed on his belly, kept his head down, and with hands and feet, hung on for dear life to a couple of chair legs.

In the cockpit, Destiny and Captain Ochre saw a snow covered pass coming quickly toward them. Ochre kept his eyes on the counter. His hand was on the red lever controlling the explosive charges. "Steady now... Three, two, one... ejection!"

He pushed the lever up. Explosions were heard from the lower part of the jet and the capsule shook violently. Destiny pressed down the green button that Torey had shown her earlier. To her relief, an indicator lit up before her eyes, with the indication *"Command transfer to capsule. Immediate ejection."*

She pulled out the controls. A hissing sound of escaping air came to her ears. The capsule disengaged itself from the rest of the plane, like an arrow leaving a crossbow.

Destiny was amazed how smoothly the ejection procedure had gone. "The controls are responding well," she announced to Ochre.

"Hovers are working... Pull up! Pick up some height or we'll crash on that ridge anyway!"

The ground was dangerously close and Destiny lifted the nose of the capsule in one desperate attempt. She succeeded in changing direction... avoiding the ridge at the last possible second. She and Ochre saw the main fuselage of the jet crash right into the ridge, with an awful screeching sound. Snow, rocks, and metal pieces flew in all directions, as the plane disintegrated from the shock, sliding wildly over a long distance.

"Seigneur Dieu!" Destiny murmured, her eyes widening in horror.

"It didn't explode, Destiny!" Ochre told her. "So Scarlet might have survived that... Keep concentrating on our situation."

She nodded, her throat tightening under repressed feelings.

As well as the controls were responding, keeping the capsule in the air was a rather difficult task, due to the bad weather and geographic conditions. The ground was still too close for comfort and no matter how hard Destiny pulled on the column, the capsule didn't seem to gain any height. She now remembered that Commander Torey had said that it COULD NOT gain any height. So there was no other way to go but down.

"Prepare for emergency landing!" she called out to Ochre.

"Destiny, there is a cliff coming up..."

"I know! But we have no choice!"

Ochre nodded. He pushed the button controlling the flaps, as Destiny pulled the control stick and, using the hovers, tried to slow down the capsule's descent. The cliff was still closing dangerously fast.

The capsule brushed off the snow-covered ground before leaping from the cliff. Destiny had to struggle hard to keep the nose up. She succeeded, but the capsule kept falling, and suddenly landed flat on its belly, on the crest beyond the cliff. The shock ripped the hovers from the fuselage, and sent the capsule sliding down the slope.

There was no way to control the wild descent, so Destiny just hung on to the control column, while Captain Ochre desperately tried to do the same. The capsule tilted to one side, its fins broke like glass and it began spinning around and toppling over.

The last thing Destiny saw before crashing to the floor was the edge of another cliff approaching. Then her head hit something hard and she passed out...

* * *

Seconds before ejection, Captain Scarlet was still struggling against the hatch that had closed behind him, imprisoning him in the lower hold of the Passenger Jet. He was already well aware that he would probably not make it in time to join the others back in the capsule. That in itself would be alarming enough if he weren't taking into account his own regenerating powers... But then again, it was all so new to him, he wasn't even sure he could survive a violent plane crash.

Then, miraculously, the hatch opened. He crawled inside the other compartment. Pieces of luggage blocked his way. He hurriedly pushed them away and got to his feet. A look at the ceiling informed him the hatch accessing the passenger cabin had been sealed.

At that moment, he heard explosions. A violent jolt sent him against the facing wall. *The capsule's ejected, he thought. Good. The others should be okay. Now to find a way out of this flying coffin before it crashes.* He had already thought of a way out. It was risky, for sure, but he had a chance to make it in one piece... providing the craft wasn't going too fast. He had to jump from the baggage hold's external hatch. He stumbled over to it. The hatch wasn't really designed to open from the inside, but Scarlet destroyed the electro-magnetic lock with two bullets from his pistol. He then pushed the door outward. The sudden rush of cold wind caught him by surprise and he had to hold on to the doorway so he would not be thrown into empty space.

He looked down in horror. The ground was so near... a hundred feet or so. It wouldn't be long before the craft crashed. He had to jump before contact, but the speed was still too high...

"Captain..."

The shaken voice behind Scarlet startled him. Still clutching the sides of the doorway, he turned around. A few feet behind him, extricating himself from under a pile of luggage, which had obviously fallen onto him, Jim Torey appeared, looking pale and confused. Scarlet frowned. How the Hell had he got there?

"Commander, what..."

A sudden shock interrupted Scarlet as he spoke. The jet had just made brutal contact with the snow-covered ground. Scarlet was thrown violently against the wall, and then lurched to the floor. Luggage seemed to attack him from all directions; he felt a heavy blow to his left arm, and it went suddenly numb. He succeeded in reaching the open door on his hands and knees and took a look back... The last he saw of Jim Torey was his body flung from one wall to another like a rag doll.

Then Captain Scarlet was thrown from the plane. He flew about fifty feet through the air before hitting the ground. The thick cover of snow wasn't nearly enough to protect him against the brutal shock, and momentum sent him rolling some few feet more, while the plane continued its wild run.

Scarlet finally stopped rolling and fell face first into the snow, gasping for air. His body hurt all over, he had a few broken ribs, at least a fractured arm, his head felt like a hundred tons, and he could taste blood in his mouth. Yet, he was alive. Perhaps due to his incredible new powers of resistance, or simply by pure dumb luck, he had survived the crash, if only just.

He heard loud metallic screeching as the plane tore itself apart on the ground. Pieces of wreckage flew all around him, so he kept close to the ground, trying to protect his head with his good arm. Then, after what seemed to be an eternity, the noise stopped, as did the rain of metal, and Scarlet risked a look.

What was left of the Aero Special One was lying all over the place. The main fuselage had broken in two, and its belly had opened up like an over-ripe fruit. One of the wings was completely gone; the other was lying in three pieces, a hundred feet apart. As for the tail, what was left of it had folded on the side.

Scarlet stared at the wreckage in complete horror. There was no way a normal human being would have survived that, he realized. Torey was dead for sure. He wasn't faring much better himself.

He tried to raise himself from where he was lying. Pain stabbed through him as he pushed himself up on his uninjured arm. He succeeded in getting onto his knees. Then the nausea hit him, and he nearly collapsed back into the snow. Raising his heavy head, he looked back at the wreckage...

And he SAW.

He saw two rings of eerie greenish light passing slowly over what was left of the Aero Special One. They seemed to come from nowhere, and there was an icy, alien feeling about them. Scarlet went cold inside and his heart started beating faster. He had an uncomfortable feeling of *déjà vu*. Panic threatened to overcome him as he saw how closely those lights were approaching him. He drew back, desperately crawling away, almost forgetting about his aching body, and leaned against a large boulder of ice. He kept a close watch on the progress of those eerie lights, his throat tightened, his eyes filled with an unknown fear.

It was as if something evil was passing by, trying to steal his soul. But fear gradually went away when he realized that those things didn't seem to have any interest in him. They simply ignored him and swept over the wreckage before fading away. His breathing returning to normal, Scarlet closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He knew the origin of his inexplicable fear. Those lights came from the Mysterons. He could feel it in his bones, in his heart, in the very fibre of himself.

And he knew, almost by instinct, exactly what those rings were. That feeling was confirmed when he heard the roaring sound of turbo engines overhead. He raised his eyes and, in the blowing wind and snow, saw a plane flying low to the ground and gaining height. A silver jet, with some very distinctive wing and tail designs.

It was a perfect replica of the Aero Special One.

Captain Scarlet tried to get to his feet, keeping his eyes on the rapidly receding craft. He had just witnessed the Mysterons' process of duplication. It was no wonder he had the feeling somebody was stepping on his grave. Now the Mysterons would use the plane for their own purposes, like they had used him.

The combined effect of that realization and the terrible pain in his body took its toll on Captain Scarlet and he fell back where he had lain before. His last thought, before he lost consciousness, was to wonder how he would be able to alert Spectrum to what had just happened.

* * *

Symphony Angel was worried.

It had been nearly an hour since she had lost sight of, and subsequently radio contact with, the Aero Special One. She had called it many times, and flown back and forth across the path it

was supposed to have taken, but without success. She couldn't raise the Passenger Jet's onboard radio, nor the captains' radio caps; her personal communicator was working just fine, for she had contacted Cloudbase to inform Colonel White of the craft's disappearance. He had acted instantly by sending the two remaining Angels to join Symphony in her search. While waiting for their arrival, Symphony was to carry on, looking for clues of what might have happened to the Aero Special One.

"The weather's pretty bad," the young American pilot said to her commander. "Maybe they've run into some kind of mechanical trouble and were forced to land."

"Without informing you, at least, of their last position?" the colonel replied sceptically.

Symphony sighed. "You're right, sir. That's pretty improbable. But there is some electrical interference around here and maybe it disrupted their communication system. Anyway, I'm going down. If they've landed, or crashed somewhere, I intend finding them."

"Be careful in that weather, Symphony."

"I will, sir. Don't worry."

Angel One turned around. Symphony was about to land when she saw the object of her search emerging from the clouds and coming her way. She heaved a sigh of relief and used her radio to try to call it.

"Angel One to Aero Special One. Can you hear me, Destiny?"

There was a short pause. Then Symphony heard Destiny Angel's accented voice, responding to the call: "Aero Special One to Angel One. I can hear you fine."

Symphony sighed a second time. Then she frowned in concern. "What happened, Destiny? I've been searching for you for nearly an hour. You didn't respond to any of my calls. Did you run into some kind of trouble?"

Another pause, before Destiny replied: "Yes, we ran into trouble. Commander Torey had to cut most of the electricals to make some repairs. We're fine, now. Everything is back to normal."

Symphony was perplexed. There was something strange in Destiny's voice. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, but it bothered her. Like some kind of coldness she had never heard before.

"You're sure everything is all right?" the American girl asked her friend insistently.

"Yes. The jet will fly without any problem now. Commander Torey says he will make some checks upon our arrival in Los Angeles."

Symphony asked herself if they should continue toward their destination, or go back to Cloudbase. They were closer to L.A., now, and if the plane should encounter other problems on the way, it would be far better for it to land there. But still, she was unsure. There was still something nagging her about the whole situation.

"All right, let's get going," she said. "But let's make it a little slower, shall we? Angels Two and Three are on their way to join us. I want to give them the chance to catch up before we actually arrive in L.A."

"S.I.G., Angel One. Aero Special One out."

Symphony did not even have the time to acknowledge the message before the radio went dead. *Stranger and stranger*, she thought. That was pretty rude, not at all like Destiny. And she didn't even give her fellow pilot the chance to talk to Captain Scarlet, which would be normal, since he was field commander on this mission. Symphony tried to raise him through his radio cap, without any more success than before. All she could receive was static. Then it hit her. *Problems that would have forced Commander Torey to cut the electrics aboard the craft?* That shouldn't bother the personal communicators of the Spectrum agents onboard. She tried to reach Aero Special One.

Nothing. Just like before.

"Am I stupid, or just paranoid?" she wondered.

There could have been a logical explanation for the radio communications not working properly, but the more she thought about it, the less it made sense. She contacted Cloudbase and informed Colonel White of the latest development. Her commander sounded preoccupied as he commented on her report. "You're right, there might be an explanation for the radio trouble," he said. "You did say there was an electrical storm around those parts..."

"Yes, sir," Symphony agreed. "But I have a gut feeling something is wrong with that plane, and that it isn't electrical."

"You know what you're implying, Symphony?"

Symphony knew, all right, and the mere thought was making her heart heavier than she would admit. "Yes, sir," she sighed. "If I'm right, and there is still somebody in that plane, they'll have to be considered hostile..." A thought crossed her mind. "What about Captain Scarlet, sir?"

"What about him?"

"Well, if Doctor Fawn's report about him is true, and he can't be killed... Wouldn't he be somehow immune to any Mysterons' attempt to... take control of him?"

There was a short silence over the radio. "I would tend to agree with you," Symphony heard her commander say. "But we know so little yet of Scarlet's condition... And as you say, we don't even know if there is anyone in that plane, even if you heard Destiny's voice. We know it's one of the Mysterons' vast powers to control an unmanned craft, and to make voices out of thin air..."

"Yes, sir," the American pilot said grimly, "I know." She was still remembering the report she had read of the DT19 the preceding week, at London Airport... And before that, there was that incident with the A42 Spectrum helicopter, at the Car-Vu... No pilot in either one of them. Yet, the Mysterons were controlling them, and disembodied voices responded to radio calls. "What are my orders, Colonel?" she asked.

"We don't have conclusive evidence yet that this plane is indeed controlled by the Mysterons... But I'm not about to dismiss your 'gut feeling' about it. Keep escorting it and keep a close watch on it. Angels Two and Three will be with you shortly. On your arrival in Los Angeles, if the situation has not changed, make the jet land on a clear runway. Force it down if need be."

"And if we can't?"

A pause. Then the Colonel's voice came out of the radio again, with a determined note to it. "You'll do what is necessary. We have no other choice in the matter."

Symphony's heart sank even deeper as she gave the acknowledgement response. "S.I.G., Colonel White. Proceeding as ordered and escorting Aero Special One to destination."

"Be careful, Symphony. If it turns out that plane is controlled by the Mysterons, it could be very dangerous. It may not be armed, but it could still ram your own jet."

"S.I.G., sir. I'll keep my distance. I'll inform you of any new developments. Angel One out."

Chapter 6

The escape capsule had miraculously stopped at the very edge of the cliff toward which it had been heading when Destiny lost control of it. When the French Angel pilot regained her senses, under the tender care of Captain Ochre, she realized how close they had all been to death. The capsule had lost its hovers, wings, and tail. Many windows had been shattered, as well as the windshield, and one side of the cabin was ripped open, tearing out the access door in the process. They all had lost consciousness at one point or the other, and Ochre had been the first to come out of it. His first priority had been to check on his colleagues. Destiny had a very light concussion and, like him, some cuts and bruises. Nothing really serious and he had proof of it when she regained consciousness shortly after he did. Captain Grey was less lucky. He was still unconscious long after his colleagues had come back to life. Aside from a bad concussion, his right leg was broken and he had a very nasty bruise on his right side. Fractured ribs, Destiny thought.

In the emergency cabinet, there was a first aid kit, some food, warm clothing, blankets, and other items to provide for their comfort and needs. UEA had included a dozen standard-issue yellow coats too. Since none of the survivors had brought Spectrum issue winter clothing in their luggage, the coats were distributed around. Destiny attended to Grey, strapping his chest and waist and splinting his leg. She then gave him an anti-tetanus injection and covered him with a blanket to keep him warm. Meanwhile, Captain Ochre used one of the other blankets to cover up the hole in the side of the cabin, so the falling snow, wind and cold would not enter the capsule. Then he went outside to evaluate the situation and installed some emergency flares all around the capsule. He sent up a flare and then went exploring their surroundings, keeping the capsule in sight, not wanting to get lost in all that snow.

While he was gone, Destiny heated up a alcohol stove also taken from the cabinet and put a pot filled with snow on it, with the intention of making some strong hot coffee. Then, with Ochre returning to the cabin, she kept a close watch over their wounded, still unconscious, comrade.

Grey regained his senses an hour later, during which time Ochre had gone out again, to check on the weather. He tried to get up from where he was lying, but Destiny gently pushed him back. The pain overwhelmed him and he went very pale.

"Lie still," the Angel pilot told him. She shook her head, smiling gently. "You have a broken leg and some broken ribs. You'll be all right if you keep quiet."

"We're down?" he asked her, his voice filled with pain but still coherent.

"Yes, we have made it."

Grey smiled faintly. "You really are a great pilot, Destiny." He frowned. "Where's Ochre?"

At that moment, Captain Ochre pushed the blanket aside to enter the capsule. He saw Grey awake, and crouched down next to him. He seemed relieved.

"You're finished with your beauty sleep, chum?" I was worried about you."

Grey nodded to him. "Was I out long?"

"Longer than Destiny or me," Ochre told him. "Two hours or so. You got a big bump on your head. Must have hit it pretty hard."

"Yeah, I suppose I did..." Grey paused a second. "I'm sorry about your friend Torey, Rick."

Ochre shook his head. "What happened to him, Brad? I guess he was thrown out as we crashed, through that hole in the side, but... I didn't see any sign of his body outside."

"You wouldn't," Grey informed him. "Shortly before the capsule ejected, he went down to the baggage hold... Figured he had a responsibility to help Scarlet out..."

"The fool," Ochre murmured. Destiny gave him a cup of coffee and he nodded his thanks to her. "It's quite cold outside," he said. "We better keep inside here, and keep ourselves warm with that stuff. Want some, Grey?"

"Don't feel like it now. Maybe later. What about the jet? Did it land okay?"

Ochre looked gloomily at his fellow officer. "The jet crashed," he answered. "Literally pulverised itself, as it hit the ground. It didn't explode, but... I don't think Jim could have made it."

"And Scarlet?"

Ochre shook his head. "No sign of him yet."

"He'll be back," Grey said with a sigh. "He has survived, I'm sure."

"Well, in the meantime, we'll have to concentrate on our own survival," Ochre replied. "We must contact Spectrum to tell them what happened so they can pick us up."

"The radio's still dead?" Grey asked.

"It would be now even if it wasn't before the crash."

"And the radiocaps?"

"Yours has disappeared, and mine was destroyed... And Destiny's communicator won't work. We tried."

"Why, I wonder..." Grey said, musing.

"We're surrounded by mountains. And there are still these electrical storms overhead. Could be causing interference."

"Or it is the Mysterons interfering?"

"Hey, they tried to kill us. We're still alive, aren't we?"

"For how long?" Destiny noted. "We're out in these mountains, there's a blizzard, and we have food for only three days."

"It's still snowing, yes, but the wind has dropped," Ochre responded. "And I rigged some emergency flares. If we keep them from being snowed in, somebody is bound to see them and then we'll be found. Sooner or later."

"Hope it won't be TOO much later."

The very distinctive English voice that had uttered these words came from the breach in the side of the cabin. All three Spectrum agents turned that way. They were amazed to see Captain Scarlet, who had just pushed the blanket aside to get in, standing there looking at them. Incredibly, he didn't have a mark on his body, but his dishevelled hair and the sad state of his uniform told them instantly he had been through a trying time. He looked tired, and cold too, all covered with snow as he was; he was trying to keep from shivering, but was doing a bad job of it with his reddened hands. Destiny took one of the remaining coats and went to put it round his shoulders. There was gratitude on his face when he looked her in the eyes. "Are you all right?" she asked him.

"Yes, thanks." He shrugged. "Retrometabolism may work wonders for injuries, but I'm afraid it's rather useless against the cold. I'm just about frozen."

"You look like it," Ochre agreed. "Come and get some coffee. You need it."

"Thanks for the invitation," Scarlet said, putting on the coat and approaching. He looked down at Grey, who was looking at him, smiling faintly.

"Hey, sport," the wounded man said. "Knew you would make it..."

"How's it hanging, Grey?" Scarlet asked him, using one of Grey's favourite expressions.

"He has a broken leg," Destiny explained, pouring a cup of coffee. "A few cracked ribs... and a mean concussion."

"I'll be all right when we get back to civilisation," Grey added.

Destiny came back to Scarlet and handed him the cup, which he took greedily between his hands, grazing hers as he did. She shook her head. "You weren't kidding earlier. Your hands are frozen."

"Not quite," he said with a smile. "But it feels like it. I'll be all right in a few minutes."

"I knew you'd survive that crash, Scarlet," Ochre said, "but I didn't count on you finding us so quickly."

Scarlet took a sip of coffee. "The wreckage of the jet is up on top of a cliff," he explained. "Not far actually, about half an hour on foot from here, all downhill. I saw your emergency lights and the flare you sent up. I just headed this way." He looked straight at Ochre. "Your friend, Torey..."

"He's dead?"

Scarlet nodded. "When I came to, I had a look around the baggage hold to see if there was anything useful in there. Torey was there. Sorry."

"He wanted to help you out," Ochre sighed. "Guess we should have explained to him that he was likely to die where you would survive."

"Were you close friends?"

"I don't have many close friends, Captain. Guess Jim was as close as it gets. He was the one who taught me to fly."

Scarlet nodded. In spite of Ochre's apparent coolness, Scarlet could see he was saddened by his friend's demise. He kept to himself in what sorry state he had found Commander Torey's body, all broken, bloody and smashed, the baggage spread all over him. It wouldn't do Ochre any good to hear about that.

"So," Ochre asked him, clearing his throat, "did you find anything useful?"

Scarlet nodded again. He gave his cup to Destiny and went back to the breach he had come through earlier. He had put next to it a heavy black backpack he had brought back from the wrecked jet.

"I think I may have found our ticket back to civilisation," he said. He came back to the others, got down on his knees, and unzipped the bag, to show a dish of about one foot in diameter which he put into Ochre's hands. His fellow officer looked at it, with perplexity in his eyes.

"And what do you propose we do with this?" he asked Scarlet.

"There's a radio transmitter in that bag," Scarlet explained. "Its power cell isn't very powerful, but still, coupled with that dish... we should be able to contact Cloudbase. Or somebody else who might be able to help us out."

Destiny looked in the bag and took a large electronic black box from it. As the communications expert of the team, she examined the transmitter thoroughly and shook her head. "This thing is prehistoric. How come it was in the baggage hold to begin with?"

"Jim was a bit of a radio buff," Ochre mused. "I remember, way back when, he used to have fun doing some pirate broadcasting with a shortwave transmitter." He looked thoughtfully at the dish. "Guess that thing was his latest toy..."

"You're sure that transmitter works, Scarlet?" Grey asked.

"It's a sturdy enough thing," Destiny noted before Scarlet could answer. "It has certainly survived the crash without much damage. The only problem would be the power source, like you said, Captain Scarlet."

