

# MURKY WATERS

A

*"Captain Scarlet & the Mysterons" story*

**by Chris Bishop**

Based on characters from "Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons", created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, © Carlton International. All rights to the original media reserved to their owners.

Fan fiction – 2013

© 2001, by Chris Bishop, for [www.spectrum-headquarters.com](http://www.spectrum-headquarters.com)

© 2013, by the author, Chris Bishop. The author keeps rights to her contribution to this book.

Freely and respectfully based on characters from "Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons", created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, © Carlton International. All rights to the original media reserved to their owners.

*This story takes place approximately a year after the War of Nerves started, and shortly before Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel became a couple.*

# MURKY WATERS

A "Captain Scarlet & the Mysterons" story  
By Chris Bishop

## CHAPTER 1

It wasn't *really* a typical mission.

At least, that was what Captain Scarlet was thinking as he gazed distractedly through one of the cabin windows of the helicopter, watching the white clouds passing by in the clear sky.

He wasn't seated in a Spectrum helijet; he wasn't in the company of his Spectrum colleagues and he wasn't even wearing his usual Spectrum uniform. Like his companions riding in the helicopter with him, he had donned a woodland camouflage uniform, distinguished from the others only by the black armband with the black, white and grey Spectrum emblem stamped on it. His bright red Spectrum uniform was deemed far too conspicuous for this operation, and besides, it would not really have been practical or even comfortable for the terrain they were about to survey.

*Regular combat boots are much better for walking in muddy water*, Scarlet reflected, looking down at his feet. He had not worn these for years, it seemed to him. They were his own boots from his time in the WAAF, not those from the Spectrum combat uniform that had been issued to him when he had been given his commission, a couple of years ago. The occasion to wear those other boots had never presented itself, not in a field situation, anyway; they were far too new to be comfortable when he had tried them on the previous day, before he was to leave for this mission. Fortunately, he had kept his old boots, and they were similar enough to Spectrum's to swap them, without anyone even noticing the difference – especially not Colonel

White. He wondered if the old man would approve of the exchange; he preferred not to ask him directly.

Scarlet looked again out through the window he was sitting next to. There was a white jet flying nearby, matching speed with the helicopter. He smiled inwardly; the Angel fighter was actually the only thing that indicated that this was a Spectrum mission. The fighter was close enough for him to be able to make out the outlines of the pilot through the canopy, with her long red hair emerging from beneath the helmet. Almost despite himself, he waved a discreet salute in the jet's direction. He saw the pilot wave back, and was almost surprised to realise she had actually seen his gesture.

"Is it true what they say, Captain? All the Angel pilots are women?"

The young commando seated by Scarlet's side was peering through the same window, towards the Angel fighter. The Spectrum officer wondered if he had seen the wave back from the pilot. Not that it was of the utmost importance. He nodded at the question.

"Yes, Lieutenant, it's true. They're all women."

"Pretty?" the commando asked.

Scarlet was rather amused by the young man's question. "Yes, they are. They suit their codename very well. And they're amongst the best pilots in the world," he added quickly. "Either male or female."

"Yeah, so I heard," the commando said. "I guess they would have to be, or they wouldn't be part of Spectrum, would they?" He paused, looking again towards the Angel interceptor through the window. "I always wanted to meet an Angel pilot," he added thoughtfully.

"Lay off, Mahoney," one of his companions told him, teasingly. "Stop bothering the captain. He has other things to think about than answering your silly questions."

"I'm not bothered," Scarlet replied.

"You might not be, Captain, but we hardly can say the same. Mahoney has been bothering *us* forever about Spectrum, and their pilots, how great they are and how he would like to meet one of them. He's been worse since he learned about this mission and that one of the Angel craft would be escorting us. Ask Major Montgomery," the commando concluded. "He will tell you about it."

Scarlet turned to the man seated nearest to the open door leading to the cockpit. The major was a tall, slim man with blue eyes blazing in the middle of a craggy, exceptionally tanned face, which was already half-shadowed by a black cap covering

prematurely greyish short hair. He shrugged indifferently and offered a thin smile to the Spectrum officer.

"Our young lieutenant's dream is to join Spectrum one day," Montgomery explained. "He's a good officer, all right, and I've no doubt that one day, he'll be able to fulfil that dream. But he's still a little green around the ears and needs to gain more experience. So for now, he's kind of stuck with us."

"And us with him!" another commando added mockingly. His remark caused his companions to laugh and exchange jokes at the expense of Mahoney who reddened violently and lowered his head. He didn't seem to mind their teasing though, despite the fact he outranked most of them. He obviously was the rookie of the team. He noticed Scarlet pensively looking his way.

"I would like to fly an Angel jet," he said to Scarlet, by way of explanation. "I signed up for the flying course... I know the Angels are women-only, but..."

"So far," Scarlet remarked, "but who knows if you might not get your chance in the future? Spectrum is an equal opportunity employer, Lieutenant. If you're good enough, you might get to be chosen. But you have to know that Spectrum only takes the very best."

"I know that, Captain," Mahoney answered, smiling. "And I intend to become one of them."

"Good lad." Scarlet smiled back. "But if you are ever chosen, won't you feel a little alone if you find yourself the only man in a squadron full of women?"

"No... I'll be the envy of the rest of 'em, Captain," Mahoney replied. "Especially if these girls are as pretty as they all say!"

Scarlet chuckled. "Clever guy. That's what I call planning!" He glanced through the window, thoughtfully. "In the meanwhile, would you *really* like to meet one of those Angel pilots?"

Mahoney's eyes lit up. "Are you serious, Captain?"

"Of course. That way you'll be able to judge for yourself how pretty they really are." He jerked his thumb towards the window. "I'll ask Rhapsody if she would accept a date with you."

There were whooping sounds from all around, coming from the rest of the commandos. Mahoney reddened anew. "You think she would accept, Captain?"

"I don't know yet, but I can always ask her. If you're free after this mission..." Scarlet glanced towards Montgomery who shrugged again.

"I'm sure it can be arranged," the major answered.

"Then I'll try my best to convince Rhapsody," Scarlet said with a new smile.

"Rhapsody," Mahoney repeated dreamily. "What a lovely name..."

Scarlet's smile turned to a grin. Rhapsody was, indeed, a lovely girl.

"Great," one of the other commandos muttered. "Think it was bad before, guys? Wait 'til Mahoney finally gets to meet one of them. We won't hear the end of this."

Chuckles and laughs filled the cabin and Scarlet's ears pricked at some of the jokes he was hearing, no doubt aimed at teasing poor Mahoney. He feigned not to hear them; he had no doubt the young man was big enough to be able to take them. He took an instant liking of the young man, having been in similar situations before during missions, with companions much older and far more experienced. He imagined the lieutenant would have his revenge, anyway, when he told them all about his date with the Angel pilot. Mahoney was probably around Rhapsody's age; perhaps a year younger, if Scarlet was any judge.

He returned his attention back to the window, looking down to the ground over which the chopper was flying. It was wilderness, as far as the eye could see: a devastated territory of swamps, woods and greenery that spread for miles around. Amongst the dense tree cover, Scarlet could see broken and dead trees, covered with moss, scattered here and there all around the ground; driftwood floated on the muddy water and though the vegetation was very dense in some areas, he thought he saw what was left of a couple of destroyed houses, standing as proof that this region had not always been as it was today.

Already covered with patches of wilderness in the recent past, this part of Louisiana had been, over the years, stricken by a series of tornadoes from inland and hurricanes coming from the Gulf of Mexico, which had destroyed nearly all habitations, and driven most of the population away, reclaiming the land to expand the wilderness of woodlands and swamps over a far larger territory than it used to be. Since those tumultuous times, most Louisianan people had elected to settle in the more protected big cities, like Baton Rouge and New Orleans, but even to this day, there still remained a few towns scattered through the now wild area, inhabited by those who obstinately refused to give in to Nature and leave their homes.

Those people still living there were stubborn, proud people, who had chosen to defy the elements that, even today, were repeatedly trying to claim a land that they had lived on and worked on all their lives. The folks from some of these mostly isolated towns lived as a close society, away from what was

called 'civilisation', often not even benefiting from the latest that technology and science had to offer. The surrounding area was untamed and inhospitable. Not only was the land itself dangerous ground for people to live on, but it now offered better protection to the animal kingdom, permitting beasts living in the existing wilderness to multiply and increase their natural habitat. Wild creatures like bears, snakes and alligators were now roaming free on this new enlarged territory, claiming it as their own, and there had been a number of fatal outcomes for human beings who crossed their paths.

Which, Scarlet mused, could add to the danger of their present mission.

"All right, men," he heard the voice of Montgomery say. "We're approaching the search area. Prepare for landing."

Everyone around Scarlet muttered their assent and then got busy. He made a careful check of his gear. To tell the truth, he didn't feel completely at ease in the company of these men, despite having been a WAAF soldier himself some years before, and a member of similar groups of commandos during various missions. Perhaps, he considered, he didn't feel like a part of these men, because of the very nature of this assignment; he was to only accompany them to the base of operations, but *his* job was to be slightly different from theirs. He had his own search to make, and for security reasons, he was not to share it with them.

Montgomery knew that much, but no more than that; and it was more than probable that he hadn't even confided any of this to his men.

Scarlet knew Major Philip Montgomery by reputation; he was a highly experienced, efficient WAAF commando, who had participated in many successful missions. Having received his own orders from the WAAF, he knew better than to ask any questions about the Spectrum officer's assignment, but it was plain by the way he was looking at the latter that he was still somewhat bemused by Scarlet's presence in his team. Perhaps he was wondering *why* he was coming with them instead of being part of a whole Spectrum party. Like Scarlet, he was English, which, the Spectrum captain presumed, was probably the reason why he had been chosen to lead this expedition in the first place. He knew that the wreckage they were to search was from a British craft, which had crashed in these wetlands more than twenty years ago. But for the rest, he probably had no idea.

And quite frankly, Scarlet reflected, it was much better that neither Montgomery, nor any of his companions, knew. They were honest men, good officers, but that wasn't enough to put

them in the know, considering the nature of this search. And specifically regarding the secrecy surrounding his mission, which was ordered by Colonel White, and passed down from the World President himself.

Considering all this, Scarlet couldn't help but feel ill-at-ease...

*"In September 18th, 2046, the A67-Z private jet out of Heathrow, England, made its last layover at St.John's International Airport, in Newfoundland, before taking off two hours later, towards Bermuda. That was the last time it was ever seen."*

Colonel White turned away from the screen behind him and looked at the two English officers seated with him in the Conference Room. Both Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel were listening with attention.

*"Tropical storm Diego, which was wreaking havoc in the Gulf of Mexico during that time, had evolved into a hurricane and struck the coast of Florida in the hours following, moving along the south coast, and then striking the Bahamas and Bermuda. While most flights had been called off, A67-Z continued its course, and was believed to have been hit by the hurricane. It vanished without trace." He turned back towards the map, as his finger pointed a spot on the digital pad upon his desk, on which the same map was drawn, on a smaller scale. A luminous dot appeared on the large map, where his finger had landed. "Two days ago, wreckage of a small plane was found here, in the middle of Devil's Bayou, in Louisiana, by a local hunter. According to what could be seen of the markings, it could be A67-Z." He turned again to his officers.*

Scarlet was nodding slowly. *"So that's where the storm would have taken the plane then, some twenty years ago. Quite a long way from its destination, I must say."*

*"Apparently," White agreed. "Diego hit this wide area hard, for three consecutive days. It travelled deep inland into Southern United States, leaving a path of destruction in its wake. The strong winds obviously carried the plane further west of its destination, and it's quite possible that, in those circumstances, while trying to battle the force of the storm, the pilot completely lost track of his trajectory. The last message from A67-Z was received from the Miami Tower, with the pilot saying he was caught in the wind with no idea of where he was."*

*"So the plane crashed in Louisiana," Rhapsody said in turn. "In the middle of the wilderness, away from civilisation... And during the storm, there were no witnesses to the exact location of the crash."*



*"It's the wilderness all right," White confirmed. "There are no major cities around that area for kilometres – only a small town or two, barely inhabited. At the time of the storm, the people of the area had probably been completely evacuated. The others who might have been left behind had other problems on their minds, obviously. The plane might have sunk deep into the swamp. Never to be found until two days ago."*

*White pressed a button, and the image on the screen disappeared, before the screen itself, slowly, started to rise towards the ceiling. The colonel addressed his officers again: "A team of WAAF commandos will be dispatched to Devil's Bayou tomorrow, to mark the place, recover what they can of the wreckage and bring it back to civilisation, so an investigation will take place to establish the cause of the crash."*

*"Isn't it obvious it was the storm?" Rhapsody asked with a slight frown.*

*"It would appear so, but it could very well be that the plane had been sabotaged in the first place, and the World Government would very much like to know if that's the case."*

*"Sabotaged?" Scarlet echoed, puzzled by the use of the word. "Why would the World Government be interested in a plane that crashed more than twenty years ago?"*

*"I don't have to remind either of you what the situation in Britain was, back in 2046," Colonel White sourly continued. "Those were the last days of the Military Regime and the world at large was growing rather concerned about the intentions of the... British leaders of the time. Not without reason, I might add. The World Government was keeping a close check on Britain back then. The Universal Secret Service had a ring of highly trained agents which operated from a secret London office. There were spies at every level of the British Government."*

*"Can't say I blame the World President of the time wanting to keep an eye on what was going on in our country," Scarlet said darkly. "Bandranaik was nothing, if not a very careful man."*

*"At some point," White continued, "the U.S.S. came into possession of some important information that they obtained from a very high-ranking official of the British Government."*

*"Obtained?" Scarlet asked with a raised brow.*

*"That's spy lingo for 'stole'," Rhapsody clarified.*

*"Thank you, I think I got that."*

*"The information in question was contained in one microchip," White moved on, "and was considered so vital that it was deemed necessary to smuggle it out of Britain without delay, to be handed over to the World Government."*

"So a U.S.S. agent left England aboard the A67-Z," Scarlet concluded, catching his commander's drift. "And the microchip was lost during the storm."

"But now, the plane has been found, after all these years. And it's imperative that this microchip is recovered," White confirmed. "By direct order of the World President."

"If it still exists," Scarlet remarked with a frown. "What does the chip contain exactly, sir?"

"At the moment, Captain, I'm not at liberty to tell you. Either of you. Suffice it to say that this is a matter of World security. What this chip contains must not fall into the wrong hands."

"Of course, sir," Rhapsody concurred.

"I chose the two of you," White continued, "because this affair is closely related to something that happened in our country. Not only is this a demand from World President Younger, but I will feel more comfortable not asking non-English members of Spectrum to get involved with this, if I can avoid it."

"We are not particularly proud of this specific part of our history, are we, sir?" Rhapsody said. "It still too close for comfort."

"You probably remember very little of it, Rhapsody," Scarlet remarked quietly. "After all, you were probably still in nappies around the time the Military Regime ended."

He saw her straightening up on her chair as she turned a withering look at him. He quickly hid an amused smile behind his hand. He knew her so well; she had such a fiery temper, and it was so easy to set her off, he couldn't resist doing it whenever he had the chance to. Obviously, references to her age were still a sore subject, ever since Captain Black had raised questions about it at the start of Spectrum just a few years before. Not that her age had ever been viewed as a setback within Spectrum – only by Captain Black, really, as he saw her as nothing more than a thrill-seeking, little rich girl. That was a situation that didn't sit too well with her at the beginning, and she had made a personal point to prove to the most senior of the captains that she was anything but a kid and an amateur. Gaining Black's respect had not been easy, and although Black had finally conceded that Rhapsody was quite able to perform her duties as well as any of the other Angels, he still was unable to see her as anything other than the 'baby' among the senior staff.

Of course, for Scarlet it really wasn't an issue, as he had experienced many similar reservations about his age during his career. Truly, Rhapsody should know that he would never think

badly of her, especially in that respect; but yet again, her anger was blinding her to the obvious.

Sure enough, the comeback wasn't long in arriving.

"First of all, Captain Scarlet, I may have been very young when the Military Regime fell, but I was far from still being in nappies. Secondly, I imagine you were not much older yourself, at the time, and too young to actually grasp the gravity of the situation in our country. After all, you grew up within a privileged military family, were you not?"

He gave her a fake wounded look. "Ouch. I'm sure you meant for that to hurt, Rhapsody."

Rhapsody never noticed the raised brow on Colonel White's face as she addressed Captain Scarlet anew, still in the same incisive tone: "Last of all, Captain, I'll thank you not to raise the subject of my 'relatively young' age again. I grow quite tired of these assumptions that I won't be able to do my job properly, based solely on the pretext that –"

"Hey," Scarlet defended himself, "calm down a little. I never implied that you –"

Colonel White loudly cleared his throat. "If you two have quite finished sniping at each other..." he said without raising his voice. His interruption brought an abrupt end to their exchange and, as if suddenly electrified by his words, they turned to him; he was looking straight at them with glaring eyes, under very furrowed brows. "I swear, at times you sound exactly like an old married couple," he mumbled in the following silence. "Perhaps we can now continue this briefing? We have an upcoming mission to discuss, and I won't tolerate any more disruption from either of you."

"Of course, sir," Scarlet apologised. "Sorry about that."

"My apologies, Colonel," Rhapsody added in turn.

"Right. Let's get on with it then. Captain Scarlet, you will join the WAAF commandos who will be leaving tomorrow for Devil's Bayou. Your mission: to recover the microchip, if it still exists. This must be a discreet operation that you must not share with the commandos."

"S.I.G., sir."

"Rhapsody Angel, you will escort the commandos' transport. You will serve as back-up for the mission, in case Captain Scarlet needs you."

"Do you expect something to go wrong, sir?" Scarlet asked.

"Quite frankly, no, I don't, Captain. But I don't want to take any chances. After all, we all know that anything can happen, don't we? So it's better to be safe than sorry. Now prepare yourselves, both of you. You are to leave for Miami in two

*hours. From there, you will proceed to New Orleans, where you will meet with the WAAF commandos team. And remember – extreme discretion is called for in this operation. If the microchip has not been destroyed in the crash, it must be recovered... and brought back to Spectrum.”*

\* \* \*

“Landing zone approaching. Prepare for landing.”

The voice of the pilot drew Captain Scarlet out of his fugue. He finished checking his gear and sat back to wait, while the helicopter slowly started its descent towards the ground below. The pilot had found a piece of dry land, near the location of their search, and steadily, he landed his craft. As soon as the floats touched ground, Montgomery slid open the door and motioned to his men. Everyone quickly got to their feet and stepped outside. Scarlet left just before Montgomery himself. The pilot, still at the helm, shut down the engines.

The chopper blades slowed down over their heads, as the seven men jogged away from the craft with their gear, to a safe distance. Montgomery made a mental count of his commandos, making sure that everyone was present for the briefing. They had eaten onboard the craft on their way over to their present location, and he seemed eager to get on with business, and not waste any time.

“All right, men, you know the drill: fan out and start the search. You are to pick up every transportable piece of debris you find and bring it all here. Mark the precise location of where you find them. If the pieces are too big to be carried, simply mark their co-ordinates on the electronic map. Remember that, more important than anything else, you are to find the plane’s black boxes, if anything’s left of them. If they’re not too damaged, they should give us details about the plane crash.”

“I still wonder why we have been assigned to this mission,” one of the commandos complained. “It doesn’t seem like a suitable job for us, Major. We’re highly-trained soldiers after all. And we’re talking about a civilian plane, right?”

“You have your orders, Palmer, and I have mine. If the brasses think we’re more useful searching for the debris of old planes and bits of corpses, that’s their decision. I’m not going to argue with them, and you won’t either.”

“Of course not, sir,” the commando said, with a slight blink of surprise at the force of his commander’s remonstrance.

“You’ll be working in teams of two. Keep radio contact with me. And keep your weapons ready. In case of... surprise encounters.”

"What kind of 'surprise encounters', Major?" Palmer asked suspiciously.

"There's quite a few alligators in the area," Montgomery explained. "They might welcome a free meal, if you bump into any."

"Great," another commando muttered. "Alligators... I hate those slimy things."

"Cheer up, Baxter," the man closest to him said cheerfully. "I'm sure they'll be more scared of you than you are of them."

"Shut up, Williams. The first alligator that crosses my path, I'll make me a pair of cowboy boots with it."

"They're protected animals, you know," the last man of the team piped up with a mocking smile.

"Perhaps, Petroski, but I have every intention of protecting myself first."

"Captain Scarlet," Montgomery asked, ignoring his men's antics to turn to the Spectrum officer standing by his side. "Will you need assistance? It would be safer for you to team up with one of my boys."

Scarlet hesitated. Of course, it certainly would be safer. He didn't care much for encountering an alligator either, or any other beast for that matter. He didn't think that his retrometabolism could protect him to the extent of recreating any pieces of him that had been eaten and digested. "Thank you, Major," he answered. "I accept gladly." In any case, the man assigned to team up with him would not know what he was looking for. He scanned the assembly. "Maybe Lieutenant Mahoney can come with me?"

He saw the face of the young lieutenant light up with a wide smile. Montgomery approved of the choice with a nod. "Go with him, Mahoney. Try to bring him back in one piece, Captain."

"Don't worry, Major. I don't intend to put him in any danger. He'll just have to cover my back – in case we meet alligators," Scarlet added with a wink addressed to Mahoney.

Montgomery narrowed his eyes; he was probably still wondering why the presence of the Spectrum officer was deemed necessary for this otherwise ordinary mission. "What direction do you need to go?" the major asked carefully.

"I just need to know the approximate location of the passenger cabin debris," Scarlet answered. "I know it was found nearby." He had read the report of the surveillance plane that had overflowed the area two days before, and knew perfectly well that Montgomery had received a detailed briefing on the findings. The major pointed in a general direction towards the south.

"It's about a mile from here," he said. "You can't miss it, it's resting against a copse of trees, half buried in the mud. The cockpit," he continued, moving his finger, "is more to the north, and half of a wing was seen floating around there too. That's where most of my men will be searching, while I'll go to the west, where other debris has also been spotted."

"You're going alone?" Scarlet asked with a raised brow.

"I studied the terrain carefully, Captain. And I know this kind of swamp. I've never been to Louisiana, but the ones in the Florida Everglades are quite similar. Of all of us, I'm the one running the least risk, I can guarantee you."

"If you say so," Scarlet replied with a shake of his head. Montgomery's statement sounded terribly arrogant. But he wasn't in any position to argue.

"According to earlier reports, what was seen of debris is scattered of about five miles around the area," Montgomery continued. "We should be able to find the most important parts easily enough. It was a rather a small plane."

"It was indeed," Scarlet mused.

"I hope you'll find what you're looking for and that you didn't come here for nothing." Scarlet kept silent at this remark and watched thoughtfully as Montgomery turned his back to him to address his men. "All right, men. Let's get a move on! I don't have any intention of staying in this hell-hole longer than necessary. Fan out – and report every hour."

\* \* \*

In the minutes that followed, during their walk towards the location of the passenger cabin, Lieutenant Mahoney took the opportunity offered to him to ask Captain Scarlet various questions concerning Spectrum. However, he showed himself sensible enough not to overwhelm the Spectrum officer, and knew exactly when and where to draw the line between being naturally curious and plainly inquisitive. As much as the young man was obviously very much fascinated with Spectrum, he was also enough of a professional to know when it was time to perform his job effectively and how not to show himself as an annoying nuisance to a superior officer.