"If we had a hover pack," Ochre added thoughtfully. "Or something of the kind..."

"We would have had one if this plane had been one of our SPJs..." Grey muttered.

"Yes, but you would not have had an escape capsule in an SPJ," Scarlet replied with a faint smile. "You would have crashed with the rest of the plane."

"What about the emergency battery?" Destiny suggested. "The one from the onboard electrical equipment?"

"I already thought of that," Scarlet nodded. "If it's still functional, we may be able to use it."

"I don't see why it wouldn't be functional," Destiny shrugged. "All the electricals are down, but I'm pretty sure there's nothing wrong with the battery. But we still have a problem to consider."

"The mountains," Ochre continued, putting the dish on the floor. "We're in some kind of valley. The mountains all around us will interfere with transmission. Even with this dish."

"Which is why we have to climb one of those mountains," Scarlet replied. "There's a high enough peak, just next to the plateau where the jet crashed. We can see it from here, to the North West. We can install the dish on top of it and make the transmission from there."

"In this weather?" Ochre remarked, frowning doubtfully. "You're not serious!"

"You said yourself that the wind's dropped," Grey noted.

"And the snow is about to stop," Scarlet added.

"Yes, but it'll only be temporary. As you well know, in these mountains, that kind of weather is pretty unpredictable. It'll start snowing again in a little while, and I'm sure that before long the wind will rise again. I wouldn't want to be stuck on some mountain when it happens."

"I know it's risky," Scarlet said. "But we don't have much choice."

Ochre was still sceptical. "Why not wait until the weather has calmed down a little bit more before trying? And beside, we don't even know if that plan will actually work."

"I'm sure it will work," Scarlet retorted sharply. "And we CAN'T wait, Captain Ochre. For more than one reason..." He looked toward Grey. "Grey's broken leg can't wait much longer, without seriously endangering his health... if not his life."

"I can hold on if necessary," Grey said in turn, in an offended tone.

"No, you can't, Captain," Destiny replied. "At least, not for long." She turned to Scarlet. "I agree with you. We must act as soon as possible. Better to try something than wait until we freeze."

"I didn't say we should stay put and do nothing," Ochre protested.

"Then what's bothering you?"

Ochre scowled at Scarlet's question. "I just think we should be careful." He looked at Grey. "And yes, for your sake, Grey, we do have to hurry things up a little." He sighed, looking back at Scarlet. "There's a toolbox in the emergency cabinet. I'll go fetch a screwdriver and I'll take that battery out of the cockpit."

"I'll help you," Destiny said. "You'll need my knowledge to get that thing without damaging it. It's neatly tucked behind a panel, under the equipment board."

Ochre went to the emergency cabinet at the rear of the cabin, picked up the toolbox inside it and came back to the others. He put the box next to Grey and sorted out a number of tools before putting his hands on a couple of screwdrivers and a wrench. Looking at him thoughtfully, Scarlet took the transmitter from Destiny's hands and knelt down, putting it before him.

"While you get that battery, I'll open the casing," he said. "To get the old battery out and prepare the connexions for the other one."

"You're sure you're up to it?" Ochre asked him.

"I've done this kind of thing before, Ochre."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you say." Ochre's tone was very sharp, still largely defiant. His eyes were bright as he stared at Scarlet. "Be back in a jiffy." Destiny followed him into the cockpit, casting a last look in Scarlet's direction. The British Captain returned the look until she disappeared from his view.

"Do I detect a little warming up in here?"

Scarlet turned to Grey who had just said those words. His friend shook his head. "Destiny doesn't seem as cold as she was toward you," he remarked.

"I noticed it too," Scarlet agreed. "Too bad the same can't be said of Ochre."

"He'll come around, Paul. You'll see."

Scarlet answered with a doubtful nod. He chose a screwdriver from the toolbox and began to undo some screws. Grey was staring at him thoughtfully.

"So... what's the other reason?"

"Sorry?"

"You said there was more than one reason to hurry things up. One being my injuries. So there must be at least one other."

"You're sure I said that?"

"I may have a concussion, Scarlet, but my head is clear enough right now. I'm pretty sure Ochre and Destiny heard the same too. Why they didn't say anything about it, I don't know."

Scarlet put down the screwdriver, and pulled the casing up. Grey shook his head. "I can see something's troubling you, my friend. What is it?"

Scarlet didn't answer. Walking down to the capsule earlier, he had been wondering if he should tell the others about what he had witnessed. And up to this moment, he hadn't reached a decision yet. Even if they knew about it, it wouldn't change anything... Except, perhaps, emphasizing the urgency of the situation.

It was obvious to Scarlet that the Mysterons had duplicated the Passenger Jet in order to sabotage the airshow. And if that was the case, that would imply that they had all had been targeted to be Mysteronised. All of them, except for Captain Scarlet himself, maybe, for he had his doubts about the possibility of being Mysteronised yet again, as he could no longer be killed.

"What is it, Paul?" he heard Grey asking him again. "What's bothering you?"

Scarlet put down the casing. He was wondering if his colleagues were aware of how close they had been to falling under the Mysterons' control, like he had some weeks ago. He was wondering if they knew that he would probably escape that danger himself... which made him even more different from them. And he was wondering if the aliens truly would need to Mysteronise him again, even if it were possible, since they were probably trying to regain the control they already had on him.

"Would you believe... that I'm frightened, Brad?" Scarlet asked Grey, rubbing his hands nervously, looking into the distance.

"You?" an astounded Grey exclaimed. "I've never known you to be afraid of anything. Even before you became indestructible."

"Not so. But I always could keep my fears in check. And now, with the Mysterons..." Scarlet shrugged his shoulders.

"What did you see up there?" Grey asked him.

"What did I see?" Scarlet stared at his friend's face. "I saw the extent of the Mysterons' powers. I saw as they duplicated that jet. I saw the duplicate flying above my head and going to carry out its orders... No doubt to sabotage the airshow." He got to his feet and began pacing in front of a dumbfounded Grey. "I was there and what I saw gave me the creeps... I've never been so afraid in all my life." He stopped, and looked at Grey again. "I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe... I could only... watch."

"And what exactly was it that frightened you so much?" Grey asked, frowning. "Do you know?"

"Do I?" Scarlet sighed, running his hand into his hair. "All the people onboard the plane, Grey. All of them... All of YOU: you were to be Mysterionised. Like the plane itself."

"You left yourself out, I notice."

"Why would they Mysterionise me again, Brad? Even if they COULD... All they have to do is wait until they are able to regain control of me." Scarlet sat back in front of the transmitter. "And I'm scared to death they will actually succeed," he murmured.

"Oh, now, if you're thinking about Fawn and his theories..."

"It hasn't left my mind for one second, Brad!" Scarlet interrupted abruptly. "What happened up there, it was so unreal. I saw what they did! I FELT their presence before it actually happened!"

"Felt?" Grey repeated, frowning.

"Yes, in the form of a wave of nausea, stronger than any I've felt until now. Even as I'm speaking to you now, my head is still hurting. And I know they're near."

"And... if it was just that?" Grey murmured thoughtfully.

"What?"

"If it was just that? What if those spells you're having are just some kind of feeling... a 'sixth sense' you've developed about the Mysterons since your encounter with them?"

Scarlet had a doubtful frown. "Grey, you know that sounds absolutely crazy..."

"Not as crazy as that idea of yours that the Mysterons are trying to regain control of you!"

"That's not MY idea."

"Maybe, but it's something you fear." Grey could see Scarlet was rather sceptical about his theory. He shook his head. "Think about it, mate: what if it was possible? Could it explain all those spells?"

"No, not all of them..." Scarlet was thoughtful. The week before, when he had the first dizzy spell, the Delta Liner the Mysterons had taken over had just arrived at London International Airport. Then today, it happened just before the Mysterons had made their threat. And then there was that violent nausea that had hit him when they Mysterionised the Aero Special One. He could not yet explain the spell he had in the duty hangar, but if he was to follow Captain Grey's theory, he could attribute his headache throughout the flight to the impending danger they were all in ...

Then why the Hell hadn't it left him yet?

He shook his head. "I'd like to agree with you, Grey, but there are still some unexplained details about..."

Scarlet stopped short when he saw Captain Ochre and Destiny coming back from the cockpit. Ochre had the battery cell in his hands. He put it down next to the radio transmitter, and then looked at his now silent colleagues. "Something going on?" he asked.

"No, nothing at all," Grey responded quietly.

"You look green, Brad. Maybe you shouldn't overexert yourself," Ochre replied. He turned to Scarlet. "There's your battery. According to Destiny, it's in perfect condition. Brand new, as a matter of fact. All that's left to do is to hook it to the transmitter."

Scarlet nodded thoughtfully. "Good. Let's get down to it, then."

"While you and Destiny do that, I'll go check the flares. I don't want them to get snowed in."

"Yes, we'd better be quick, before the weather gets too bad outside. As soon as the transmitter's ready, I'll be on my way."

"There's no way I'll let you go up there alone," Ochre protested vehemently.

"I thought we'd agreed, Ochre, that this expedition would be pretty risky."

"Yes, we agreed on that. And that is exactly why I'm going with you."

"Out of the question."

"Look, you may be indestructible, but that doesn't mean you should be the only one to take risks. Remember that we are Spectrum agents as well as you. We can take care of ourselves. We're not children you have to take care of, for God's sake!"

Silence followed as the two men stared each other in the eyes, neither one of them willing to give in.

"What about the emergency flares around the capsule?" Scarlet asked. "Somebody must maintain them."

"I can take care of that," Destiny proposed. "Now, if the two of you would stop playing macho..."

"I'm not playing macho," Scarlet replied rather dryly.

"And neither am I," Ochre said in turn. "I'm just trying to point out to our fearless leader here that it would be madness to go up there alone."

"Ochre..."

"If you fell into a precipice with that equipment," Ochre interrupted abruptly, "you might not be able to get out of there all by yourself. And then what would happen to the rest of us?"

Scarlet could not find any answer. Ochre looked defiantly at him one last time before turning away from him. He pulled up the hood of his coat over his head.

"Think about it while I go check the flares," he said. "As soon as you have finished preparing the transmitter, we'll pick up some ropes and enough warm clothing and be on our way. In the meantime, call me if you need me. I'll be outside."

He picked up some more flares from a box near the door, pulled the blanket aside and went out, without even looking back. Scarlet's glare followed him until the blanket fell behind him. Then the British agent sat down in front of the transmitter.

"We'd better prepare that thing, Destiny, if we ever want to be ready to go..."

"So you'll let Captain Ochre go with you?" the French pilot asked.

"He's right, you know," Grey remarked in turn.

"Yes, I know," Scarlet sighed. He looked at Destiny. "And that is why we'll go together. Anyway, he doesn't leave me any choice in the matter, does he?"

"I'm glad he's going with you," Destiny said, sitting too. She chose an assortment of wires and proceeded to strip the ends. Scarlet began to remove the old power cell from the transmitter, shooting some furtive glances in the young woman's direction.

"Why does that make you glad?" he asked her.

The question took the French woman by surprise. She looked at Scarlet with some embarrassment, but quickly regained her composure. "Ochre's argument about what would happen to us if you go all alone to climb that mountain was a valid one," she said, shaking her head.

"Oh!" Scarlet sounded somehow disappointed. "I thought that..." He stopped.

"What?" Destiny didn't even look at him; she could sense his eyes staring intensely at her, waiting for a reaction.

He shrugged. "No. Nothing. Forget about it."

He concentrated on his work and didn't notice Destiny giving him a concealed look. *I know what you hope to hear, she thought, but I'm not about to say it to you.* Though there might have been some truth in the fact that the young woman felt some worries about Scarlet's safety rather than their own, she wasn't ready to admit it yet. Not to herself and least of all to him. She was still unsure of the mixed feelings she was presently having about him.

But if Scarlet had his doubts about that, Captain Grey was certain he knew what was going on. Lying there quietly, he could see all the reactions of his two colleagues, who were trying to avoid any eye contact. He had guessed the turmoil within Destiny. The time was not far, he thought with a faint smile, when the girl would completely overcome her resentment and begin fully trusting Captain Scarlet, the way she did before this whole mess with the Mysterons.

Ochre, however, Captain Grey grimly added to himself, was another matter altogether...

* * *

Captain Ochre had just finished clearing up the snow that had covered the flares he had put around the capsule. He stood up and pulled up the collar of his coat around his neck. Blowing a heavy sigh, he looked up the snowy sky. At least, he thought, if a plane flies low enough, there was a good chance its occupants would see them.

Ochre shot a glance toward the capsule; *Scarlet and Destiny must be about finished preparing that transmitter*, he thought. *We'll be on our way soon. Good thing, too.* The snow was falling heavily; the winds weren't too strong right now, but if they rose, they would end up with a pretty bad blizzard.

Better go see what they're doing, Ochre mused, moving toward the door. *We can't wait much longer.*

He heard a sound behind him and stopped suddenly. He spun around. Was it his imagination? Or maybe it was the wind playing tricks with his ears... It was like a low moan, in which he could swear he had heard his name.

There was a large boulder about ten feet in front of him. He thought he saw movement behind it. He approached it with caution, his right hand on the handle of his pistol. He pricked up his ears, but this time heard nothing. Still, he continued to walk toward the boulder.

He had just reached it when someone sprang from behind... and fell off-balance right between his arms. A stunned Ochre nearly had a stroke when he recognized the pale face of the man staring at him.

"Dear God!" he murmured. "Jim!"

"Am I glad to see you, Rick..." Commander Torey's tired features lit up with a faint smile as he struggled to get to his feet, leaning on the boulder behind him. Ochre helped him up. Torey's breathing was heavy. He was absolutely exhausted, his clothes were in rags, but otherwise, he seemed fine.

"You're alive!" Ochre said. "I can't believe it!"

"Yeah, me neither," Torey responded, trying to get his breath back. "Although I came very close to dying... I think I may have a few broken ribs." He winced, getting his balance back. "It's a real miracle, Rick. In fact, if the Aero's fuel tanks hadn't been empty, it would have exploded as it crashed... and it would have been 'bye bye Jimmy'."

"That doesn't explain how you survived," Ochre replied. He was still on his guard, not sure how to react to Torey's unexpected return. The commander looked at him with perplexity in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Rick? I'd swear you don't believe me..." Seeing how Ochre didn't seem to react to this remark, he sighed. "I was thrown out of the plane through a rip in the side," he explained. "I landed on a thick layer of snow... that broke my fall." He looked to Ochre closely. The Spectrum agent was still unsure of what to do. "I swear it, Rick! It's the truth! What is it? What are you afraid of?"

"You tell me," Ochre replied, still defiant. "Scarlet said you were dead."

"Oh! He would say that, wouldn't he?" Torey said dryly. He put his hand on Ochre's shoulder, looking him squarely in the eyes. "That guy's not human, Rick. I don't know what he is... but he's not human!" Ochre didn't bat an eyelid. He just noticed that Torey seemed somehow panicky. "I don't know how HE survived that crash... He came walking out of that wreckage, like some sort of... of zombie or something. I saw him, Rick. He was injured, but that didn't seem to bother him. He passed right by me... I needed help, I begged him to give me a hand. He just stared at me. That look, Rick... The look in his eyes..." Torey shivered and looked away. "I've never seen the likes of it before. It was something inhuman."

Torey seemed to lose his footing and hugged his arms around himself, obviously freezing. Ochre then removed his coat and put it over his friend's shoulders, who thanked him with a nod. "He passed right by me. Never even acknowledged my presence. Like he didn't care." Torey shook his head, staring back at dumbfounded Captain Ochre. "He didn't seem to be the same man he was on the craft, Rick. WHAT is he?"

"What happened then?" Ochre asked him, instead of answering his question.

Torey shrugged. "I'm not quite sure. I... I think you'll say I'm crazy, but..."

"Go on."

"I heard the engines of a plane, flying overhead. When I looked up... Rick, it was a Passenger Jet. And even in the falling snow... I could have sworn it was the Aero Special One."

"What?" Ochre exclaimed.

"I know that sounds crazy. The Aero Special had crashed and... It must have been an hallucination. I lost consciousness then. When I woke up, Scarlet was gone. He must have thought I was dead!" Torey peered closely at Ochre. "You do believe me, don't you?"

The Spectrum officer didn't respond. His feelings were in turmoil right this moment. Torey was there, in front of him, very much alive, and after having heard his side of the story, Ochre was quite in dismay. These last few hours, he could have sworn Scarlet was on the level. Now he wasn't sure about anything at all.

A confrontation seemed in order, Ochre thought. Maybe when Scarlet and Torey came face to face, then he would know what to do. He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Come with me. We'll have to see what Captain Scarlet has to say about your story."

"I can use some warm coffee right now, Rick," Torey said with a faint smile.

"You'll get it. I promise you. Now come."

Ochre guided Commander James Torey toward the capsule. Walking a couple of feet behind the Spectrum agent, a victorious smile spread across the pilot's features... A smile Captain Ochre failed to notice.

* * *

Captain Scarlet had just finished putting the casing back on the transmitter with the help of Destiny Angel when a new wave of nausea suddenly hit him. It was a violent one. Almost like the one he had when the Mysterons made their reconstruction of the Aero Special One. If he hadn't been seated, the British captain would probably have fallen. Destiny saw him becoming very pale and taking his head between his hands. Concerned, she touched him gently. "Are you sick?"

Captain Grey, who had been feeling bad himself some minutes ago, was about to doze off when he heard Destiny's worried question. He opened his eyes and tried to raise himself on his forearms to look upon Scarlet. The latter pushed him back down. "Keep your strength, Brad. You'll need it."

"You don't look too good yourself," Grey noted. "What is it this time?"

"I don't know." Scarlet looked toward the blanket covering the opening on the side of the capsule. "I need to go outside. Get some fresh air..."

"Good idea," Grey sighed, trying to get himself comfortable. Scarlet glanced thoughtfully at his wounded colleague, then turned to Destiny.

"Keep your eye on him," he whispered to her before getting to his feet. She nodded and watched as he strode toward the exit. She saw him pushing the blanket aside to get out. Then, she turned her attention to Captain Grey.

Scarlet didn't feel any better outside the capsule than inside it. As a matter of fact, he felt quite the opposite. *Dear God, what is happening to me?* he asked himself.

Throughout the falling snow, he saw a figure wearing a yellow coat coming slowly toward him. He walked up to it.

"Captain Ochre, did you finish with the flares?"

He received no response. A strange, unnerving feeling of impending danger came over him as the figure drew nearer. Instinctively, Scarlet put his hand on the handle of his pistol.

"Ochre?"

He didn't have anything to fear from Ochre, wasn't that right? Even if his colleague was presently holding him in so much contempt, that didn't mean he would go to the extent of threatening him in any way...

"Ochre, why don't you..."

Scarlet's words died on his lips upon seeing the face of the man who had just stopped about five feet in front of him. The Spectrum agent took a step backward. "Commander Torey!"

"Surprised to see me alive, Captain?"

'Surprised' was putting it mildly. Absolutely astounded would have best described Captain Scarlet's reaction to the man he had seen dead a couple of hours earlier. And then there was the absolute certainty that THIS man wasn't what he appeared to be. There was no doubt in Scarlet's mind that he was facing a Mysteron reconstruct.

"Damn it..."

Scarlet quickly drew his weapon; he aimed it at Torey who suddenly looked at him in panic.

"Please, don't shoot!"

Strange, thought a puzzled Scarlet. He had a feeling fear would not be part of a Mysteron agent's retained traits... Unless it was just an act.

The Spectrum officer didn't have time to assess his suspicion. As soon as the thought came to his mind, his eye caught a shadow coming fast toward him to his right. He was pushed to the ground with tremendous strength and lost his weapon in the fall. He struggled to get free, but his attacker was keeping him pinned to the ground, using all his weight.

A bewildered Scarlet just had time to glimpse Captain Ochre's angry face, just before the butt of a golden coloured pistol hit him violently over the forehead. He instantly lost consciousness.

Chapter 7

There were reactions of surprise when Captain Ochre entered the capsule, carrying an unconscious Captain Scarlet whom he dumped unceremoniously onto a large seat. Their surprise then turned to amazement when Commander Torey entered, and carefully told them his story, just like he had told it to Ochre a few minutes before. Then pure outrage took Captain Grey over, as he turned an accusing glare on his fellow officer who, putting a new coat on, related how he had knocked Scarlet out, in order to prevent him from shooting the UAE pilot.

"Are you completely out of your mind?" Grey bellowed at Ochre. "You actually hit him? How can you be so sure Torey has even told you the truth? He could be lying through his teeth!"

"I'm really touched by your trust in me, Captain Grey," Torey noted in a cold and cynical tone.

"Shut up, I'm not talking to you," Grey replied bitterly. He turned back to Ochre who was now proceeding to cuff Scarlet's right hand to one of the metal feet of the seat. Grey was absolutely dismayed. "Ochre, you're going too far!"

"Look, I had no choice!" Ochre replied harshly. "He was about to shoot Commander Torey! I had to stop him!"

"Did you have to hit him so hard?" Destiny asked Ochre. She had come nearer to examine the gush of blood from Scarlet's forehead. He had a large, deep wound that seemed serious enough. She put a damp dressing on it, to stop the bleeding. "You could have killed him, Captain," she said, addressing Ochre again.

"Give me a break! Nothing can kill that guy. He's survived worse. I HAD to hit him hard if I was to be sure I'd actually stop him."

"How do you know he was really about to shoot Torey?" Grey retorted.

"I saw it, Grey!"

"And what if he had a good reason to do it?"

"Spectrum agents don't act that way. We're not killers!"

"We didn't have to face the Mysterons before, Ochre! New enemies mean new ways to deal with them!"

Ochre sighed. He crouched next to Grey. "Look, we all know where this guy comes from," he almost whispered. "We all know what he tried to do to the World President. How can we be sure he hasn't reverted to that?"

"How can we be sure he has?" Grey responded dryly.

"Why hasn't he told us about the Mysteronised jet, like Jim did?"

"He told ME, Ochre!" Grey almost shouted.

"He told you?" Ochre repeated incredulously.

"Just did, before you came from the cockpit with Destiny and the battery."

"Why didn't he tell US, then?"

"I guess he never had the chance. Remember? You argued with him before going outside... And then you clobbered him!"

"I see." Ochre sighed again. "Is there anything else he told you, without telling the rest of us, Grey?" he asked roughly.

"I don't see your point."

"I'd say this is a good way to win your trust, my friend," Ochre said shaking his head. "I know about the dizzy spells."

"What?" Grey's face paled. "How?"

"That's not important."

"The Hell it isn't! How did you find out?"

Destiny, who was still attending to the unconscious Scarlet's wound, turned a curious gaze toward the two officers. Torey was keeping away, watching the scene in silence.

"What dizzy spells?" the Angel pilot asked, sounding suddenly uneasy.

"You remember how Scarlet seemed to get sick before boarding the plane?" Ochre replied.

"He didn't seem well either during the flight," Destiny nodded. "But what..."

"According to Doctor Fawn," Ochre interrupted her, "those spells might be an indication that the Mysterons are trying to regain control over Scarlet."

"What?" Destiny murmured, frowning. "Are you sure?"

"I heard Scarlet himself telling Grey, in the plane."

"So you were listening," Grey exclaimed. "I would never have thought you would spy on us, Ochre!"

"Come on, Grey! I came upon that information by chance."

"It's FALSE information! There is no way Fawn could be sure. Even Colonel White was certain there was something else about this..."

"The Colonel KNOWS about this?" a bewildered Destiny asked in dismay.

"That's what Scarlet said to you," Ochre replied, addressing Grey. "How do we know for sure it's the truth? Why would Colonel White send him with us if there was any chance Doctor Fawn could be right?"

"I can't believe the Colonel would take such a risk," Destiny sighed. "Not with what has happened since the beginning of this..."

"I think you're jumping to conclusions, the both of you," Grey noted.

"Really?" Ochre pointed to Scarlet. "You heard Torey describe how Scarlet acted up there, after the crash? Didn't it sound somehow familiar? Don't you remember what Blue and the World President told us about Scarlet, after the Car-Vu incident?"

"Then why would he have risked his life saving ours, so we could escape today?" Destiny remarked in an uncertain and sad voice.

"I don't know." Ochre sighed heavily. "Maybe he's not totally responsible for what he's doing. Maybe he acts normal and then answers the Mysterons' call when they need him..."

"*Mon Dieu...*" Destiny whispered, a shiver running down her spine.

"One thing is for sure, he may be dangerous. He left Commander Torey for dead up there... A few minutes ago, he tried to kill him. What's he planning for us?" Ochre shook his head. "My guess is that he would have killed us, one by one, fulfilling the Mysterons' threat."

"And to do that, he came here, with that transmitter, and proposed to go install it on top of a mountain to call Spectrum to our rescue?" Grey sounded sceptical.

Ochre shrugged. "And an unsuspecting Spectrum rescue team would have come here to save us," he replied grimly. "And would have collected reconstructed Mysterons agents..."

Destiny stared at Captain Ochre with horror in her eyes. She then looked back to the still unconscious Scarlet, with the same horrified expression. "Even knowing what he is, I can't believe he would have premeditated such a horrid plan..." She shivered, looking away. "This is a nightmare..."

"Oh, for God's sake..." Grey could not believe what he was hearing. He turned a furious glance toward Ochre. "Your paranoia has got out of hand! I know you haven't trusted Scarlet since he's been back with us, but I would never had imagined you would go to those lengths... He's our field commander for this mission and you actually hit him..."

"Look me in the eyes, Grey," Ochre replied roughly, "and tell me that at no time was there any doubt in your mind about Scarlet's loyalty to Spectrum."

"I..."

Grey stopped. There was a doubt, he had to admit. If just the shadow of one. He had always preferred not to think about it. Seeing his hesitation, Ochre nodded thoughtfully and got to his feet, sighing.

"I thought so," he said. "I'm sorry, Brad, but as long as we're stuck up here, we're going to keep Scarlet secured."

"I take it you're taking command?" Grey asked bitterly.

"I have no choice. You're out of action, right now. That leaves me."

"You realize you're risking a court-martial? What you're doing could be interpreted as mutiny."

"I'll take the risk."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a little while, as Grey, still unsure, stared defiantly at Ochre. Torey still waited silently, away from the conversation. To say he didn't seem interested by it would have been a lie. "Would one of you explain to me what all this is about?" he asked

suddenly. "I feel like I just jumped right in the middle of a movie... What are these Mysterons exactly? And what's their relationship with Captain Scarlet?"

"Sorry, Jim," Ochre replied. "Most of it is restricted information."

"Restricted maybe, but this all seems pretty bizarre..."

"We really can't tell you," Ochre sighed. "At least, not now..." He looked toward Grey and got to his feet. "Look, Grey, we'll settle this later. The blizzard's coming fast. I have to get that transmitter up on a mountain and make that call so we can be rescued."

"You're going ahead with Scarlet's plan?" Grey asked ironically.

"It was a good plan nonetheless," Ochre retorted. He turned to Destiny. "The transmitter's ready?"

"Yes it is," the young woman said, a bit hesitantly. "But, Captain, you can't go up there alone. The same reason you gave to Captain Scarlet applies to you too."

"Do I have a choice?"

"I'll go with you," Torey proposed. There was a moment of silent surprise following his words. Grey looked up at him suspiciously. Even if Ochre had installed some doubts in his mind concerning Scarlet's loyalty, he didn't trust Torey at all. But he didn't want to show it too openly.

"I don't think it would be a good idea," he noted.

Ochre hesitated. He too had some mistrust of Torey, the same as for Scarlet, but perhaps less strongly. If only there was a way of being totally sure... In the case of the UAE pilot, however, the idea was to not leave him with the others. Just in case.

"All right," Ochre said. "You'll come with me, Jim. Get yourself ready. We go in five minutes."

"What is it you Spectrum agents say?" Torey asked with a grim smile. "S.I.G.?"

He walked toward the emergency cabinet to fetch some more winter clothing. Ochre crouched in front of the transmitter next to Grey and was putting it back in the cloth bag Scarlet had brought it in. Grey was staring at him with worry in his eyes. When his colleague closed the bag and started to get to his feet, Grey grabbed him by his sleeve.

"Rick... You better be careful up there."

Ochre looked at his friend. He noticed the tired, pale features. *He's getting weaker*, he thought. *There's no telling how long he will be able to stay conscious now...* He put a reassuring hand on the wounded man's shoulder. "I'll be all right, Brad."

"The commander... I don't trust him," Grey insisted in a whisper.

"I'll keep my eyes open," Ochre promised.

"You'd better." Grey shook his head. "For Scarlet's sake, I hope you're wrong. But if you're right, you..."

"Hey, don't worry about me. I'm a tough guy. I can take care of myself." Ochre's tone had softened a bit. He patted his friend's shoulder. "You better get some rest. You're tiring yourself."

Grey nodded quietly and lay down. Ochre pulled the blanket up to his colleague's neck and stood up. Taking the bag, he went to Destiny, who stood up when he drew level with her. He gestured towards Grey. "Take care of him," he whispered. "I'm worried..."

"Yes, he grows weaker by the minute," Destiny agreed in the same tone. "And all this agitation is not doing him any good..." She looked up at Ochre. "Where are you going, exactly?"

Ochre shrugged. "The peak Scarlet described. It's the highest one surrounding us, and the nearest. I figure about two hours to get to the top and then back...depending on the weather, of course."

"You'll be careful?"

"Sure! I've got all of you to think about." Ochre addressed a roguish smile to the young French pilot. "Aren't I always?"

"I'd swear I'm hearing..." Destiny stopped. The faint smile on her beautiful face disappeared to be replaced by an expression of sadness. She looked away from Ochre, somehow embarrassed by her apparent weakness. The American Captain gently touched her face and she glanced at him again.

"You're thinking about Paul, right?" Ochre asked her.

She nodded and then stared uneasily at Scarlet. "He looks so much like him. He's so much like him..." Her beautiful eyes came back to Ochre. "I can't believe he would do us any harm, Captain."

"Well, we'll find out soon enough," Ochre replied. "Appearances can be deceiving, you know... While Commander Torey and I are away, be careful with him. DON'T LET him manipulate you. I'm sure he'll try to convince you to free him." He put his hand in his coat pocket and brought out a red colour-coded pistol he discreetly presented to Destiny. The young woman stared at the weapon.

"You don't expect me to use this, do you?" she muttered.

"I don't think you'll need it, but... Better safe than sorry, you know? Just in case he gets free and threatens your life and Grey's... He may be indestructible, but he's sure not invulnerable. This pistol will stop him temporarily, if you use it."

"Let's hope it won't be necessary," Destiny said, taking the weapon.

Torey was coming back from the emergency cabinet. He had taken a couple of stout ropes, a grapnel, a pickaxe, and some leather straps. He looked at Ochre and shook his head in dismay. "We could use some pitons, but we don't have much climbing equipment in here," he noted. "Remind me to correct that oversight when we get back to civilisation."

Ochre shrugged, examining the equipment Torey had brought back. "That should be all right. The summit of that peak doesn't seem too difficult to get to. We'll make do with this."

Torey handed him a rope and a new pair of gloves. He nodded toward the exit. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah, let's get on with it." Ochre then turned to Destiny to address her one last time. "Now don't you worry. We'll be back as soon as we've made the transmission. Then it won't be long before Spectrum comes to collect us."

"Let us hope so," Destiny murmured.

Ochre gave her a reassuring smile and went outside, followed by Commander Torey.

* * *

The first part of Captain Ochre's expedition proved to be fairly easy. The path to the plateau where the Passenger Jet had crashed, even if it was uphill, was clear, the snow not too deep, already marked by the previous crossings of Captain Scarlet and Torey. Upon reaching the plateau with Torey, Ochre looked back. He could distinctly see the outlines of the capsule down there, surrounded by the orange flares he had put up. About twenty feet in front of the nose of the capsule was the edge of a steep cliff. A chill ran down Ochre's spine. If the capsule, upon landing, hadn't stopped sliding in time, it would have plunged right off that cliff.

Ochre then took a look around the wreckage of the Aero Special One. It was spread all over the place, the main body of it torn in half. Still having his doubts about Torey, Ochre went exploring, on the pretext of wanting to see if there was anything useful for the survivors. Torey didn't try to stop him and even stayed out of his way. He would take a little rest during that time, he told the Spectrum captain. Ochre lingered mostly around and inside the baggage hold, where both Captain Scarlet and Commander Torey had been trapped during the crash. The side of it was completely ripped open, its contents lying everywhere. Ochre found some traces of blood, staining what was left of the floor, and some damaged luggage, but nothing else. He wondered about Scarlet's story. According to him, he had found Torey's body in the baggage hold. If it was true, and if the man quietly waiting outside was indeed a Mysteron reconstruct, the body of the real Torey would still be around. There was no trace whatsoever that a dead body had been recently carried out of this place.

Then whose blood was this? Torey didn't seem injured to the point of losing so much of it. Scarlet, on the other hand, would have healed from his wounds. He must have sustained some, taking into account the sorry state of his uniform. And Torey did say he saw the British officer walking out of the wreckage, injured but seemingly not shaken by it.

There was still some uncertainty in Ochre's mind when he came back to join Torey, who was waiting for him, quietly puffing on one of those awful cigars the Spectrum agent remembered he was already smoking some years ago when, as Richard Fraser, he had learned flying from him.

"Found anything interesting?" Torey asked him, blowing out smoke.

"Nothing, really." Ochre almost said 'nothing conclusive', but he stopped himself in time. No point in arousing Torey's suspicions, he thought. He frowned, eyeing the cigar hanging from the

commander's mouth. "Put that thing out, please! Don't you think you've polluted your lungs enough as it is?"

Torey laughed. "Never like these things, did you?" he noted, throwing the cigar away. "I remember how annoyed you always seemed whenever I lit up ... You were always saying that life was short enough without having to shorten it even more."

The remark stirred up some mixed feelings within Captain Ochre. Was it just an innocent attempt to reminisce over the past, to alleviate the awkwardness of the situation? Or was Jim Torey trying to allay any suspicions the Spectrum officer might be having toward him?

"My opinion on the subject hasn't changed," Ochre said simply. "Come on. We've lost enough time already."

Torey nodded his agreement and the two men directed their steps toward the mountain that was to be the end of their journey.

Walking knee-deep in snow toward the peak they would climb to make their transmission wasn't easy. Fortunately, the blizzard hadn't begun yet, and a high crest was protecting them from the winds, though the snow was falling thick and fast. As Ochre had earlier deduced, the summit wasn't really difficult to reach. The plateau was situated right next to its easier slope. The only difficult part presented itself in the form of a large shoulder about fifty feet high.

Captain Ochre was a good climber, although the equipment he presently had was pretty inadequate for the job. Using the axe, he scaled a very narrow and slippery ledge, just wide enough for his feet. Torey climbed up close behind him and joined him on the ridge. Then they slowly followed the side of the cliff, grappling any boulder that could provide a good enough support.

For the last twenty feet, Ochre threw the grapnel up, after tying it to the end of one of the ropes. The grapnel caught hold of something at the first try. Ochre tested it with his own weight, and then climbed up it. It was not easy, the Spectrum Captain's hands being numb from the cold, but he succeeded in reaching the top of the cliff and crawled onto it. He was now on a large ridge, covered with thick snow, from where he could still see the flickering emergency flares surrounding the capsule down in the valley. The falling snow was now too dense for him to actually see the capsule itself.

He took a few seconds to catch his breath and evaluate his position. The top of the peak was now about a hundred feet from him, up a crest he would just have to follow to reach it. All in all, it had been a pretty easy climb, he thought.

Torey was now using the rope. When he came within reach, Ochre helped him get his footing on the ridge. The UAE Commander stretched his back, while Ochre was busy securing the rope around a large, solid boulder of ice. The Spectrum agent had figured it was best to leave it there, so they could use it again to get back down to the capsule.

Torey looked over the crest leading to the top of the mountain. "Not much further to go, now, is there?"

Ochre agreed, shaking his head. "We don't have to go farther. The snow is too thick. We can try to use the transmitter here. I'm pretty sure it will work. If not then... we'll go higher."

"Sounds good to me. Hey, climbing up here, that was Captain Scarlet's idea, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Ochre admitted. He made one last knot on the rope, while glancing down the cliff, toward what he could see of the capsule's position. "It was a good idea."

Why was he having that strange feeling of certain and imminent danger lurking around him?

"Wonder what his plan was, anyway?" Torey continued. "Maybe he was going to throw you off that cliff when the two of you reached it..."

The feeling within Ochre suddenly gave way to an icy certitude. It was as if he actually felt Torey reaching to hit him from behind. If he hadn't already been on his guard, he probably would have fallen victim to the traitorous blow the other man was preparing to lay on him with a large piece of ice. Ochre turned around quickly and raised his arm, elbowing Torey in the abdomen. He then reached for his pistol with his other hand and drew it; the improvised weapon of his adversary knocked it from his hand and sent it into the snow.

Ochre pushed Torey away from the fallen weapon, throwing him off balance; he jumped on top of him and grabbed him by the collar of his coat to look angrily into his eyes.

"Why you dirty traitor... You were trying to kill me, weren't you?"

Torey stared back at him, with an evil grin. "Trying?" he repeated coldly. "I'd say I'm about to succeed... *Earthman*."

He pushed Ochre's face away from his, maliciously pressing his thumb into one of Ochre's eyes. The Spectrum officer had to pull back to avoid having his eye put out. Torey hit him in the throat and pushed him toward the edge of the cliff. Ochre narrowly avoided falling over and rolled on his belly to reach a safer point.

The American captain saw Torey going for the gun. Ochre himself was too far away to jump him, so he leapt swiftly to his feet and hid behind a nearby boulder. A bullet rang close to his ear the moment he took cover. He heard Torey utter a loud curse.

"Come on, Rick! You can't win! Make it easy on yourself," Torey sniggered wickedly. "For old times' sake..."

"Go to Hell!" Ochre lashed out angrily from his hiding place.

"I've been to Hell, Rick. Believe me, it's not what they say it is. But you'll see for yourself very soon."

"You're not Jim Torey!"

"Are you so sure of that?"

Ochre could hear Torey's footsteps carefully approaching his position. *He'll kill me*, he thought. *And when I'm dead, he'll go back to the capsule and kill the others. Destiny won't be wary of him, Grey is wounded, and Scarlet is handcuffed. They're defenceless against him...*

"Good God," he muttered, "What have I done?"

The steps were drawing nearer. In one desperate attempt, Captain Ochre sprang from cover, roaring furiously. He threw a handful of snow into Torey's face and jumped him. The gun spat flame into the snow-covered ground. Ochre smashed his fist into Torey's stomach and knocked him down.

He saw the Mysteron agent on his back, raising the gun in his direction. *This time*, Ochre realized grimly, *I'm done for. I've got no chance of avoiding the bullet.*

It was at this moment that he noticed the ground trembling beneath his feet. To his horror, he saw it suddenly disappearing; the thick cover of snow he was standing on crumbled and he fell with a cry of surprise into the hole that had just opened to swallow him.

Torey watched with amazement as the enemy he was about to destroy escaped from the death he had prepared for him, to plunge into the darkness of another one. He rose to his feet and approached what now appeared to be a narrow but deep precipice. He could not get too near, to get a closer look; the snow was threatening to slide down into the opening and would have dragged him along.

"Rick?" he called loudly.

He received no response. Nor did he think he would. He smiled to himself. Alive or dead, Captain Ochre was now finished. There was no way for him to get out of the abyss all by himself. Torey took one last look into the dark hole and then went to the edge of the cliff he had just climbed with the Spectrum officer. His eyes gazed down toward the capsule he could see in the valley, about an hour and a half away from him.

"One down," he muttered, playing distractedly with the yellow colour-coded pistol, "three to go... The Mysterons' instructions will be carried out."

Chapter 8

Destiny Angel had no intention of leaving Captain Scarlet's wound unattended. Traitor or not, aware or unaware of what he was doing, he was still a human being – *well, sort of*, she added to herself grimly – who needed treatment.

He was still unconscious. His wound had stopped bleeding and the dressing Destiny had put on it was now heavily stained a dark brown-red colour. Destiny thought it would be better to change it and to clean up the wound more thoroughly before it became infected.

Captain Grey had fallen asleep, finally giving up to exhaustion. After making sure he was comfortable, Destiny collected the first aid kit and crouched beside the unconscious Scarlet. She removed the dressing on his forehead. Nothing under it but a dark stain of almost dried out blood, she noticed. She frowned. She knew Scarlet was healing fast now, so she deduced the wound would already have reduced itself to a scar. She carefully cleaned up the excess blood to uncover smooth, clean, unmarked skin.

Scarlet suddenly opened his eyes and Destiny, as stunned to see him awake as she was to realize that his injury had already completely disappeared, jumped away from him.

"Destiny!" he gasped, seeing her. He tried to stand up, but his handcuffed arm stopped him. He looked at the restraint in total disbelief. "*What* is going on here?" he asked, with anger in his voice.

"Don't tell me you don't remember!" Destiny almost scoffed, frowning.

He stared at her, his eyes blazing, confused about his present situation. Then the last memories he had – of Captain Ochre's furious face gazing down at him – came back to him.

"Ochre," he muttered. "He clubbed me..."

"So, you do remember that," Destiny noted dryly. "Do you recall why?"

"Damn it! Torey..." Scarlet's throat tightened. "He's alive..."

"You tried to kill him," Destiny reminded him.

Scarlet glared at her, then tried to get up again. She took a step back but the handcuff pulled him back to the seat. He seemed as annoyed as he was frustrated...

... And totally desperate to get free.

"Why am I restrained like this?" he said angrily to the Angel pilot. "Destiny, Torey's a Mysteron!"

"Do you have any proof of that?" Destiny asked.

"Proof? I saw him dead in the wreckage of the jet!"

"That's what you say. He told us a different story: you left him there for dead. He said he was thrown out and saw you walking out of the wreck after the crash."

"I was the one who was thrown out!" Scarlet protested. "And I very nearly broke every bone in my body when I hit the ground. I almost didn't survive it. Nobody else could have pulled a stunt like that and walked away after... You know that."

"Yes, I know," Destiny replied coldly.

Scarlet sighed heavily. "Destiny, nothing human could have survived that crash!"

She stared blankly at him. He then realized what he had just said, but he continued. "Did he seem injured in any way to you?"

"A bit shaken, maybe," Destiny answered. "And obviously afraid of you."

"It was all an act, can't you see that? Destiny, he wasn't wounded because he is a Mysteron agent. When they recreate their victims, they recreate them whole..."

Still Destiny seemed adamant to his plea. Grey gave a low moan from where he was lying. Scarlet glanced toward him as he opened his eyes. The second his American counterpart saw him awake, he gave him a faint smile. "Hey, Scarlet... you okay?"

Scarlet responded with a sigh of relief. *At least one of them seems on my side...* "Frustrated, maybe," he said in answer to his friend. "But physically, I'm fine." He showed his handcuffed wrist. "Ochre's idea, I take it?"

"Yeah," Grey murmured. "Sorry about that. I couldn't do anything to stop him."

"The fool," Scarlet muttered bitterly. He turned back to Destiny. "Where is he? I've got to talk to him!"

As Destiny was carefully keeping silent, it was Grey who responded, in a very tired voice: "He's not here. He's gone with Torey to try and call Cloudbase, the same as you wanted to do..."

"What?" Scarlet bellowed. "He's gone climbing that mountain with Torey?"