Following Montgomery's instructions, Scarlet had reached the co-ordinates where the cabin had been located. Indeed, it wasn't that hard to find, when you knew where to look; from the ground, anyway. It was so covered with mud and wild vegetation that it was effectively camouflaged from the sky. No aircraft would have been able to spot it. If not for that hunter finding it a couple of days ago, no-one would have ever known

that A67-Z possibly had crashed in this area. The plane could have been missing for still many years to come. If not indefinitely.

What was left of the cabin was half submerged in the dirty water. The side had been entirely ripped open during the crash years ago, and nearly all of its contents had spilled all over the place, completely disappearing into the wild nature. *This isn't going to be easy*, Scarlet contemplated gloomily. *It's quite possible that what I'm looking for has been swallowed by the swamp – and can't be retrieved.*

"Mahoney, you can start looking around and proceed with your mission," Scarlet instructed. "I'll inspect the immediate area of the passenger cabin."

"You need any help, Captain?" the lieutenant offered.

"No." There was no discussing this. Scarlet had instructions to pursue his search completely alone. It was a matter of extreme security.

However...

"If you should come across any remains of the unfortunate people who were in the plane, or find any of their personal effects, call me right away," Scarlet instructed the young man. "But... don't touch anything."

"Right, sir. Good luck in your search."

Mahoney walked away, leaving the Spectrum officer alone. Scarlet watched him go, then, when he considered the young man had gone a reasonable distance, he returned his attention to the gutted cabin. He heaved a deep sigh, as he removed his rucksack from his back and put it against the foot of a tree, on dry land. He took his communicator from his pocket, and activated it, in order to contact Cloudbase and inform the colonel that he had reached the location of the cabin and was about to commence his search.

Strangely enough, he could only get static from his communicator.

From above his head, he could hear the sounds of jet engines passing at slow speed, and saw, through the branches of the tree hanging over him, the outlines of the Angel fighter. He quickly changed channel on his communicator.

He changed channel. "Scarlet to Angel Three."

"Go ahead, Captain," he heard the voice of his compatriot over the speaker.

"Rhapsody, I can't seem to be able to reach Cloudbase."

*"I know. I've been informed by Lieutenant Green that there's a violent storm brewing in the Gulf of Mexico. It's scrambling communication with Cloudbase. That was the last contact I had."*

"A storm?" Scarlet asked, slightly alarmed. "Are we in any danger of being hit?"

*"No, apparently it's travelling North-East, towards the Atlantic. Louisiana should be safe. This part of it, anyway. You won't get wet, Captain, don't worry."*

Scarlet looked down at his legs, almost knee-deep in the water. He didn't need that storm to get wet. He already felt damp enough as it was.

*"Cloudbase has moved into a higher position, and is trying to avoid the storm,"* Rhapsody added. *"If I climb high enough, I should be able to contact them."*

"Good. In that case, can you forward a message to the colonel for me?"

*"Of course."*

"I have reached the location of the A67-Z's passenger cabin. There's not much left of it, I'm afraid, and it looks completely empty, of either the people or anything else it was originally carrying. I'll search it, though, and the immediate area as well, as thoroughly as I can. But I don't think there's much chance of me finding the microchip. It might be lost forever in this swamp." He shook his head. "The only chance we might have of ever finding it would be to send a special unit down here, to search the swamp from the bottom up. I'll be marking the location of the wrecked cabin very carefully, so we can find it again, in case it should come to that."

*"No need to, Captain,"* the voice of Rhapsody answered. *"My onboard computer already saved the position, based on the signal it's currently picking up from your Personal Tracker."*

Scarlet grinned. "Resourceful as ever, Rhapsody. I see you're keeping your eye on me."

*"Well, that's my job, isn't it? Don't forget that the tracker you're wearing only works over a very short distance. So don't go running off this swamp and out of the county without telling me, while I've gone to relay your message. I might have trouble finding you again."*

"They don't call them 'counties' in Louisiana – they're 'parishes'," Scarlet informed her. "An old legacy of the State's French origins."

*"Whatever. You know what I mean."*

"Don't worry, I won't go away. I have my work cut out for me right now." Scarlet paused a second, as a sudden thought crossed his mind. "Rhapsody... when this mission's over... are you busy?"

*"What do you mean?"* she asked with curiosity. *"Why the question?"*



"Well, I reckon that we'd be entitled to some time off afterwards... So I was wondering... How would you feel about going out with someone?"

*"You mean... is this an invitation?"*

Scarlet could hear the surprise – and doubt – in Rhapsody's voice. "Yes, sort of... What do you say? You've certainly earned a break. I can ask the colonel. I'm sure he won't say no. We'll be returning to New Orleans after the mission, and there's some rather nice neighbourhoods there."

*"You mean, like the New French Quarter?"*

"Yes - it's amazing what they've done with the city, since they rebuilt it after the last big flood, twenty years ago... Really, you can't pass up the opportunity to visit."

There was a silence over the radio. Scarlet frowned.

"Rhapsody, are you still there?"

*"Yes, I am,"* he heard the female voice again. *"I'm sorry, I was thinking. This is quite unexpected, Captain. Thank you."*

"Is that a yes, then?"

*"Why, yes. I'd be glad to!"*

Scarlet smiled. "Splendid! I'll tell Lieutenant Mahoney that everything is settled, then."

He thought he heard a hiccup. *"Who?"*

"Lieutenant Mahoney," Scarlet explained. "He's dying to meet a real Angel pilot. I told him that I would do whatever I could to introduce him to one. Well... you actually, since you were there."

*"You plan to take this Mahoney on a date – with us?"*

Rhapsody asked, her voice betraying her incredulity.

"Of course not!" Scarlet protested. "Three's a crowd, Angel. You and Mahoney won't need me. He's about your age and he's a nice man. I'm sure you'll appreciate his company. You'll get along together fine without me."

There was a pause yet again, during which Scarlet heard a very audible breath exhalation.

*"Of all the unfeeling –" Rhapsody kept the rest to herself, and her voice suddenly became very cold when she spoke again: "You don't know how LUCKY you are to be down there and me up here, Captain Scarlet! If you had been in front of me when you made that... 'invitation', I would have punched you in the mouth!"*

"What's the matter?" Scarlet asked in bewilderment.

*"DON'T play the innocent with me, it doesn't become you! Next time you want to have a joke at my expense, be VERY SURE to keep your distance!"*

"But –"

*"I'll be back in half an hour after I had made that call to Cloudbase. You won't be able to reach me in the meanwhile. I'll make contact with you when I'm back. Angel Three out."*

That said, very abruptly, Rhapsody cut communication. Seconds later, Scarlet could hear the engines of the fighter, as it made a last pass over his position and headed in a westerly direction, climbing as it did.

Scarlet heaved a deep sigh and closed the channel. Even if he were to live a hundred years, he would *never* understand that girl.

He liked all the Angels – they were agreeable women, smart and witty... and not at all unpleasant to look at. He would pass a good number of hours in their company, either in the Amber Room or the Officers' Lounge, or anywhere else on Cloudbase. If it happened that he and an Angel had furlough at the same time, he would invite her out to dinner. He appreciated each of their individual qualities, but for some reason, it was Rhapsody he felt the closest to. Closer than Symphony, with whom he shared so many traits he had come to consider her as a younger sister; or even closer than Destiny, with whom he had shared an intimate relationship a few years before. He couldn't exactly explain why he felt so close to Rhapsody. Perhaps it was because they were compatriots – but he felt there was more to it than only that.

Rhapsody was the youngest of the Angels – and the fiercest amongst them. For someone so young, she had accomplished so much already in her life. He could relate to her in that aspect, knowing exactly how it had been for her during her career. In his time, he too had to face contempt from far older colleagues in the WAAF, when he rose through the ranks to become a high-ranking officer before the age of thirty. 'The youngest colonel in the WAAF', he had been called; but there was no denying he had won his rank through hard work and successes – not because, as most people were too happy to gossip about, of his social standing and his family history.

He could almost see himself in Rhapsody – more so than in Symphony, perhaps. They were more alike than he was willing to admit. Their social upbringings, although different, had points in common – she was from an aristocratic family and he grew up in a very strict, reserved military environment. They shared the same set of moral values.

Perhaps, Scarlet reflected, it was what actually appealed to him in her. They were, as they say 'good for each other's'.

*What is it exactly with me about that girl?* he asked himself. *Do I fancy her or what?*

There were times, he had to admit, where he did feel attracted to her; but in view of unique condition, he also didn't feel that it would be a good idea to get involved that way with a woman. Not that he didn't have many opportunities lately; he was still interested in girls – was he glad to know he was still very much of a man because of that fact! – and *they* were obviously interested in him. Which was making his situation even more difficult for him. His last attempt to get closely involved with a woman had been disastrous for her – as well as for him. After that, he didn't feel that it would be fair to renew the experience with anyone else. Not as a long-standing relationship anyway.

*Having changes of mind is normal for a human being,* Scarlet reflected, looking up to the sky. *Maybe it's time for me to re-evaluate my decision. After all – I am still as human as I was before this business with the Mysterons started...*

"Captain Scarlet?" The voice of Mahoney made Scarlet turn abruptly on his heel. The young lieutenant was standing behind him, just a few metres away. He looked a little uncertain.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

Mahoney shook his head. "Sir, I don't know what it is that you're looking for... I just imagine that it must be something very important for the World Government to ask a Spectrum colour-coded officer to join us in a survey mission to inventory the debris from this crash. And I know you said you didn't need any help, but..."

Scarlet sighed. "Please... to the point, Lieutenant."

"I might have found something of interest for you, Captain."

Mahoney jerked his head in the direction from which he'd come. "It's over here."

Scarlet had to admit he was a little curious about what Mahoney could have found that he thought would be important for him. He gave a last glance at the eviscerated passenger cabin in front of him and then slowly turned to join the young lieutenant, splashing the muddy waters as he did so.

\* \* \*

"This is disgusting... I really didn't sign up for this."

WAAF Sergeant-Major Sam Baxter wasn't a very happy man, as, with Sergeant Palmer, he was squelching knee-deep in the sludgy waters, grumbling with disgruntlement and sharing his disapproval with his companion. They had been searching the area for hours, gathering tiny bits of what looked like

remnants of a crashed aircraft, that they both carefully put in marked plastic bags, before placing them in their backpacks.

There was not a single soul around, not any trace of civilisation. Nature really had claimed the area back, erasing with time all signs there might have been of any previous passage of man. As the two soldiers went deeper into the swamp, it became more creepy and murky – even threatening, as they noticed a faint mist slowly starting to surround them. Sounds of animals echoed in the distance – birds singing a disturbing mantra that sounded like an ominous laugh, mocking them on the futility of their labour.

“I don’t like it anymore than you do,” grunted Palmer at his companion’s comments. “Mind you, I’ve been in dirtier spots than this one. And certainly as sticky as here,” he added, as he pulled his left foot out of the muddy hole in which it had become stuck. “At least in this place, we don’t have to worry about the enemy emerging from behind the trees to attack us.”

“What about beneath that mud?” Baxter replied. He was holding his automatic weapon at the ready, trailing it around, directed at the surface of the muddy water. He grimaced. “I worry enough about alligators at the moment, you know. I wouldn’t want to see one of them appear suddenly and snap at my legs.”

“We haven’t seen any yet,” Palmer remarked. “You know, Williams might be right: those alligators might be more afraid of you than you are of them.”

“Oh yeah? What about if they’re hungry enough? A hungry beast ain’t afraid of nothing, Jim.”

“Wherever did you learn that, Sam? I bet you’ve been reading National Geographic again!”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong in reading informative stuff! You should try it some time! That is, if you know how to read.” Baxter heard sounds of disturbed water from his right and turned sharply, weapon at the ready. His movement was welcomed by a loud curse.

“Je-sus, Baxter!” the voice of Williams shouted as he and Petroski, appearing from behind the trees, approached. “Will you please put that thing away? What are you trying to do, scare us to death?”

Baxter lowered his weapon, exhaling with relief. “I thought you might be one of those damned alligators, Williams.”

“Well, obviously, I ain’t,” the other WAAF soldier grunted.

“Though with that skin condition of yours, I wonder...” Palmer said with a thin smile.

“What skin condition?” Williams protested. “I don’t have a skin condition!”

"Have you looked in the mirror lately?" Petroski said in turn, joining in the fun. He left his companion to stand by the other men, who had stopped their advance. "How come you're here, you guys? I thought you were searching east of our landing position."

Baxter and Palmer exchanged a quick glance. "We thought YOU two were searching west," Baxter replied. "The major sent us north shortly after you left."

"Ain't so," Williams insisted. "We were instructed to follow a northerly direction. Which brought us here, obviously. The major told us he'd be searching west. Ask Petroski, he'll confirm."

To that, Petroski answered with a vigorous nod of his head. Baxter groaned loudly. "Oh great," he muttered. "Don't tell me we misunderstood the chief's instructions. We won't hear the end of this..."

Sounds of broken branches made the four men turned on their heels. They found Major Montgomery watching them, very relaxed and holding his automatic weapon down, standing just a few feet away on the mounded bank of the swamp they were squelching in. A still-nervous Baxter had instinctively raised his gun; he rolled his eyes at his own foolishness.

"Actually, you men followed my exact directions," Montgomery said very quietly. His eyes fell on Baxter, who was slowly lowering his weapon, in the vain hope that his commander would not have noticed his previous gesture. Baxter felt himself reddening to the roots of his hair when he saw the smile on Montgomery's thin lips.

"Sorry, sir," he said apologetically. "We didn't hear you come."

"You thought I might be an alligator or a bear, did you, Baxter?" Montgomery remarked, still smirking.

"Yeah – that was very stupid of me, wasn't it? But this place... it's giving me the creeps."

Montgomery's eyes rose and he looked about their surroundings, slowly, as if attentively assessing the place. "Yes, it is a little... sinister around here, isn't it?"

"It is indeed, Major," Petroski agreed.

"Don't worry, men. You don't have anything to fear from alligators or bears around these parts. Does that reassure you, Baxter?"

"It sure does, sir," Baxter said with just a hint of assurance in his voice and a grateful smile. "But how come you sound so sure? You said yourself that we might encounter some."

"Did I say that?" Montgomery said in a detached tone. "Oh, then, my mistake, I suppose. They won't hurt you, that I can

assure you. As for the reason why I'm so sure..." His hand, which was holding his automatic weapon pointing down, rose suddenly, and he turned the barrel directly at the four men standing knee-deep in the muddy waters. "... It's because I know the danger will come from elsewhere."

A cold edge suddenly replaced the good-natured tone of his voice, and his face became a hard expressionless mask.

Surprise barely had time to register on the commandos' faces as Montgomery's finger squeezed the trigger. The gun was equipped with a powerful silencer so that the sound of the hail of bullets emerging from the barrel was barely heard... and was effectively covered by the cries of pain from the WAAF soldiers as one by one, they fell like trees being mercilessly cut down.

A very cruel smile appeared on Montgomery lips, as, lowering his weapon, he looked down coldly at the four men now lying dead in the water.

The mission could now proceed according to plan...

\* \* \*

Captain Scarlet couldn't believe his luck.

Lieutenant Mahoney and he were standing in front of a copse of trees, about thirty metres away from the position where they had found the main wreckage of the passenger cabin. Mahoney had discovered the cabin door, half buried in the mud, nearly intact, if slightly distorted on one side. By the look of it, it had probably been torn from its hinges during the crash, perhaps on impact, as it was not that far away from the cabin.

It wasn't the door itself that Mahoney had found interesting – but rather, what he had found *beneath* it.

There was a body lying there, nearly hidden by dirt and half-sunken in the mud, crushed between door and trees. *Half* of a body actually, reduced to a skeleton by the passage of time, with one of its legs gone, either severed by the crash, or taken away by hungry predators, it was impossible to say. The clothes were but dirty rags, but still, it was possible to distinguish that they had once been a fashionable man's costume. Only a handful of blond hair was hanging from the skull now; his face having gone, it would have been impossible to identify who that man was – short of using dental or DNA analysis, that was.

Scarlet's first reactive thought upon discovering the corpse was to mutely recommend his soul to whatever deity the dead man might have believed in. He caught sight of Mahoney crossing himself, almost without thinking about it. It was never pleasant to find a dead body, especially in this state of

decomposition, years after the person's death – even for hardened soldiers. He hoped this man's death had been a quick one, and that he wasn't still alive when he had been ejected from the plane and crushed underneath the door.

That moment past, Scarlet's interest was drawn by what was left of the man's left hand. A handcuff encircled the skeletal wrist, attaching to it a black briefcase – covered with mud but otherwise apparently intact. Scarlet's eyes narrowed. *Could it be...?*

He lowered himself to his knees and carefully searched what remained of the corpse's clothes; there were no papers, nothing to say if it was the U.S.S. agent Colonel White had told him about. Not that Scarlet imagined he would find anything of the sort; he was just looking for...

*There.*

In the inside pocket of the man's vest, Scarlet found a key, that shone between his fingers as he examined it closely. Obviously, it wasn't a key for those handcuffs the dead man was wearing but perhaps...?

He looked in the direction of the briefcase.

"Lieutenant Mahoney," he said in a very even voice to the WAAF soldier standing behind him, "would you leave me for a few minutes, please?"

"Of course, sir," Mahoney answered with only a hint of hesitation. His voice betrayed the disappointment he felt over the fact that Scarlet was trying to get rid of him when it was beginning to become really interesting. The Spectrum officer noticed that, and turned to the younger man, offering him a grateful smile.

"You have been most helpful. Thank you for your help."

"My pleasure, Captain," Mahoney answered with a smile of his own. Just at that moment, the communicator hanging from his belt beeped, attracting his attention. He glanced at it for a second, then addressed Scarlet anew: "If you'll excuse me, sir – I'll take the opportunity to answer this call from the major."

Scarlet answered with a distracted nod; he barely paid attention as Mahoney splashed away from his position, all the while attaching the communication device to his ear.

The Spectrum officer turned his attention back to the briefcase hanging from the dead man's wrist; he wondered if the key he was now holding would be able to open it – and if indeed, the briefcase contained what he was looking for. It was almost too much to hope for.

Still in a crouched position, he went around the dead body, and approached the briefcase to pick it up from the ground; it came out with a sucking sound as it disengaged from the mud.

Mostly, as Scarlet had ascertained, it was intact, aside from a large dent on the lower side. Scarlet carefully checked the security lock, brushing the multiple dials to remove the dirt covering them; like the rest of the briefcase, it was also intact, having withstood the crash of long ago and its prolonged submersion in these dirty waters. He imagined that the security combination within the lock must still be working; Colonel White had explained that if the briefcase were to be forcibly opened, without using the proper combination, a security device would automatically set off a small explosive charge that would destroy the content of the briefcase... and probably take off the hands of the unlucky person who had tried to open it.

Blasting the handcuff attaching the briefcase to its owner would have the same effect, Scarlet recalled Colonel White's warning; it would be easy enough, however, to blast the dead body's hand, take it off and carry it away. But Scarlet, after considering this for a few seconds, decided against it. The dent he could see on the side of the briefcase worried him; even if it apparently hadn't been enough of a shock to either open the case or set off the explosive device inside, he wondered if the impact had not damaged it in some way. Transporting the case might prove a hazardous business; the thing might explode at any moment, taking away whatever secret it was holding – and even claiming victims in the process.

The bumpy ride back to New Orleans in the helicopter might not be a very safe one...

No, the safest solution was to open the case right here and now.

Fortunately, Colonel White had been informed of the proper combination used at the time and had given it to Scarlet. However, the question still remained: was the lock still working after all these years?

*Only one way to find out...*

Scarlet slowly inserted the key in the lock, and turned it without much difficulty, listening closely as he did so. He heard a click from the lock. *So far so good. The first step has been completed. Now to the next, more dangerous one...*

Carefully, Scarlet turned the dials; there were five of them, and he had to apply three series of number to them, one by one, and in the right order. Some of the dials were a little difficult to operate, clogged with dirt and water, but Scarlet painstakingly persisted; he had the impression that long minutes passed by, during that time, while he fully expected an explosion to occur at any moment.



When for the third time he turned the last dial and stopped it on the last digit, he heard a very faint click from within the case.

Wiping a brow wet with perspiration, he blew a deep sigh of relief and opened the case.

There wasn't much in there; mostly, it was filled with some greyish foam rubber, in the middle of which a very small hole had been cut; inserted into that hole was a tiny, metallic case, even smaller than a jewel box.

Scarlet removed the box from its place and held it in the palm of one hand, while carefully opening the lid with his other hand; inside, resting in the middle of the box, was the microchip, shining exactly like a diamond ring.

Scarlet grinned. He closed the lid, and then slid the small box into the large pocket on his left thigh, taking great care to close the zip tightly; he certainly didn't want to lose it, now that he had it!

He then activated his communication device.

"Captain Scarlet to Cloudbase..." The static sound that screeched in his ears reminded him, almost instantly, that Cloudbase couldn't be reached at the present. He grimaced and changed channel, trying to contact Rhapsody instead. "Angel Three, do you copy?" He received no answer. *She must still be out of reach*, he thought. *Well, she should be back soon enough...*

As he was thinking that, just at the limit of his hearing, Scarlet could detect a whirling sound coming not that far away, from a direction behind him. *Helicopter blades*, he realised instantly, and from experience, he knew it was the very specific sound of a WAAF chopper. He would recognise it anywhere.

"Captain Scarlet?" That was the voice of Mahoney that Scarlet heard as he got to his feet. The sound of the helicopter was growing nearer.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" As he turned around, he discovered the young man, standing only a few feet away from him – and holding his weapon on him.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I have my orders..."

Scarlet frowned, upon hearing the genuinely apologetic tone in Mahoney's voice.

"Lieutenant, what is the meaning of this?" he asked angrily.

"I can't even offer you an explanation, sir," the lieutenant answered. Behind Mahoney, in the sky, Scarlet could see the helicopter approaching. It was the same one which had brought him and the WAAF commandos to the Bayou. "The major just told me to apprehend you – as soon as you opened the case."

"The major?" Scarlet's surprise and anger rose. "You *told* him about the case, Lieutenant?"

"The major already knew about it, sir. I only had to confirm to him that —" Scarlet stepped forward and Mahoney backed off a step. "Please, Captain, don't make a move! I don't want to shoot you, but I have orders to do so if you resist arrest!"

"Lieutenant," Scarlet growled, stopping in his tracks, "you are making a *big* mistake!"

"I'm just following orders, Captain. I was told that everything will be explained once we're back in the chopper. Please, stay where you are."

Scarlet gave up trying to convince Mahoney that something was wrong; he kept totally still, under the young man's vigilance, and gritted his teeth as the helicopter approached their position. It didn't land but instead, hovered overhead, just a few feet above the treetops, and he watched as the belly hatch slid open. Mahoney came over to him and, still keeping him covered, swiftly relieved him of his handgun. Lines were thrown down through the chopper's hatch; Scarlet looked on as two men swiftly slid down.

Everything was moving so fast that Scarlet barely noticed the nausea that mounted in him; as he looked up at the men descending towards them, it hit him suddenly, and he swayed, a cold sweat covering his brow in mere seconds. The two men landed next to him and Mahoney, and he recognised both Palmer and Williams.

A defenceless and nauseous Scarlet, still covered by Mahoney's weapon, didn't make a move as Williams snapped a security hook from one of the lines to the ring attached at the front of his belt, while Palmer was fastening a metal hand-grip to the same line. He firmly took one of Scarlet's hands into his own and put it on the grip, smiling coldly at the Spectrum officer. "Hang on tight, Captain... we wouldn't want to lose ya."

Scarlet just had the time to grab the handle with both hands before he felt the sudden jerk and his feet left the ground. He was hoisted upward at such a speed that, nauseated as he already was, he nearly felt his stomach coming to his lips. He held on for dear life and a few seconds later, he had reached the helicopter. Hands pulled him inside, none too gently, and pushed him to his knees, beside the opened hatch.

"Put your hands on your head," a rough voice told him, as at least two gun barrels appeared in his line of vision. "And don't try anything funny!"

Scarlet obeyed, trying desperately to dispel the violent nausea he was feeling. For him, there was only one explanation possible for all that was happening right now.

A pair of combat boots appeared before Scarlet and he raised furious eyes upward to meet the cold stare of Major Montgomery.

He saw Palmer and Williams being heaved inside the helicopter by the same motorised winch that had pulled him up. Mahoney appeared a second later; the first thing he noticed was Scarlet being held at gunpoint. The young man's brow furrowed and he quickly unhooked himself from his line to walk straight to his commander.

"Major..." Mahoney seemed rather unnerved by all that was happening and obviously didn't understand any of it. Scarlet could see he clearly had had nothing to do with it. "Sir," the lieutenant continued, "What's happening? Why did you tell me to arrest Captain Scarlet?"

Suddenly, upon seeing the hardened expression on the major's face as he turned toward Mahoney, Scarlet felt very concerned for the young man.

"Lieutenant, you'd better be care—" A brutal shove from Palmer interrupted Scarlet, and threw him forward; he fell on his hands.

Mahoney turned in anger. "Stop that!" he admonished Palmer, before turning again to Montgomery. "Why are you treating him like a criminal?" He gestured toward a grim-looking Scarlet.

Montgomery raised an eyebrow. "You demand an explanation from *me*, Lieutenant?" he asked in a detached tone.

"You owe me that much, sir," Mahoney insisted. "You did say earlier that you would tell me what it's all about once we were back in the chopper. Now we are. Please, tell me. I don't understand."

"Oh yes, I remember saying that," Montgomery continued quietly. "Well, Lieutenant, there's really only one answer I can give you, actually..." Calmly, the major unholstered his handgun; Mahoney looked down with surprise obvious on his face at the weapon now aimed right at his heart.

"What —" Mahoney never got to finish his sentence, as Montgomery coldly pulled the trigger three consecutive times, without even blinking.

Lieutenant Sean Mahoney was thrown backwards by the impact of the bullets; he was dead before his body even hit the floor, just in front of a still kneeling Captain Scarlet.

For a moment, the Spectrum officer looked down on the still face of the dead young man; then, he carefully raised his eyes and glared at each of the five men surrounding him, with their weapons trained on him. His eyes rested lastly on Montgomery. The major's expression was as cold as those of

his men as he gazed impassively at Scarlet. His gun was still smoking in his hand.

"Murderer," Scarlet growled between his teeth.

Quietly, Montgomery re-holstered his gun.

"You're Mysterons," Scarlet continued. His nausea wasn't as strong as it had been previously, but there was no denying what it was telling him. He looked all around again, dejectedly. "All of you... you're all Mysterons."

"You are right, Captain," Montgomery answered quietly. "I'm surprised you didn't suspect anything before now... Or is your much vaunted sixth sense highly overrated?"

"You were *not* all Mysterons when I boarded this chopper in New Orleans," Scarlet replied harshly. "I'm sure I would have felt something."

"You are still right," Montgomery answered. "Only I had been taken over by the Mysterons at that point. Well me and the pilot. The others... joined us later on."

"You mean you killed them in the swamp," Scarlet realised. He looked down with anger at Mahoney's body. "Except the lad. That's why you had to kill him now. He was with me, when you dispatched the others." He made a move to get up, but suddenly, Montgomery pointed his gun directly between his eyes.

"Stay on your knees and don't make a move, or I won't hesitate to kill you right away."

He motioned to Palmer, standing nearest to Scarlet, and the man swiftly searched the Spectrum officer for any weapon on his person. Scarlet didn't so much as bat an eyelid as Palmer relieved him of his Swiss Army knife, that he found in one of his trouser pockets. He thanked his lucky stars that the case containing the microchip was so tiny and thin that it escaped the search. Scarlet kept his eyes on Montgomery, standing in front of him.

"No other weapon on him," Palmer told his commander. He pocketed Scarlet's knife, wickedly grinning down at him. "Thank you for the gift, Spectrum."

"Hang on to it," Scarlet icily replied. "I'll reclaim it soon enough."

Palmer scoffed mockingly at the implied threat.

"I would advise you to keep very quiet, Captain," Montgomery said quietly.

"I haven't heard a threat from your masters yet," Scarlet hissed between his teeth. "Did they decide to change the rules of their own sick game this time?"

"You know the Mysterons better than that, Captain," Montgomery replied. "They are always true to their word. At the

moment, they are simply putting the pieces in place, for their next act of retaliation."

Scarlet slowly nodded his understanding. "Of course. Like they often do. I should have realised that. Well, if you ask me, it's still cheating."

"You are not really in any position to make that kind of comment, Scarlet. Be careful with your words."

"What do you want from me?"

"Don't you know?" Montgomery presented his opened hand. "We want what you retrieved from the wreckage of the plane."

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

"Don't play games with me, Scarlet," Montgomery replied harshly. "I know all about the orders you received... to find the microchip that was onboard that plane."

Scarlet's expression hardened. He had no idea how Montgomery had learned about that, but when it came to the Mysterons, he wasn't all that surprised that they should know, probably very precisely, and better than himself, all the details of the microchip and exactly what it was. They had a way of knowing some of those nasty little things, and to act upon them. Now would not be any different from any other time.

If the Mysterons wanted this microchip, Scarlet considered, then it was even more important than he imagined. Probably potentially dangerous.

"I don't have it."

"Now, Captain," Montgomery demanded more insistently, "the Mysterons need that chip. I know you found it. Lieutenant Mahoney was kind enough to tell me. You will give it to me."

"Like Hell I will."

Scarlet lowered his eyes for a brief instant, stealing a glance at his breast pocket, and raised his head half a second later to stare back into Montgomery's face. The Mysteron agent had obviously seen the almost imperceptible movement of his eyes; a smile crossed his lips. "So that's where it is, is it?"

Scarlet kept silent, lifting his chin in defiance.

"Major, the Angel jet is coming back," the voice of the pilot then said, coming through the opening leading into the cockpit. "She's at four o'clock."

Montgomery turned to look through the nearest window, in the direction indicated by the pilot. Scarlet's gaze followed the same direction; he could see Angel Three, coming their way from a higher position, its pilot unaware of what was going on.

Scarlet's heart started beating faster when he heard Montgomery's next order:

"Blow her out of the sky, Whitaker. Before she realises something's wrong." The major swiftly turned to face Scarlet again, his expression even colder than before. "Williams, search his breast pocket. Give me that chip."

Eager to obey his commander, Williams leaned in front of Scarlet. The latter didn't wait a second longer. As soon as the man was within reach and he felt his hands on him, he swiftly attacked with a headbutt. Hit on the chin, Williams saw stars and bent over with a muffled cry of pain; Scarlet roughly pushed him to one side, sending him reeling into the legs of Baxter and Petroski, standing to his left, while hitting Palmer, on his right, with a violent uppercut where he knew it would hurt him the most. The yelp coming from Palmer's lips reached a height that Scarlet never knew could come out from the throat of a man.

Scarlet was on his feet in a fraction of a second, as Montgomery was barking orders to his men to stop fooling around and stop him. Himself did try to reach the Spectrum officer, raising his gun as he did, but he was stopped in his tracks, as Scarlet threw the still-incapacitated Palmer in his way, sending the major sprawling on the floor.

Thinking very fast, the unarmed Scarlet knew there were too many opponents surrounding him to tackle all at once. His only chance, while he briefly had the upper hand, was to get away as fast as he could. He turned to the still-open hatch close to him; one of the lines was within reach, not completely rolled back into its winch. Kicking the winch into motion would be a piece of cake and he would be out of the chopper in no time.

He grabbed the line with one hand, while with the other, activated his communicator that Palmer had neglected to take from him. He had to warn Rhapsody of the danger.

"Captain Scarlet to Angel Three!" he barked into the mic. "S.I.R.! Rhapsody, get the hell away from —"

He was interrupted by a loud detonation, that resonated through the cabin; at the same time, he felt as if his skull had exploded from inside, and he let go of the line. His knees buckled underneath him and he toppled forward, straight through the opening at his feet.

His mind numbed with pain, he felt himself falling toward the tree-covered ground so far below, the helicopter having gained height since the commandos had picked him up.

His world became dark as he finally gave in to the pain.

## CHAPTER 2

"Damn it!"

*The barrel of his gun still smoking, Major Philip Montgomery crossed the distance separating him from the hatch in three long strides, taking little notice of his men who were getting back to their feet around him. He pushed Williams, who was already peering down the hatch, out of his way and, hanging on to the line, looked down in turn. It was too late for him to see anything of significance; the falling body of Captain Scarlet had already disappeared into the greenery below – and it was impossible to see where exactly, as the helicopter had changed position since.*

"Damn it all!" The raging Montgomery turned to Williams, next to him. "You should have stopped him!"

"I tried, sir," Williams defended himself. "But I wasn't close enough and it was already too late to do anything."

"At the very least, did you notice exactly where he fell?"

A call coming from the cockpit prevented Williams from answering. "Major!" Montgomery turned on his heel. That was the pilot, busy at the helm. "The Angel fighter, sir. It's still coming at us!"

Montgomery's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. Although he wasn't sure he had been able to stop Scarlet from warning the Angel pilot, he had little doubt that she must have seen the body falling from the chopper.

"I already gave my orders, Whitaker," he replied. "Get rid of her, fast." He turned a dejected look in the direction of the still-open hatch. Scarlet would have to wait a little longer. They had a more urgent problem to attend to first. "She *must not* contact Spectrum and report what happened here."

\* \* \*

Upon her return to the search area after contacting Cloudbase, Rhapsody Angel was a little puzzled to discover that the WAAF helicopter – which was on the ground when she had left earlier – was now in the sky, flying over Captain Scarlet's previous position. She wondered what could have been going on while she had been away.

As she was moving towards the chopper, things happened very fast. First, her radio came suddenly to life with the voice of Captain Scarlet shouting in her ears, issuing an urgent warning; the anxiety she could hear in his voice was brutally interrupted by a loud crack – a single gunshot – and a muffled cry. Eyes wide in confusion, and then complete horror, she then saw a body

stumbling from the hatch underneath the belly of the chopper and falling to the ground far below.

Her heart missed a beat. From her present position, she couldn't see clearly enough to be sure, but there was barely a doubt in her mind that this falling body was Captain Scarlet. She could feel it in her guts.

The following seconds, even before she could come out of her surprise, she saw the WAAF helicopter veer squarely and head towards her – and a flash appear from underneath the cockpit.

"Oh, damn..." It was purely instinct that made Rhapsody pull on the helm as she realised – just as she saw it – what that flash meant for her. Two missiles had been launched in her direction, and at this distance, there was little chance they would miss her craft.

She managed to avoid the first missile – it grazed the belly of her craft, and made the Angel tremble as it passed. As for the second one, although it missed the direct hit, it did manage to strike the lower part of the tail.

The shock sent the Angel fighter into a wild spin, and warning lights started blinking red inside the cockpit. Rhapsody bit off a curse and, fighting against the now barely manageable helm, desperately attempted to regain control of her craft. At the same time, she activated her communicator to send a distress call:

"This is Rhapsody Angel calling Cloudbase! S.I.R., I'm under attack! S.I.R..."

The first thing she heard was the static in her earphones. *Of course*, she couldn't contact Cloudbase, she recalled in frustration; she had momentarily forgotten that at this location, she was out of touch with base, due to that blasted storm over the Gulf of Mexico. Cloudbase would know nothing of her predicament, until it was too late.

Maybe if she used a new channel, she could reach someone else in the area and –

***"THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE MYSTERONS..."***

Rhapsody's eyes grew wide again. *Of all the rotten luck... No... it couldn't be a coincidence!*

She never got to hear the remainder of the Mysterons' threat. A violent explosion made her craft jolt, and the radio went dead all of a sudden as sparks flew from the control panel. An electrical shock made Rhapsody let go of the now useless helm. Either it was a second volley from the chopper or the first missile returning – it could have been heat-seeking – she would never know. Neither would it serve her, actually. The Angel fighter was



now totally out of control and she saw part of her left wing, torn by the explosion, spin away from the craft.

Again, her instinctive reflexes saved her and she pulled on the ejector seat lever. The clear canopy blew away over her head and she felt the catapult beneath her seat pushing upward. She closed her eyes and prayed that she wouldn't hit any debris as she ejected from the interceptor with the seat.

She was lucky. The angle of the falling craft was such that she was blown in an oblique direction, completely away from the Angel jet. Only at that moment did she realise how close she was to the ground, and she knew a short moment of panic, at the thought that her parachute might not have time to deploy safely. But she didn't need to worry, as a second later, she felt the comforting if violent jerk, and her descent slowed down considerably. She looked up to see the white of the parachute unfolded over her head, and then down towards the ground, which was now approaching slowly.

A violent blast made her turn her head towards the sky, and she saw her Angel craft, at some distance overhead, explode in a ball of fire and debris. The helicopter had obviously finished it off and was now turn its attention towards her.

She was not out of danger yet.

The WAAF helicopter was coming her way, threateningly, and her eyes grew wide at the realisation that the pilot had no intention whatsoever of letting her land safely.

She looked down towards the ground below; the trees were not so very far now. Could she make it in one piece if she was to leave the seat and jump, she wondered? No, she was still too high, she would more than likely kill herself. She looked up in fear at the approaching helicopter.

Right at this moment, Fate suddenly lent her a helping hand.

As the helicopter was coming in for the kill, a rain of debris and fire fell between them, obviously coming from the Angel craft destroyed only seconds before, and the helicopter had to veer abruptly to avoid it. Rhapsody felt a tug as something hit her parachute; she looked up to see a burning hole, the size of her head, in the white fabric. Her descent suddenly speeded up.

*No choice now...* Quickly, her decision was made, and she punched the security button attached to the belt crossing her chest. She was automatically released from both seat and parachute and she jumped down the remaining distance to the top of the trees below her feet.

*This will be a hard landing,* she realised instantly. Instinctively assuming the landing position, she brought her forearms upward in front of her face, tucked her chin down

against her throat, pressed feet and knees together as tight as she could, while at the same time bending her knees and pointing the balls of her feet upwards. The tension in her legs was a little too tight and she fought herself to keep calm, as she ploughed through the top of the trees, hoping that she wouldn't hit the branches too roughly as she fell to the ground. She was lucky, as no large branches hit her directly enough to cause her any harm, but she did feel twigs grazing and flapping against her body; she kept her forearms tightly against her face to protect it, feeling the stings as the branches and leaves tore through her uniform and lacerated the skin beneath, and prepared herself for the roughest landing she had ever experienced.

Her incredible luck held, and she felt her feet coming into contact, not with the ground, but with water instead. She gasped loudly as she sank completely into the coldness. She just had the time to take a quick gulp of air before the water covered her head and she sank deeper. The contact of the water against the scratches of her body made her wince and, desperate to keep the little air she had, she fought the urge to cry out in pain. She removed her helmet, which was weighing her down, and threw it away. She forced her eyes open. The water was cloudy, and she could barely see through it; there was a ray of light, just overhead. The surface, obviously. She kicked in that direction.

Rhapsody burst through the surface and gasped in some clammy, but much needed, air. She couldn't believe she had survived with only the most minor of injuries; never before had she ejected in the middle of the wilderness. She was aware of having been very lucky.

She assessed her situation; she had obviously landed in a small lake – or rather a large pond, partly covered by overhanging trees; at the moment, she was swimming in the middle of it, and she could see the clear sky above her head.

She heard an approaching whipping sound, and just over the top of the trees, coming towards her position, she saw the WAAF helicopter, with a man sitting on the edge of the side opening, his feet resting on the float beneath. The enemy was obviously searching for her, with the intention of finishing her off if she had survived her fall. Rhapsody had no intention of giving them that opportunity. Finding she was too exposed, she quickly plunged underwater and headed in the general direction of the closest shore.

When she emerged, a few seconds later, she found herself under the safety of the lowest branches of a large copse of trees. Hidden amongst mace reeds and thorny bushes, she watched the helicopter, which was now flying very low and very slowly over the middle of the pond. The man in the hatch was armed

with an automatic weapon, and was scrutinizing the water with attention. She saw him firing a long volley of bullets into the empty water, and winced; either he had seen the shadow of an alligator swimming under the water, or he was just firing blindly to make sure that she would not escape. She kept still and low in the water and watched the operation, clenching her teeth, trying desperately to keep them from chattering from the cold.

Coming from the shore, she heard dead wood crack under heavy footsteps, and almost jumped in surprise. Then there were voices, approaching her position.

"If you ask me, we're wasting our time," she heard a male voice say. "The girl bought it."

"Shut up, Williams, and keep searching. The major doesn't want to take any chances."

Rhapsody soon saw two men appear behind the bushes; they were two of the WAAF commandos she had met in New Orleans, just before they had left for Devil's Bayou. Her heartbeat increased as they came a little too close for her comfort. If they were to discover her hiding place, they would kill her, she had no doubt. Behind her, a new volley of bullets fired into the water reminded her that the helicopter was also still looking for her.

She was certain that other commandos, besides those two men, were searching the shores too.

Although still out of view of the approaching soldiers, Rhapsody feared that they might find her within seconds if she were to stay there. Quickly, she scanned the area with her eyes. Not that far from her position was a huge willow tree, with its lowest branches extended nearly into the water beneath, and its foot completely covered with mace reeds and thick, tangled bushes.

*There.*

Quickly, Rhapsody's numb hand slid down her right thigh towards her pocket and her fingers slipped inside, to remove a small oblong object from it. Then, slowly, as silently as she could, she sank back into the water, and disappeared completely under the surface, just as the two men came to stand barely a foot from her.

She didn't know how long she would have to wait there until it would be safe for her to resurface, so she put the miniaturized respirator she had taken from her pocket into her mouth and pulled it open to activate it. It was Captain Grey's most recent creation, and only recently, the respirator, with its capsule of thirty minutes' worth of concentrated oxygen within, had been added to the Angel pilots' equipment, as part of their survival kit, in case of an emergency landing or ejection over water. Now it

would be helpful to her in a different way, by permitting her to escape her pursuers.

Rhapsody swam underwater for a good five minutes, breathing through the respirator, and trying to get a sense of direction in the muddy water. She kept close to the shore, trying not to disturb the surface too much. She finally emerged anew, amongst the copses of thick bushes and reeds, just under the shadow of the root of the willow tree, which plunged directly into the pond. This new hiding place kept her out of sight from the helicopter – still flying low over the pond – and whoever might be searching for her on the shore.

“Whitaker just called in.”

As she removed the respirator from her mouth, Rhapsody froze when she heard that voice – the same voice as before – so close over her head. She raised her eyes. Just leaning against the tree, under the root of which she was hiding, was one of the same men she had seen before. He was presently hooking his communicator back to his vest, and was addressing his companion, who, standing by the shore, was looking in the direction of the hovering helicopter. Silently, Rhapsody lowered herself further into the water, down to her nostrils, and kept deadly quiet.

“They found the girl’s ‘chute,” the man continued. “It was torn in two and had a burned hole in the middle. It was probably hit by that rain of debris that nearly got us too.”

The other man slowly nodded. “No trace of the body, though?”

“If she was still attached to her seat, then she probably sank with it to the bottom of the lake. It’s too damned dark to see anything in that dirty water.”

“I don’t know, Williams. Those damned Angels are resourceful. At least that’s what their reputation says. We ought to know: Mahoney kept mentioning that damn reputation of theirs.”

“She would have resurfaced by now if she was still alive, Baxter. We haven’t found her, and neither have the other teams. Besides, Palmer is making sure she won’t come up to breathe.” Cracking sounds of gunfire came from the lake at that moment, as if to give weight to Williams’ words. A thin, cruel smile appeared on his lips. “Face it, she’s dead and out of our hair.” He paused a short moment. “The major wants us to regroup at the chopper in five minutes. We’re going back to search for Scarlet.”

“I wish we knew exactly where he fell,” Baxter said morosely.

"Relax, we know the approximate position. He can't go very far." Williams chuckled evilly. "With that bullet the major put in his head, and that fall he took, he's not about to revive anytime soon, no matter how indestructible he might be."

Rhapsody's teeth clenched in anger. There was no doubt now: that body she had seen fall from the helicopter was indeed Captain Scarlet. And the fact that these men knew about his indestructibility was a very good indication that they might be Mysterons. That secret was not known amongst other security or military agencies.

"We'll find him and then get rid of him once and for all," Williams continued. "And take from him what we are here for."

"Perfect. Then we'll get out of this Godforsaken swamp and get on with our job," Baxter added. "If we use the chopper to search the area, that shouldn't take very long."

"Actually, we can't," Williams replied, causing his companion to turn toward him. "We can't afford more than one reconnaissance flight over the area, then Whitaker wants to take it back to our previous landing spot. He says he heard some spitting sounds coming from the engines and he wants to check that out. It's possible they took a hit earlier. Besides, we don't have enough fuel to fly much longer anyway. We have to keep what we have left to go back to New Orleans."

"Great," grumbled Baxter. "Looks like we will stay here longer than we really intended to." He sighed and straightened up, leaving his watching position, while his companion pushed himself away from the tree against which he was still leaning. "Well, let's go then. Let's not keep the major waiting. He must be in a right mood right now."

The two men left, without even a look back.

Still deep in the water with only her head out, Rhapsody watched them go; then, carefully, she glanced over her shoulder towards the middle of the pond.

She saw the helicopter slowly gain altitude, while the shooter at the hatch went back inside, sliding the door closed behind him. The helicopter veered abruptly in the same direction Williams and Baxter were heading.

From what she had just heard, Rhapsody imagined that all the teams searching for her were now to rendezvous with the craft at an already agreed location. She cautiously looked around, to make sure there was no-one else still there; it was only when she was perfectly sure that she was all alone in the surrounding wilderness that she permitted herself to sigh with deep relief, and slowly squelched out of the pond to crawl onto solid, yet muddy, ground.

She was gasping, her teeth were chattering, and she was shivering from her long stay in the cold water. Her feet were soaking in her water-filled boots, so she hurriedly removed and emptied them. She took off her soaked socks and energetically wrung them out to remove as much water from them as she could, before carefully spreading them atop the dry root of the willow tree underneath which she had hidden earlier. Her clothes were filthy, and were sticking uncomfortably to her; she removed her torn uniform top, at the same time glancing at her communication epaulettes. One of them was completely shattered, while the other was filled with water – both broken beyond repair. Groaning, she put the jacket aside and gingerly checked herself for any injury.