"Nice going, Captain," Destiny said sharply to Grey. "Now he knows the two of us are alone with him."

"And what can he do, restrained like that?" Grey replied weakly.

"Listen to me, Destiny," Scarlet continued with urgency in his voice, "Torey's a Mysteron. If Ochre has gone to that mountain with him, he's as good as dead! And so are the rest of us!"

"Well, in that case," Destiny retorted icily, "I suppose that leaves you off the hook, since you cannot be killed."

Scarlet's face paled, hearing those harsh words. His heart felt terribly heavy, seeing Destiny's cold expression.

"Why do you hate me so much?" he asked, his words almost catching in his throat.

"I don't hate you," the young woman defended herself.

"What is it then?" Scarlet lashed out. "I know you're uneasy with me. You don't think I'm the same man as before, isn't that right?"

"The man I knew is dead."

"Ochre said the same thing. You're both wrong."

"Are we? You were created to do the Mysterons' bidding."

"I'm free of their influence, for God's sake! I have been for the last three weeks. Can't you see that? I don't even remember anything of what I did during the time they had me under their control."

"You, you keep saying that." Destiny narrowed her eyes, looking sternly at him. "What proof do we really have you are indeed free from them? What can assure us that you are not actually planning to kill us all in these mountains, so the Mysterons can create cloned agents from all of us?"

"Destiny, please, you can't really believe that!"

"I don't know what to believe, actually," Destiny sighed. "All I know is that I don't want to talk to you."

She turned her back with the obvious intention of getting out when Scarlet succeeded in getting to his feet and desperately called out to her:

"Juliette!"

The sound of her first name stopped her and she spun around to face Scarlet. He was looking at her with pleading eyes, reaching out his free hand in her direction. "You KNOW I would never do ANYTHING to hurt you," he said, almost whispering. "Not of my own free will, Juliette. And I've got my own free will. Please, believe me when I say we're all in terrible danger! I don't care about me. I only care about you and Brad. Torey will kill Ochre up there, if he hasn't already... and he'll come back here to finish the job."

Grey got up on one elbow and looked up to Destiny, whose hesitation was fairly apparent. "Listen to him, honey," he murmured. "I believe him. You know, if he's telling the truth, and I think he is, we've got to act fast. Not just for our sakes, but for Rick's as well."

"You're getting worse, Brad," Destiny noted, with worry in her voice.

"Yeah, I know... I can feel it. And if Torey has his way, I'll be dead before the day is over. We all will be."

"I... don't know what to think any more."

Captain Scarlet sighed heavily. "If it's proof you want, I can't offer you any," he said. "The only thing I can think of that may change your mind about me, would be for you to go to the crash site of the Aero Special One. If I'm right, the body of the real James Torey will still be there, in the baggage hold... providing his Mysteron reconstruct hasn't hidden it anywhere else."

Destiny looked blankly at him. "It is what you did... with the body of the real Captain Scarlet, isn't it?"

Scarlet shivered; he could see the mere thought of it was excruciatingly painful for the young woman. *She's looking at me as if I'm a monster*, he noticed with dismay. He hesitated, and then sighed again, not really knowing what to say. "They say I may have done," he answered truthfully. He shook his head. "Like I told you... I simply can't remember."

She nodded, looking at him coldly, but straight in the eyes. "According to you," she said, "the path to the wreckage is a half hour walk..."

"More or less," Scarlet agreed.

"It would take me about an hour to go there and then get back," Destiny remarked. "And if I find what you say I would find, it may still be too late to save Captain Ochre... if it's not already too late."

Scarlet nodded grimly. There wasn't much he could say on that matter. "I swear to you, Destiny," he added softly, "it's not a trick on my part..." He indicated the opening hidden behind the blanket hanging from the side of the capsule. "I must say I would prefer that you stay here. It may be dangerous for you if you go to check the wreckage. It's on the way to the mountain Ochre and Torey have gone to... You might meet Torey..."

"If what you say is true."

"It's the truth, Juliette. I'm not lying to you."

He sounded so sincere; Destiny would have loved so much to believe him implicitly. But she was still hesitant to do so. Notwithstanding the possible danger of their situation if he was telling the truth, if she were to go check the crash site, that would mean leaving Grey alone with Scarlet... And even if Scarlet was restrained, that was a responsibility she was not sure she was ready to take.

"I... I'm sorry. I can't reach a decision, right now."

"We don't have the luxury of waiting," Scarlet urged her.

Destiny gave him one last look before pulling the hood of her coat over her head and suddenly turning away from him. He saw her pulling the blanket aside. "Where are you going?" he called to her.

"I have to go check the flares," was the quick uneasy reply. "They must not get snowed in..."

"Juliette, wait!"

She didn't turn back and left hurriedly. A dismayed Scarlet exchanged worried glances with Captain Grey, who didn't know what to do. "Sorry about that, Paul."

"Sorry for what?" Scarlet sat back down. "You're not responsible if I can't prove myself to two of my friends... who in turn can't even give me the benefit of the doubt."

"I wish I knew what Destiny will do," Grey whispered. "Think she'll go to the wreck?"

"I really can't say." Scarlet tested the strength of the metal chairleg he was secured to. He let out a low, annoyed growl. "I have to find a way to get free before Torey comes back to finish us."

"I suppose you're referring to Destiny and me, rather than yourself," Grey noted, looking at him. "Let's face it, Scarlet, Destiny is right about that: you've got nothing to fear from Torey. After seeing you revive after the incident at the airport, I don't think there is much that can really injure you permanently."

"I won't bet on that one," Scarlet grumbled. "Anyway, you'll understand if I'm not eager to put it to the test."

"Point taken," Grey sighed. "I wish I could help you. But Ochre has taken the key to the handcuffs with him."

"Wasn't trusting you and Destiny to keep me in check?"

"I'd rather say he wasn't trusting YOU. He knew you would try to convince us to release you."

"Are there any weapons in here?"

"I don't have my pistol. I suppose Ochre must have taken it. The only one around is yours... and Destiny's got that."

Scarlet was eyeing the toolbox, right next to Grey. "Maybe there's something in there which can help us," he murmured thoughtfully.

Grey glanced in turn at the toolbox. "Don't kid yourself, sport! Those are magnetic handcuffs Ochre put on you. You can't pick the lock, you know that."

"I wasn't thinking about the cuffs, but rather of that damned metal chairleg..."

"Reinforced steel. It's not even hollow. Believe me, if it withstood the crash, it could withstand anything. And the bolts at the base are secured. You can't unscrew them."

Scarlet looked at the handcuff in frustration. He slid it down to the floor where he crouched, and then stretched out, trying to reach the toolbox with his free arm. He didn't even come near it. "Too far," he muttered. "Grey, can you push it toward me?"

Pushing himself up on one elbow, Grey leaned toward the toolbox and grabbed one of its side handles. He pushed it hard in Scarlet's direction, biting his lip. He was obviously in great pain from the effort, judging from his contorted face. *We've got to get some help for him soon*, Scarlet thought grimly, while grabbing for the other handle of the box. He pulled it to him. Grey lay back with a heavy sigh, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Are you okay, Brad?" Scarlet asked him in concern.

"Yeah, I'm okay," responded the American in a croak.

"You've just exhausted yourself," Scarlet noted. "I shouldn't have asked you..."

"Drop it," Grey cut in. "I'd rather die trying to do something helpful than waiting until my injuries finish me off... or Torey, as a matter of fact." He rose slightly on his elbow and looked back at his British friend. "Now, is there anything useful in that box?"

Captain Scarlet was looking inside the toolbox; he searched it with his free hand, putting aside screwdrivers, spanners and pliers. He found a hammer which he took out of the box, looking at it thoughtfully.

Grey snorted lightly. "What can you do with that? Are you going to try destroying the mounting of that seat to get out of those cuffs?"

"Could be useful as a weapon against Torey," Scarlet retorted, musing.

"Not much of a weapon, if you ask me..." Grey muttered. "Torey would have to get very close to you if you want to use it... Unless you're planning to throw it at him."

Scarlet let the hammer fall into the box. He sat on the floor, a worried expression on his features. He had to find a way to get free soon, so he could protect Destiny and Captain Grey... the girl wouldn't be able to stand her ground against a fanatical Mysteron agent, and Grey, in the state he presently was in, would be easy prey. Captain Scarlet himself wasn't much of a threat, right now, cuffed and unarmed as he was...

"I can't believe we're in such a mess," Grey murmured. "You know, I almost wish right now that Ochre was right about you... We wouldn't have anything to fear if it was the case, would we?"

"Sorry, Brad." Scarlet smiled faintly at his friend's pitiful attempt at a joke. "I wish I could reassure you, but..."

He stopped; a shiver ran down his spine and his head started throbbing; he pressed it against the arm of the seat and closed his eyes. *Oh no! No, not one of those dizzy spells... And if Grey was right about them...*

"Scarlet, what is it?" Grey asked, seeing his colleague's sudden indisposition. "Ochre hit you pretty hard, maybe you're in worse shape than you thought..."

"It's not that," the Brit replied. He looked toward the door. "It's HIM."

Grey blanched and also looked up in the direction of the door. *So soon?* he thought. *And what about Captain Ochre?*

The blanket was slowly pulled open to the side and the two Spectrum officers saw the barrel of a golden colour-coded gun. Then the face of Commander Jim Torey appeared, looking at them coldly. A smile spread across his face as he stepped inside.

"Captain Scarlet," he said with sarcasm in his voice, "you look in rather bad shape..."

Scarlet didn't answer and simply gazed at the Mysteron's face with a stare that was unmistakably as unyielding as before. Torey looked down at a very pale Captain Grey. "You look almost as bad as your friend there," he added. "What is it, your head's hurting from where Captain Ochre slugged you?" He shook his head, musing. "You seem to have healed pretty well from it..."

"What have you done with Ochre?" Scarlet asked heavily.

"Forget him. We had just climbed a cliff and we were near the summit of that mountain when the fool fell into a crevasse, with your precious transmitter. I was about to kill him, anyway..."

"Where is Destiny?" Grey asked in turn. "You murdered her too?"

"Not yet. Her time will come. I didn't see her outside, but she can't be very far. If I were in your place, I would be more concerned about my own safety, though."

"She'll escape you," Scarlet replied sharply. "If you didn't see her, that may be because she has gone to check on the wreckage of the jet on the plateau. She will see for herself what kind of monster you truly are."

"Monster, Captain?" Torey retorted. "Then I wonder what that makes you. Oh yes, I know about you... I know what a threat you could become to the Mysterons. We must not allow that to happen. I will have to kill you... the same as your... 'friends'." He stressed the last word, intent on reminding Scarlet that his friends had betrayed him and by doing so had put him at the mercy of his enemy. The British Spectrum officer did not lower his gaze when Torey aimed his gun straight at his head. "A bullet will stop you temporarily. I will have to think of a way to completely destroy you afterward."

"That is all your masters can think about, isn't it?" Scarlet replied between clenched teeth. "Killing... and destruction..."

"The Earthmen began this war!" Torey snapped angrily. "The Mysterons intend to finish it on their own terms!" He shrugged his shoulders. "They were YOUR masters too, once..."

"Yes, so I found out... to my utmost horror."

"I am truly sorry. But the Mysterons must prevail. At least, by killing you first, I will spare you the pain of seeing your friends die in front of your eyes."

Torey was about to fire when a red-coloured gun suddenly appeared from behind the blanket. The barrel pressed itself hard against the back of his skull, and a very distinctive, heavily accented and furious voice rang in his ear: "Drop it this instant. I won't repeat myself."

There was a combined sigh of relief from both Captain Grey and Captain Scarlet when Torey lowered his gun to the ground and let go of it. Grey addressed an uneasy, thankful smile to a grim looking Destiny Angel who walked into the cabin.

"You didn't come back a moment too soon, honey," he told her weakly.

"I was on the other side of the capsule, checking the flares, when I saw Commander Torey coming back, alone," Destiny explained. She gazed at Scarlet, who was trying uneasily to stand up. "I owe you some apologies, Captain Scarlet. I should never have doubted you."

"Hearing that is comforting in itself," Scarlet smiled slightly.

"Do you really think you can win, Earthmen?" Torey said ominously. "You are still stuck here, in the cold, with almost no food and absolutely no way of calling for help. And one of your people is already dead."

"You have killed Captain Ochre?" Destiny asked, her voice bleak.

"He said Ochre fell into a precipice," Scarlet said quickly. "Maybe there is still a chance..."

"Don't kid yourself, Captain Scarlet!" Torey laughed. "He's lost, the same as you are, the three of you!"

"Oh, change the record!" Grey muttered. "This is getting monotonous."

"Maybe there is still a chance for you too, Commander," Scarlet noted.

"Me? You're even more of a fool than I thought you were, Captain. What chance do you think your kind can offer me? Look at the way they treated you! They can't even bring themselves to trust you."

"Shut up!" Destiny ordered, pressing the barrel closer against the Mysteron's skull. "We were short-sighted, yes, but you did your worst entertaining our doubts against him."

"You think I have done my worst yet, Earthwoman?" Torey replied to her with a cold, threatening tone. "Then you've seen nothing yet!"

Acting like a man who had absolutely nothing to lose, Torey suddenly spun on his heel, fast as a snake. Destiny realized she was standing too close to him when his hand pushed the barrel of her gun away from him. The weapon discharged itself on the floor and Torey, with a roar of victory, threw himself at the young French woman.

With untold horror and disbelief, Scarlet and Grey saw Destiny and Torey stumbling against the blanket covering the opening on the side of the capsule and then falling outside, completely disappearing from their view.

"Juliette!" Scarlet yelled.

"My God, Destiny!" Grey made a move to get up, but fell on his back, crying out in pain.

Scarlet desperately threw himself in the direction of the opening. His shackled hand held him back and he dropped on his knees. Cursing the handcuffs, he instinctively grabbed the

hammer from the toolbox with his free hand. He stared at it, a crazy idea forming rapidly in his mind. *Not much of a weapon*, Grey had said. Well, it could still be used as a tool...

Scarlet forced himself not to think about what he was going to do, and raised the hammer. At that moment, Grey turned to him, with a desperate and pain-filled look.

"Scarlet, he's going to kill her..."

His words stuck in his throat when he realized what his colleague was about to do. His eyes widened with horror.

"Oh no! Paul, don't..."

He could only watch helplessly as the hammer brutally came down on its target.

* * *

Destiny was desperately struggling to free herself from the hands of Commander Torey. In doing so, she had lost hold of her gun. Fortunately, it fell out of reach of her opponent. She gathered all of her strength, and pushed him off-balance. He fell back and she did too, away from him. She quickly got to her feet and looked around for the weapon; she could not see it, and thought the thick snow had probably swallowed it.

Seeing Torey regaining his footing too, fear filled her and she tried to put some distance between them, running away from the capsule. He pursued her. They both were staggering in the snow, battling against the strong wind. *Have to find a way to stop him*, Destiny thought, her heart pounding wildly inside her chest. *The others are defenceless... He'll kill me, and then kill them.*

She had made a few meters and could hear Torey's heavy breathing close behind; he was gaining on her, she realized.

Then suddenly, he jumped her. She fell again in the snow under her much stronger and heavier opponent. She tried to get free again, but this time with no success. All she managed to do was to turn on her back to face the Mysteron agent, who put his large hands around her throat, smothering the scream that was building in it. Only a faint moan came out of the Angel pilot who stared with bewildered horror into the icy eyes of her killer. A cold smile spread across Torey's features.

"Prepare to die, Destiny Angel."

He was slowly choking her, tightening his hands around her neck. She could not breathe any more and a mist was slowly descending between her and the face of her murderer.

Suddenly, she saw a yellow streak coming out of nowhere and jumping right onto Torey. He let go of his hold on her and she could breathe again. Dazed, she coughed a couple of times, and looked around, trying to figure out what had just happened.

She saw Captain Scarlet, armed with an hammer, standing over her, facing Commander Torey, a few feet away from them, getting ready to attack again.

"Let's see what you can do against somebody your own weight, mate!" Scarlet shouted angrily at the Mysteron agent.

"Do you really think you can stop me with that hammer, Earthman?" Torey scoffed.

How on Earth did Scarlet manage to free himself from those handcuffs? Destiny asked herself. She tried to regain her balance on her still unsteady feet. The British captain was carefully keeping himself between her and Torey. She noticed the odd way he was standing, facing the Mysteron agent with the hammer in his left hand, ready to strike, while trying to keep his right hand out of view of his opponent.

She then saw the sorry state of that hand, and the blood dripping from it, and her heart skipped a beat. But carefully, she said nothing and stepped back a few feet, discreetly looking around for the weapon she had previously lost.

Torey was approaching cautiously, apparently confident he would be victorious over Scarlet, who, still on his guard, took a few steps back. The Mysteron stopped just out of range of the hammer and tilted his head to one side, gauging his opponent. An evil smile crossed his face.

"Why don't you attack, Captain?" he taunted the Spectrum officer.

Almost instantly, Scarlet flung himself forward, trying to strike him with the hammer; Torey easily evaded the blow, caught the swinging arm in midcourse, and struck it. The hammer flew from Scarlet's hand and landed into the snow.

Seeing his weapon gone, Scarlet rammed into Torey's chest and knocked him down. The Mysteron agent hung on to him and brought him down as well. Now the two men were fighting in the thick snow, Scarlet desperately trying to keep on top of Torey. But as he was using only one arm, he was at a distinct disadvantage; the Mysteron agent made use of it and succeeded in pushing Scarlet under him.

Torey got up and repeatedly kicked Scarlet in the side; the Spectrum agent tried to protect himself, but he was far too vulnerable to his opponent's attack. The latter viciously trod on his right hand, already wounded and covered with blood. The Spectrum officer cried out as unbearable pain seared through the nerves of his hand.

"I noticed how you kept trying to protect that hand," Torey said matter-of-factly, standing over Scarlet, his foot still pressing down on the wounded hand. "You must have broken all the bones in it with that hammer, to get out of those cuffs. Impressive."

He stepped harder on the crushed, bloody hand. Scarlet let out a muffled cry. "And it must be very painful too, I'll bet," Torey continued evilly. "You must have been really desperate to do a thing like that, even knowing it would eventually heal." He shook his head, looking down at the injured Spectrum agent. "What a waste! What a perfect agent you would have been for the Mysterons... Perhaps there is a way to retake you..."

Scarlet blinked, hearing those ominous words. "Go to Hell!" he lashed out between clenched teeth. He tried to get free, but the Mysteron agent simply had to push down on his hand a little more to keep him down. The awful pain was threatening to overcome the British agent. *Don't pass out*, he told himself. *If you do, nothing will stand in his way. He'll kill you and the others...* But it was so hard to think...

A thunderous sound pounded in Scarlet's ears and he saw Torey shaking. The foot pressing down on his hand released him and the Mysteron agent stepped back. A dark stain of red had appeared right in the middle of his chest.

Another detonation resonated and Torey stepped back again. Scarlet rose up on one elbow and looked over his shoulder; Destiny was a few feet behind him, a gun aimed at the Mysteron agent. Not finding Scarlet's pistol Torey had made her lose in the snow, she had taken advantage of the fight to run into the capsule to fetch the one he had wanted to use on all of them. Upon coming back with it, she had seen Scarlet literally tortured by Torey and had not hesitated one instant to shoot.

She fired a third time when she saw the Mysteron agent taking a tentative step in her direction. Shot through the head, the man who had been Commander Jim Torey fell back into the snow and stayed there, motionless.

Scarlet slowly got to his knees, gritting his teeth against the throbbing pain coming from his broken hand. Destiny came over him and knelt by his side. He raised his head to look into her confused, worried eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

She nodded; she could see the pain in his handsome, unnaturally pale face, and it hurt her. *He's the one who's injured, and yet, he's concerned about me!* she realized with amazement. She gently took his bloody hand to look at it, with a mix of guilt, horror, and perplexity. It had been smashed almost beyond recognition, the fingers deformed and crushed. Thinking of what he had to do to get out of those shackles and come to her rescue sent shivers down Destiny's spine.

"Your poor hand," she muttered, her words catching in her throat.

"It will heal, Destiny," he sighed tiredly.

"*Mon Dieu*, I can't believe..."

"Juliette." Scarlet touched her face with his good hand and drew her attention away from the wounded one. She looked deep into his warm, blue eyes. "It will heal," he repeated with insistence.

"How can you be so sure about that?" she asked.

"I know," he said simply, shaking his head.

She was still sceptical, but managed to accept his answer. She nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you..." she whispered, in an unsure, weak voice.

Scarlet drew her close to him in a reassuring gesture, resting her head on his shoulder. She was shivering; she closed her eyes and clung to him. Scarlet breathed a sigh of relief as he

pressed her against his heart. "*Quand tu voudras, chérie,*" he murmured in her ear. "Anytime you want."

Chapter 9

A few minutes later, Captain Scarlet and Destiny Angel were back in the capsule. A worried Captain Grey was very relieved to see them coming back together, very much alive, and even more relieved to learn that Mysteron agent James Torey was now dead. That didn't improve his health, though, as Grey was developing a fever from his wounds and his temperature was rising fast. Scarlet and Destiny first settled him more comfortably and put another blanket on him. He soon fell asleep, completely exhausted.

Destiny had put some snow on Scarlet's injured hand, to help ease the pain a bit; she then dressed it with a temporary bandage. He let her do it, and announced his intention of going up in the mountain Ochre and Torey had climbed with the transmitter. She didn't really try to change his mind, but it was pretty obvious she was against the idea. She simply told him to keep resting a few minutes, until the pain in his hand eased, and she went outside, to once again clear up the snow that was threatening to cover the emergency flares.

When she came back after a few minutes, she found Scarlet putting his coat back on over a new warm vest he had just taken from the emergency cabinet. With his bandaged hand, he was having a difficult time trying to button up the last layer of clothing; she came over to him, sighing.