She had been very lucky: from her fall and subsequent swim in the pond, she was suffering from only a pulled muscle in her left shoulder and a few scratches all over her body, the deepest of which had been inflicted on her left arm and ran from the shoulder down to the elbow. Now that it was out of the cold water, it was stinging like hell and bleeding; Rhapsody thought it would be better to clean it up the best she could and to bandage it quickly. There was no telling what kind of filth could be floating in that pond, and she didn't want to worry about any kind of blood poisoning or infection in the near future.

From the large inside pocket of her jacket, she took the pouch containing her Spectrum-issue first-aid kit. The pouch was waterproof, and fortunately had not been ripped during all her recent mishaps; it contained only the very basics of what she would need in case of trouble, and quite frankly, to properly take care of that cut, she would have preferred to have something a little more than that. She shrugged, trying to dismiss the thought. Obviously, this would have to do the job for now. She would have her wounds checked by a doctor as soon as possible.

While working very quickly to clean up the cut – all the while clenching her jaws against the stinging pain caused by the antiseptic iodine – Rhapsody's mind was working fast to assess her situation, and what would now be her course of action. The Mysterons had launched a threat – of what nature, she didn't know as yet, because her radio had gone dead before she could hear it. However, she was one hundred percent sure that it had something to do with what Captain Scarlet and she had come to retrieve, here in this Louisiana bayou.

The WAAF commandos were acting hostile, and she had to suppose that they could be Mysteron agents. Scarlet was lost somewhere in this wilderness, either grievously wounded or dead, and the commandos, believing her to be dead as well,

were now looking for him – and for whatever they thought he possessed.

She had no means of contacting Cloudbase even if it had been within reach; for that matter, she couldn't even reach anyone else, as her communications devices were either lost or destroyed. She was away from civilisation. From memory, she could recall one or two small settlements in the area, but still they were at some distance from her position, and she wasn't that sure they were deserving of any 'civilised' epithet. She wasn't even sure there was any authority or law enforcement figures in those places.

*Right, a fine mess this is...*

But there was one bright spot to all this – namely, following the new Mysteron threat, Cloudbase would now expect them to radio in before they missed their scheduled check-in time. That was standard procedure. If they were not to contact Spectrum... then their prolonged silence would be considered as highly suspicious. And if the threat was specific enough for Spectrum to believe it had something to do with their mission, then Colonel White would order that someone be sent to Louisiana to find them – as quickly as possible.

But how soon would that be, before it was too late?

Rhapsody didn't think she could waste any time in waiting to be rescued. She had to do something herself, and she didn't have much choice about what she actually had to do; as a matter of fact, her decision had been reached already as she waited in the stagnant water for the WAAF soldiers to go away.

She had to find Captain Scarlet before them.

While at the helm of her Angel craft, she had had a pretty good view of where he had fallen, and she had every hope of being able to get there before the commandos. According to what she had overheard, their helicopter would go first to that landing spot they had previously used. That gave her a head start, as it was some distance from there. Furthermore, they would have to make their way through the swamp with all their weapons and heavy equipment – while she would be travelling very light. Of course, she would have given *anything* to *at least* have a handgun; unfortunately, she had lost hers when she took that forced dive in the lake; she would have to do without.

*It's going to be close, though,* she reflected grimly.

Still, she considered she had a good chance. The commandos believed her dead; so they would never think that she might beat them to the prize and consequently, they would not hurry too much to get to Scarlet – especially if they considered him dead, or at least, very seriously injured.

If he was dead, and Rhapsody believed him to be if he had been shot in the head before that awful fall, then he would not heal fully and revive for a good six hours.

At least, that's what the English pilot grimly considered. She didn't like thinking that he was all alone, and totally defenceless, somewhere in this swamp. Scarlet's extraordinary healing capacities since his first encounter with the Mysterons had never ceased to surprise her – and everyone else too – but sometimes, she wondered if he didn't take them too much for granted. So far, his powers had never failed him, but there was still so much they didn't know about them, that it was natural to wonder to what extent he could really trust in them. Thus far, it was merely supposed that high-voltage electricity could be as dangerous for him as it was for any human being, but there was still the high possibility that something else might be equally as lethal to him... something that hadn't occurred yet.

If his body were to be so very severely damaged – whatever the reason or the circumstances – could he still heal? So far, he had come back from some rather horrible and grisly 'deaths' but... maybe he just had not yet reached the limits of his powers?

*I wonder if these thoughts also concern him, Rhapsody pondered. Or if he even imagines that we would worry about him so much – perhaps needlessly, and I'm sure he would tell us so himself. But still, we're his friends... and I for one can't help worrying about him.*

Trying to chase away those troubling thoughts, Rhapsody finished wrapping the bandage tightly around her arm. Then, she put her still damp socks and boots back onto her feet. After tying up her hair into a crude ponytail, so it would not fall into her eyes, she searched the multiple pockets of her jacket and removed from them a collection of useful objects – matches, safely kept into a sealed plastic bag, a lighter, a small compass, a multi-bladed knife, her Spectrum ID wallet and the respirator tube, and put them into the various pockets of her trousers, along with what remained of the first aid pouch. She also took her Spectrum Personal Tracker from one of her trousers' pockets, and was about to press the middle button to activate it, when she noticed the long crack running through it. The button fell into her open hand.

*Well, it's not with that I'll be expecting any help,* Rhapsody reflected gloomily, realising the SPT was beyond any repair and totally useless. She discarded it, and then rolled the jacket into a ball to stash it under the root of the willow tree. It was uncomfortably damp in this swamp, and the jacket, damaged as it was, was now worthless. She thought it would be far more



comfortable for her to travel wearing only her sweater, trousers and boots.

She checked the time on her watch, and then orientated herself, searching for the direction that would lead her to Scarlet's position, and recalling from her memory the terrain's general geography, to draw the surest and fastest course to get to him. The ground was treacherous all the way, she considered – with swamps, pits, snakes, alligators, quicksand, and whatever other dangers she didn't know about. She estimated a good two hours' distance on foot. And the commandos, leaving from their previous landing position — would have approximately the same distance to cover.

*This **will** be a very close race*, Rhapsody reminded herself again.

Grimly, she began her journey at the double. She didn't have any more time to lose.

\* \* \*

Captain Scarlet's body took a very harsh beating as it fell through the thick foliage of the trees, and hit many branches on its way down. Fortunately for him, the Spectrum officer was unconscious through the whole ordeal, and when his body finally hit the ground with a dull thud, his fall had been slowed down enough so that it didn't hit as hard as it might have, even considering the height it had fallen from.

Bleeding, his uniform and flesh slashed in many places by the lashing of twigs, his bones broken and suffering from multiple internal injuries, he lay limply on his back at the foot of the trees, the shadows concealing his motionless form from prying eyes which might have watched him from the sky.

He never saw any of the ensuing battle over the treetops, as the helicopter left its position to attack the Angel fighter, nor did he hear the sound of the explosion, as the Spectrum craft was blown out of the sky. If he had, he would probably have been worried sick about the fate of its pilot. He was too far gone to worry about anything at all – and even less about his own fate.

Contrary to what the Mysterionised commandos had assumed, neither the bullet, nor the fall, had killed him, but he was so grievously wounded that had he been a normal human being, he would have died from his injuries in a very short time, and no amount of care would have been able to save him. For a time, he wavered uncertainly between life and death, his breathing at first laborious, his heart beating unsteadily, his mind captive in a dark place from which he didn't seem able to escape.

The first image to enter his mind was that of a violent flash of light – red and yellow – like fire threatening to eat at him. It was burning, consuming him, causing him unbearable pain. Vague pictures then followed through the pain, haloed by a strange white mist – fast cars, aircraft he didn't know flying into a blue sky dotted with white clouds... faces that he couldn't recognise, indistinct and out of reach. And then sounds filled his ears, horrible sounds of untold violence – shouts, violent deflagrations, screams of pain from women and men alike, crackling of automatic weapons, gunshots, mounting in a violent crescendo that threatened to drive him crazy.

The last sounds he heard were the whirling sound of helicopter blades, then warning shouts – and the cracking thunder of a gunshot that reverberated through his skull.

Coming out of his dream, he opened his eyes with a start, gasping.

His brutal awakening caused a fiery pain that clouded his mind and he groaned, closing his eyes. His whole body was in terrible, unexplainable pain, but it was *nothing* compared to what he was feeling in his head.

He could barely move – he didn't *dare* make a single move, in fact. He was lying there on his back, trying to overcome this pain that seemed to stop him to think and to comprehend what was happening to him.

Gasping – it seemed to him his lungs were on fire – Scarlet opened his eyes once more, this time very carefully. He had to blink many times before his vision would clear, and he realised that he was staring up towards the sky, through the high branches of a tree under which he was lying. In his ears, he could now hear the peaceful sounds of the wind through the leaves, a river, which seemed to be running nearby, the song of birds, and the incessant tapping of a woodpecker working on the bark of a tree. Nothing remotely as violent as what he had heard and seen in his dream – all the calm and quiet of the Nature surrounding him.

Almost too calm and quiet.

*What happened? What am I doing here?*

He still felt the pain throughout his body and especially in the back of his head. He tried to rise, but was barely able to lift his head more than an inch, as the pain pulled him down. His back was killing him; it was as if it was broken. But if it was broken, he wouldn't be able to move at all – and he wouldn't feel anything, right? That was something of a consolation, he thought, although he was hurting so much that he wasn't sure if he should be that happy with it.

More cautiously this time, he made another attempt, pushing himself up on one elbow as he rose to his side; his head felt like a thousand bricks, and momentarily, his vision blacked out entirely, as if his skull exploded; he closed his eyes and gasped; it hurt so much, he was almost unable to breathe. As he tried to raise himself further, turning on his side, he felt the persistent throbbing in his left leg. The pain became so intolerable that he cried out.

Scarlet forced himself to open his eyes again; he looked at the leg which was hurting him so much. Again, he blinked many times to clear his eyes from the salty sweat falling into them. He could see the blood soaking the lower part of his leg, about midway below the knee, where there was a large tear in his trouser leg. He could see the sharp end of a broken bone sticking out through the flesh and fabric.

*Compound fracture*, he realised almost immediately. No wonder his leg was hurting so much...

*It'll have to be put back in place.* The coldness with which he came to this conclusion surprised him, and a new pang of pain to the back of his head made him close his eyes again and lower his head. It was hurting him more than he could bear. Slowly, with a cautious and very hesitant movement, and despite enormous effort demanded of his aching body, he lifted his right arm up and then carefully slipped his hand behind his head. He searched for the tender spot he could feel on the back of his head; his fingers came into contact with something sticky and damp and he gasped again. He brought his hand forward and opened his eyes to look.

He was shocked to discover his whole hand covered with blood.

His own blood.

Panic started to fill him, and it did nothing to ease his pain.

"You alive, son?"

The deep voice calling to him – tainted with an obvious accent of surprise – startled Scarlet, and he turned his head in the direction from which it came. He immediately regretted it as another new pain raced through his neck and spine. Through a growing mist, he saw the outlines of a grey-bearded old man, wearing dirty clothes and armed with a huge rifle, striding his way, his gun aimed at him. Scarlet's eyes, wide with deep concern, followed the barrel of the gun, as the man approached. His heart rate increased, as he contemplated the possibility that the violent dream that had welcomed his return to consciousness was suddenly becoming a reality.

But as he reached him, the old man simply knelt by his side, putting the rifle onto the ground to lean over him. There was an

expression of concern and astonishment on his craggy face. The tension that was keeping him upright left Scarlet at that moment, and with it the remainder of his strength, and he fell on his back, with a loud groan.

"Take it easy," the old man told him. His voice, although gruff, was surprisingly soothing. "You're in a bad way, boy... It's a good thing Ol' Joe saw your fall. He'll take good care of you."

"F-fall?" Scarlet muttered almost inaudibly. "W-what...?" He muffled a cry as the pain in his head became even worse than before, and his mind started to spin vertiginously, before starting to cover itself with a deep mist.

"Don't try to talk, son. It'll be all right..."

"W-what..." Scarlet slurred, trying to look at the old man he knew was bending over him. "What happened... to me?"

His eyelids fluttered, as he drifted further into unconsciousness; he fought desperately to keep a grip on reality – but barely had the time to utter one last sentence:

"I can't... remember a thing..."

His eyes closed and, as his skull exploded in fiery pain, darkness mercifully engulfed him.

\* \* \*

Standing at the opening of the observation tube, in the Control Room, Colonel White was thoughtfully watching the horizon, looking towards the huge grey and black clouds that had formed a few hundreds of feet below their present altitude. He could see flashes of lightning through the moving clouds and knew that underneath, the storm was raging furiously, pouring bucketfuls of rain onto the earth below. Called away to attend its next mission against the Mysterons, Cloudbase was at a safe distance and height, and was presently moving in a north-easterly direction, further away from the storm.

"Angels One and Two are in flight, sir," the voice of Lieutenant Green, seated at his station, told him quietly.

White silently acknowledged the report with a brief nod. With Angel Three away on its own assignment, he had previously ordered one of the backup craft out of the hangar and ready for use in case of emergency. It had been a while since the use of more than three Angels at a time had been needed – the necessity of it only occurring two or three times in the past. And even then, one of those times had been to replace a launched Angel that had just crashed to the ground. Fortunately, the pilot at the helm at that time – Symphony – had been able to eject safely.

"We'll reach Futura City in two hours," Green continued. "Estimated time of arrival: 1735, local time."

"No news from Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel?" White asked, not leaving his position in front of the tube.

"None so far, sir. Not since Rhapsody contacted us, a few minutes before the Mysterons issued their threat."

White thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "She was returning to her escort duty in Louisiana, after her report," he said, almost to himself. "So since the storm is still obstructing any contact with her through the communication satellite, she's back out of touch. And so is Scarlet."

"Rhapsody did report that everything was going fine," Green noted, as his commander turned back to him, and he saw the musing – even slightly concerned – expression on his face. "I know they should have reported soon after the Mysterons' threat to ask about new orders, but... maybe they didn't hear that either, due to the storm?"

"That's possible, yes," White agreed. "Considering the communication firewall..."

A little more than a year ago, when the Mysterons had made their Voice heard through all of Earth's communication frequencies announcing their first threat, the event had caused a wind of panic to spread amongst Earth's population. At the time, no-one had been able to intercept that first message, as nobody was even prepared for it. But times had changed since then. Taking its most crucial decision since its creation, the World Government's official position concerning the Mysterons was to deny they were from Mars, but instead, to pretend that they were a new group of worldwide terrorists using elaborate hoaxes to strike fear into the collective mind. That was, of course, an incredibly daring and perilous gamble, and the World Government was hoping that the people of Earth would not discover the lie. Politically, a conspiracy on such a large scale was particularly risky, but it was nothing compared to the kind of difficulties posed by frightened crowds dreading attacks from alien invaders. For security forces around the world, it might even become too much to handle. Eventually, maybe, the world would know the truth about the Mysterons. When it was ready. Or when no other choice was left to its leaders.

In order to keep people unaware of the Mysterons' true nature, and avoid a repetition of the panic created by their first message, a very secure firewall was devised and installed on mini-sats in orbit around the world; they were designed to intercept any signals coming from Mars, before they could reach any other receivers.

Now, only World Government Security satellites, specifically configured for Spectrum use, were able to pick up the Martian signals. Whenever a Mysteron threat was announced, it was broadcast on every communication frequency used by Spectrum, so that every member of the organisation who heard it would be on immediate alert and ready for duty.

"If their radios were cut off from the main loop, indeed they might not have heard the threat either," White concurred. "So they would be totally ignorant of what's currently happening and would carry on with their mission."

"Should we send someone to inform them, sir?" Green inquired.

White gave it some thought. According to Rhapsody's report, Captain Scarlet had found the A67-Z's passenger cabin and was about to search the immediate area. There was no telling how far he had got in his investigation, or if he would even have succeeded, but he still had some chance of finding the microchip.

*I might as well give him that chance... Who knows when we'll be THAT close to finding that damned chip again?*

"No," White finally answered his aide's question. "Their presence is not required as yet, as we still don't know the nature of the Mysterons' threat. Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel can proceed with their current mission. However, they have to be informed of the situation, in case we need them to return urgently." He went to his desk and sat down. He took a pen in his hand and returned his attention to Green. "We need all remaining onboard personnel at the moment, so I won't be sending anyone to Louisiana right now. Have our New Orleans ground agent contacted through relayed transmission, Lieutenant. You can arrange that, can't you?"

"Yes, sir," Green answered, while consulting his instruments. "Our line to Washington is clear. Our base there will be able to contact our New Orleans offices."

"Perfect. I want Washington to radio-contact Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel, and to tell them of the Mysterons' threat, but that they should carry on, until further orders."

"Yes, Colonel."

"Maybe that storm will have blown itself out by the time we might need them, and we'll be able to reach them ourselves directly," White continued. "In the meanwhile, we have to concentrate on this new threat that's fallen into our laps. Have all the on-duty captains report to the Control Room at once for briefing."

"Right away, sir."

Colonel White threw his pen onto his desk, in a frustrated gesture. "I hate cryptic threats," he grumbled. "Let's hope we'll quickly find out what the Mysterons are planning this time..."

\* \* \*

Spectrum agent Maxwell Laborteaux, the New Orleans communications and inter-administrative liaison officer – a rather high-sounding title that simply meant that he was responsible for all communication and relations between Spectrum and the various official authorities of the city – was in his office as he spoke on the phone to Lieutenant Dun, communications officer at the Washington Spectrum base. Seated in front of his window, his back turned to his desk, Laborteaux was distractedly outside, as the rain was falling over the city. A few minutes ago, Dun had called him with instructions relayed from Cloudbase. Laborteaux was now contacting him in turn with a report on the situation.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," Laborteaux said to his interlocutor, spinning his seat around to face his desk. "I tried to make contact with Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel as instructed, but I have the same trouble as yourself and Cloudbase in reaching them. Yes, I know my office is the one closest to them..." He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Yes, I believe this damned storm in the Gulf is responsible for the problem too – it's jamming our frequencies. It hasn't reached the coast, fortunately, but it probably stands right between us and the satellite relay. Currently, I even have trouble hearing you clearly..."

As if to prove his words, static sounds filled his receiver and he pushed it away from his ear, wincing. When he put the receiver against his ear again, it was to hear the frustrated groan from Dun at the other end.

"Sorry about that," he added apologetically. "It's not like there's anything I can do. Yeah, I copy. I'll relay Colonel White's instructions to both Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel as soon I'm able to contact them. Of course, I hope it'll be soon too... Yes, Lieutenant... Don't worry about a thing... I have everything in hand. I'll keep you informed... Goodbye."

Laborteaux hung up the receiver, before even hearing the reply from his interlocutor. He whirled his chair around and looked pensively out of the window again. The rain outside was only local, and judging from the sky, it would end very soon. It was far from resembling anything like the violent storm that was currently raging in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Was it good enough?" he asked over his shoulder.

"You did well," was the answer he received.

Laborteaux turned around once more, this time to face the man standing rigidly in front of his desk. He slowly intertwined his fingers and gave a sigh. "You do realise that they will eventually get suspicious?"

"Then you will know what to do," the monotone voice replied slowly.

A faint smile spread upon Laborteaux's lips. "Oh yes," he answered ever so quietly, as he looked up into the cold, pale features of Captain Black. "The Mysterons' orders will be carried out..."



## CHAPTER 3

Captain Scarlet woke up with a start and was greeted by a violent headache. The pain was such that it was barely tolerable, and he had to fight desperately not to lose consciousness again. He felt hot; at the same time, a cold sweat was running down his spine. He couldn't manage to think straight through the pain. His body didn't seem to want to respond to him; when he tried to open his eyes, the pain seemed to increase, and it was as if his pupils were suddenly burned by a blinding white light. He quickly closed his eyes shut, and gasped, knowing a moment's panic.

*God, what is it? What is happening to me?*

It took a few seconds that seemed an eternity for him, for the pain to thankfully vanish. Very carefully, he was finally able to open his eyes. The sight offering itself to him was at first blurred, but slowly, it cleared and he was able to see a low ceiling, made of wooden boards, just over him.

He was lying on his back, in a rather uncomfortable bed, his head supported by a badly filled feather pillow. He raised his head only one centimetre to let it fall again and grunted. The awful pain he had felt earlier might have been gone, but he still felt light-headed enough to be unable to rise. Yet, there wasn't any pain in the rest of his body. Only the sensation of being damp with sweat all over...

... And naked, under a patchwork quilt that covered him from toes to neck.

"Awake already?"

Scarlet carefully turned his head at the sound of the crusty voice addressing him; there was an old man standing beside the bunk, who was looking down at him with some kind of curiosity in his eyes, while scratching his badly shaved chin in a thoughtful way. There was a faint smile upon his lips and Scarlet decided that he wasn't threatening in any way – on the contrary, he could see there was something benevolent in his features.

However, Scarlet's opinion of the man nearly changed, when he noticed the huge shotgun resting against the wall just within reach from the man's hands. He felt a brief instant of concern, although he would have had difficulty in explaining exactly *what* he was worried about.

"That's remarkable," the old man continued. "I didn't think you would be awake for a while yet. How do you feel, son?"

Scarlet tried to talk and found he couldn't at first; his throat was so terribly dry. It felt like sandpaper. "Thirsty," he finally managed to say, his voice almost catching. He made an attempt

to clear his throat; it was painful, and there was an awful coppery taste in his mouth. "Can I have... some water, please?"

The man eyed him for a brief moment, as if he was suspicious of some kind of trick; then, as he realised there was none to expect from his guest, he nodded in agreement and took a step forward. There was an old pitcher next to the bed; he took it and poured the contents into a cup that he handed to Scarlet. The latter struggled into a more comfortable, sitting position, not without difficulty – something was holding his left leg down; he could barely move it.

He greedily drank the water from the cup, and it took three more before he felt refreshed; he indicated to the old man that he had had enough. Sighing with relief, he lowered himself down onto the bunk, closing his eyes; he still felt light-headed, especially after the efforts he had just made.

"Feeling better?" the old man asked in his gruff voice.

Scarlet slowly nodded. "Yes, better." He opened his eyes again, and looked up at the man. "My leg... I can't move it. What's the matter with it?"

"Don't you remember?" The old man pulled off the blanket from the other end of the bed, to reveal Scarlet's left leg. It was all bandaged, from the knee down to the foot, revealing only the toes, and was supported on three sides with splints made of solid wooden boards. Midway down, blood had soaked the bandage.

"You broke it," the man answered, as Scarlet regarded the leg fixedly. "You had an open fracture, and I had to push the bone right in, before putting a splint on it." He pulled the blanket over Scarlet's leg. "Lucky you were unconscious at the time, or it would have been mighty painful."

Scarlet shook his head. "I don't feel a thing," he said.

"No feeling in your leg?"

"No, not that. I mean... I don't feel *any pain* at all. It feels fine."

The old man shrugged, dismissively, as Scarlet looked at him with an interrogating stare. "Probably the shock, then," he said.

"Are you... a doctor?" Scarlet inquired with a frown.

He saw a brief flicker in the man eye, before the latter shook his head. "No, I ain't no doctor," he said. "Living in the bayou, I learned a few helpful tricks, that's all. You will need to see a *real* doctor when you return to what you call civilisation."

"Bayou? Civilisation?" Scarlet was puzzled. "Where am I? Who are you?"

"The name's Joe. Joe Benson. People around simply calls me 'Ol' Joe'. This is my house, and we're in the middle of Devil's Bayou. You needed help when I found you, so I brought you

here, 'cause I might not have gotten you to town in time. I called the sheriff of 'Les Arbrisseaux'. He should be coming over soon." The old man looked Scarlet squarely in the eyes. "Though whether he'd be taking you to the hospital or jail, I wouldn't like to say."

"Jail?" Scarlet repeated with a creased brow. "Why? Have I done something wrong?"

"Well, let's say that government officials don't take too kindly to strangers coming around these parts and hunting protected species."

"Sorry?" Scarlet was more and more perplexed. "Hunting protected species?"

"Alligators," Joe specified. "You know, personally, I don't give a fig when you do it fairly – Lord knows I kill more than one of those scaly bastards a year – but to shoot them down from a chopper... now that's mighty unfair, if you ask me. You gotta give the beasties a chance, at the very least."

"Choppers... alligators..." Scarlet was now totally confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You tellin' me you're not one of those rich strangers who come here for some 'excitement'?" Joe asked.

"I..." Scarlet's frown deepened. "Hunting alligators? Me? I don't think..."

"You don't think what?" Joe asked, seeing Scarlet's hesitation.

"It doesn't seem like my style... I'm not... a hunter." Scarlet rubbed his brow. "I think."

"*You think?*" the older man repeated with curiosity.

"I don't know... I can't remember."

Joe rolled his eyes. "You can't remember? Now that's mighty useful. You mean, you don't remember being in a chopper with your buddies and shooting down alligators from the sky?"

"No... I can't say I do."

"It's not the first time rich boys like you would do that, you know?"

"What makes you think I'm rich?"

"Well... you're not from these parts. Your accent... You're English, right? Maybe you came all the way from your English manor to get some excitement in the American wilderness?"

"I..." Scarlet frowned again and shook his head. Joe's words were plunging him deeper and deeper into confusion. He couldn't understand what he was on about; more disturbingly, as he was struggling to make sense of what the old man was telling him, he was discovering, quite rapidly, that there was something vital *missing* that could have helped him comprehend what was happening to him.

He realised suddenly what it was, and said blankly: "I can't remember a thing."

Joe raised a sceptical brow. "You can't remember a thing," he repeated, musingly.

"I can't recall anything," Scarlet muttered, trying hard to remember. "But what you're saying, somehow, it doesn't feel right..."

"What about this?" From a basket lying on the floor nearby, Joe produced the camouflage-printed shirt he had removed from Scarlet's body earlier. It had been torn nearly to shreds and had traces of blood in many places. "Looks like what hunters wear, ain't it?"

"I suppose it does," Scarlet murmured, frowning anew.

"This was yours. You remember wearing it, don't you?"

Scarlet stared at the shirt and hesitated. Yes... that was certainly familiar..." He returned his attention to Joe. "You're sure about that helicopter of yours?"

Joe threw the rag back into the basket. "I heard the helicopter flying over the area a good part of the day," he explained. "Since early this morning, in fact. I saw it in the distance. And I heard the shots too, and what sounded like big explosions. What did your buddies and you do, exactly – throw dynamite into the river to get the monsters out? Seems like a good strategy," he continued, staring at the still perplexed-looking Scarlet. "But again, you must know that's highly illegal."

Scarlet shook his head. "Sorry. I *really* don't remember anything. But it doesn't seem to me that I was... hunting animals. Alligators or anything else. I don't think I'm a hunter..."

"That's the second time you say that. You know you fell from that helicopter?"

"I did?" Now Scarlet was even more puzzled. "And I'm still alive?"

"Obviously." Joe rolled his eyes. "Maybe you didn't fall as high as I first thought. But still, high enough to be hurt. By the way you looked, I would say the trees broke your fall. You're pretty cut up," he moved on as Scarlet was looking down at his bandaged chest. "You're lucky to be alive."

"I don't remember," Scarlet repeated, his eyes glazing over as he searched his memory. As hard as he tried, he really couldn't remember a thing. It was as if there was nothing there, in his mind. Falling from a helicopter? That seemed so odd, so improbable.

However...

He suddenly had a flash of memory, and he moaned, as his head started hurting again. All around him seemed to fade away suddenly, to make way to a new, disturbing location. Yes, he was

finally remembering something. He was falling; he could feel himself going down... There was nothing for him to hang onto. And far below, there was the ground, that he could see approaching rapidly...

He didn't reach it and the memory disappeared as suddenly as the pain. He looked around, with a lost expression gasping; he was back on the bunk, with Joe now standing nearer to him, looking at him with concern.

"You okay, son?"

"Yes... I... I just remembered..." Scarlet looked into empty space. "Falling... Yes, I was falling... and I hurt..."

"Ah, you see I was telling the truth," Joe said, grinning. "What else do you remember?"

"Nothing, it's gone..." Scarlet answered. He searched his mind. There was nothing more to find. "It's *all* gone. I can't remember anything else," he murmured.

"Nothing at all?" Joe asked, raising a brow.

"No... Nothing. Why can't I remember?" Frustrated, Scarlet reached for his head with his hand again; the latter came into contact with another bandage. "I hit my head?" he whispered, feeling it with his fingers.

"Pretty hard, judging by all the blood there was when I found you," Joe answered with a nod. "The wound didn't look that bad when I treated it, though. It was barely bleeding anymore. You must have a thick skull, mister. Say, what's your name?"

"My name?" Scarlet repeated awkwardly. "I..." He blinked, as he suddenly realised that there was something else he couldn't remember. Something even more important than all the rest. "Who I am?" he said, frowning anew. "I... don't know."

He tried, harder than before, searching as deep as he could. But there seemed to be nothing to be found; that memory was gone as well. His mind was a total blank.

*What is my name? Who am I? What am I? What am I doing here?*

"I have to remember..." In the supreme mental effort that followed, a twinge of pain shot through his skull; he moaned, grabbing his head with both hands. Panic returned, as the sudden, awful realisation settled in, and a feeling of total loss and anguish struck him. He felt his heart beating faster. "I can't even remember my own name!" he moaned between clenched teeth.

"Oh, amnesia, is it?" Joe said musingly. He didn't even seem to realise the extent of his guest's anxiety and was looking at him with what seemed to the appalled Scarlet like complete indifference. "Now that's even better. Does that often happen to you?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Scarlet snapped in frustration. "You think I'm lying to you, don't you? I tell you I can't remember a thing! Nothing at all! It's like my memory has been entirely wiped out! I don't even know who I am and —" Lights flashed in front of his eyes and yet again, the terrible pain, reverberated through his skull. He found himself unable to talk, or even to think, although he tried very hard to. He lay back onto the bed, moaning miserably, and closed his eyes against the flashing lights.

Joe watched him closely, wondering if he wasn't faking it.

"You're not kidding, are you?" he finally asked, still a little gruffly.

His voice somehow reached Scarlet's mind and he shook his head in answer; the mere movement was enough to send a new wave of pain through his head.

"Does it look like I'm kidding?" he hissed, forcing the words out. The effort seemed to cause his brain to pound against his skull. His hands were now shaking and he felt nauseous. "I can't... think..."

"You're just getting yourself too excited." Joe's voice was now softer, and he approached; he gently made Scarlet more comfortable, pulling the quilt up to his neck.

Slowly, the pain in his head started to leave Scarlet, and he looked up at the old man now tending to him.

"Lie still and calm yourself. You should get some rest. That's a terrible fall you took, so you probably hurt yourself worse than I thought."

"You saw me fall?" Scarlet asked in a murmur.

"Well, from a distance, yeah. I was surprised to find you alive at all, I must say. As I said, you probably didn't fall as high as I thought."

"Do you know why I fall from that helicopter?"

"How the hell would I know that? Maybe you weren't securely strapped in and, in all the excitement, you simply fell out. Maybe you were drunk. Though there wasn't any smell of alcohol on you. Who knows?" Joe looked curiously into the younger man's face. "You *really* can't remember a thing?"

"No." The pain was dissipating, and Scarlet made a new effort to remember.

*Nothing. Not a blasted thing.*

He grunted with exasperation; feeling the pain slowly returning, he pinched the bridge of his nose. It started to ease again as soon as he stopped taxing his memory. "Why can't I remember?" he moaned.

"That'll come back with time."

"Are you sure?"

Joe grinned. "These things usually do in the movies, don't they?"

"I couldn't say," Scarlet groused. "And this is not a movie. This is happening to *me*."

"Well, don't you worry about a thing," Joe answered almost reassuringly. "Get some sleep. Maybe you'll feel better afterwards."

Scarlet shook his head. "I don't feel sleepy," he said. He thought it strange, actually. He imagined that maybe he was too stressed out to actually feel tired. "As for not worrying," he continued, "I find that very difficult to do right now. How can I not worry? I can't remember anything about myself; I'm in a place I don't know... You said, 'Devil's Bayou'?"

Joe nodded. "Louisiana, U.S.A. Sounds like you're a long way from home, boy."

"How can you tell? You said something about me being English."

"I'm no expert, that's for sure, but I think I can recognise an English accent when I hear one."

"Louisiana," Scarlet murmured thoughtfully. "And you think I came here to hunt alligators?"

"Why else would you come to this hell hole?" Joe asked with a shrug. "Around here, there ain't nothing else that might interest tourists, rich or otherwise."

"I'm still doubtful about that part. What if I'm not a tourist?"

"What else could you be?"

"How do you expect me to know?"

Joe sighed. "Well, whatever, the sheriff will arrive soon, and maybe he'll sort it all out for you. I can't hear no helicopter no more, so I'm guessing your buddies are gone away. Or maybe they've landed to try to find you."

"They might have gone to the sheriff too, mightn't they?"

Joe sniggered. "That might be, but that would be surprising, boy. As I said, hunting 'gators ain't legal in these parts. They're protected beasties, Lord knows why. Your friends wouldn't want to rub with any kind of justice around here. You might consider they have left you behind and split."

"Very comforting," Scarlet mumbled. "So I'm to be arrested for something I don't remember even doing. *If I did it.*"

"That's what happens when you like to live dangerously," Joe remarked. "Hey, you might be worrying 'bout nothing. Sheriff Masters ain't such a bad guy – might be he'll sympathise with you, considering your... memory loss?"

"You still don't believe me?" Scarlet asked, bristling.

"Calm down, now. I ain't saying you're a liar, mister. You don't have to convince me. The sheriff's the one that'll need

convincing.” Joe shook his head. “You should really try to relax. Maybe sleep a little.”

“I’m not sleepy,” Scarlet repeated. He rubbed his rumbling stomach, and grimaced. “I’m hungry, though. Can you spare a sandwich or two?”

Joe tilted his head to one side and stared at him with curiosity.

“You’re a strange one. Any guy in your place, having taken a dive like you did, would simply count himself lucky to be alive and would try to sleep it off, if only so not to feel the pain. You, you want to eat something?”

“I don’t feel any discomfort,” Scarlet replied. “My headache is gone – mostly. There’s only a little buzzing in my head. Otherwise I feel absolutely fine.”

Joe stared at him for a moment, without saying anything. Then, he walked towards a drawer and took out a shirt and a pair of used jeans, that he tossed in his guest’s direction; they both landed on Scarlet’s face and he took the clothes in his hands to look at them with a puzzled expression.

“If you feel fine enough, put the shirt on, then,” Joe told him. “You wouldn’t want to go about stark naked when the sheriff comes to take you. You’re about my size, it should fit you okay.”

“You expect me to put the trousers on as well?” Scarlet asked with a raised brow. He motioned to his left leg. “That would be difficult, I think.”

Joe grunted. “We’ll see what we can do about that part later.”

“You’re about to hand me over to the sheriff and you worry about my dignity?”

“What can I say? I’m that kind of guy.” Joe took his gun from the wall, and that made Scarlet go rigid for a split-second; he wondered what his host intended to do with the weapon. But then he saw Joe walking towards the door. “I’ve got some wood to cut,” the older man announced.

“You’re taking your gun with you to cut wood?” Scarlet inquired. “A hatchet would seem the usual choice to me.”

Joe turned to glance almost accusingly at Scarlet. “You would expect me to leave the gun here... with you? I ain’t that gullible, boy. Besides,” he added almost thoughtfully, “these parts ain’t that safe either. A man’s got to have some protection when he goes out in the wilderness.”

“Against alligators, right?” Scarlet asked with a raised brow.

“Right... and other kinds of beast as well,” Joe muttered. He took one more step away towards the door.

“How about that sandwich?” Scarlet called after him.



"This ain't the Ritz, boy." Joe opened the door – it was the only door in the little cabin, and it led straight to the outdoors. He looked over his shoulder in Scarlet's direction, as the latter was pushing himself into a sitting position. "I need kindling to heat the soup," he answered, with a kinder tone. "I don't think you'll run away with that leg of yours, but..." He flippantly showed Scarlet his gun. "I wouldn't want to look like a fool in front of the sheriff if he should come and not find you. So stay still, and I won't be forced to use this on you."

"I wouldn't get far, anyway," Scarlet admitted. "And you won't need that gun with me, Joe. I'm grateful that you found me and helped me. Looks like you might have saved my life. I wouldn't do you any harm."

Joe answered with curt nod, before walking through the door, and closing it behind him.

Left alone, Scarlet pondered his situation; once again, he made an effort to remember something, but to no avail.

His mind was a blank – he couldn't recall anything at all. No past, no name, no indication of who he was, where he was or why he was there. Nothing at all. This time around, however, he experienced no head pain from his attempts, which was fortunate. Earlier on, he nearly had passed out.

He looked around. This place certainly wasn't familiar to him, so there was nothing to help him remember. His eyes fell on the basket into which Joe had thrown the shirt he had shown him; it was but a piece of camouflage clothing, shredded nearly to ribbons. *His* shirt, according to Joe. Seeing it had not jogged Scarlet's memory. But now, as far as he could tell, this shirt might not even be his.

*Maybe there's something in the pockets? Maybe some I.D., that would tell me who I am.* He chided himself for not having thought of asking Joe if he had found anything of significance in his clothes.

He stared at the basket. If only he could go over to it and check; after all, it wasn't that far – only about six or seven feet away. Of course, there was his broken leg. Sure, he didn't feel any pain from it, but if he were to walk on it, maybe then the pain would come back?

The wisest move would be to wait for Joe to return, and ask the old man to check his pockets – if he hadn't done so already. But Scarlet was far too impatient.

With a decisive gesture, he pulled the blanket off and pushed himself up, swinging both his legs over the side; despite his eagerness to spring into action, he took great care not to put too much pressure on his injured leg and, biting his lower lip in apprehension, gently put the foot down onto the wooden floor.

He still could feel no pain at all; carefully, he stroked the bandage, feeling the leg underneath it. If anything, it only felt a little stiff, tightly bandaged as it was, and imprisoned between those three wooden boards; stiff, and itchy as well. He felt like scratching it, but kept himself from doing so. He wondered for a moment if Joe had not given him some painkillers, but he quickly dismissed that idea; he would feel woozy, if it was the case. But then, why wasn't there any pain in his leg?

Or, come to think of it, why wasn't there any pain at all *in his whole body*?

He looked towards the basket again; he could still see the clothes that Joe had tossed into it, hanging over the side, taunting him. He rubbed his chin, still hesitant, pondering again the wisdom of actually walking to it.

Through the window just next to him, coming from outside, he could clearly hear the chopping sound of an axe. He looked through the pane and saw Joe, busy with cutting his firewood, by a small shed at some distance from the house. Beyond the old man, there was the landscape of a deep wood with a large stretch of water running by – maybe a river. It looked peaceful enough, although visibly isolated. Scarlet wondered how many neighbours his host could have around; not many, he imagined. And if there were any, their homes were probably very far off.

He returned his attention to his leg. *It's as if there's nothing wrong with it*, he mused. But then, he had actually seen it broken – that much he could remember. That was about the only memory he could call to mind, before he woke up in this bed, in this cabin.

*I was in the woods. My leg **was** broken – I saw it. And it looked bad. I was in so much pain, I thought I'd pass out...*

*Was it real?*

His eyes fixed on his leg, he took a sudden decision.

He started to unwrap the bandage.

He had to see for himself how bad this wound was – and why it wasn't hurting him anymore.

\* \* \*

A robust man, Joe Benson had cut most of what he needed for the day in just a few minutes. But since he was outside, and thought he would undoubtedly need more wood in the following days, he decided he would actually continue with his job for a while.

Stopping for rest after a moment, he thoughtfully looked towards the house; truth to tell, he wasn't that eager to return to his 'guest'. He had taken an immediate liking to the mysterious

young man, who had, quite literally, fallen from the sky. Added to that, he couldn't help but sympathise with his predicament – not to know where he was or who he was. Joe had no doubt he wasn't faking it; it seemed too genuine not to be true.

Yet, even though the Englishman had expressed obvious apprehension, it was remarkable to see how he could remain in relative control of himself; quite like a man who had seen and experienced so much in his life – or who had learned early on to keep his emotions in careful check.

*Maybe it's that legendary 'English stiff upper lip' self-control that I heard about,* Joe mused. *They make such a fuss about it... Apparently, some of it must be true.*

Joe shrugged inwardly. It was quite a shame, really, that Sheriff Masters would take that young man into custody on suspicion of poaching on a wild-life reserve. In regard of the wild-life preservation laws, it was a grievous offence, which could result in very serious consequences; the Englishman could be facing a few years in jail, if found guilty. *It's not like I never hunted any of those scaly monsters before, and it's not like anyone would miss a few more of them,* Joe grimly asserted. Still, maybe considering his present situation, the Englishman would get out of this jam easily enough. Joe was hoping it would be the case. They would just need to figure out who he was, and someone would come to help him. And more than probably, if he was indeed part of that gang who was flying a chopper to hunt alligators, someone amongst his friends would be able to pay off his bail to get him out of jail. For the rest, it only concerned Law and Justice.

Joe tried to dismiss it. Telling himself it was none of his business, and that he had more than enough of his own troubles, he picked up his axe to return to his work. As he was about to swing the axe down on the new log, a sound caught his ear and he raised his head to look in the direction it was coming from. He narrowed his eyes. Between the trees, down the narrow path through swamps and trees leading to his house, he could see a cloud of grey dust. The sound was increasing: engines, and many of them.

*Speaking of trouble...* It seemed that it was presently coming his way.

He saw the first four-wheel, off-road vehicle, and then the second one, as they emerged from behind the trees to come towards his house. The engines sounded louder now, and were mixed with sounds of whoops and laughter coming from the drivers. Three more ORVs emerged from behind the trees, and Joe, muttering under his breath, put his axe down and walked to

his gun, that he had left lying on the side of the pile of logs yet to be chopped.

*Jasper and his friends again...* He should have known. It had been a few days since they had last visited, and presented him with their latest ultimatum. He had flatly refused it, and was expecting them to show up very soon.

Now here they were again; coming for another attempt.

Joe cocked the hammer of his gun. *Well, that won't do them any good... Let them come. I have right here the answer they deserve. And it's certainly not the one they want...*

\* \* \*

Sitting on the side of the bed, Scarlet was looking down at his exposed leg with a puzzled expression on his face.

The skin was completely unmarked; he could see no visible wound on it. Under his fingers, he couldn't even feel anything wrong that might be hidden under the skin – no torn muscles, no broken bones, nothing that seemed remotely out of the ordinary. And he could walk on it with no problem whatsoever – he had tested it a few times, walking around in the confined space of the small cabin, putting all of his weight on it.

As far as he could tell, this leg was perfectly fine and healthy.

With deep perplexity, he stroked his chin pensively. He *did* remember having seen a wound. A very ugly wound at that – bone sticking out through torn and bloody flesh, and he remembered it was hurting like hell. Had he dreamed all of it? It seemed unlikely – as apparently, Joe had witnessed the same, and had tended to the leg and dressed it like he would a broken limb. Scarlet looked down at the discarded bandage, now lying on the floor; it was soiled with dried blood on several layers, testimony that indeed, they had covered an open and bleeding injury very recently.

*It cannot have healed that quickly*, Scarlet observed, looking down at his obviously uninjured leg. *That would be impossible.*

Musing, he removed the bandage around his torso and threw it away onto the floor. He looked down at himself, and checked the rest of his body. Didn't Joe tell him he had fallen from an aircraft? Considering this, he *should* certainly hurt all over and would have other injuries – at least minor ones: bruises, scratches, whatever. Joe did say he had been cut all over. Yet, he could see nothing obvious on any part of his body.

Except for his head, which was still buzzing from time to time, he felt perfectly fine.

He removed his last bandage – the one from around his head. Then he cautiously felt his head for any sore spot. Again, he could only make the same observation: he felt nothing but unblemished skin under his fingers. There was only that faint hum inside his head. Whatever he had, it was obviously internal – a concussion maybe?

*That would certainly explain the amnesia...*

He looked outside, through the window. He could still see Joe, who had just stopped chopping some wood, seemingly to take a break. *Is he some kind of healer, or something of the kind?* he wondered for a moment. He dismissively shrugged the thought away. *No, that's impossible... There are no such things as miraculous healers...*

*If it's not him... then it must be... me?*

It was all very strange. Whatever had happened, he reflected, it was indeed nothing short of miraculous, of that much he was certain.

He started putting on the clothes that Joe had left for him, lost in his thoughts, trying to comprehend exactly what had happened, how he could have healed so fast from his wounds, and, more importantly to him, why he couldn't remember a single thing about himself. He was somehow convinced that the answer to this mysterious healing was hiding somewhere in those memories that kept evading him. But as soon as he made any kind of exertion to remember, a headache would come, almost instantly, at times so violent that he had to force himself to stop trying; it was as if something was blocking his mind from remembering – and hurting him, whenever he attempted it.

As he pulled the jeans up, he looked at the basket into which Joe had discarded the clothes he supposedly had been wearing when he had been found; he still wanted to examine them. Briskly, he walked towards them; maybe there was a clue in there, of who he was, and what he was doing in this place – what had Joe said it was called? – oh yes... Devil's Bayou, in Louisiana. Joe thought he was some kind of hunter – or rather a poacher, just judging by the clothes he was wearing. But to Scarlet, that simply didn't ring true at all.

Reaching the basket, he crouched in front of it and took the shirt out. It was badly damaged, torn in places, and there were stains of blood on it. It was made of a green and brown camo design; the fabric was rather sturdy, and it probably took a lot to damage it. The trousers were made of the same fabric, and what was left of the left leg was heavily stained with blood. Obviously, the man who had worn these clothes had passed a very difficult moment.

All right, it did happen, then. These clothes must be mine. But that doesn't answer any of my questions. It doesn't suggest I'm some kind of 'poacher' either. Joe is certainly mistaken.

Is there something I can learn from these clothes?