"Here, let me help you."

She motioned him to sit down, before putting his red colour-coded pistol into his good hand. He looked at it, nodding.

"I see you found it."

"It wasn't very far," she responded. "Just outside the door, actually, about half covered with snow." She paused a second, then added: "You're really sure you want to climb that mountain? The weather is pretty bad now, out there..."

"That's why I'm dressing warm." Scarlet nodded toward the apparently sleeping Grey. "I don't have much choice," he whispered. "Grey's condition is deteriorating by the minute. I must find that transmitter and make the emergency call."

Destiny closed the last press-stud on his collar. Scarlet grinned maliciously. "Do you remember the last time you helped me dress?"

Their eyes met and Scarlet suddenly felt uneasy. He tried to look away. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No," Destiny interrupted him and forced him to look back at her. She smiled faintly. "I do remember. Was it really three years ago?"

He smiled back at her, his heart feeling lighter. "I think it was a little more than that..."

"Oh, really? You have a bad memory, Captain!"

"No, I rather think it's you demonstrating some of that French coquetry of yours."

"So, now I'm *coquette*?"

"You always were. And I do mean that as a compliment."

"I certainly hope so!" Destiny looked down at his bandaged hand. "How is your hand?"

Scarlet shook his head; before the Angel pilot could stop him, he began removing the long band of cloth covering his hand. It appeared whole, though still a bit blue, and apparently close to its normal size. Scarlet flexed his fingers and grumbled softly. "Still a bit stiff."

"STIFF?" Destiny repeated. "Fifteen minutes ago, I would have sworn you would never be able to use that hand again. How long before it will be completely healed?"

"I'd say another fifteen minutes." Scarlet saw her perplexed look. "It's only a rough guess. It could be longer."

"Or even shorter," Destiny nodded. "Still, it's rather impressive..."

"Funny. That's exactly how Rhapsody described it earlier today... Come to think of it, it was the same hand..."

"What had you done to it for her to say that?"

"I... er... scratched it on some thorns, on the Promenade Deck."

"Thorns?"

"From a rose tree I... accidentally destroyed."

Destiny looked at his uneasy smile. She shook her head. "There is only one rose tree I can think of on the Promenade Deck," she noted. "Aside from that, there are some bushes of red roses..."

"The roses were definitely not red."

"Don't tell me you destroyed the Colonel's tree of white roses!"

"It was an accident!"

"Well, accident or not, you're really in trouble."

Scarlet scoffed. "What can the old man do to me? Kill me?" He got to his feet and went toward the emergency cabinet, from which he took a ski cap and a pair of mitts. Destiny kept looking at him.

"What does it feel like?" she asked. "Being... like you are?"

Scarlet came back to her; he noticed how she avoided calling him by his name; she was obviously still feeling uneasy about him. "Confusing," he answered. "Troubling... I'm having a hard time adjusting to it."

"How far are you... indestructible, anyway?" she asked.

"I really wish I knew, Destiny."

"You still can feel pain..."

"Yes, but to a lesser degree. I don't think a normal human being would have been able to stay conscious long after having his hand broken like mine... Although I nearly did lose it."

"I'm lucky you didn't. You saved my life, out there."

"And you saved mine."

"Did I? I don't even know if you can really die."

Scarlet looked straight into the young woman's eyes. "I'm not even sure of that myself," he replied softly.

"And yet, you still put yourself on the line, risking life and limb..."

"Yes."

"Why?"

There was a short silence, before Scarlet sighed. "Because no-one else can do what I can do," he responded. "I'm living on borrowed time, Destiny. The best I can do with it is to make every opportunity count."

Destiny did not reply. Scarlet put on the cap and pulled down the earflaps. She watched as he put his gun back in its holster, turning his back on her. "You really don't remember anything about what happened during the time the Mysterons controlled you?" she asked.

He did not turn to face her. "No," she heard him reply. "No, I can't remember a thing."

"THAT must be confusing."

"Yes, it is, but... it's also kind of a blessing." Scarlet turned back to face her. "Can you imagine how it would feel to actually remember having buried my own body to conceal it from discovery?"

Destiny averted her eyes. "I'm sorry for that crack about it, earlier," she whispered.

"Not your fault. You were hurt. You still are, I can see." He sighed again and came to kneel in front of her. "Were you humouring me, just then, when you acted as if you really thought I was the man you once knew? The real Paul Metcalfe?"

"I... really can't say," Destiny replied uneasily. "I guess I was humouring myself."

"Or maybe you were trying to find out if I really am him."

Destiny nodded thoughtfully. "And are you?" she murmured.

He weighed his answer for a few seconds before giving it. "I believe I am. Every fibre of me says I am Paul Metcalfe. I must believe it. I can't accept, and won't accept, the idea that I could be just a soulless alien clone, with the memories and feelings of a dead man planted in my brain. If I believed THAT... it would drive me mad."

Destiny didn't answer but looked thoughtfully into his bright blue eyes. He was so much like Paul... Was it really possible that it could be him? Could it be that Rhapsody was right about him all along? She touched his cheek. "In any case," she said, "you are not soulless... and you are not an alien. I think that, whatever you are, you are very human." She kissed his cheek gently. "Proof of it... you're in dire need of a shave..." she added, smiling.

He smiled before standing up, taking a coil of rope he had put nearby. "I must go now. Can't wait too much longer."

"Do you really think you can find that transmitter? In all that snow?"

"I hope so. It's our only chance to make contact with civilisation." Scarlet looked thoughtfully in the direction of the sleeping Captain Grey. "You and I can hold on a few days, with the food we have, but Grey..." He shook his head. "His condition's getting serious."

"What about Captain Ochre? You implied earlier that he may still be alive."

"I'm crossing my fingers about that."

"I... have a horrible thought."

"Which one?"

"If indeed you find Ochre... you must keep in mind that he may be already be lost to us. He may well be a Mysteron agent."

Scarlet nodded grimly. "The same thought had crossed my mind," he murmured, looking down. "I hope it's not the case." He cleared his throat. "I'll try to make it quick. In the meantime, keep Grey comfortable... and if it's possible for you to go outside despite the weather, make sure the flares are still visible. Don't take any risks, though."

"I won't. Would I dare ask the same from you?"

"I can only promise you I won't take unnecessary ones." He quickly kissed her cheek. "I'll be back in a few hours. Don't worry too much."

Scarlet was gone before Destiny could actually think of an answer. She found herself staring almost blankly at the opening through which he had gone.

"Good luck, Paul," she whispered softly.

* * *

The cold bit hard, even with the extra warm clothing Captain Scarlet had put on for the expedition. Furious winds and snow lashed at him, making progress difficult, but the Spectrum agent continued on despite the punishment he was taking. Too much was at stake here. Grey's and Destiny's lives were in his very hands. He knew exactly what they risked if he failed.

When he passed near the wreck of the Aero Special One, he almost didn't stop to notice how the drifting snow had almost completely swallowed it. In a few hours, he mused, it would have disappeared totally. The same fate was awaiting the capsule eventually. And if Destiny wasn't able to make sure the flares stayed alight and visible, there would soon be no trace left of their presence at all.

It seemed to take an eternity to reach the cliff he would have to climb to reach the top of the mountain he knew Ochre and Torey had previously encountered. Beginning the difficult ascent, he wondered if they had used the same path he was taking. Then he cleared his mind of any thought that wasn't of the mountain itself. He had to concentrate in order to reach his goal, without slipping to his death. The stones on the side of the cliff were sharp, covered with ice and snow, and very, very slippery. The winds and falling snow were not helping any. Scarlet was thankful that his right hand was now completely healed. Both hands were nearly not enough for him to achieve his goal.

After a long, agonizing time, he reached a narrow ledge and crawled onto it on his belly. He then permitted himself a few minutes of rest and looked around him, evaluating his position and pondering his next step. He shone his electric torch up the side of the cliff, trying to find the easiest path to the top. Immediately to his left, about ten feet higher up, he noticed a large black spot contrasting with the white snow. He frowned; strange, he thought, there didn't seem to be any snow on that spot. He got to his feet and approached it, to examine the phenomenon more closely.

It was some kind of crack in the side of the mountain. A large opening, swallowing up all the snow falling into it. Scarlet climbed up to it. It was large enough for him to step inside. It looked like a dark, murky cave, he noticed, looking around with his torch. He could see an opening some way above his head. An overhang of snow almost covered it; part of the natural roof had fallen into the cave, revealing the grey, snowy sky above.

Captain Scarlet shook his head; reckoning the distance, this cave opened somewhere higher up the mountain, not very far from the summit. The stone walls were solid, if somewhat damp.

They could, however, offer a better grip than the cliff outside. In any case, inside, Scarlet wouldn't be exposed to the wind and snow.

He took a few steps further, looking up, hoping to find some ridge sturdy enough to hook his rope and then use it to pull himself up. He was about ten feet from the opening when his ears caught something through the sound of the blowing and whistling winds. It sounded like pebbles rattling down on a stone surface... He would probably have dismissed it as a trick of his mind if the echo hadn't taken the sound, repeating it endlessly.

Have I kicked some loose stones? Captain Scarlet thought. He hadn't really noticed, in fact. Looking down, he realized he was actually standing on snow.

No, the sound seemed to come from behind him now. He turned around, fully expecting to encounter a racoon or some other creature of the same kind. The shadow of a much larger creature suddenly came out of the dark and jumped at him with a furious cry.

Scarlet only realized it was another human being, dressed in a yellow coat just like himself, when his assailant shoved him against the stone wall and laid into him with the fury of a wild animal. Under the attack, he lost hold of his torch, which landed safely on the snow-covered ground, sending grotesque and distorted shadows of the fight all over the cave. Trying to deflect and avoid the blows, Scarlet caught a glimpse of his aggressor's face and, although already suspecting who it might be, gasped in surprise.

"Rick, stop..."

Captain Ochre's next punch hit him in the groin and sent him to his knees, his breath driven from him. Ochre pressed his advantage and kicked him in the side.

"Think you've won, but I'll show you you haven't yet!" Scarlet heard his attacker panting. He kicked him again and Scarlet sprawled to the ground, groaning in pain. *He's going to injure me unless I stop him*, he thought. He'd covered his head to protect himself from the attack, but managed to notice that Ochre was standing unsteadily against the stone wall, supporting himself on it. With a quick movement, Scarlet grabbed his ankles and pulled. Ochre fell backward.

With difficulty, trying to catch his breath, Scarlet got to his feet; he saw Ochre crawling on the ground, toward an object the British captain recognized as a short-handled pickaxe. Scarlet reached it in three quick strides, drawing his pistol from its holster. He stepped on Ochre's hand at the very moment he reached the axe handle. Ochre cried out in pain, and Scarlet shoved the barrel of his weapon under his nose.

"Don't move!" he barked.

Ochre's low moan was the first response he received. Scarlet didn't know what to do next. Was his colleague a Mysteron or...

"Go on!" Ochre snapped, not even looking up. As far as Scarlet could tell, he had closed his eyes against the pain in his pinned-down hand. "If you've come down here to kill me, do it now and be done with it! I just hope you and your Mysteron masters go straight to Hell!"

Scarlet shook his head; understanding his colleague's confusion, he put away his gun and sighed. "Ochre, it's me," he said quietly.

Ochre opened his eyes. Seeing him blink in disbelief, Scarlet removed his foot from his hand and crouched in front of him. He carefully threw the pickaxe away from them, just in case.

"It's me, Ochre," Scarlet repeated softly. "Do you recognize my voice?"

"Scarlet," Ochre murmured. The first thing he saw was the red boot right in front of him. He quickly looked up and stared right into the face of his British counterpart, who was looking at him steadily. "Scarlet," he repeated excitedly, with apparent relief in his voice. He tried to get up. "How did you..."

"Are you okay, Ochre?" Scarlet asked, still on his guard.

"Yes. Yes, I'm okay..." Ochre got himself onto his hands and knees and Scarlet helped him to stand. The second he put his left foot on the ground and tried to support himself on it, Ochre stumbled forward, right into the arms of his fellow officer who caught him before he sprawled on the floor again.

Ochre groaned. "No," he said, gritting his teeth. "I'm not okay. I think I hurt my ankle."

"Well, let's have a look." Scarlet helped his colleague to sit on the ground, leaning his back against one of the stone walls. He started to crouch in front of the injured foot when Ochre stopped him suddenly.

"No. Forget about me right now." He gestured toward a corner of the cave. "The transmitter is there. It's perfectly all right, and can still work. Go fetch it... and make the call to Spectrum."

"You're asking me to leave you here?" Scarlet asked him with a frown.

"Look," Ochre sighed deeply. "I'll be all right until you come back for me. We've got the others to think about..." He looked at Scarlet with a dismayed and troubled expression upon his abnormally pale face. "They're... they're all right, I hope?"

"Yes," Scarlet responded, nodding. "They're all right."

"Thank God for that!" Ochre exclaimed with relief. "Torey...?"

"Torey's dead, Rick."

"You killed him?"

"Actually, Destiny did."

"I knew I could count on that girl," Ochre murmured with a fond smile. "Look, you can tell me the whole story later. Go make that call. I'll wait for you here. Can't do much climbing with this foot."

"Is there a way up from here?" Scarlet asked.

"Go to the end of that crevasse. The climb should be easier... and with that rope, you'll reach the top in no time. Go on, Captain! I tell you I'll be all right!"

Scarlet stared at his fellow officer and nodded quietly. He went to the corner Ochre had gestured toward a few minutes earlier and found the backpack in which was the transmitter. He took his rope off his shoulder, put the pack on his back, and went deeper into the cave. Ochre watched him go, until he could not see him anymore. Then he rested his head against the wall and heaved a deep sigh.

"I hope it will be all right, now," he murmured to himself.

* * *

Using the rope, Captain Scarlet reached the top of the mountain in less than fifteen minutes. He had to dig his way through the thick snowcap that had formed on top of the crevasse, and emerged from it about thirty feet from the summit of the mountain. He put down the backpack in front of him and opened it to install the transmitter and the dish. He double-checked the connections between all the devices, switched on the juice, and sighed with relief as all the lights turned green. He closed his eyes, murmured a quick prayer for success, took the microphone, and made the call.

"This is an S.O.S. call from Captain Scarlet, of the Aero Special One flight. Calling Spectrum. Come in please." He waited a couple of seconds before sending the call anew. "S.O.S. from the Aero Special One flight. We have crashed in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. We're in desperate need of help. I repeat, this is Captain Scarlet of Spectrum. Please acknowledge this S.O.S. call."

He repeated his call three or four times, with sufficient time between each transmission for somebody to answer him. He only could hear faint static over the speaker of the transmitter. Then, after about fifteen minutes of apparently fruitless attempts, a voice finally made itself heard, sending a wave of relief and gratitude into Scarlet's heart.

"S.I.G., Captain Scarlet. This is Captain Blue answering your call. Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Captain Blue!" Scarlet answered joyfully. "You don't know how glad I am to hear your voice! Aren't you supposed to be ill?"

"I dragged myself out of Sickbay just to join the search team for you," came the response over the speaker. "Spectrum Helicopters have been scanning the area for hours now. How are things down there?"

"Better now, thanks to you. We ejected the capsule to escape the crash, but we still landed rather hard. Captain Grey's been injured in the crash. Broken leg, ribs and concussion. He needs medical attention as soon as possible."

"Any fatalities?"

"Only Commander Torey. He was taken over by the Mysterons and tried to kill us all. He's dead now."

"I see."

"There's another thing. The prototype that went to Los Angeles..."

"We know it was a replica," Blue interrupted. "Symphony worked that out early on. When the other Angels caught up with her and the Aero Special, they investigated it more closely and saw there was no-one at the helm. To cut a long story short, they shot it down... Not a minute too soon, either. It was heading toward the hotel where all the aviation companies' representatives were staying."

"So that part of the Mysterons' threat is over too," Scarlet sighed.

"Yes. Now all that's left is to pick you up. Where are you exactly? We can't get a trace from your beacon."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me. Wish I could tell you where we are. All our navigational instruments were dead long before we actually crashed. Can you home in on me?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Good. I've installed a transmitter up a mountain about eight to ten kilometres South East of the capsule's position. There's a blizzard raging around here, but you should find it quite easily. The capsule landed in a high valley, and we put emergency flares all around it."

"Can you leave the transmitter on that mountain?"

"Sure. But I estimate only about two hours' power max left in the battery."

"That should be long enough. Now go back to the capsule, and make sure the snow doesn't cover those flares. We'll find you and pick you up there."

"S.I.G., Captain Blue. Make it fast, please. That blizzard's getting pretty bad, you know."

"We'll be as fast as we can. Now we know where to look. Hang on a bit longer. Captain Blue out."

Scarlet left the transmitter operating, and got to his feet. *Good, he thought. Now it will be only a matter of a couple of hours before we're found. Got to hurry back to the capsule with Ochre,* he added to himself.

He went down the crevasse much more quickly than he had climbed it and strode the distance separating him from Captain Ochre. He found his colleague at the same place he had left him, waiting impatiently. When he saw Scarlet coming back to him, Ochre looked at him questioningly. "Did you do it?" he asked expectantly. "Did you make the emergency call?"

Scarlet knelt down in front of Ochre's injured foot and nodded with a broad smile. "Don't worry, I made the call. I contacted a search team from Cloudbase. I left the transmitter on so they could home in on it to find the capsule."

"Thank you, Lord!" Ochre murmured, closing his eyes. "Who's conducting the search? Magenta?"

"Blue got out of sickbay. It's him I reached," Scarlet answered. He looked thoughtfully at Ochre's booted foot. "Now let's see this ankle. I want to know if you can actually walk back to the capsule."

"I sure hope I can!" Ochre murmured. He watched as Scarlet tried to remove his boot. The effort sent a wave of pain up his leg. "Be careful, though!" he added between his teeth. "I may need that leg, you know!"

"I have to cut your boot," Scarlet remarked. "Do you have anything I could use?"

Ochre nodded. He took a penknife from his trouser pocket and gave it to Scarlet. The British captain opened the sharp blade and nodded in turn. "Not my Army Swiss knife, but it'll do," he said. "You're not too nervous of actually seeing it in my hands?"

Ochre said nothing. He looked on as Scarlet carefully made an incision on the side of his boot. "Tell me," the American captain said, "how did you get out of those handcuffs I put on you?"

"I... er... used a trick I know," Scarlet responded.

"Which one?" Ochre asked curiously. "I don't know, maybe it could prove useful for me one day."

"Professional secret," Scarlet smiled. "And I don't think you would use it. Believe me, it wouldn't be in your best interests."

"If you say so."

Scarlet cautiously removed the boot, and then the black sock under it. He examined the bare, swollen foot he now had before his eyes and gently touched it. He saw Ochre's face crease in pain. "Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. You're lucky. Your foot isn't broken. You've got a sprained ankle."

"Is that all?" a surprised Ochre asked.

"Yes. It's a bad sprain, but only a sprain. It'll swell a bit more, and turn blue... but in a few days, you should be as good as new. In the meantime, I've got to bandage that foot, to reduce the swelling. I've brought some bandages from the medical kit."

"Always the reliable one, huh?" Ochre said, watching as Scarlet retrieved the bandages from one of the numerous pockets of his coat. "Funny. With that fall I took into that crevasse, I'd thought I would have gotten much more than a few bruises and a bad sprained ankle... I landed on a thick layer of snow, and lost consciousness for a time. When I came round, I looked for a way out. That's when I saw you."

"And you mistook me for Torey, didn't you?"

"Didn't see the red boots, only the yellow coat. Figured he wanted to finish me off."

"He thought you were dead. At least, that's what he said when he came back to the capsule to finish US."

Ochre kept silent a moment as Scarlet began to wrap his foot. He was gritting his teeth against the pain. "Hang on," Scarlet told him.. "It'll only take a moment."

Ochre nodded, looking on as Scarlet continued. The American shook his head. "All right, you can say it."

Scarlet stared at him, puzzled. "What do you want me to say?"

"That I acted stupidly," Ochre said, bitterly. "That I should have trusted you instead of Torey." He gestured toward his injured foot. "That I brought this on myself."

"All right. You brought this on yourself."

"You could be more tactful than that, though!" Ochre retorted. He stopped, seeing the look Scarlet was levelling at him. "I know I shouldn't have hit you..."

"You hit me pretty hard," Scarlet remarked. "You know, if I hadn't been indestructible, you might have killed me... or at least done me a serious injury."

"What can I say, Scarlet? I'm sorry."

"Well, I suppose you had the others' interests and security at heart." Scarlet secured the bandage tightly around Ochre's foot and picked up the boot. "So I forgive you."

"I put the others at risk," Ochre muttered. "I know my conduct could have had serious and fatal consequences. I was acting irrationally. All I could think of was..." He stopped, noticing Scarlet's look of curiosity. "Forget it," he added, waving his hand.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind, Captain Ochre?" Scarlet asked him quietly. "Let's get this over with once and for all." As Ochre kept silent again, Scarlet sighed and carefully put the boot back on the injured foot. "Why can't you bring yourself to trust me?" the Brit asked quietly.

"Didn't I show you some trust, just now?" Ochre protested.

"Yes, well... considering the circumstances, I don't think you had any other choice!"

Ochre opened his mouth to protest, but stopped almost right away. Scarlet was now using the belt of his own coat to tie the cut boot around his colleague's ankle. "That should hold it tight," he murmured, looking at his job with satisfaction.

"You're right," Ochre murmured.

"About what? The boot?"

"You know what about... What you just said."

"Oh! It must've cost you to admit that!" Scarlet mocked him. "I don't think you ever said it, even before the... accident." Ochre didn't answer. Scarlet cleared his throat. "It's where all of this began... the accident."

"It wasn't really an accident, and you know it," Ochre icily replied, eyes blazing. "It was plain murder. A conspiracy to kill two Spectrum officers. A conspiracy just like the one we just narrowly escaped." Ochre turned his eyes away, adding morosely: "Except that other time, two friends of mine didn't escape. They died."

Scarlet could not find an immediate reply. Ochre gave him an uneasy, almost embarrassed glance. "I was told you don't remember what happened after that car crash."

"Between that and the moment I woke up in sickbay, after that fall from the Car-Vu," Scarlet nodded. "In fact, the entire time I was under Mysteron control."

"So you can't remember having talked to me, during that time."

"What?" Scarlet asked, frowning. "When was that, exactly?"

"Just after the crash, actually. Brown was already with the World President, and you came to New York Headquarters to leave for Cloudbase. You looked so cool after that crash... so surprisingly untouched by it... You said you had been lucky. You even took me up on my invitation to do the town when the mission was over." Ochre averted his eyes again, as he continued: "A few hours after that, there was the explosion at the Spectrum Security Building. I was called to investigate the site of your car crash. And there I found..." He stopped, his throat tightening.

Scarlet waited, giving him a moment to regain his composure. "You found the bodies of your two friends," the British officer continued for his colleague. "That much I was told..."

"Can you imagine how I felt?" Ochre asked him. "My friends were dead... assassinated. And an impostor deceived me by posing as one of them... and had pushed the indecency of acting so casually friendly with me. I felt betrayed. How could I ever trust you again after that? How could I ever believe you really were who you claimed to be, if you were capable of acting that way, just so you could follow your masters' orders?"

"No wonder you were so bitter toward me," Scarlet remarked, nodding. "But, Ochre, the Mysterons have no control over me any more."

"I know that now!" Ochre said dryly. "But I couldn't believe otherwise before! I guess I didn't WANT to trust you."

"Instead, you chose to trust your friend Torey."

Ochre seemed embarrassed again. "Well, in my defence, I must say I investigated the wreck of the Aero Special One, to see if he was telling the truth about what had happened there."

"Oh?" Scarlet said, raising an eyebrow. "Before or after you tried to crack my skull open?"

"Er... After, actually."

"Thank you for your candour. Much appreciated."

"In any case," Ochre sighed, "except for a large smear of blood in the baggage hold, I didn't find anything conclusive. Nothing to confirm or deny your story... or Torey's, as a matter of fact, and it's one of the reasons I kept my doubts about him. It probably saved my life when he did try to kill me."

"There was no dead body in the wreckage?" Scarlet asked, frowning.

Ochre responded with a shake of his head.

"The reconstruct must have hidden it somewhere, then," the Brit added thoughtfully.

"It's possible, but there wasn't any indication that a body had recently been moved," Ochre retorted. "Believe me, with the blood there was inside, it would have left some trace."

"I did see a body, Ochre," Scarlet insisted.

"Hey, I believe you, don't sweat it," Ochre defended himself. "You're not the one who tried to kill me... Torey did." He shrugged. "Strange. The real James Torey was a friend. It was indeed a surprise to see him on Cloudbase, after all these years. How easily I'm referring to his Mysteron reconstruct, using his name."

"As if it was the same man..." Scarlet murmured, frowning.

"This isn't a crack against you, Scarlet."

"No, no... You just got me thinking. And if the man we met on Cloudbase actually was the same one who tried to kill us? Oh, Lord... the dizzy spells."

"What?"

"I have these spells, Ochre... ever since that Mysteron incident in London, last week. I... thought it was the Mysterons trying to regain control of me. But Grey... Grey suggested it might be just me actually sensing the Mysterons' presence."

"You mean, you would've sensed Torey was already a reconstruct when he arrived on Cloudbase with the prototype?"

"That could explain why we had so much trouble with the jet... He could have sabotaged it."

"And the radiocaps? Come on, Scarlet! How could he have sabotaged THOSE?"

"All right then, maybe there's another explanation for that particular incident. Maybe it's another aspect of the Mysterons' powers... BUT my theory would explain the disappearance – apparently without trace – of Torey's body from the wreck."

Ochre wasn't sure he was understanding correctly what Scarlet was trying to tell him. He gave it a try anyway: "You don't mean the dead body would actually have got up and walked away on its own?" he asked, with a puzzled frown.

"We overlooked one thing, Ochre," Scarlet said. "If I have the power to regenerate myself, it's a good bet other Mysteron clones also have it."

"I... see your point. But you must admit, that thought is far from comforting..." Ochre stopped in the middle of his sentence. He suddenly turned pale and stared at Scarlet, with concern in his eyes. Seeing his colleague's expression, almost as uneasy as his own, he understood the same thought had come to Scarlet's mind, exactly at the same instant. "Oh, my God..." Ochre murmured, his throat tightening. "You know what that could mean..."

"We must get back to the capsule quickly!" Scarlet urged him. "Think you can walk with that foot?"

"I'll crawl if I have to!" Ochre replied, starting to get up, gritting his teeth. "Come on! We have no time to waste!"

Chapter 10

Captain Grey's fever had increased by several degrees; delirium had taken hold of him, and he was drifting in and out of consciousness. Destiny, who was tending to him, was worried sick. Help had better come soon, if there was to be any chance of saving Grey's life.

Where was Captain Scarlet? Had he reached the top of that mountain and found the transmitter? Had he succeeded in contacting Spectrum? Destiny had no doubt now he would try his very best, so they would all be rescued. But the weather outside was so bad. Climbing that mountain could only be hazardous in all that cold, wind and snow... If he were to fall, what would happen then?

Well, he would surely survive, she mused. He did survive an 800 foot drop, and on top of that, his body was crushed and buried under tons of falling metal. Nothing could really stop him then. What worse could he endure, up there?

Destiny shook her head. She wasn't really worried about him, but about Grey... and herself. *Stop being so selfish!* she thought angrily. *He is still human enough to feel pain... You have seen it with your own eyes.*

Hours had passed since his departure. It should not be much longer, now, before he came back...

Destiny heard sounds coming from outside, throughout the whistling wind. Footsteps, she realized; and they were approaching the door. She stood up from where she was seated, next to the feverish Grey.

"Captain Scarlet?" she called.

Since she didn't receive any answer, she went to the door and pulled the blanket aside. She didn't have time to actually see who was on the other side before a violent blow hit her over the head. Stunned, she fell on her back. Throughout a mist, she saw booted feet entering the capsule. Black boots, not red. It was not Scarlet. Looking up, Destiny saw the face of her attacker. And blood chilled in her veins.

Commander Jim Torey, his eyes icy, his features implacable, walked up to her and pulled her up by the collar of her coat. "Surprised to see me?" he asked ominously.

Destiny's throat was too tight, she could not even speak. Torey pulled her to her feet and dragged her toward the seat where Captain Scarlet had previously been cuffed. The handcuffs were still attached to its metal foot, the free end of it still smeared with Scarlet's blood. Torey pushed Destiny brutally to the floor, in front of the seat, and, keeping hold of her left arm, took up the handcuffs. Seeing his intention, the Angel pilot struggled to stop him. He backhanded her across the face, threaded her slender hand through the empty handcuff and then squeezed the cuff tightly shut around her wrist.

"That should keep you still long enough." Torey slapped the girl again, sending her sprawling on the floor. Fighting her fear and disbelief, she stared up to him, trying to show herself as defiant as she could.

"You should be dead!" she shouted. "I shot you!"

"Oh, that..." Torey negligently brushed off his bloodstained yellow coat. There were still bullet holes apparent on his chest. "You're a fool, Earthwoman. Did you really think simple bullets would actually be enough to stop me?"

Understanding dawned on Destiny and she paled. "You're like Captain Scarlet," she murmured, shaking her head in despair. "Oh, God..."

"So you see you cannot stop me. You can't stop the Mysterons!" Torey gazed deeply into her eyes. She instinctively drew back; there was nothing human in his eyes... They were cold and unfeeling, with some alien presence in them. The Mysterons' presence. "You will die, Destiny Angel. And your friend here will die with you."

"I won't let you..." Destiny's loud protest died in her mouth as Torey slapped her again and she fell flat on the floor. The Mysteron agent stood up and stepped back from her.

"Be quiet, woman! You can't escape your fate now!" He heard moaning behind him, and looked back; Captain Grey was restless, still caught in his delirium. "Your friend is the lucky one. He won't be aware of his own death." That said, Torey turned on his heel and went to the back of

the cabin. Destiny followed him with her eyes, wondering what he could be up to. She saw him opening a compartment in the floor and searching it. He took out two cylinders that looked strangely like compressed air containers. He also took out a box that he opened in front of Destiny's curious eyes. She saw a charge of plastic explosive, a timing device, and some wires.

"A bomb?" the Angel said, frowning. "You intend blowing us up?"

"I should have used it sooner," Torey replied. He looked up at Destiny. "It's not ready yet, I didn't have time to put it completely together before I landed on your Cloudbase... Otherwise, your base would have been blown to pieces!"

"You were already a Mysteron then?" Destiny murmured, opening her eyes wide.

"You and your companions were already doomed the minute you boarded the jet, Earthwoman," Torey replied. "Now it is time to take our revenge." He gestured toward the components of the bomb. "When that bomb is completed, I will hook it to those cylinders. They contain a substance comparable to liquid napalm. I'll put them at strategic points around this capsule. When the bomb explodes, the capsule will become a giant fireball... in which you and Captain Grey will be trapped."

Destiny looked at him in complete horror. He closed the box, put it under his arm, and got to his feet. Taking the two cylinders by their straps, he strode toward the opening. The female pilot desperately struggled against the cuff restraining her. She understood now, much to her dismay, how frustrated Scarlet must have felt when he was in the same situation, a few hours before.

Torey put his burden down next to the door and looked at the young woman. Obviously, the thought that she could use the same drastic solution as Scarlet to free herself must have crossed his mind, for he came close to her to take the toolbox. He slid it away from her, toward the other side of the cabin. Destiny stared at it in desperation, before casting a disgusted glance at the Mysteron agent.

"Why not finish us with a gun?" she angrily asked. "Why expose us to such a horrible death?"

"Don't you understand, Destiny Angel?" Torey replied coldly. "The Mysterons don't only intend to exact revenge on your pitiful race. We want to strike fear into your collective heart. Your deaths, horrible as they will be, will be testimony to the extent of our rightful anger."

"But there won't be anyone to witness it," Destiny protested.

"You're wrong. There will be a witness," Torey said with an evil grin. "Captain Scarlet should be here shortly. I have a remote control for the bomb. I'll make sure he sees you burn. And he will be unable to save you."

"You can't possibly hope to get away with this!" Destiny told him dryly.

"I live only to follow the Mysterons' instructions, Destiny... Or did you forget that?"

Destiny desperately tried to lash out at him, all claws out, anger overwhelming her mind and heart. He repelled her assault with a violent backhand and stepped back to keep out of her reach. He felt a hand grabbing at the bottom of his trouser-leg and looked down. Captain Grey, his face awfully pale and covered with sweat, was using what was left of his strength in trying to help the Angel pilot. He actually succeeded in pulling himself into a sitting position. But he couldn't keep it up. Torey got out of his hold, without much difficulty, and hit him over the head, sending him sprawling back on the floor. He then gave Grey a vicious kick in the side, driving him toward a worried and horrified Destiny's feet. Under the brutal blow, Grey let out a cry of pain and then went silent.

"*Mon Dieu!* Brad!" Destiny crawled to her fallen companion. His eyes were closed, but he moaned softly when she touched him and gathered him against her, with her free arm, in a comforting and protective gesture. "You're a monster!" she cried out in fury, looking up at Torey. "He has been injured... He's so weak, he can't even defend himself! And you have not hesitated to hit him!"

"He should have stayed where he was!" Torey shouted back. "Anyway, it is of no importance. He will die shortly... and you with him."

"Captain Scarlet will avenge us!"

"Then, perhaps, I'll get the chance to kill him too!"

Torey went back to the door. He took the two cylinders and the box containing the bomb and went out, without looking back at his intended victims. Destiny stared for a moment at the blanket, her eyes filled with fear.

"Destiny?" The weak voice of Captain Grey drew her attention to the injured officer. His head was resting on her shoulder. With her free arm, she held him close to her, gently stroking his damp hair.

"Shh... Don't you worry, Brad," she whispered in his ear. "We'll get out of this one..."

"Looks mighty bad..." Grey faintly said, without even opening his eyes.

"Rest, please... Don't tire yourself anymore."

"Sorry I wasn't... strong enough to help you..."

The words trailed off as Grey passed out in the young woman's arms. She could feel his heart beating against her breast. At least he was still alive, she thought. She closed her eyes, repressing a sigh of complete despair. She knew their situation was hopeless.

Oh God... How long now, before this maniac kills us? How much time is there left to us?

* * *

For Captain Scarlet, it seemed to take an eternity to climb down the mountain and get across the plateau where the jet had crashed. He couldn't run fast enough. The snow on the ground was too thick, and more was still falling. Captain Ochre was doing his best to keep up with him, limping on his bad foot, clenching his teeth, but never complaining. He, too, was terribly worried about what might happen at the capsule. At least, they were walking downwind, pushed forward by it. They finally left the plateau, and went down into the valley.

At a distance, the two men could see the flickering flares. *They must be almost covered with snow*, Scarlet realized, suddenly fearing that it was already too late. He pressed on, leaving Ochre stumbling a few feet behind, his heart pounding faster against his chest.

He was only a few yards from the capsule; he could see the torn-off door on its side, with the blanket covering the hole, flapping in the wind...

A violent explosion erupted at the tail of the capsule, stopping Scarlet in his tracks; his eyes widened in horror, he saw flames rising into the sky, spreading quickly across the surface of the capsule, covering it almost entirely in an instant.

"Dear God, no!" Scarlet cried out. He had arrived too late... just a few seconds too late.

An overwhelming presence near him prompted him to throw himself sideways. Commander Torey had appeared from out of the blue, swinging a heavy metal bar at his head. The Spectrum agent tried to dodge the blow, but caught it on the left shoulder. He sprawled in the snow, the Mysterion coming after him for another attack.

Ochre arrived at that moment, and furiously jumped at Torey, rolling with him on the ground, wrestling for the bar. The fight brought them dangerously near the burning capsule.

Scarlet got to his feet and drew his pistol. "Get out of the way, Ochre!" he shouted, taking aim.

His colleague heard him and quickly scrambled clear. Torey was trying to stand when Scarlet pulled the trigger several times. He literally riddled the Mysterion agent with bullets.

Torey fell into the wall of flames at his back, and disappeared right into it, through a large, new hole in the side of the capsule, caused by the recent explosion.

Scarlet looked on, fully expecting to see the Mysterion coming back. It didn't happen, but he thought he saw movement...

"Are you okay?" Ochre was next to Scarlet. The Brit motioned him to keep silent. He could have sworn he heard... There! Coughing! And a call for help, in a female voice!

"My God! There're alive in there!" Scarlet murmured.

Ochre went pale. "They'll burn alive!" he cried, his throat tightening.

Scarlet put his gun back into his holster; an alarmed Ochre saw him moving closer to the wall of flames; his intentions were quite clear. Ochre grabbed him by the arm. "Don't be crazy, Scarlet!"

"I won't leave them to die that way!" Scarlet replied furiously. "I must try to get inside..."

"Not like this. Think, man! There must be another way." Ochre looked around. His eye fell on a large piece of wreckage lying some feet away. "There! Help me. We'll use that as a bridge to get across the flames!"

Scarlet nodded. The two Spectrum captains hurried to heave the heavy piece of metal, and dragged it toward the rip. They let it fall through it. The flames smouldered under the improvised bridge, which provided them with a safe passageway to the interior of the capsule.

"That won't hold long," Scarlet said. "Let's hurry!"

He stepped over the bridge and jumped inside the capsule, closely followed by Ochre.

Not far from them was Torey's body, lying on his belly, surrounded by the flames, his clothes on fire. Then they saw Destiny and Grey, where Torey had left them earlier. The young woman was seated on the floor, clinging to her apparently unconscious companion, while trying to cover her mouth and nose with her free hand. She was coughing through the smoke rapidly filling up the restricted space of the cabin.

Destiny's eyes lit up when Captains Scarlet and Ochre approached her. "You're alive," she murmured with relief, staring at Ochre, before coughing again.

"Grey..." Scarlet then said, looking at his injured colleague. "Is he..."

"He's alive," Destiny answered quickly. "Just unconscious..."

Scarlet eyed the young woman's handcuffed wrist. "Ochre, the key."

Captain Ochre took it out of his coat pocket and put it into Scarlet's open palm. The Brit hurriedly inserted it in the cuff lock.

It refused to open.

"It doesn't work!" he shouted at Ochre.

"What?" Ochre yelled back. "That's impossible!"

"It's not the right one... Don't you have another key on you?"

"No! I... It must be that key, Scarlet!"

The British officer tried it again, with no more success; he examined it closely and raised his eyes, to encounter the desperate look in Destiny's own. "It's definitely not the key Spectrum issues for those cuffs," he said heavily.

"How can it not be?" Ochre replied in a groan.

Scarlet took his pistol and aimed it at the handcuff's chain. *Impossible*, he realised almost right away. *I don't have a good enough angle on it. Destiny's hand is too close. I could take her fingers off with that shot...*

He shook his head, putting the gun back in the holster. "Take Grey and get outside," he ordered Ochre. "I'm staying to get Destiny out of those cuffs."

"Then I'm staying too..." Ochre started.

"Don't be a fool!" Scarlet barked, turning angrily to him. "You've got Grey to think about! Do as I say!"

For a few seconds, Ochre stared at Scarlet's determined face. He saw his British counterpart would not change his mind. And anyway, he was right. Ochre sighed and shrugged quietly. "All right. It's your call." He took Grey under his armpits and carefully lifted him across his shoulders. Then he stood up, his eyes still on Scarlet. "We'll wait for you outside, at a safe distance from the capsule." He was trying to render his voice as assured as he could, but wasn't sure he had actually succeeded. Scarlet said nothing but nodded his acknowledgement. Ochre turned on his heel and went out.

Scarlet returned his attention to the handcuffs. Destiny gave him one desperate, yet resigned look.

"You should get out of here too," she murmured to him.

He feigned not to have heard her and looked all over the place, hoping to find something that might be of help. He saw the toolbox at the other end of the capsule and went to it; he burned his hand on the metal surface, trying to pick it up. Ignoring the pain, he got hold of it and dragged it hurriedly to Destiny's side, where he knelt again, before searching the contents of the box.

"It's useless, Captain," Destiny told him. "There's nothing in there which can open these shackles..."

"I must find something," Scarlet muttered, not even looking at her.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Destiny said again. "You must get out of here!"

"I won't let you die!" Scarlet snapped, suddenly raising his head to her. She saw the anguish in his blue eyes. He cupped her face in his trembling hands. "I won't let you die," he repeated in a whisper, shaking his head. "Not this way."

"You can't do anything about it."

"The Hell I can't! I won't stand idle while you burn in front of my eyes! I won't accept it!"

Until now, Destiny had been wondering what an indestructible man could possibly fear. Now she knew. What the man in front of her was most afraid of was to actually see everyone around him die, without being able to stop it. It was killing him to know he would continue to live on... And how awful that pain and fear must be, when loved ones and those close to him were involved.

"Rhapsody told me your heart can be broken," Destiny remarked, with a faint smile, gently stroking his cheek.

"Juliette..." Scarlet rasped, his throat tightening.

"Let it go, Paul," she replied. She was not even surprised that she had used his first name, for now she knew it was really him. "You can't free me. Unless you're willing to break my hand, like you did yours."

Scarlet shook his head, horrified at the thought. She would never recover from that kind of injury; her hand would be irrevocably lost and she would never again be able to fly a jet. Beside, he could never bring himself to hurt her willingly in any way.

He pressed his forehead against hers, closing his eyes.

"If only we had that key..." he murmured. It hit him. He drew back, gazing straight into Destiny's eyes. "Torey must have taken it," he realized.

He looked toward the body of the Mysteron agent, lying some feet from him. *That must be it... Torey must have somehow taken that key from Ochre's pocket and exchanged it with another one.* He went to the side of the dead man; fire was spreading across his clothes. Quickly, Scarlet removed his coat and used it to smother the flames. He knelt beside Torey's burned body and frantically searched his pockets. *Nothing there*, he realised, grimly. He turned the body on its back.

For a moment, the horrible sight of the blackened, half-burned face took him aback. Almost all of Torey's hair was gone, and he had lost part of one ear. The smell of burned flesh was sickening, and Scarlet forced himself to overcome his repulsion. Destiny's coughing behind him reminded him of the urgency of the situation.

Opening Torey's coat, Scarlet thought he had found the object of his search inside the pocket of the UAE uniform. His fingers closed around a key and he examined it with hope. It looked exactly like the key issued for the handcuffs restraining Destiny.

"I think I've got it!" he called victoriously.

It was at that moment that he saw the dead man opening his eyes. Stunned by the sight, Scarlet didn't even react when a burned hand closed around his throat.

Destiny's horrified scream filled the cabin as Scarlet felt himself being pushed backward. His head roughly connected with the floor, stunning him. He gasped for air, looking deep into the mutilated features of the Mysteron, who pinned him down with his own weight.

"You can't save the girl, Earthman!" Torey hissed in his face, between clenched teeth. "You can't even save yourself!"

Only half-hearing him, Scarlet struggled to get free. The tight grip on his throat was incredibly strong and was choking him. His right arm was trapped under the Mysteron's knee, while he couldn't get a good enough hold with his left hand. He had the precious key in that one, and he didn't dare risk losing it.

"Now," Torey continued, his distorted face twisting in a grotesque, evil grin, "You will die... Nothing will stand in the way of the Mysterons' revenge!"

Captain Scarlet tightened his hold on the key... and used it, ruthlessly; now was not the time to play fair. He plunged the sharp end of the key into the Mysteron agent's eye.