Scarlet searched the multiple pockets, hoping to find something that might inform him of his identity. Maybe there was an I.D. card, driver's permit... anything... All he discovered, stuck deep inside one of the trousers' pockets, was what looked like a small metallic jewellery box; he opened with curiosity, only to find it contained nothing but a tiny roundel that to his eyes seemed to be of little significance. He closed the box and threw it back into the basket. He was somehow disappointed not to find anything helpful. For a moment, he had imagined that maybe the box contained a ring, or something similar, that he was to give to a lady upon his return to civilisation. Though whatever that thing in the box could be, he had no idea.

*Hunter's clothing*, Scarlet mused, turning the shirt in his hands and slowly getting to his feet. *Well, sure, it does look like it. But it also looks like...*

*... A military uniform.*

His brow furrowed. A military uniform? Could it actually be that? Could Joe have mistaken it for hunter's dress? That was an easy enough mistake to make, after all; it did look very much the same.

Quickly, his hand reached for the two dog tags which he could feel, cool and metallic against his chest, hanging from his neck; he had awakened with them, but up until now, had not paid that much attention to them. Soldiers wore dog tags, maybe these were his... Maybe they held the secret of his identity.

*Is that it? Am I something in the military? Am I a soldier?*

He took the chain off his neck and held the dog tags in front of his eyes, narrowing them to read the inscription.

On each of the little metallic plates, there was the same series of numbers – along with a single word...

*Scarlet.*

His frown deepened. *Scarlet? Now THAT can't be my name*, he told himself. *That's a woman's name...*

*Isn't it?*

He didn't have time to give more thought to the subject, as his attention was suddenly drawn by a roaring sound coming from outside; he turned to face the window.

He could see that Joe had left his axe, to pick up his gun, before advancing in the direction of five four-wheel off-road vehicles that had emerged from the woods to come towards the

house. By the old man's attitude, Scarlet imagined that whoever was coming could only mean trouble.

*Unless it's the sheriff arriving for me...*

Scarlet put the chain back around his neck; doing so, his eyes fell on a pair of dirty boots standing right next to the basket that contained the remains of the camouflage clothes. *Combat boots*, he thought. At least, they looked very much like it. If they were there, by the basket, with these clothes, then maybe they were his boots as well.

*Makes sense, actually...*

He took the boots and returned to the bunk. If it was the sheriff, then he imagined that it would be better for him not to be barefooted when they came face to face. Since he had no explanation to give as to his presence in this place, the best to hope for was to at least make a good impression, and not look like some kind of tramp.

He looked down at himself and shook his head, grunting. He already pretty much looked the part, he realised.

*Well, at the very least, I'll be able to follow him without stubbing my toes...*

\* \* \*

"That will be far enough, boys."

Joe had patiently waited until the five vehicles had stopped in front of him, and the engines had stopped running, before calling to the drivers. Seemingly taking no notice of the warning, the first of them was casually removing his helmet, revealing a youthful face, and long locks of unruly dirty blond hair that fell freely on his shoulders. He was moving to step down from his vehicle, when Joe took a step forward and pointed his shotgun directly at him.

"I said, that will be far enough," the old man repeated, this time in a sterner voice. "You can climb back onto that contraption of yours and go your way."

The blond young man stopped in his movement; he rolled his eyes upwards, and sighed, before stepping down from his machine, and putting down his helmet onto the seat. "Oh, come on now, Joe, don't tell me you don't want to see us around anymore?" he asked with an insolent smirk.

"You ain't welcome here," Joe replied dryly. "And you know it, Jasper."

"Since when?"

"Since always. You never were welcome. You and your buddies, you just keep coming here, bugging me over and over,

and I keep telling you..." Joe curled his finger around the trigger of his gun, "... *Get the hell off my land.*"

"Well, if that ain't hospitality for you," Jasper said, turning to address his companions, who were stepping down their ORVs in turn, while also removing their helmets. They, however, kept their distance. Apparently, they didn't share his obvious confidence that Joe wouldn't use his gun on them. Jasper didn't step back, and stayed where he was, crossing his arms on his chest. "Enough of the sweet talk," he said. "Time to get down to business. You reached your decision, old man?"

"I thought I couldn't be clearer than I am right now," Joe replied. "And I told you already: I ain't giving up my land, Jasper."

"I never asked you to give it," Jasper sighed heavily. "I meant to buy it from you."

"You don't fool me, Jasper Holland," Joe snapped. "You could never pay me the value of this land to begin with."

"I'm offering you far more than this piece of mud will ever be worth."

Joe bristled at these words. "This ain't no ordinary 'piece of mud', this is my home!" he barked. "I know what you *really* want, you no-good little bastard... But I won't be giving you anything. I won't give you that satisfaction. This is where I live. I'm staying."

Jasper narrowed his eyes. "This is your last say on the matter, old man?"

"This is my *only* say on the matter. Now get your butts the hell off my land." Joe stepped forwards, and pushed Jasper with the barrel of his gun; this time, the young man stepped back a pace, raising his hands as if to show that he meant no harm. "All of you, boys, now git!"

"If you know what we're after," Jasper continued, "You know, we can share the dough with you, if you like. There's plenty for all."

"You can't share what you don't have! You double-crossing, good-for-nothing scum, I know what you are – you're no different from your thieving father! I'm telling you for the last time – leave me alone! The sheriff's coming soon, and if you're not gone by then, I'll make sure to tell him what you're up to, you and your little gang of teenaged thugs!"

"You called the sheriff on us?" one of the other boys asked suspiciously.

"That ain't very wise, old man," Jasper added.

"Ain't got nothing to do with you bunch!" Joe replied. "But he's coming... and since he'll be here anyway... Well, I'll make sure he knows about you, and you won't be bothering me again."



Jasper's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Joe, you know that if you rat on us, we can do the same to you... And you have far more to lose than us."

"And what's that's supposed to mean?" Joe snapped back.

"You want me to spell it out?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" Joe replied, without apparently losing any of his self-assurance. "But I'm leaving you one last chance, Holland: you and your gang, leave now, before the sheriff arrives. And don't ever come back here again, if you know what's good for you."

Jasper shook his head, a smirk starting to form on his lips again. "You're bluffing, Joe. And you're lying."

"You callin' me a liar, boy?" Joe barked, stepping forwards to close the new distance between them.

"The sheriff ain't coming," Jasper continued with assurance. "And you would never dare tell him anything, anyway."

"Don't dare me! I ain't got nothing to hide... unlike you, Jasper. Or your buddies."

"You're sure about that?"

Jasper's taunting was trying Joe's patience, already stretched to the breaking point. "That's enough! Now, go on, GIT!" Joe gestured with the barrel of his gun. "Before I lose my cool and do something you and I will regret!"

"You know what, Joe?" Jasper said. "You don't know how to lie proper and you don't know how to bluff. You ain't never gonna shoot any of us. You don't have the guts. You might have had in the past, when you were younger... But you don't have it anymore."

Angered by the young man's words, Joe took another step forwards. "So help me, boy..."

Before he could even finish his line, Jasper suddenly grabbed the barrel of the shotgun, and violently twisted it up, wrenching it out of the old man's hands. It was just at that moment that Joe realised – far too late – that he was just a little too close to Jasper. The latter now had the gun in his hands – and was pointing the barrel at its owner. The smile on Jasper's face had become an evil one, and his eyes were turning dangerously cold.

"In fact," Jasper continued, "I'm willing to bet this gun of yours ain't even loaded. He took aim, nonchalantly. "Wanna check that out for me, old man?"

Joe made a step back, fearfully. He looked up at Jasper's face, and then he saw his own death, reflected in those dark eyes...

... A fraction of a second, before the young man pulled the trigger, and the shotgun thundered loudly.

"Oops," Jasper remarked coldly, his eyes unfeeling. "My mistake..."

\* \* \*

Scarlet was putting his boots on when he heard the nearby thundering shot. Quickly, he rose to his full height and took a look outside, through the window. His eyes grew wide with disbelief when he saw Joe, previously standing in front of a young man who was aiming a smoking shotgun at him, suddenly falling backwards, like a cut tree. Scarlet muttered a low curse, and without even thinking about it, ran to the door, that he opened wide.

"Joe!"

The young man who had fired on Joe and the other youngsters behind him raised their heads and looked in surprise at the unexpected newcomer. Scarlet didn't have any hesitation as he ran towards the fallen old man; he didn't even care about the now smoking gun – it was a single shot gun, though exactly how exactly he knew that he would be quite unable to say. The potential threat presented by this group of youngsters standing over the old man lying in the dirt wasn't important to him either.

There was a wounded human being there, who needed help; and he wasn't about to turn his back on him.

"Hey, who's this dude?" Jasper suddenly said, as Scarlet arrived next to him. He glared ominously at the stranger, who ignored the five young men completely. He fell to his knees next to Joe. The old man was still alive, but he was seriously wounded; his hands were clutching his belly, and his shirt was tinted red with blood. Scarlet assessed the wound; he didn't think Joe stood a chance of living very long.

Nevertheless, he wasn't about to watch him die, without trying to help him.

"Joe, can you hear me?" he asked urgently, looking into the pale face, whose eyes were closed. "Hang on in there, please!"

Joe's eyes fluttered and he opened them, tiredly. His face was a mask of pain, as he looked up at Scarlet, who was leaning over him, obviously concerned. "Hey, boy..." He coughed, then frowned, as if he suddenly realised that the Englishman's presence there by his side should be impossible. How could he have left the house, with his broken leg? "What are you doing here? How did you —"

"Don't talk," Scarlet urged him. "I'll get some help..."

"*Their* help?" Joe whispered. Scarlet could see that the old man's glazed eyes were now fixed in the direction of the

youngsters he knew were standing behind him, watching like silent hawks. He tried to ignore their presence.

"You've got to hang on, Joe," he pleaded. "I won't let you die. You saved my life..."

"No..." Joe put a hand on Scarlet's shoulder, smearing his shirt with blood, and looked straight into his face. His strength was leaving him rapidly. "I'm finished... You're a good man, I know that now. You wouldn't try to help me if it wasn't the case..."

"Joe, you shouldn't tire yourself –"

"Promise me..." Joe interrupted, swallowing hard. "Promise me you won't let them get it..."

"Get what, Joe?" Scarlet asked with a frown. "Please hang on..."

Joe shook his head and groaned feebly. "Get –Get on out of here... Run..."

"Joe..."

"Run away... before they kill you too..." Joe's hand slid from Scarlet's shoulder and fell onto his bloody torso; his eyes closed and his head fell backwards to the ground. Scarlet heard but a single rasp, before the old man finally ceased to breathe.

At first, Scarlet felt desolation filling his heart, and he lowered his head, in a brief and silent prayer for Joe's soul. Then, abruptly, a thought came to his mind: the old man had been murdered, right in front of his eyes; quite gratuitously, without any apparent reason. And he had not been able to do anything to save him.

He raised his head and looked around; the perpetrator of this brutal murder was still there, standing over him; and his four accomplices had approached as well, surrounding the stranger kneeling by their victim's side. In truth, Scarlet should have felt threatened – or at least, intimidated by these youths' presence. But somehow, his anger was blinding him to whatever danger he could be facing.

"You killed him," Scarlet said between clenched teeth.

"Who are you?" Jasper asked with a frown on his face. Unconsciously, he had his gun aimed at the stranger who, slowly, rose to his feet. Jasper cautiously stepped back from him. "I'm warning you –"

"You killed that man," Scarlet repeated, glaring ominously at the younger man. He then addressed a disgusted look at the others, who were standing around, surrounding him even closer. "And you, you just stood there and watched... and did nothing!" He turned against to Jasper. "WHY did you kill him?"

"Why not?" Jasper replied so casually that it sent a chill down Scarlet's spine. "I don't see why it's any of your business, man. Now answer my question: *who* are you?"

"That's none of *your* business," Scarlet snapped back, his brow furrowing deeply. He narrowed his eyes, looking straight at Jasper. "Joe said not to 'let you have it'. You wanted something from him. What was it? Is that why you killed him?"

"Never mind," Jasper answered with a shrug. "And I don't care who you are. You've seen too much already. Right, boys?" he asked, addressing his gang. Scarlet saw some of them nodding their confirmation. There was a coldness in their eyes that didn't bode well for him.

"So now you're planning to kill me too?" Scarlet growled between his teeth. "That won't be as easy as killing a defenceless old man." He had no idea where the confidence in that challenge came from. It seemed the words had just automatically come to his lips.

"Oh yeah?" one of the youths said with an evil sneer. He was a tall, thin young man who was standing very close to Scarlet's left. "We're five, dude... you're alone. Seems the odds are in our favour. What d'you think?"

He was the first to receive the answer, in the form of a swift and brutal punch right into his throat, which robbed him of his breath almost instantly. Scarlet had not taken the time to think; he only reacted to the threat against him.

As the first boy started gasping, Scarlet's left foot went backwards and caught a second one in the stomach; he then grabbed the shotgun from Jasper's hands and violently shoved the butt into the young man's belly. Jasper stumbled under the impact, groaning in pain. Scarlet took the gun and used it as a club against the next youth who stepped forward in an attempt to hit him; that forced the young man to back away. The last boy, obviously fearful, already was stepping out of Scarlet's way.

Scarlet rapidly extracted himself from the midst of his adversaries. He hadn't even had time to register the effectiveness with which he had disposed of them to get free; it was only when he turned towards them, the shotgun in hand, that he realised exactly what he had done. He could see in the faces of the young men in front of him, three still standing and two others on their knees, gasping, that they seemed as surprised as he was himself. The tall, thin boy that Scarlet had hit first now seemed determined now to avoid more of his wrath and was making a run towards the nearest ORV. Scarlet let him go.

Holding the gun aimed at the remaining boys, Scarlet wondered if any of them knew or even suspected it was now unloaded; in any case, they didn't dare approach him. Jasper

was glaring at him murderously, holding his aching belly. That one was visibly the leader – and potentially the most dangerous of the lot.

As the Spectrum officer was quickly accessing his situation, contemplating what he should do next, he heard a sudden call coming not that far from behind him. That made him turn swiftly around, the shotgun instinctively at the ready. He heard a cracking sound, and then felt a pain in his shoulder; that made him lose the gun and sent him to one knee.

He looked up in puzzlement, instantly thinking that an opponent he had not seen up until now had taken him by surprise to help his accomplices. He was surprised to see a small boat on the river, just by the wooden pier, with a tall black man standing right in the middle, legs apart, and aiming a smoking handgun in his direction. The man was in a pale grey uniform, with a flat hat, and had a star-shaped badge pinned on his chest.

*The sheriff.*

“Hold it right there!” he barked at Scarlet. “Don’t make a single move or I’ll shoot!”

Scarlet inwardly groaned; he had no trouble figuring what exactly the sheriff could be imagining, finding him there, a stranger, standing with a gun in his hands, a body at his feet, and apparently threatening five frightened teenagers. However far from reality it might be, Scarlet could understand very well that he actually looked like the bad guy of the scene.

The sound of an engine starting behind him caught Scarlet’s attention and he automatically turned to look – just in time to see the boy who had apparently fled earlier on his ORV, and pushing his machine in his direction at full speed.

It was instinct born out of desperation that made Scarlet react more quickly than he could think. But even with that, it wasn’t nearly fast enough for him to completely avoid the collision. When he jumped to the side, he already knew it was too late, and he felt the front of the vehicle brutally hitting him in the back. He knew pain, as his body arched under the impact, and the momentum flung him six good meters away from where he previously stood. He hit the ground hard and felt his right arm crack on landing; the pain was excruciating and he almost lost consciousness.

Dazed, he struggled to get back up, and suddenly, his head started thumping, just like it did before, and dots of light flashed in front of his eyes. There was a flash, and suddenly, through the pain, he saw a figure suddenly coming into view, standing over him.

*It was a man, looking down at him without any emotion on his face, so pale it looked like the face of a dead man, with sunken eyes, and seemingly devoid of life...*

Scarlet blinked his eyes and frowned. He *knew* that face. He knew that man, and yet, he didn't know who he was.

The image disappeared into a new blinding flash, and the face of the unknown man was replaced by another, younger face, looking down at him with contempt.

*Jasper.* And the shotgun was back in his hands.

The last sight that Scarlet saw was the butt of the shotgun, just a fraction of a second before it was brutally brought down onto his face. The new pain was sharp, but mercifully brief, and then it turned to darkness, and total oblivion.

\* \* \*

"Stop it right there!"

Sheriff Masters jumped from his boat onto the pier, and his foot nearly slipped down into the river as he started running up to reach the bank. Jasper Holland was standing over the stranger, whom he had just clubbed violently with the butt of the shotgun he was holding. It was the sheriff's second shout that stopped the boy from hitting the man once again; however, the stranger wasn't moving anymore, and Masters feared the worst.

The group of boys, now surrounding the spot where the stranger was lying, made way for the sheriff when he reached them. He leaned down to check on the man at their feet. He glared furiously up at them.

"Are you out of your mind?" he barked, addressing Jasper. "Why did you have to hit him like that? He was already down!" He turned to the young man who had used his ORV to ram into the stranger. "And what got into you, *Scarecrow*? I had the guy in my sights... He couldn't possibly do any harm!"

The young man scowled at the use of his nickname, well-deserved because of his skinny, raggedy appearance. From his friends, he didn't mind that much, especially from Jasper – he was too afraid of Jasper to object anyway. But coming from the sheriff, he found it particularly distasteful.

"I thought of helping you," he said, in way of explanation. "This guy... this guy's a killer!"

"You don't know how dangerous this guy is, Sheriff," Jasper added, nodding to his friend's statement. "I swear, if you hadn't arrived when you did –"

"I saw what he was doing," Masters replied. He had to admit, the way the man had dealt with the five teenagers was impressive. He could certainly understand why the boys might have been fearful of him.

The sheriff checked the stranger's pulse at the base of his neck; it was beating feebly. There was an ugly wound on his forehead where Jasper had hit him. Masters looked around, searching with his eyes, and found the body of Joe Benson, lying only a few feet away; his chest and belly were covered with blood.

"What happened here?" Masters frowned and looked up to Jasper again. The latter didn't hesitate one second to answer:

"Joe's dead," he said, stating what did seem like the obvious to Masters.

"How did this happen? Do you know?"

Jasper nodded down at Scarlet at his feet. "This guy killed him."

"Did he?" the sheriff asked, with a renewed frown. "You actually saw him?"

"Of course we did," Scarecrow said quickly, before Jasper could answer. "We saw it – as surely as we see you."

The others vigorously nodded their agreement.

"He was holding the shotgun directly at Joe's belly when we arrived," Jasper continued. "Shot him right in front of our eyes. We saw it."

"*Why* did he shoot him?" Masters asked, narrowing his eyes.

Jasper shrugged. "Hell if we know. We don't even know who this guy is." He paused a second. "Do *you* know who he is, Sheriff?"

Masters didn't answer. His eyes had fallen on the gun Jasper was still holding. The weapon of the crime. "That's Joe's gun," he said, pointing to it.

"Yeah – he probably took it from Joe... and then shot him with it," Jasper offered.

"You stupid kid – you're putting your fingerprints all over it!"

The sheriff leapt to his feet and snatched the shotgun from Jasper's hands. He glared ominously into the youth's face. "This is a single-shot weapon! You're trying to tell me that this stranger was holding you all at gunpoint with an *unloaded* gun, after having killed Old Joe, is that right?"

"Hey, seeing how he tore into us, I don't think he needed no gun," one of the other boys replied.

"Johnny's right," Jasper added. "We didn't stand a chance against him..."

"Shut up. Five against one? Seems you bullies found your match, didn't ya? And what *where you* doing here?"

"We were just passing by," Jasper answered coolly. "You know, just riding our machines... We thought of stopping to ask Joe for some fresh water. We had used all ours up and –"

"All right, save the rest for later."

Sheriff Masters leaned once again over the stranger. He was thinking that, after the beating he just had, he would probably need to see a doctor, and very soon. Earlier, his pulse was weak, and his breathing shallow; whatever the man might have done, he deserved to be helped – if only to go on trial and eventually be convicted.

Somehow, however, Sheriff Masters had his doubts about the stranger's culpability in Joe Benson's death. There was something in what the youths were saying that didn't seem to add up. He also knew that these boys weren't friendly with Old Joe; there was some bad blood between them, although Masters wouldn't be able to say what exactly it could be.

So maybe there was more to this story here than met the eye – and maybe the stranger knew what it was.

Masters checked the man's pulse again; but this time, he could find none. He frowned, and put his hand on the man's chest, and then checked for any breathing.

"Do you know who this guy is, Sheriff?" Jasper asked again. "We never saw him in these parts."

"Your guess's as good as mine," Masters grumbled. "Joe contacted me earlier today to tell me he had found a wounded poacher in the bayou... He wanted to hand him over to me."

"Must be this guy, then," Scarecrow said quickly, catching the opportunity. "That's why he killed Joe. He didn't want to be handed over to you and... and he wanted to escape."

"Yeah," Jasper agreed. "That's right... and Joe didn't want him to go. And the guy killed him."

"And then we arrived," Johnny added in turn. "It all fits, Sheriff."

Masters sighed heavily. *It fitted all right. Almost too well.*

He slowly got to his feet, looking down at the stranger. "Well," he said, "whoever this man is – and whatever the reason he might have killed Joe for – we will never truly know."

"What do you mean?" Jasper asked with a curious frown.

"He's dead."



## CHAPTER 4

There wasn't any real hospital as such in Les Arbrisseaux. The town was just too small and too remote from civilisation, to afford itself the luxury of having a hospital as big as in New Orleans – or even something remotely similar to the closest neighbouring city. There was only a small but very effective clinic, with only three doctors, about the double that number of nurses, all of them under Doctor William Evers' authority. Evers himself was at the same time general physician, paediatrician, dentist and surgeon, and was in charge of the local morgue.

It was to Doctor Evers that Sheriff Masters took the bodies of Old Joe Benson and the stranger who had apparently killed him, after he had called for his deputy, Alan MacGibbons, to come with a police vessel to Benson's cabin in the middle of the bayou in order to pick them up.

It was barely two hours since the two bodies had been handed to Evers, who had received from the sheriff very specific instructions regarding the stranger. Masters wanted to know exactly what it was that killed him – he didn't ask for the same regarding Joe, as it was pretty obvious that the gunshot to the guts had been more than sufficient to put an end to his life. But regarding the stranger, Masters seemed to have some doubt; it looked like the violent blow he had suffered to the head had been responsible for his death, and the sheriff just wanted to make sure of that. To that effect, Evers thought that a simple X-ray examination should clearly indicate if it was the case; afterwards, when they had received the results, they would go ahead with a proper autopsy of the body.

It should have been an easy and clean affair, all things considered, but strangely enough, that would not be the case. Something very strange happened, and so Evers called for Sheriff Masters to come straight away to the clinic, the minute he received the latest results.

Masters found the doctor in his office, seated on the edge of his table, looking down at some negatives from a large folder; upon the sheriff's arrival, Evers raised his eyes to him and gestured to him to close the door behind him.

"Sure glad you could come so quickly, Leonard," Evers said by way of welcome.

"Well, I did ask you to call me as soon as possible," Masters said, closing the door. "I'm still filling in the report on this sordid affair. So maybe you will be able to tell me if that blow to the

head killed that guy or not, so I can wrap this up... and maybe arrest Jasper Holland and his gang."

"The way I understood it, the kids were just defending themselves against this stranger... Wasn't that so?" Evers asked with a raised brow.

"Who told you that?" Masters asked with a frown.

"From Johnny Monroe, He's in the waiting room."

"Yes, I saw him earlier when I came. What's he doing here?"

"Apparently, Johnny hurt his wrist in what happened in the Bayou, and he's waiting to be seen. Jamie Lewis came with him, but didn't stay long... Well, just long enough to join Johnny in telling their story to anyone wanting to hear about it. I heard them saying it to one of the nurses. They were bragging about how they helped in arresting a murderer."

"Stupid kids. I'm willing to bet Jasper and the rest of the gang are doing the same in town," Masters mumbled. "I'm sure that the news that Old Joe has been killed is all over town already. They would make sure everybody knows a stranger killed him. That will certainly not help in my investigation. I still have to determine exactly how everything happened." He shook his head. "I'll deal with them later. So you've got news for me? That blow killed the guy?"

"Quite frankly, I'm not sure... There's something bizarre going on."

A puzzled Masters frowned, as Evers motioned for him to approach; he handed him the folder he was holding, before rounding his desk to sit down. Masters started looking at the pictures; his frown deepened. "Not very clear, are they? These aren't X-rays, Doc..."

"No, they're not," Evers answered, rubbing his chin pensively. "Those... ah... those are scans from that new machine we received a month or so ago. That new technology that replaced scans by X-ray a few years ago? I'm afraid I don't have the hang of it – it's the first time I ever used it. So the pictures came out a bit... fuzzy, to say the least. It might need some adjustments."

"So you finally got around to using that machine," Masters said, with a thoughtful nod. "You've always been resistant to this new technology, and kept using that old X-ray machine of yours."

"Well, it would appear my... 'resistance' wasn't for nothing, if that's the best this machine can come up with," Evers replied. "Anyway, there was a reason why I finally used it."

"What's that *thing* I see there?" Masters said, without really listening to the physician, as he raised the film in front of the light, and narrowed his eyes to get a better view.

"The pale grey mass? Looks like a hematoma, probably caused by a violent trauma."

"So the blow *might* have killed him?" Masters asked, still looking at the picture. "No, wait... there's something else..." He held the film closer to the light. "Right in the middle there – that smaller, white spot... Can't see very well..."

"Indeed, you can't..." Evers commented. "I saw that thing too, but I'm unable to see clearly what it is either. Looks like some kind of foreign body, as far as I can tell. The autopsy will tell us exactly what it is. I'm having the body prepared right now, so I'll have the answer shortly."

Masters put the picture down. "If it's the best you can do with this machine, why don't you use the X-rays then, Doc?"

"I did," Evers answered with a frown. "The first time around, actually. And it's because of the results of the X-rays that I used the new machine." He opened the top drawer of his desk and took a new folder from it. "I told you: something bizarre happened, but I wanted to know what results the new machine would give me before I called you."

"Now you're intriguing me," Masters said, closing the folder and putting it down as Evers was handing him the other one.

"Wait," Evers sighed. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Puzzled, Masters opened the new folder and took out the first film, to look at it against the light. He frowned deeply, before staring at Evers.

"Okay now, what's the joke?" he asked. "These are obviously regular mug shots of the guy who killed Joe."

"I have a full set," Evers deadpanned, pointing to the folder the sheriff was holding. "Front, right and left... and I even have a back picture to go with it."

"Where are the X-ray pics, Doc?"

"*These* are the X-ray pictures, Leonard."

Masters glared at him incredulously. "You're *kidding* me!"

"No." Evers shook his head. "This is what came out of the X-ray scan, I swear."

"That's impossible," Masters muttered, looking at the pictures again.

"I know, I could scarcely believe it myself," Evers commented. "I can't figure out how an X-ray scan would give that sort of results – it's like the rays were unable to get through the guy's skin."

"So you don't have an explanation as to how this could have happ –"

Masters' question was left hanging in midair as suddenly, a scream was heard through the door that made both men jump to their feet. It barely took them a second to come out of their

surprise, and Masters was the first to get to the door, and open it, at the same time instinctively reaching for his gun. Evers was right behind him when they stepped out of the office and the scream was heard again, this time much clearer. They turned to face the corridor, and saw one of the clinic's nurses running up to them at full speed. She collided with Masters who took hold of her shoulders. Her face was drained of all colours and she was shaking like a leaf; it was a wonder that she could stay on her feet.

She pointed a trembling finger down the corridor, towards a door that was left open.

"He... he's alive..." she stuttered. "He's in there... Oh God, it can't be... I was getting him ready and... He was dead and now... he's alive... alive... alive..."

Masters couldn't make any sense of what she meant. He could see there were people around watching with curiosity, wondering what could be happening – another nurse, and the lady tending the desk at the entrance of the waiting room, and patients waiting there to see a doctor. He left the nurse where she stood and ran down the corridor, Evers following him. He went straight to the door she had pointed to; it was marked 'Mortuary'. He pushed it fully open.

There were only two bodies, lying on two tables, side by side, in the very cold room; one of them was the body of Old Joe Benson, covered from head to toes with a shroud, waiting for autopsy.

On the other slab, there was the body of the stranger, only half covered, instruments laid on a small table right next to him, ready to be worked on.

And as Masters laid eyes on him, he heard the man groan loudly. The sheriff opened wide, unbelieving eyes.

"It can't be!" he murmured.

He stood there, rooted in place, and Evers pushed him aside to get through the door; he went straight to the stranger, whose chest was rising and falling - he was obviously breathing. Masters took a few steps into the room, almost mechanically, watching the impossible motion, as Evers made a quick assessment of his 'patient', whose eyes were still closed.

He looked up at the sheriff. "He *is* alive, Leonard. But that's... impossible! He was dead when your deputy brought him in!"

"And he was dead in the bayou," Masters answered, unable to detach his eyes from the stranger's body. He noticed the man's naked shoulder, which seemed to have been cleaned recently. There was a small scar on it, very small... nothing like

the kind of scar that would have been left by a bullet wound, inflicted only a couple of hours ago.

*It's impossible, he told himself. I shot this man. He could not have healed that quickly!*

Somehow, this reminded him of something, and he found himself searching his mind for what it could be, as Evers was checking the body further.

"This can't be," the doctor was repeating. "Not only he is alive... but he's getting better." He looked up at the sheriff once more; there was something like fear in his eyes. "This is nothing short of a miracle, Leonard!"

"A miracle, eh?" Masters repeated, chewing on his lower lip. "I suppose you don't have a better explanation than that, do you, Doc?"

"No – and it's scaring the daylight out of me." Evers took a few steps from the stranger and came to stand next to the sheriff. Quickly, he shut the door leading into the corridor. "He's still unconscious... but I don't know for how long. It looks like he could wake up any time now. Leonard, what's going on?"

"I don't know, Doc. The memory Masters was looking for had returned to him, and with it a whole new set of worries he never thought he would ever have to face. He turned to Evers. "Bill... remember that communiqué you and I received from Spectrum, a few months ago?" Evers' brow furrowed as he tried to recall, still staring at his strange patient. "It listed the same phenomena that we are witnessing today," the sheriff reminded him. "And it said that if we should ever encounter *anyone* displaying one of those –"

"– To contact Spectrum without any delay," Evers suddenly remembered. He turned to Masters. "And to consider the said person hostile."

The sheriff grunted and looked at the still unconscious stranger. "Right. I'll call Mac at the station and we'll get this man out of here and into a jail cell. Quietly."

"Leonard, I must protest... Not a few minutes ago, this man was – apparently – dead –"

"But you just said that he was getting better," Masters interrupted quickly. "And quite frankly, Bill... after the way he seemed to have... 'revived' in front of your nurse, do you really think that he needs to stay in this hospital?" Evers hesitated at the question, and sighed heavily, as he finally shook his head. Masters put his hat on. "Keep this quiet," he said to the doctor. "Remember that the Spectrum communiqué asked for the utmost discretion if these situations should occur. You think you can have your nurse keep quiet as well?"

"I'll try. How about Jasper and his gang? And I'll remind you that Johnny is in this clinic as well. I don't think they will keep their mouths shut."

"I know." Masters sighed. "I should have followed my first instinct, and kept the whole lot of them in prison until the end of the investigation. There isn't much I can do about that right now, I'm afraid. Mac and I will transfer this guy into a cell discreetly. We'll use your back door."

"Doesn't Mac have to go to Baton Rouge today?" Evers asked his friend.

"Yeah, for a few days. His uncle died recently. He has to go and help his aunt with the whole funeral business." Masters frowned deeply. "Which means I'll be left alone to deal with this whole crazy affair. I really need the help, but I can't very well ask Mac not to go. His aunt's his only relative now, and she'll need him."

"If you need any help, Leonard..."

"Thanks, Bill, but this is my business. Anyway, I should be able to cope, once this guy's in a cell." Masters shook his head. "Before he leaves, I'll have Mac call Jasper to come see me, and tell him to keep quiet or I'll have him behind bars for interfering with the investigation."

"Hope that'll be sufficient for him to shut his mouth," Evers muttered. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation for all this, Leonard. I don't know what the hell it could be... and I sure don't like it."

"I don't like it either, Bill," the sheriff answered sombrely. "I don't like *any* of this... and like you, it's scaring the *hell* out of me."

\* \* \*

Accompanied by his friend Jamie Lewis, Johnny Munroe had gone to the clinic straight after his return to Les Arbrisseaux. When the tall stranger had fought back, there at Old Joe's cabin, Johnny had been thrown to the ground and had hurt his left wrist in his fall. His wrist was now a disturbingly bluish colour, and fearing that he might have broken something, he wanted to see a doctor as soon as possible. Unfortunately for him, as he was briefly checked over upon his arrival, his condition was not deemed that pressing, and he was made to wait, until such moment as someone would have time to see him.

Grumbling and showing plainly that he wasn't very happy about the situation, Johnny sat down in the waiting room, his hand simply wrapped in an icepack, Jamie sitting by his side. The latter had very little to do, and so, even though no-one asked, he

was only too happy to explain how Johnny had been injured. Of course, he told his own version of the story – how they heroically helped Sheriff Masters get his hands on a stranger who had killed that crazy Old Joe Benson, who lived in the middle of Devil's Bayou.

The boys were still in the waiting room when they saw the sheriff and his deputy arrive with the bodies of both Old Joe and the stranger, and they watched with interest as the two lawmen entered by a back door and were taken to a room at the end of the only corridor they could see from where they were sitting. The sheriff gave the boys a hard look that sent a shiver down Johnny's spine.

He wondered if Masters didn't suspect the truth regarding Joe's death. It didn't seem possible, however: the stranger made a perfect – and unexpectedly welcome – patsy. Of course, Jasper and Scarecrow trying to kill him with the sheriff there might not have been the best of ideas – but quite frankly, what else could they do exactly? The stranger knew too much and could have denounced them all.

Cautiously, Johnny didn't share his worries with Jamie, in fear that someone would hear them. In any case, that poor, stupid, devil-may-care Jamie would have dismissed his fears with a wave of the hand: Jamie's only thoughts were to have fun and please himself, never thinking about the consequences. In that respect, he was very much like Jasper.

It was with some nervousness that Johnny kept waiting for a treatment that failed to come as soon as he would have hoped. At this point, Jamie, bored out of his wits, had left him, to go join the others at Sam's Diner, and tell them about the arrival of the two bodies at the clinic. The pain in Johnny's wrist slowly subsided, and he started to doze, almost despite himself; it had been a long and tiring day.

It had already been nearly two hours, and Johnny was now deciding if he should ask again to see the doctor, or if he should simply leave, considering his wrist wasn't hurting him that much anymore, when he heard a sudden commotion down the corridor.

He shot to his feet, and went to the waiting room door to see; a nurse was running from the door behind which he had seen the two bodies disappear earlier. She collided with Sheriff Masters and Doctor Evers, who just had left the latter's office. She was repeating the same words, again and again, stammering as she spoke:

"He's alive... He's in there... Oh God, it can't be..."

Johnny frowned in perplexity, wondering exactly what could be happening; he watched as Masters and Evers left the nurse

where they had met her, to run down the corridor to the door, and went inside the room behind.

The nurse was near to tears and the woman keeping the reception desk came to her and took her into an empty room, trying to comfort her at the same time. Johnny bit his lower lip, watching the door behind which Evers and Masters had disappeared. Only at that moment did he see the word 'Mortuary' written on the door.

The young man took a look around; the two women had disappeared from view and he could only hear nervous sobs coming from the nearby room. His curiosity got the better of him; quickly but quietly, he approached the Mortuary door.

He felt for sure that Jasper would want to know what was happening...

\* \* \*

"That's definitely the spot where he landed."

Sergeant Palmer stood from his crouched position on the ground in front of a big tree, which he had been perusing with attention for the last few minutes. He looked up at the sky; the branches above his head were either broken or stripped of their foliage. He reached for one of the lower damaged twigs, pulled a piece of torn dark cloth from it and examined it. It was covered with blood. He grunted.

"The branches must have broken his fall considerably," he said to his companions who were standing a short distance behind him. "It wasn't a soft landing, that's for sure, but it wasn't as hard as it should have been, considering the height he fell from." He threw the piece of cloth to the ground. "He might have survived the fall," he added coolly.

"Why am I not surprised?" Major Montgomery didn't sound or look very happy. Ever since they had discovered, a few minutes ago, that Scarlet was not where he was supposed to be, he had been displaying a frown of frustration and barely contained anger upon his face.

Palmer simply nodded, thoughtfully stroking his chin. He was the most experienced tracker amongst the group, and was patiently examining the surrounding ground with his expert eye, trying to get a clear picture of what had happened. "If the fall didn't kill him," he said, "he was probably seriously wounded."

"I'll say," Williams groused darkly. "The major put a bullet in his skull."

"Maybe it just grazed him," Baxter suggested.



Palmer crouched again, to further examine the spot where Scarlet's body had so roughly landed. "The ground is soaked with blood. He was bleeding heavily."

"But if he had been dead, or seriously wounded, he would still be here," Montgomery said sharply. "His recuperative time depends largely on the seriousness of his injuries. He fell from the chopper about three hours ago. If he wasn't as seriously wounded as you suggested, could it be possible for him to have already healed – and then simply left?"

"No, sir," Palmer replied, turning to look at his commander. "I don't know if he was dead or not, but he certainly didn't walk from this spot by himself."

"And how can you be so sure?" The frown on Montgomery's face deepened.

Palmer pointed to the ground and slowly followed a trail with his finger. "See these tracks? Scarlet was wearing combat boots similar to ours. Those weren't left by combat boots."

"So someone else came," Williams realised.

Palmer nodded again. "Whether Scarlet was alive or dead, that person dragged him away in *that* direction." He pointed to the ground, in an easterly direction. "Look at these other marks. They were left by his feet dragging on the ground." He stood up, and started to follow the trail he had found, his companions walking closely behind. They could see the traces in question, mixed with deep footprints – the same kind of footprints he had found which were not made by combat boots – imprinted in the muddy ground. Obviously, whoever it was who had taken Scarlet, that person had difficulty carrying the body with him – the weight was probably hindering his progress. There were traces of blood all the way, smeared on the ground and surrounding foliage.

The men walked in silence, guns at the ready, looking all around, almost expecting to see someone appear from behind the trees. They soon arrived at a river of dark and gloomy water and they stopped.

Imprinted in the thick mud of the bank, they could see the deep marks of a small boat that had obviously been launched from there very recently.

The trail they had followed ended there.

Montgomery did nothing to hide his irritation, as he looked up and down the stream, hoping to see something; the surface of the water was empty of any boat, as far as the eye could see. There were only a few dead trees floating down the stream, which churned up a sickening yellow froth on the surface of the muddy water.

He cursed. "Damn it all! That's all we needed. Where could they have gone to now?"

"Downriver," Petroski suggested. "By the looks of it, they left very recently from this spot. We didn't hear an engine, so they might be using a rowboat? And since they're already out of view, I'd say they went with the current. Not against it."

"They're on a small craft," Baxter concurred, examining the marks on the bank. "Very light, by the looks of it. Yes, I would also say they've gone downriver."

"There's a small town downstream," Montgomery concurred with a thoughtful nod. "Les Arbrisseaux. Whoever found Scarlet might be taking him there for treatment – since our man is wounded." His brow furrowed anew. "So we'll follow the river then. And we will look for any trace of this damned boat. Maybe it has gone to Les Arbrisseaux, but it could stop anywhere between here and there. Whatever, I want it to be found."

"It could have gone across to the other side," Williams remarked.

"Thank you for volunteering, Williams. You and Baxter will cross the river and follow it down from the other bank."

Baxter seemed bewildered by the order. He looked towards the river, with hesitation. "But... how are we going to get across?"

"I don't care!" Montgomery snapped, turning to his men. "Find a way, that's all. We have a mission to perform, and I won't let anything or anyone stand in our way." He glared at his men. "I want that microchip Scarlet is carrying," he said between his teeth. "And I want Scarlet dead. And I mean *permanently*." He spun on his heel, turning his back on the others. "Now get a move on. We have work to do!"

He started walking, and Petroski and Palmer followed, in silence. Left behind, Baxter and Williams watched them go morosely, before Williams finally turned to his grim-looking companion.

"You're not afraid of crossing that river, are you?" he asked with curiosity.

"Of course not," Baxter replied, scoffing and shaking his head. "I have no concern about that. The Mysterons' orders will be carried out."

"But there's still something bothering you."

Baxter scowled. Being a now Mysteronised agent meant that he possessed all of his human counterpart's expertise – but also, some of his natural concerns and uncertainties. "I still hate alligators," he muttered under his breath. He then turned cold eyes towards the river. "Come on. Let's find a way to cross safely."

The two men started walking up the river, in the opposite direction from their companions.

\* \* \*

Not that far from there, crouched behind thick bushes which concealed her perfectly from her enemies, Rhapsody Angel watched attentively as the WAAF commandos separated into two groups to follow the river.

Delayed in her trek by a terrain that presented many more obstacles than she had counted on – she nearly fell into quicksand and had to make a detour to find a passage across a dangerous-looking patch of quicksand – she had arrived barely minutes after the soldiers had discovered the spot where Captain Scarlet had landed. She had stayed hidden, and spied on them as they made their discoveries and followed the trail of the vanished Spectrum officer, hearing and witnessing everything.

Now that they were gone, she rose from her hiding place and retraced her steps to the spot where Scarlet's body had hit the ground. She didn't expect to find anything more than what the soldiers had already found; in any case, their footprints were now all over the place and if there was any other clue left to find, that was enough to erase it.

She stood over the disturbed ground where she could still see the body's imprint on the crushed twigs and flattened grass; there were traces of blood all around. Her eyes scanned the ground for a moment longer, before rising to the sky above; she could see the many branches and twigs through which Scarlet had fallen some hours before. *Such a long fall*, she told herself, trying hard not to shiver at the thought of it. *And it looks like it was a rough one...*

Her eyes narrowed as she saw something caught on a branch, which was flapping in the wind. At first, she thought it was a leaf, but then, she noticed it was dark, and had an odd, square shape; something colourful was printed on it.

Frowning, she stood on tiptoe; it was dangling on a twig just within reach and she snatched it, almost losing it as her fingers closed around it. It was hard and had a leathery feel to the touch.

It was only when she brought it back to eye level that she realised that it was the remains of a badly damaged cardholder. The half-torn cover was printed with what was left of a Spectrum emblem.

Although she already knew which one it was, Rhapsody's heart missed a beat when she opened the cardholder to find the dirty and blood-smeared I.D. card of Captain Scarlet still inside it.

Probably, Rhapsody realised, it was torn from his uniform pocket in his fall.

She crouched down and sighed heavily as she examined the ground again. She had to grimly concur with Palmer's deduction that Scarlet had been badly wounded. She also had to agree with the fact that he hadn't left by himself and that someone else found him – and took him. She had followed the same trail the commandos did – so her conclusion was not in any way different.

*But who found you, Paul?* she asked herself with concern. *And where did that person take you?*

Friend or foe, it didn't make any difference. If Scarlet was wounded – and he was – he would heal eventually, and that meant someone would witness his incredibly fast recuperative powers. What would be that person's reaction to this miraculous feat was anyone's guess, but Rhapsody was apprehensive it could mean some kind of trouble for her colleague. At the very least, it would arouse questions, to which he would not be able to provide any answer. Not without imperilling Spectrum's security, anyway – and perhaps even shedding some light on the real nature of the organisation's fight against the Mysterons.

*Right. You're getting much too far ahead of yourself, Dianne. No sense in worrying about such abstract notions for now. The important thing is to find Paul – quickly. And before those murderous bastards do.*

But where to look was another question. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she rose to her feet. Should she follow the same trail as the commandos? It seemed to her that, that way, she would always be a step behind them, and that they would certainly find Scarlet before her. And certainly, she couldn't fight them all – she was all alone and completely unarmed.

*Okay – time for a change of strategy then.*

Until a few minutes ago, Rhapsody's priority was to beat the WAAF commandos to finding Scarlet. That was still the case, but as her opponents had a good head start on her, she now had to do this a different way.

She needed help. If someone had found Scarlet after his fall, that meant that there were people living around there somewhere; and some of these people, she reckoned, would probably have a means of communication – a phone, at the very least. Her new option would then be to try to warn Spectrum – or contact the proper authority, if there was any nearby – and ask for help to locate her missing colleague before the Mysterionised commandos.

At the moment, it seemed to be her best alternative.

She looked around, getting her bearings and deciding which direction to take; from what she recalled of the area's map, the nearest settlement of any importance was downriver, on the western shore, towards the south. Les Arbrisseaux, she had heard Montgomery say. She remembered the name. The commandos were heading in that direction, but as the river followed a serpentine course, probably filled with obstacles along the way, they would take a very long time before reaching it. She, on the other hand, would be there much faster if she were to cut through the woods and head directly towards the town.

Still, she realised, it would be hours of walking...

*But do I have any choice?* she asked herself.

She wiped her sweat-drenched brow with her forearm. She felt hot, and she wondered if it was because of the warmth and dampness surrounding her, or if it wasn't some fever due to the not-so-well-tended injury to her arm. She shrugged, trying to dismiss it. She still had things to do, and she couldn't let this get in the way of her work.

She didn't hesitate much longer in taking her decision, and started to jog... hoping that this time, the terrain would be more favourable than it had been up until now. And maybe, she would find someone along the way, who would be willing to help her.

The race against time had started again.

\* \* \*

Scarlet woke up with a start and sat up abruptly, breathing rapidly. He felt like he had awakened from a very bad dream that he couldn't remember, his heart beating fast, his brain pounding against his skull. He felt hot all over, and was famished and thirsty, his tongue thick inside his mouth. He looked around with haggard eyes, dazed and disoriented, trying to clear his mind and concentrate on where he could be.

He was lying on a bunk, made of a thin mattress, in a dark, very small room, barely lit by a dim fluorescent light recessed into a grey concrete ceiling, its plastic cover filthy with dirt and dead bugs. The floor and three of the walls surrounding him were made of the same, obviously solid concrete.

The remaining wall, that he was facing, was made out of sturdy steel bars.

*I'm in a cell,* he realised in confusion. *A prison cell... How...?*

The memory of what had happened in the bayou, outside of Joe's cabin, suddenly came back to him. He closed his eyes in sadness at the thought of the old man's death, and felt a wave of

anger for those who had killed him – and also tried to kill the only witness of that heinous crime.