Crying out in pain, Torey lost his hold on Scarlet's throat. The Spectrum officer pushed him to the side and struggled to his feet, greedily gasping for air. He looked as the Mysteron stepped back, one of his hands covering the bleeding cavity of his put-out eye. With one quick and fluid movement, Scarlet threw the key to Destiny, who caught it with ease. Knowing that the pilot would now be able to free herself, the Brit turned his attention back to Torey. The wounded Mysteron agent was furiously coming on for another attack, but this time, he found his opponent quite ready for him. A direct punch to the stomach stopped Torey on the spot, and Scarlet pressed on with a hook to the chin. He pounded into the Mysteron until he finally drove him to his knees.

Destiny was finally free from her handcuffs and she stood up, looking expectantly at the fight taking place a few feet from her. A last punch threw Torey at her feet. Obeying to an instinctive impulse, the French woman snapped the handcuff closed on his wrist, imprisoning him.

"Quick, now!" Scarlet called, stretching his hand out to her. "Let's get out of here!"

He took the girl by the hand and the two of them ran for the large hole in the side of the capsule. They could hear behind them the roar of frustration of the doomed Mysteron agent.

Scarlet and Destiny stepped over the improvised bridge and jumped outside. It was just in time. The flames engulfed the opening completely just as they passed through it.

Scarlet could see Ochre, standing at a safe distance, Grey lying at his feet. The British Spectrum agent glanced over his shoulder at the fiery inferno he and Destiny had just escaped. They were too close to it. It could blow up any second now...

"We'd better get away from that thing now!" he said to Destiny. Taking her by the shoulders, he guided her toward Ochre and Grey, as fast as they could run in the thick snow.

They were about ten yards from the capsule when it exploded violently. The blast knocked both Scarlet and Destiny to the ground. The Brit quickly threw himself on top of the young woman's body, in order to shield it with his own.

"Don't move!" he shouted in her ear, over the thunderous roar coming from behind them.

She nodded, her head safely cradled against Scarlet's chest. Explosions followed one after another, although less violently than the first one. Bits of fiery wreckage were falling all around the two agents' motionless bodies. Scarlet suddenly felt a sharp pain, tearing at his left side. It made him flinch against Destiny's body. She saw his face crease and he closed his eyes for a few seconds, before looking down at her again. She gave him an interrogative look. He held on to her, protecting her the best he could.

"You run when I tell you to..." he told her, between clenched teeth.

The signal came less than ten seconds after that. Destiny quickly scrambled to her feet, Scarlet helping her, and the two of them broke into a run, toward Ochre and Grey's safe position.

Captain Ochre had witnessed the explosions and had dropped onto his knees next to Grey, shielding his eyes from the blinding blast. He had seen Scarlet and Destiny fall and for a long, dreadful moment, thought they had been hit, if not by the initial explosion, then by those which followed, or even by the falling shrapnel coming from the capsule. He blew off a sigh of relief when he saw them actually standing up and running toward him. He patted Grey's shoulder in a reassuring way. The wounded Spectrum agent was now conscious and, supporting himself on one elbow, was looking worried as his two colleagues quickly came their way.

"They're all right now, Grey," Ochre told him with a satisfied tone. "It's finished now."

"Yeah," Grey answered, slowly. "It's finished..." He couldn't help but consider the fact that they had lost their only shelter and that they were stranded in the middle of nowhere, exposed to the cold winds and snow... Would they be able to survive, if they were not rescued soon?

Now safely away from the burning capsule, Scarlet and Destiny had stopped running and slowly walked the remainder of the distance separating them from Grey and Ochre. The latter came to meet them; he noticed that Scarlet was holding his left side and was limping slightly, but did not make much of it. He smiled at his British colleague while he affectionately hugged Destiny against his heart.

"I swear," he told the two of them, "I thought you both had had it!"

"Can't keep a good man down," Scarlet replied, smiling back faintly.

"Or a good woman," Destiny added, looking at him.

"Or a good woman," he nodded in agreement.

Sounds of jet engines in the sky made them all raise their heads. They saw lights coming their way. Then three sleek fighter jets passed quickly overhead, at a very low altitude.

"Angels!" Ochre exclaimed excitedly.

"They must have seen the blast," Scarlet realized.

The three jets came round for another pass. The one taking the lead waggled its wings as it passed over their heads.

"They have seen us," Destiny noted.

"Yeah," Ochre agreed, grinning widely. "Won't be long now before a helicopter lands to pick us up."

He kept looking up, in search of the anticipated craft. Destiny's attention was drawn to Captain Grey, still lying at some distance from them. It didn't seem right to leave him there, all alone. She went over to him, a reassuring smile on her face.

"We're safe, now, Captain," she told him, as she approached. "In a few moments, you will receive the care you need."

Grey watched her approach, and she saw him frown, tilting his head to one side. Then she saw the worry in his wide-opened eyes. "Destiny, you're hurt!"

She stopped, perplexed. He raised his hand and pointed to her right side. She looked down.

Blood had soaked her yellow coat; the entire side of it was a dark red. She gasped in surprise. She didn't feel wounded in the least... where was all that blood coming from?

Destiny realized it almost instantly. It wasn't her blood at all... She spun around.

Captain Ochre was still looking in the sky; behind him, Captain Scarlet was standing rigidly, but wasn't looking up; he had lowered his gaze to his left side, which he was still holding. Blood was oozing between his fingers and dripping in profusion to his feet, where a large stain had already formed.

"Oh, my God!" Destiny cried out. "Rick!"

Surprised at the sound of his name, Ochre looked in Destiny's direction; she was gesturing toward Scarlet. Ochre turned to face him; he saw the large red spot on the white snow, the bloodstained uniform, and Scarlet's awfully pale face, looking down at the blood covering his hand.

Ochre went pale, as Scarlet stared up at him.

"I think I overexerted myself..."

With these words, Captain Scarlet took one tentative step and collapsed straight into the arms of Captain Ochre, who caught hold of him. "Easy now, my friend," he heard the American say softly in his ear. "I've got you. I won't let you down. Not this time."

Scarlet moaned faintly. Supporting him, Ochre led him to Grey's side where he gently laid him down.

"In God's name, what happened?" Ochre asked Destiny, while removing his coat. "When was he hurt?"

"I don't know," the Angel replied. "He was fine when we got out of the capsule..." The memory of him flinching when he was shielding her with his body suddenly came to her mind. "He must have been hit by a piece of wreckage when the capsule exploded..." She dropped down on her knees at Scarlet's side. "My God, he's so pale..."

"He's losing a lot of blood," Ochre noted. He covered a shivering Scarlet with his coat. "Paul, stay with us, buddy!" he implored his colleague.

Scarlet's eyelids fluttered as he looked up at Ochre. "Cold," he murmured. "I'm so cold..."

Not surprising, Ochre mused. *All that blood he has lost...* "Hang on," he told the Brit. "The helicopter's on its way."

"You're actually... worried for me?" Scarlet asked, finding the strength to smile, although very faintly.

"Why shouldn't I be worried?" Ochre retorted in an unnerved voice. "You're my friend... I hate it when my friends are hurt. I've got so few of them." He could see a dark red stain forming under Scarlet's body and rapidly widening.

"Oh, Lord, he's bleeding to death," Ochre croaked, staring at Destiny's worried face.

The young woman took Scarlet's head and put it on her lap, to keep it out of the snow. She gently touched his deathly pale, handsome face and planted a kiss on his forehead. "Hang on, Paul," she pleaded him, tears coming to her eyes. "I beg of you, stay with us."

Scarlet looked up to her and saw her tear-filled eyes. He frowned with disbelief, weakly shaking his head. "Don't cry for me," he whispered softly. "It's not... worth it."

"Don't you dare tell me what is worth crying for!" she replied angrily, her throat tightening.

"You don't understand..." Scarlet could feel his strength ebbing rapidly. "You forget what I am..."

"I don't care what the others say!" Destiny retorted. "I don't even care what I saw you doing today. Right now, I can see you're dying... And I don't want to lose you again!"

Scarlet smiled faintly. Sounds of a helicopter were now coming to his ears; he saw Ochre raising his head to the sky.

"The helicopter is here, Paul," Ochre told Scarlet. "Just hold on a few minutes longer..."

"I can't..." Scarlet glanced to his side where Grey was lying; the grim-looking American was supporting himself on one elbow, staring at him. He still seemed quite feverish, but managed to appear in quiet control of himself. "Explain everything to them, will you, Brad?" Scarlet whispered with a voice so low Grey almost wasn't able to hear him.

"I will, sport," Grey answered serenely. "Don't you worry about a thing..."

Captain Scarlet nodded his thanks to him and then closed his eyes; the last of his strength finally left him and he passed out.

Epilogue

"He was dead before the helicopter actually touched down."

Rhapsody Angel stared blankly at Destiny, seated across from her in one of the couches in the officers' rest lounge. She frowned deeply. "Dead? Are you sure?"

Destiny nodded quietly. "Yes, quite sure," she answered. "He wasn't breathing anymore, his heart had stopped beating... He was dead." She sighed heavily, looking down uneasily at her hands. "It turned out he had been hit by a sharp piece of wreckage when the capsule exploded," she explained. "It severed an artery close to his heart... Can you imagine that? Every beat of his heart was actually pumping his blood out of him. There wasn't much left of it when the medics from the helicopter took him." She looked at Rhapsody. "He saved my life yet again. If he had not been shielding me with his body, I would have been hit by that piece of wreckage... And I would have died in his stead."

"Except you would not have revived afterward, the way he did," Rhapsody added quietly.

"Yes. That is something I am not about to forget. It was quite amazing... Grey told Ochre and me that Paul would be all right, that we had no need to worry about him. He tried to remind us that he was indestructible." Destiny shook her head. "I didn't know exactly what it meant, before. But after what had happened in those mountains, I THOUGHT I had it all figured out: he walked out unscathed from that jet crash. The wound he received to his head took only a few minutes to completely disappear. And his hand... *Mon Dieu*, his hand was completely crushed... And yet, less than an hour later, it was perfectly all right. So I thought he could heal from any wound, no matter how severe ... and maybe, he could not be killed... just maybe."

"You weren't sure of that," Rhapsody noted.

"It seemed so incredible," Destiny sighed again. "And yet... I saw him DIE. Oh yes, he could be killed... but to actually think he would REVIVE..." She shrugged. "Even after Captain Grey's insistence that it would actually happen, we kept staring at the instruments they hooked Paul to in that helicopter. We were sceptical about it. And it was obvious even Grey had some doubts... even if he had already witnessed it before. We all felt pretty relieved when we saw that monitor showing some signs of life. When we finally arrived on Cloudbase, Paul was well on his way to complete recovery."

Rhapsody smiled widely. "That's the third time you called him 'Paul'," she reminded her friend.

Destiny gave it some thought before answering serenely. "It comes so naturally. It does not feel awkward to call him 'Paul'. No, it feels right." She looked down again. "He IS Paul. The things he did in those mountains... A Mysteron would not have done it. I've seen what those reconstructs were actually all about. Commander Torey was dedicated only to his masters' orders. He was cold, unfeeling, calculating, and cruel... Paul could never be that way. He's the same caring, warm, courageous man I have known all along. I recognized his spirit down there... I recognize his soul. I should never have doubted him. And thinking what those doubts caused... We could all have been killed, because of that."

"You weren't the only one at fault, Juliette."

"But I had a great deal of responsibility in all of this. Paul didn't want the Colonel to learn about what really happened with Captain Ochre and me... He actually asked us not to put this on our official report."

"Once again, showing you he's the real thing," Rhapsody noted, smiling broadly. "Who else but Paul Metcalfe would risk doing a thing like that?"

"He's trying to protect us. Again. Well, I must say, I wasn't too sure to follow his lead in this direction. I did it for Ochre, more than for myself, actually. But I felt so guilty over what I personally did in those mountains... Fortunately, it was taken out of my hands."

"Meaning what?" Rhapsody asked, frowning. "I know you saw the Colonel this morning... You... didn't talk to him about this, did you?"

Destiny shrugged. *I had to*, she thought, but she did not say that to her British friend. It wasn't a difficult decision to make, however. Colonel White HAD come to see her that very morning. Why he suspected something was wrong with these reports was beyond her knowledge,

though. The talk she had with him did a lot of good; she had felt quite relieved afterward. She was just a little worried that Paul would eventually have some problem over that whole falsified report affair. But the Spectrum commander didn't seem to have taken it the wrong way. Not TOO wrong, anyway. He had something else on his mind...

"Don't concern yourself too much about this," Destiny said to Rhapsody. "The question has been taken care of." Thinking of the Colonel provided her with a reason to change the subject. "By the way... did you know somebody almost destroyed the Colonel's rose tree in the Promenade Deck?"

It had the result she had hoped for; she saw her friend frown. "It's been the talk of the base since yesterday," the British pilot said carefully. "It was discovered shortly after you and the others left... How did you find out?"

"You need to ask? The Colonel grilled me this morning. It seems he's on the lookout for the culprit." Destiny glanced curiously at Rhapsody. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Colonel White asked me the same question," Rhapsody retorted. "Of course I don't know anything about it."

She was lying and Destiny knew it. Captain Scarlet himself had told her about the tree, and Rhapsody's presence when the accident happened. But since the British girl had chosen to be discreet about it by not saying anything, even to the one she considered her closest friend, Destiny decided not to press. Instead, thinking again of Scarlet and of all that had happened with him the day before, she lowered her eyes, and her voice was filled with embarrassment when she spoke up again:

"About Paul, Dianne..."

"Yes?"

"You were right, you know? You were right all along about him, and I was wrong. So terribly wrong. Now I only hope he finds it in himself to forgive me for how I treated him until now."

"You actually doubt that?"

Destiny looked up at Rhapsody, who was still watching her, with a smile on her face. The British pilot shook her head. "Come on, you should know him better than that: that same 'warm, caring man' you described earlier isn't able to carry a grudge. Especially if it's against somebody who'll actually admit to having been wrong."

"Yes, that I know," Destiny murmured. "But under the circumstances, I would not hold it against him if he would not talk to me anymore."

At that precise moment, the door slid open and Captain Scarlet strode in; he nodded to the two women seated there and, whistling a happy tune, went directly to the coffee distributor. The girls followed him with their eyes and watched as he poured himself a big cup. He added some milk and turned around, stirring the warm beverage, when he suddenly realized he had become the centre of their attention. He instantly stopped whistling and stared back at the girls with a perplexed frown.

"What?" he asked. "Is there something wrong?"

"We were planning a ski trip to Aspen," Rhapsody told him, causing Destiny to smile in amusement. "Would you care to join us?"

"Oh, very funny!" Scarlet threw the spoon he was using onto the counter behind him. "I don't want to see any more snow for a LONG time!"

"Provided your job doesn't send you to Antarctica," Rhapsody remarked, standing up. "If you'll excuse me, Captain, I've got some business to attend to."

"What kind of business?" Scarlet asked, frowning again.

"Er... ah... things. They can't wait. See you later."

Rhapsody shot an understanding look at Destiny and then hurriedly left the room, followed by Captain Scarlet's puzzled glance.

"Was that because of me, or am I imagining things?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Destiny replied with a warm smile. "Rhapsody isn't about to act toward you as foolishly as I did. I'd dare say she thinks you're the best thing to happen to this Earth since sliced bread."

"Seeing the way she flew out of here, it doesn't really look like that!" Scarlet was still asking himself if he should take it as a compliment, being compared to sliced bread.

"She just thought you and I should be left alone together for a talk," Destiny explained.

"Really?" Scarlet came to sit next to her and put his cup on the low table in front of them. "So, what do you want to talk about?" he asked with a grin. "Sport? Politics? Don't tell me it's about a ski trip to Aspen, you will really disappoint me..."

Destiny smiled slightly. His humorous tone and the twinkle in his clear blue eyes were good to see.

"You look good," she noted.

"I feel good," he replied. "I think I could take on the world right now... No, wait. Some people may take that the wrong way, considering recent events. Let me rephrase that: would you settle for me taking on the Mysterons?"

His bad-taste humour wasn't really out of character, Destiny thought. In any case, it was more proof that he was really back.

"You're looking pretty grim, love," Scarlet noted, frowning. "Why the long face?"

"I acted pretty badly toward you these last weeks," Destiny said, looking down. "I was even cruel to you..."

"Forget about it, Juliette. I told you I could understand your reasons."

"Perhaps, but I would like to explain myself... even if it doesn't excuse my behaviour toward you."

"If it makes you feel better..."

Destiny nodded; she was keeping her eyes down, not daring to face Scarlet. Her throat was tight and her heart heavy. She could feel the tears coming to her eyes. "Paul, I..." She finally looked up to him. She could see the puzzlement in his handsome face. He was obviously wondering what could put her in such a state. To his amazement, she burst into tears, right into his shoulder. "I saw you dead," he heard her say in a muffled voice, filled with tears and pain.

"Hey! Come on, now!" he protested with a soothing tone, taking her into a warm hug. "Don't cry over me... Twice in two days, this is starting to be embarrassing, you know! Especially since I know you're not the crying type."

"I can't help it..." the girl replied, sobbing.

"Stop it, please! You're making my brand new uniform wet!"

Scarlet heard her giggle through her tears. *That did the trick*, he thought, smiling. He put his hand under her chin and forced her to look at him. "Calm down, Juliette. I'm not dead... Far from it, actually. What happened in the mountains is over now."

She shook her head. "That is not what I'm talking about," she retorted.

"What are you talking about, then?"

She hesitated a second, and bowed her head again. "After your car crash a month ago? I... I saw your dead body."

Scarlet frowned. "What?" he murmured. He raised her head again, taking it between his hands to look into her eyes. "You actually saw my body? The original one?"

She nodded. "I was the one who identified it and signed the death certificate as witness."

"Oh, God!" Scarlet exclaimed. "Don't tell me..." His tone changed then, to a furious growl, and his eyes flashed angrily. "I'm going to wring Fawn's neck!"

"Don't be angry at him, Paul. I actually insisted to do it," Destiny protested quietly.

"Why in God's name did you let yourself in for that?" Scarlet asked her. He nodded his understanding. "Now I see why you had so much trouble accepting me, after seeing that," he murmured, looking at her with compassion. He blew out a heavy sigh and let himself slump against the back of the couch. He looked thoughtfully at the young woman. "You must have felt awful," he realized. "I know I did."

"What do you mean, 'you did'?" Destiny asked him, puzzled.

"I saw the state the body was in."

"Oh, no..." Destiny murmured, starting to go pale. "You didn't... see the body?"

"Yes, I did," Scarlet nodded. "They didn't want me near the actual body, at first... But I was rather insistent." He scratched his head. "Actually, Adam helped me convince the Colonel and Doctor Fawn. They were reluctant to let me go into the morgue, but... they finally agreed. Adam came in with me. He didn't want me to face it alone." He shook his head. "It was a sorry sight, wasn't it? I nearly broke down myself when I saw it... If Adam hadn't been there..." He shrugged uneasily and cleared his throat. "I won't bore you with the sorry details. Let's just say he helped me pull through."

"And you asked me why I exposed myself to that?" Destiny frowned. "Why did you? It was your own, original body..."

He shrugged again. "I really can't say... Morbid curiosity, perhaps. And somehow, I had to see for myself, to convince myself that what everybody was telling me was really the truth. It all seemed so strange, so improbable, so confusing... It was so hard to believe." His stare became distant, as the memories of his broken, half-burned body flashed into his mind like a chamber of horrors exhibit... or rather, a scene from a very frightening nightmare. *I can't burden Juliette with that, not after what she's been through herself. She doesn't deserve it.* He sighed. "Well... I suppose I know now, it was all true... And I have to accept what happened and make the best of it."

"That was... a very courageous thing to do", Destiny said. She gave a faint smile. "But then again, you always have been courageous..."

"No. I've always been lucky."

"Don't give me that, Paul," Destiny replied, looking straight at him. "I know you. Probably better than anyone else on Cloudbase. I know what kind of man you are." She nodded thoughtfully. "You said you had to make sure, well it was the same for me. I had to make sure it was really you who were dead. It was hard enough believing you had kidnapped the World President, even having witnessed it myself... But the thought that you were dead was very hard to accept. And then, I learned that the body I had identified was not actually that of the man I saw falling from the Car-Vu..."

"That must have been confusing."

"I'm just starting to understand more of it now." Destiny looked at Scarlet. "And now I realized you can be no other than the man you pretend to be. You are not a 'cold soulless Mysteron clone', like you said yourself. I knew Paul Metcalfe, and I saw you act like him. With all my heart, I believe YOU ARE Paul Metcalfe." She smiled slightly. "Can I ask your forgiveness for ever doubting you?"

He looked at her, thoughtful for a moment, then smiled back at her, and hugged her close to his heart. "The day I can't forgive my closest friends, I would be a 'cold soulless Mysteron clone'," he told her. "I'm glad you've come around, love."

She closed her eyes and squeezed him tightly, letting herself be washed by his warmth. "And I'm glad you're back, Paul," she murmured gently in his ear.

* * *

"Hello! How are things going here?"

Captain Scarlet entered the bedroom in Sickbay that had been assigned to Captain Grey the day before, when they all came back from their ordeal in the mountains. In the room were Captain Blue and Colonel White, surrounding the bed where Grey was lying, his injured leg elevated to reduce the pressure on it. When he saw Scarlet entering, a large smile crossed his face.

"Hi, Scarlet! Good to see you on top of things!"

"You look better too, Grey!" Scarlet nodded.

"Doctor Fawn says I'll be on my feet before I know it," Grey explained.

"He also said you have to rest for a few weeks," Blue noted.

"Physicians don't know the extent of a strong man's capacity to recover," Grey retorted, winking at Scarlet. "Three years ago, they said I would never be able to walk normally again."

"Nevertheless, I suggest you don't overexert yourself," Colonel White said. "You are not Scarlet, Captain Grey."

"Believe me, sir: I know that."

Colonel White turned to Scarlet. "And I see you're back to normal, Captain."

"Yes, sir," Scarlet answered with a grin. "Taking into consideration what 'normal' means for me now... Nearly didn't make it, though. That Mysteron was a tough one to handle."

"It would appear all Mysteron agents would have the same rejuvenating powers you have inherited," White remarked gloomily.

"Not all, sir," Blue retorted. "What about Captain Brown's reconstruct? He didn't come back to life."

"Brown was literally blown to pieces, Captain Blue," White replied, shaking his head. "I doubt there is any regeneration possible after that."

"Or maybe the Mysterons were relying on me at the time, to finish Brown's mission," Scarlet noted, quietly.

"That's a rather cold assessment!" Blue remarked.

"What choice do I have?" Scarlet retorted. "I can't keep dwelling on it. It would drive me mad."

"Well, anyway, while there is really no explanation why you have retained that regenerative ability, the fact that you did could even the score," White said, thoughtful. "And we must consider the fact that, basically, all Mysteron agents do possess the same powers."

"The mere thought of that sends shivers down my spine," Grey said grimly.

"There is another thing going for us," White added, looking closely at his young compatriot. "Now we know what those dizzy spells of yours are all about, Captain Scarlet."

"Yes," Scarlet answered, scratching the back of his head. "As strange as it seems, they're part of some sort of 'sixth sense' I've developed, telling me of a Mysteron's presence, or danger coming from them."

"You sensed the DT19 was Mysteronised, when it landed at London Airport, last week," Blue noted.

"Yes. I also sensed Torey's presence when he landed on Cloudbase, yesterday. He was already a Mysteron."

"And on board the jet, his presence near you was so overwhelming that you were actually feeling sick through almost the entire flight," Grey added quickly.

"So now, in addition of being indestructible, you're a walking Mysteron detector," White mused. "Mmm... I had a feeling it was something like that..."

"Really, sir?" a puzzled Blue asked.

"I couldn't believe the Mysterons were actually trying to take Scarlet back under their control," White replied. "So there had to be another explanation. That seems to be it."

"If Doctor Fawn's prognosis is right about the sixth sense, the symptoms should become less and less pronounced as time goes by," Scarlet said. "I ought to think of this as an 'adaptation period'. In fact, I believe the process is well on its way. My headache was gone, more or less, by the end of yesterday's misadventures."

White nodded thoughtfully. "Good thing, then. It wouldn't do much good if you're too ill to do your job every time the Mysterons make their move."

"He did a pretty good job yesterday, sir!" Grey protested.

Colonel White shot him a measuring look. "I was trying to be humorous, Captain," he replied dryly. "Obviously, I didn't succeed very well."

"How did you find out the Aero Special One had been Mysteronised?" Scarlet asked. "Nobody's told me that, yet..."

"It was Symphony, who had her doubts at one point," White explained. "And then, the body of the real James Torey turned up. Killed in a car accident."

"Like me," Scarlet murmured.

"We realized then that the Jet was in the hands of the Mysterons," Blue said. "It didn't answer any of our calls, and the Angels succeeded in getting a look in the cockpit. They saw there was nobody at the helm... Like the DT19 last week. So they shot it down."

"As for what happened to you all," White continued, looking straight at Scarlet, "We thought that at least YOU would have survived a crash. So we put out a search party."

"All for me?" Scarlet said, grinning. "Gee... I'm touched!"

"We're not about to let our best asset against the Mysterons slip through our fingers, now!" White retorted with a faint smile. "Captain Blue insisted on leading the search team."

"Sick as you were?" Scarlet asked his friend.

"I'm quite all right, now, thank you very much," Blue retorted. "You can imagine how glad we were to actually find out you were all alive, the four of you!"

"Well, I have to thank you. I'm certainly glad to be out of those mountains," Scarlet glanced at Grey. "You had your share of troubles there, Captain Grey. I think I'd better be going now... Let you get some rest."

"That's a good idea," White agreed. "We'd better all go... But I still have some words to exchange with Captain Grey... alone, if you don't mind, gentlemen." He addressed a reassuring smile to his wounded Captain. "Then I'll leave you alone."

Captains Scarlet and Blue nodded and left the room. Colonel White then pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down next to Grey. The American was looking uneasily at his commander.

"Is there something the matter, sir?"

"You tell me, Captain," White said quietly. He nodded toward Grey's injured leg. "How are you, really?"

"Doctor Fawn said I was lucky," Grey answered, shaking his head. "My fever's been under control since the rescue team found us. It's pretty well gone, now. My leg will heal quickly. And I've got a couple of cracked ribs that shouldn't cause any problem now."

"I heard you had a concussion."

"Just have to keep quiet for a couple of days and it will only be a bad memory. I should be back on duty soon enough, sir."

"Right now, that doesn't worry me. The important thing is for you to rest, and get well soon. And that's an order, Captain."

"Yes, sir."

"I won't tire you much longer... Now, on an entirely different subject..." White got himself comfortable and cleared his throat. "What REALLY happened down there, Grey?"

"Sir?" Grey looked in puzzlement at Colonel White. The latter could see his officer was on his guard. He nodded thoughtfully.

"Something happened, didn't it?" the Spectrum commander said, more as a statement than a question.

"You read our reports, sir," Grey answered cautiously.

"Yes, and that's why I'm here to question you. I'd like to know why one of my agents' account of events is different from the other three..."

"Say that again?"

White sighed, a little annoyed. "Of all the members of Spectrum, I would have thought that at least I could count on YOU, Grey, to be truthful to me." He gave the faintest of smiles. "Remember... you carry my real name? And you were a Navy man, just like me... Now, as one Navy man to another... Would you mind telling me what happened down in those mountains?"

Captain Grey was more than embarrassed. When Captain Scarlet had revived, some hours earlier, he had pleaded with Grey, Destiny and Captain Ochre to keep silent about certain details of their misadventure. He didn't want the Colonel to learn how he, as field commander, had been so badly treated and mistrusted by two of his team-mates... No doubt, he wanted to protect Destiny and especially Ochre, who had knocked him out and restrained him with handcuffs... This could have had serious consequences for all of them. Knowing how the Spectrum commander-in-chief would react to Ochre's blatant indiscipline, Grey had reluctantly agreed to follow Scarlet's lead and left out the incriminating incidents from his report. He particularly wanted to save some trouble for Destiny, who could have been considered an accomplice after the facts.

But now, someone obviously didn't produce the same report as the others and Colonel White was now on to them...

"You know, falsifying official reports could be considered a serious offence," White continued softly. "Who put you all on to this? Scarlet, yes? That would be like him."

"Ow, sir..." Grey sighed heavily and turned a pleading look on his commander. "Don't blame Scarlet for that. He had it pretty tough down there..."

"I knew it!" White observed dryly.

"I bet it's Ochre who reported everything," Grey noted.

"Captain Ochre did what he thought was right," White replied. "And I had a talk with Destiny, earlier this morning. She confirmed most of what Ochre's report had already told me. Now I want to hear your side of the story."

"You won't like it, sir."

"From what I've learned of it, I already dislike it pretty badly. Grey, do I have to take disciplinary action to make you talk? I don't want to. And I'm sure YOU don't, either."

"It won't be necessary, sir," Grey sighed. "I'll tell you what you want to know. Guess I should have known you'd learn about it sooner or later. But, please, don't be too harsh on Scarlet..."

"Let me be the judge of what I should do with Captain Scarlet," White interrupted. "For now, I'm still waiting. And my patience is wearing thin, Captain."

"All right, sir. Here it is, then..."

* * *

Captain Ochre snapped to attention in front of Colonel White, seated at his circular, computerized desk. The Spectrum commander took a look at the report spread in front of him and looked up at his officer. "At ease, Captain," he told him. "Have you been waiting long?"

"No, Sir," Ochre replied, clasping his hands behind him. He was still rigid enough, obviously fully expecting the worst from this encounter.

"All right," Colonel White said. "Following your report, I spoke to Destiny Angel and Captain Grey, asking them not to talk about this to anybody else. I would have liked to talk to Captain Scarlet concerning this matter, but it seems that will have to wait. His position on this is fairly clear, anyway, and nothing he would have to say would change the outcome of this meeting."

"Excuse me, sir," Ochre said tentatively, "Could Captain Scarlet be in trouble concerning that false report thing?"

"What are your feelings about that, Captain Ochre?"

Ochre shook his head. "Considering what happened, sir, and since it's all due to my own actions, I don't think you should take any action against him."

"He DID ask you and the others to falsify your reports. I know it was HIS idea. That could be considered a conspiracy."

"I know, sir, but Scarlet did it to protect his team-mates."

"Destiny and yourself, anyway. Captain Grey wasn't in any position to interfere or stop you."

"Destiny neither, sir. I was pretty convincing in dragging her along in that whole mess. She was reluctant to do anything. I took full responsibility."

"I'll be the judge of your responsibility, Captain. Right now, you should be concerned about your own actions, and let ME decide if I should take measures against your team-mates."

"But, sir..."

"That part of the subject is closed, Captain."

Ochre kept his mouth shut and watched silently as Colonel White turned the pages of the report for one last look through it. "I know you want this over with, Captain Ochre," White continued, "so I'll make it quick."

"I appreciate that, sir."

"Wait before actually thanking me." White paused a few seconds before looking up to the American. "Captain, I must say that your report and my subsequent investigation of the incidents that occurred during your last mission has given me cause for concern. I assigned Captain Scarlet as your field commander. You contested his authority – and mine by doing so – knocked him out and put him in handcuffs. All that because you choose to believe the story of your friend, Commander James Torey – who happened to be a Mysteron agent – over that of Scarlet himself. Now I realize you already entertained some mistrust toward Captain Scarlet..."

"Yes, sir. I regret to say I did."

"You used the past tense."

"Yes. The mistrust I may have had... that's been resolved."

"Explain yourself, Captain."

"Ever since Captain Scarlet came back on duty, I had a hard time considering him as the real thing. For me, he was just an impostor, who had taken a friend's place. In fact, he took everything from him: his face, his identity, his name... even his life, for all I knew."

"The Mysterons kill their victims before making reconstructs out of them, Captain," White remarked. "That much we know. If you are implying that Scarlet has..."

"No, sir. I don't imply anything. Not anymore." Ochre sighed. "I was wrong, I know it now. That's not an impostor who came back to us. Except for that retrometabolism thing, he's the same, loyal guy. He came through for us, yesterday, more than once. You were right to trust him. I should have trusted your judgement over that fact."

"If you had, it would have saved you and the others a lot of trouble," White noted dryly. "Do you realize your own actions during that mission could have had serious consequences? They could have cost your life, as well as the lives of the others."

"I realize it fully, sir," Ochre said without expression.

"Your act of insubordination could be considered as mutiny, Captain. Notwithstanding the fact that you actually sided with an enemy agent to trap your field commander and put him in a defenceless position... Do you know what Captain Scarlet actually DID to get out of those handcuffs, in order to come to Destiny's rescue?"

"Destiny and Captain Grey told me, sir. He broke all the bones in his hand." Ochre shook his head in disbelief. "I don't think anybody else would have done the same thing under the same circumstances."

"Nobody in his right mind and not possessing the same powers of recovery, anyway," White agreed.

"Still, it must have been very painful," Ochre added. "He would not have needed to do that, if I had acted correctly toward him."

White looked sternly at the American officer. He looked pale. *Must be in pain, standing on that sprained foot of his*, the Spectrum commander thought. *No sense in dragging this on needlessly.* "Do you have anything more to say in your defence, Captain Ochre?"

"I have no defence, sir. I'd plead guilty to all charges in front of any court-martial you'd send me to."

"Those are serious offences, which could be brought against you."

"I'm prepared to face the consequences of my actions, sir."

"So I see. And if it weren't the case, you would have followed the others' lead and falsified your official report too."

Captain Ochre didn't say anything; he waited, while his commander was writing some quick notes on the report before looking back at him. *Here goes*, Ochre thought, getting himself ready for the worst. *I'm done for, now...*

"Here's my decision, Captain Ochre," White finally said, in an official voice. "Since Captain Scarlet is obviously reluctant to press charges against you, and taking into account the fact that you honestly came clean with that story, I'm willing to drop all the charges but one, on certain conditions."

Ochre blinked, obviously surprised by his commander's magnanimity. "Colonel, I... I don't know what to say."

"I am not finished. The charge I keep against you is your insubordination and obvious contempt for Captain Scarlet's authority during this mission. I take this as a personal offence, since I was the one who assigned Scarlet as your field commander. I cannot accept this kind of behaviour, especially coming from one of my senior staff officers. So I assign you to radar duty for a period of two weeks."

"Two weeks, sir?" Ochre asked with dismay.

"Two weeks, Captain. And if you haven't already done so, you will have to present your formal apologies to Captain Scarlet."

"S.I.G., sir."

"One more thing: the entire incident will be put on your permanent record. You pull just one more stunt like it and I'll personally kick you out of Spectrum."

"It won't happen again, sir. I promise you."

"For your sake, I hope so." White closed the folder. "Dismissed."

Captain Ochre saluted his superior officer and turned on his heel, sighing with relief as he did so. He was about to make good his escape when a call from Colonel White stopped him short.

"Captain, one last thing..."

What now? Ochre thought, turning back to White. The Colonel was looking at him in a curiously suspicious way.

"Yesterday, did you happen to go onto the Promenade Deck?"

"Sir?" Ochre was puzzled. "I haven't been up there for weeks, Colonel."

"You're sure?" There was a note of scepticism in the Spectrum commander's voice.

"Yes, sir. Ever since the Mysterons announced their first threat, actually."

White nodded quietly; he seemed somehow upset. "All right, then. You can go."

Ochre didn't need to be told again; he passed by a quiet Lieutenant Green, as always seated at his station, and strode out of the Control Room, wondering what the Promenade Deck thing was all about.

As soon as the door had closed on Ochre, Lieutenant Green turned to a grim-looking and thoughtful Colonel White. "It seems your investigation isn't producing any results, sir," the young Black man remarked.

"It's maddening," White murmured, resting his chin on his steepled fingers. "I asked just about everybody on base. The only ones left were the members of the team who boarded the Passenger Jet, yesterday. And I have met with all of them today, and asked them... Now it seems even they don't know anything about the incident." He sighed heavily. "I suppose that's it, Lieutenant. It looks as if I won't find out who's responsible for what happened to my rose tree."

"Did you ask Captain Scarlet, sir?"

White stared thoughtfully at Green. Scarlet. Maybe he knew something about what had happened the day before in the Promenade Deck. Curiously, the commander had left him out. Proceeding by elimination, and since Scarlet would be the last one he had to question, and also providing nobody had dared lie to him...

White quietly stood up. "I'll be back in a short while, Lieutenant. I going to have a talk with Captain Scarlet."

"Do you want me to call him up, sir?"

"Not necessary." A devilish smile crossed the habitually stern face of the Spectrum commander. "If I'm right, I know where to find him. As they say in the mystery novels: the culprit always comes back to the site of his crime..."

* * *

Up on the Promenade Deck, scissors in hand, Rhapsody Angel was looking with obvious satisfaction at the tree of white roses she had put onto the table in front of her, when Captain Scarlet entered and saw her. He also saw the tree and frowned deeply, wondering what was happening with it now.

"Come to finish my job?" he asked as he approached the young woman.

He startled her, but she recognized his voice almost right away. She smiled at him and gestured toward the tree. "Actually, I came to see how my patient was doing."

"Patient?" Scarlet asked, puzzled.

She nodded. "It was a painful experience, but I think it will survive. Look."

Scarlet bent down, looking at the tree. It was clean of all the dirt he had thrown the day before on its leaves and flowers... A few of them had actually disappeared, and there were some fresh cuts where they previously had been.

"You had to do some trimming, I see," Scarlet noted.

"Couldn't be helped. The branches were lost, anyway. I think, in a few days, the damage will be nothing but a bad memory. Look: there's already new buds here and there..."

"Good job, Angel," Scarlet grinned, straightening up. "I didn't know you had such green fingers."

"I didn't know, either," Rhapsody smiled back. "But I guess desperation can cause a person to discover some unsuspected abilities..." She scowled. "Too bad I didn't act fast enough so the Colonel wouldn't discover anything about the... accident."

"He knows about it?"

"He's been on the prowl since yesterday, looking for the culprit. I kept my mouth shut, of course... but if I were you, I'd ask for a weekend pass right now."

"Or better, a long enough assignment until that tree is completely healed and those buds have blossomed."

"That would be safer."

"Now, what about that ski trip to Aspen, then..."

Rhapsody started laughing. "Hey! Your sense of humour is actually improving! That's good. I take it all is well in Captain Scarlet's life?"

He nodded. "All is well in Captain Scarlet's life," he agreed. "And in Paul Metcalfe's too."

"You had your talk with Destiny."

"Yes, I had. And it did a lot of good." Scarlet looked at the Angel pilot. "You were right, she came round."

"She loves you too much to stay that angry at you forever."

"I think I owe a great deal to you, though. You talked to her."

"But you did the rest. When you were trapped down in those mountains, she saw you for what and who you truly are."

Scarlet nodded again, quietly. For a moment, he looked at the young woman, who turned away to put her scissors down on the table. She was aware of him staring at her and felt a bit uneasy about it.

"By the way," he suddenly said, "I checked out that novel of yours..."

Rhapsody turned back to him, with a puzzled look, as if she didn't remember what he was talking about. He shook his head. "*The Machine to Kill?*" he reminded her. There was a twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. "Now I know how it ends." He crossed his arms on his chest, smiling at her mischievously. "Did you really think I would've thrown myself off a cliff?"

She smiled back, but didn't have time to answer. The door not far from them slid open and Captain Ochre walked in. His eyes immediately acknowledged Scarlet's presence. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," Scarlet nodded back, uncrossing his arms. He had not seen Ochre since early that morning, shortly after he had revived from his ordeal, and Scarlet had spoken to him only to ask him not to include in his official report everything that had happened between them. Not a word from Ochre after that. And right now, the American Captain seemed pretty embarrassed as he walked toward his British counterpart.

"I... er... thought I'd find you here," Ochre said. "I seem to recall you're fond of this place."

"Yes, I've always found it lovely," Scarlet agreed. "Reminds me a lot of the wood behind my parents' house in Winchester... minus the tropical plants, of course."

Rhapsody cleared her throat, to remind to the two men she was still there. "I think I'd better leave you alone, gentlemen..."

She was already moving to go when Ochre stopped her in her tracks. "No, wait. I may need a witness for this."

"A witness?" a perplexed Scarlet asked, frowning. "Are you going to challenge me to a duel or something like that?"

Ochre laughed softly. He shook his head. "No, that would be your privilege, I think."

"His humour is improving," Rhapsody told the American officer, as in confidence.

"So I see. I..." Ochre stopped right away. Seeming to suddenly remember something, he searched his trouser pocket and withdrew a shiny object which he held out to Scarlet. "I wanted to give this back to you."

Scarlet took the object; he recognized it the second he laid eyes on it. "My Swiss Army knife," he said, frowning again. "I thought I had lost it forever... Where did you find it?"

"At the site of your car crash... when I investigated it a month ago." Ochre lowered his gaze, under Scarlet's perplexed and curious stare. "I... know it was a gift from your father."

"Yes. He gave it to me when I received my Spectrum commission," Scarlet replied quietly. He shrugged. "You kept it all this time?"

"I didn't feel it truly belonged to you. That is... until now." Ochre looked up at his British colleague. "I am truly sorry, Paul. For all I have done."

Captain Scarlet said nothing. He looked down thoughtfully at the knife, distractedly toying with it. He then turned his attention back to Ochre. "You owe me," he said quietly.

Ochre had been expecting this. But then he saw the grin crossing Scarlet's face. "You owe me a revenge match in the boxing ring," the Brit said, in a sprightly tone. "And THIS time, you'd better play fair!"

Ochre relaxed. "Knock me out if I don't," he retorted, extending his right hand and grinning broadly.

The two men clasped hands, before the very happy Rhapsody's eyes. Scarlet showed the knife to Ochre. "If you want one so much, I'll ask my father where he bought this one and get you one."

"You're too kind. But it wouldn't be the same. I kept it 'cause it reminded me of a good friend. Now I don't need it, because I've got my friend back." He frowned. "Now, I hope you don't actually think I intended keeping that knife!"

"Perish the thought!" Scarlet replied. "Coming from an ex-police commissioner, that would be pretty ironic!"

Ochre gave Rhapsody a puzzled look. "You're sure his humour is improving?"

The young woman shrugged. "One can always hope," she remarked. "I guess he's a hopeless case."

"I thought you were on my side!" Scarlet protested.

"Come on, now! There are some things so obvious you can't deny them, you know?"

Scarlet was about to make some retort when he heard the door behind him sliding open. He did not even have time to turn around before a strong voice, with a very recognizable accent, thundered suddenly, startling the three of them:

"Captain Scarlet!"

Scarlet spun around swiftly; a very stern, angry-looking Colonel White had stepped into the Promenade Deck and was staring straight at him, with blazing blue eyes that caused the young man to snap to attention. Behind him, he heard Captain Ochre and Rhapsody Angel doing the same.

"Yes, sir?" Scarlet asked uneasily.

"I was looking all over for you," the Colonel said, coming closer, his voice still sharp. "I want to ask you a question..."

Oh boy! Ochre thought, making himself as invisible as possible. *The falsified reports... The old man must have reached a decision about them. Scarlet must be in trouble, now. And I didn't have the time to tell him...* But Ochre soon realized it was far more serious than that when Colonel White pointed an accusing finger toward the tree, standing in honour in the middle of the table, right next to Captain Scarlet.

"By any chance, do you know what happened to my rose tree, yesterday?"

THE END