Instinctively, he reached for his shoulder, remembering the bullet that had hit him. It was healed, under the new grey shirt he was now wearing; there wasn't even a single scar apparent. He looked down at himself; the shirt replaced the one that had been covered with his own blood, when he had been shot, and he was wearing it over a grey tee-shirt. He was still wearing the trousers that Joe had given him, but he had no boots on; obviously someone had removed them before putting him in this cell.

He heard the sound of a lock being turned and raised his head to look beyond the iron bars, where a door was open and a tall, black man, wearing a uniform, was approaching. Scarlet didn't move as the man came up to the bars of his cell, stopped and simply looked at him.

Scarlet recognised the man as the one who had shot him in the bayou.

The sheriff... Masters, Joe had called him.

For a few seconds, the man stood, immobile and silent, as he stared at Scarlet with something that looked like curiosity; it was becoming uncomfortable, and Scarlet, almost despite himself, found that he couldn't stay still. He wiped his sweat-covered forehead in a nervous gesture. The sheriff tilted his head to one side.

"You're awake already," he said matter-of-factly. "Seems like we moved you to this cell not a moment too soon, then."

Scarlet swallowed hard and slowly got to his feet. "Sheriff Masters?" he asked, his voice sounding hoarse. He cleared his throat, and noticed the frown on the black man's brow.

"How the hell do you know my name?"

Scarlet felt ill-at-ease under the sheriff's very intense stare. "Joe told me," he answered. "He told me he had called you, after he found me."

"So you had time to talk to him before you killed him?"

Scarlet frowned at the accusation. "I didn't kill him."

Masters scoffed. "Right. You would say that. I found you with the murder weapon in your hands. Your fingerprints are all over it."

Scarlet took a step forward. Masters raised a warning hand. "Stay where you are, mister." The Englishman stopped instantly, and the sheriff sighed. "You have the right to remain silent..." he started, and Scarlet nearly rolled his eyes upon hearing him. It sounded way too much like a badly written line from a cop and gangster movie. He wondered how he could even remember that; he didn't even *remember* any movie that clearly.

"Look, I know all the evidence is against me," he said, interrupting Masters in the middle of his homily. "But I can assure you – I didn't kill Joe. Why would I have killed him?"

Masters shrugged. "I don't know – maybe because you didn't want to go to prison for poaching and he was stopping you from escaping before I arrived?"

"I *am not* a poacher," Scarlet shot back.

"Who and what are you, then?"

"I..." Scarlet stopped himself, realising that even at this moment, he wasn't even close to knowing *who* he was and what exactly he was doing in the bayou. Again, he searched his mind, frowning, trying desperately to remember. A twinge of pain hit him and he grunted, stopping instantly, knowing far too well that further effort would bring further pain.

As he returned his attention to the sheriff, he noted that the latter's eyes were still riveted on him.

"I'm waiting, Mister." Apparently, Masters didn't seem to have noticed his momentary malaise.

"I... don't know," Scarlet finally admitted. "I... don't remember."

Masters raised a brow. "You don't remember," he repeated doubtfully, sounding exactly like Joe. "How convenient."

"I know it seems ridiculous but –"

"Ridiculous, all right." Masters half-turned to take a step in the direction of the door, plainly showing this way that he was about to leave. Scarlet shot to the bars, grabbing them, and called him back.

"Wait! You have to hear me out!"

Masters returned his attention to him, his eyes glaring. "I won't listen to you until you tell me who you are."

"I... I can't tell you that. I can't..." Scarlet felt desperately frustrated. If there was a moment when he would need to remember something as simple as his name, it was surely now, but it kept eluding him, as hard as he tried. His head started pounding anew.

Again, Masters seemed ready to leave, and suddenly, on an impulse, Scarlet shouted after him: "O'Hara!"

That stopped the sheriff right in his tracks and he turned back. "O'Hara?" he repeated. "That's your name?"

Scarlet nodded, a little hesitantly. *Where the hell did that name come from?* he wondered. He had no idea. His left hand reached imperceptibly for the dog tags which he knew should be hanging from his neck, where he had seen the name 'Scarlet' earlier.

He couldn't find them.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

Scarlet watched as Masters reached for his shirt pocket, and extracted something from it; he saw the man's fingers holding the thin chain, with the dog tags dangling from it. The sheriff raised the dog tags and narrowed his eyes at them.

"There's something like a serial number on them," he said. "And a word... A name perhaps? Scarlet?" Something like a sardonic smirk appeared on his lips. "Scarlet O'Hara? Are you saying that's your name, Mister?"

Scarlet hesitated. Somehow, he felt that it wouldn't be safe to answer, so he kept silent, and wondered why Masters seemed to find this name so unlikely. He watched as the sheriff approached to stand in front of the bars, keeping at a safe distance.

"Mister O'Hara," Masters continued, scoffing, and putting the dog tags back into his pocket, "if that is your name – if you are not a poacher, like Joe thought you were – what was your business in Devil's Bayou?"

Scarlet opened his mouth to answer that he didn't know, but he stopped himself right away; he hesitated, not knowing how to respond to that question, realising that he had to find a credible answer to give.

Masters grunted with impatience. "If you didn't kill Old Joe Benson – who did, then?" he snapped.

"The boys who came to see him," Scarlet answered without hesitation. "One of them... Tall, blond... he used Joe's gun against him."

"Jasper Holland?" the sheriff suggested. "Why would he have killed him?"

Scarlet shook his head. "I don't know... Joe said they wanted something from him... I don't know what."

"So Joe had time to confide in you? A stranger whom nobody knows and who he found poaching in the bayou? That makes perfect sense."

"You don't believe me," Scarlet realised, noting the sarcasm in the sheriff's voice.

"I've got plenty of reasons not to believe you," Masters harshly replied. "Mainly, I don't see why I would take the word of a stranger who refuses to tell me what his business in this area is over that of a local resident – whose father is a very influential businessman, I might add."

"I wish I could tell you, Sheriff..." Scarlet murmured.

"You said you can't. Why is that?"

"I... I don't remember."

"You said that already. You know how preposterous that sounds?"



Scarlet swallowed hard. He was very aware that it all seemed absurd. Or at the very least, not very credible. His shoulders sagged. "Nevertheless, it's the truth. I don't remember a thing. Not a single thing. Why I was in this area, who I am..."

Masters raised a sceptical brow. "You don't remember who you are? And that name you just gave me? That... ridiculous name?"

Scarlet shrugged. "It just popped into my mind. I thought it might be *my* name?" He frowned. "Why is it so ridiculous to you?"

"You're pretending not to know... Yeah, right," the sheriff muttered. "And you don't remember because... you suffered a shock or something?"

"I hurt my head."

"You mean, when Jasper clubbed you with that gun? That's what caused you to forget?" The sheriff still sounded doubtful.

"No, no," Scarlet protested desperately. "Joe said I fell from a helicopter. I can barely remember even that. I know it must be true, but..."

Masters nodded. "He told me the same when he called me about you."

"So you see I'm telling the truth! All I know is that I was lying in the woods, in pain – and Joe found me. After that, I must have lost consciousness, because then I woke up in his cabin. I had been hurt, and he looked after me. My leg –" Scarlet stopped in the middle of his sentence. How could he tell Masters that he had broken his leg, when obviously there wasn't anything wrong with it *now*? Already, the sheriff didn't believe most of what he was telling him.

Seeing that his prisoner now seemed reluctant to continue, Masters deeply sighed with impatience. "So you hurt your head and you forgot everything about yourself," he said. "And you expect me to believe that."

"I swear that's the truth," Scarlet answered bleakly. "I know I don't have any apparent injury –"

"That's another thing, Mister O'Hara," Masters swiftly interrupted him. "You don't have any apparent injury. But then, you just told me you fell from a helicopter – a fact that was confirmed by Joe Benson himself. And also..." He took a step forward, narrowing his eyes at his prisoner. "I shot you earlier. Put a bullet in your shoulder. *Here.*" The sheriff passed his left hand between the bars and poked at Scarlet's shoulder at approximately the place where he knew the man had been injured. Scarlet didn't move; the sheriff had his right hand resting on the butt of his gun, as an obvious warning for him to stay still.

"Now explain to me," the black man continued in a low voice, "how is it that you don't have any injury from that *now*?"

"I..." Scarlet shook his head, unable to answer. "I don't know."

"You don't have a mark on your face from Jasper's clubbing either," Masters pursued. "And I *know* both of these injuries existed. I saw them. But now they're gone. Can you explain that?"

"Sheriff, I wish I could..."

"Can you also explain to me what's the deal with the X-ray pictures?"

"What X-ray pictures?" Scarlet asked with a frown, genuinely confused by this new question. "I don't understand..."

"You wouldn't now, would you? Well, I have yet another strange question for you, then: how did you manage to appear dead and then seemingly come back to life soon after?"

Now Scarlet's brows rose skywards in obvious surprise. "What!?" he exclaimed, almost scoffing at the apparent accusation. "I don't understand what you –" He stopped and looked awkwardly at the sheriff. He swallowed hard. "That's impossible," he said.

"That would seem to be obvious, wouldn't it?" Masters' cold remark sent a shiver down Scarlet's spine, and yet again, he found himself unable to reply. The sheriff took a step back. "Well, Mister O'Hara, it would seem you can't give me any answers to my questions. It's quite a shame, I must admit. I was rather curious to learn a little more about all these strange... phenomena."

"Sheriff, I genuinely don't understand. Will you explain to me... What about those X-ray pictures? Did you find something wrong with me?" Scarlet was concerned now. He dejectedly shook his head. "Maybe that might explain... why I can't remember anything? Please, tell me –"

"I'm sorry, mister. But I probably already said more than I should have. I guess that I'd better follow the directives I received regarding a case such as yours."

Masters turned on his heel and started walking towards the door; it was obvious he intended to leave, but Scarlet found his last words far too ominous for his taste and he couldn't help but call for the sheriff's attention again: "What do you mean by 'a case such as mine'? What directives are you talking about?"

Masters had opened the door; he stopped in his tracks, at the sound of his prisoner's call, and turned one last time to face him. "Why, I'll be calling Spectrum, of course," he quietly answered. Scarlet could see by his intense stare that he was hoping to see a reaction from him; he was sadly disappointed.

The prisoner could only stare back at him with a clueless expression. The sheriff shook his head. "You know what Spectrum is, do you?"

Scarlet frowned, trying to remember; he felt his headache increasing, and he shook his head. "No... I can't say I do."

"Well, if you don't, maybe you're on the level and you don't know what it's all about, then. It would appear your case is way out of my jurisdiction. Even considering you might have killed Old Joe. Which *would be* under my jurisdiction."

"I did not kill him," Scarlet repeated insistently.

"Whatever. Considering the circumstances, however, it's all out of my hands now. We'll see what Spectrum thinks of all this. And maybe, they will be able to help you remember... assuming you're not faking this amnesia of yours." The sheriff stepped outside. "Don't get too comfortable. You won't be staying here very long." And with that, he closed the door behind him and locked it, leaving his prisoner alone to ponder his situation.

Scarlet made another attempt to call him. "Sheriff! Wait, you have to tell me... I want to know... What does it all mean? What the devil *is* this Spectrum you're talking about?"

If the sheriff heard him, he didn't return. Scarlet suddenly felt his mounting headache seemingly explode inside of his head, sending a wave of pain that made his knees buckle underneath him. He moaned in pain, reaching for his head, and barely able to stand on his feet, went down into a crouching position. He clasped his hands to his head; that's when he felt something wet dripping from his nose, and running into his mouth with a salty taste. He wiped it with his hand and looked at his fingers.

They were covered with blood.

*His own blood.*

"Good Lord," he muttered under his breath, opening eyes wide with perplexity and fear. "What the hell is happening to me?"

It was with great difficulty that he stumbled and almost crawled, to his bunk; the pain in his head was almost impossible to fight, and his body was shaking, barely responding to him.

He fell onto the mattress, and felt darkness, mercifully, engulf his burning mind and body.

\* \* \*

When Leonard Masters turned around after locking the door, he found himself facing young Jasper Holland; the boy seemed to have appeared behind him out of nowhere. Not expecting to see anyone there, the sheriff nearly jumped in

surprise, and just managed to stop himself from reacting too violently.

"How come he's alive?" the youth asked, his face a mask of coldness.

"What *the hell* are you doing here?" Masters snapped back, frowning.

"You asked for me," Jasper answered.

*That was true*, Masters reflected. He had asked his deputy Mac to get Jasper, before he left for Baton Rouge. The sheriff however didn't comment and passed the young man, grabbing his arm and taking him along with him. "I mean, you shouldn't be *here*, next to the cells," he said, grumbling. "You are not allowed to come near the prisoners."

"What '*prisoners*'? You only have one!"

"Don't play smart with me, boy, or I will have more than one in a minute! You know what I mean!"

"You said he was dead," Jasper remarked. "Back there, at Joe's place."

They had reached Masters' office, and the latter threw his key onto his desk, before taking his seat, in front of a cup of coffee that he had poured himself earlier. He looked up at the young man who was glaring at him, and shrugged. "Obviously, I made a mistake."

"*Bullshit*," Jasper spat.

"Be polite with me, boy," Masters quickly warned before Jasper could say another word. "I'm *really* this close to throwing you in there too, you hear? You *are* fortunate that this guy *isn't* dead. Or I would have arrested you for murder."

"I was only defending myself," Jasper protested. "We told you already... and you saw it too! That guy is dangerous! He killed Old Joe."

"So you keep telling me," Masters said, leaning back on his seat and putting his feet up onto the corner of his desk. He nodded towards the open door, in the general direction of the cells. "*He* said you're the one who killed Joe."

Jasper scoffed derisively. "Don't tell me you believe him!"

"Should I believe him?" Masters asked with a raised brow.

"Look, Sheriff, I don't like that kind of accusation! And I don't have to accept it! I'm no killer, not like that stinking poacher!"

Masters examined the young man closely; there was no indication in his general disposition that would tell him that he could be guilty of any crime. But then, the sheriff didn't count on him being easy to find out if by any chance he *was* guilty.

"He says he ain't a poacher," Masters pursued evenly. He picked up his cup of coffee, and grimaced as he tasted it; the beverage had grown cold, some time ago.

"Well, obviously he's lying," Jasper noted. "What else could he have been doing in the bayou? Joe said he was a poacher, didn't he? So maybe Joe saw it all... and that would be the reason why that guy killed him. That makes sense! And... didn't that guy say he didn't remember a thing? So how could he remember he ain't a poacher?"

"That's assuming he's telling the truth about his amnesia," Masters replied. He put his feet down and straightened up in his seat, glaring up at the young man facing him. "Say, how come you know that?" he asked suspiciously. "Exactly *how long* were you standing in front of that door? *What else* did you hear?"

"More than enough to know this guy ain't clean, Sheriff. That whole business about him... It smells rotten. I mean, really rotten." Jasper narrowed his eyes at the sheriff. "What does Spectrum have to do with him, anyway?"

"That's not for you to know," Masters replied harshly, as much as for the youth's benefit as to hide the fact that he himself had not a clue about that specific question.

"Oh, then, maybe I'll be able to help you out here, Sheriff," Jasper said with a faint smile.

"You, helping me out?"

"Of course. Y'see, I know a thing or two about Spectrum..."

Masters rolled his eyes. "I wonder what you could possibly know, boy."

"Well, for starters, I know this: Spectrum fights terrorists, right?"

"It's part of their jurisdiction," Masters said, and then cursed himself, as he realised he should probably not even have commented on that subject... and shouldn't even listen to whatever the boy might have to say.

"You know these new guys they've been fighting... with that weird name... the Mysterons – you heard of 'em, right?"

"Yeah... I heard the name."

"You know, there's crazy rumours about them... It's all over Worldnet, I read about it. The World Government, they're trying to hide the whole thing, but when you know where to look, you can learn the truth. These Mysterons, y'see, they're not even from this Earth. They would be from Mars, and... you know, it's said they're able to wake up the dead..."

At the first mention of 'Mars', Masters, who was starting to take another gulp of his coffee, nearly choked himself with it and put his cup down onto his desk, roughly. "Now, stop talking nonsense!" he snapped angrily, looking up at Jasper again. "What are you driving at, exactly? That guy in there would be a zombie, or an alien from another planet? He ain't got antennas or green skin, you know!"

"But that would explain *everything*, Sheriff! He was dead in the bayou, don't deny it. He was dead and he came back... Johnny saw it all at the clinic."

Masters jumped to his feet. "Now I should be worried! Johnny ain't nothing but a tattletale liar! He doesn't know what he saw, he wasn't there!"

"Yes, he was," Jasper shot back. "He was in the waiting room for his arm, and he saw you running to the mortuary when –"

"So that makes him a first line witness, then? Listen, boy – there's a logical explanation about all this. And it doesn't involve Martians, I can assure you that."

"Then tell me what this explanation is, Sheriff."

"I don't see why I would have to, even if I had the expertise. I'm not a doctor."

"Then maybe Doc Evers could –"

"That's enough!" Masters pointed a warning finger at Jasper. "Now you hear me, Jasper Holland: you will stop this crazy talking about Mysterons and aliens. You will keep quiet about all this, and about this stranger in my cell coming back from the dead. If I hear that you, or *any* of your stupid friends say anything about this to *anyone* in this town, I'll have you all *arrested* for disturbing the peace!"

"You ain't gonna hide the truth forever, Sheriff," Jasper challenged. "If any of this was as crazy as you say, why would Spectrum come for him? You see it all makes sense."

"Whatever business Spectrum might have with this guy concerns only Spectrum," the sheriff replied harshly.

"Will they take that freak away from here?"

"He's not a freak," Masters warned. "And how the hell should I know if they'll take him away? If they do, they'll have good reason, and I'll have nothing to say, even if this man's suspected of murdering Joe Benson. Spectrum business takes all precedence over any police business. Even a murder in a small locality like ours. I might not like it, but I have no choice but to accept that fact – and co-operate."

"Yeah, Spectrum deals with worldwide security," Jasper reasoned. "They would have the power to do whatever they want, without anyone asking questions. So you see the alien theory ain't that crazy... The Government wouldn't want us to know. Spectrum would make sure of that."

"Of course..." Masters said, rolling his eyes anew. "That old conspiracy theory again. Have you considered this guy might be a down to earth terrorist, boy? After all, Spectrum's an anti-terrorism organisation. But I don't want to assume – I might be as wrong as you are."

"And what if I'm not wrong, Sheriff?" Jasper replied.

Masters glared at him. "As I said, whatever the reasons Spectrum might have to interrogate this man, it's *their* business, and I won't get my nose in it. And you should do the same." He leaned over his desk and looked directly at the young man. "And I'm warning you for the last time, Jasper: you keep quiet about all this, and you don't go spreading crazy rumours around... Or else!" His eyes flashed. "I'm serious, you're *this close* to getting yourself arrested. I don't care who your old man is, you'd better keep your nose clean. I'm keeping my eyes on you, kid... and on your little gang of punks."

"All right, Sheriff. We'll keep quiet... Don't want no trouble with the law."

Masters scoffed, as he reached for his phone. "Well, that would be a first. Now get the hell out of here, right away. I've got an important phone call to make."

"Sure, Sheriff, whatever you say." Jasper sighed as he moved towards the exit.

"And I don't want to see your face around here, if I don't call for you!" Masters called after him.

He watched the young man shrug his shoulders as he disappeared from his view, and heard his footsteps decreasing in the distance. A few seconds later, he heard the main door being open and closed.

Masters grunted with irritation, and pensively put the phone down; he was wondering, very seriously, if the stranger in the cell had not told him the truth about what had happened in the bayou. Thinking about it, it was quite probable that Jasper had killed Old Joe. Masters knew there had been some trouble between the two of them, but he couldn't really figure out exactly what it could be, and had no idea if it would have been sufficient to lead to murder.

Still, the stranger was the most likely suspect. For starters, he seemed to have a motive, unlike Jasper; and all the evidence pointed to him as Joe's murderer. Moreover, the murder weapon was in his hands when he was found, and he was threatening Jasper and his gang – who had gladly testified against him. Of course, if Jasper was the real killer, and if his buddies were witnesses, or even accomplices, it was possible that they would do their very best to exonerate their friend – even if it meant ganging up on an innocent man.

*But exactly how innocent is that stranger?* Masters wondered. Joe said he was a poacher, but he could have been wrong. Obviously there was more to this man than met the eye.

The way he had seemingly come back from the dead was staggering; of course, the sheriff had heard of so-called 'Yoga masters', or other such meditation practices, who had so much

control over their own body that they were able to slow down their metabolism to a point where they would *seemingly* stop breathing and that their heart would appear to have stopped beating. Masters would have readily accepted that the stranger could have been an adept of this strange technique – if he had not been witness of those other strange happenings – like the surprisingly rapid way he had healed from his wounds and the X-ray phenomenon.

No, there was obviously something else; something that made this man O'Hara – if it was his name, and Masters doubted that very much – someone of interest to Spectrum. Someone who was to be considered so dangerous that he was not to be approached, and Spectrum had to be contacted right away, for them to deal with him personally.

But there it was: the man was in Masters' cell, and didn't seem at all that dangerous. If anything, he looked confused by his situation; which made the sheriff even more uncomfortable. He didn't want to believe Jasper's 'speculations' – it all sounded way too absurd to consider. But even without taking this into account, Masters had to admit that this was all very unusual; and he didn't like it.

*I'll be losing a murder suspect*, he thought grimly. *Or, at the very least, a witness to a murder.* He didn't expect Spectrum to leave the man to him until the investigation of Joe's death was through. Unfortunately, like he had said to Jasper, Spectrum's business took priority, and a little business like a simple murder in a small town wouldn't convince them to let the local Law follow its own course.

*Oh well... Maybe they'll be helpful in discovering what happened, then*, Masters reflected, as he picked up the phone once again. *I can always ask them if they need what little expertise I could offer them.*

*Yeah... I wish!*

\* \* \*

"So, Jasper, what's the news?"

Jasper Holland found his friends – all those who had been with him when he had visited and killed Joe Benson – waiting for him at Sam's Diner, where they had agreed to meet after Johnny came back from the clinic with his stunning news. As Jasper had been asked by the deputy sheriff to come see Sheriff Masters, they all were a little nervous to learn what it was all about.

The diner was almost empty, except for Sam himself at the counter and a lone couple near the door. The gang was reunited at the far end of the diner, and they were watching Jasper



approach, expectantly. Curiously, their leader didn't look worried when he joined them at their table. He took the Coke bottle resting in Scarecrow's hand and before the latter could even protest, took a swig from it before addressing a nod to Johnny.

"You were right – the guy's alive."

Scarecrow gasped. "How could that be? He was dead when the sheriff took him! We all saw it!"

"I know," Jasper grumbled. "I don't know how he did it. Guy must be a freak..."

"Sure must be!" Jamie concurred. "Nobody can come back from the dead like that!"

"You should have been there at the clinic," Johnny added. "Everybody was freaking out! I nearly did myself... I had to come and tell you all..."

"Keep it down," Jasper hissed between his teeth. "The sheriff just told me not to talk about any of this and not to spread any kind of crazy rumours around. Or we'll all be thrown in the jail."

"Is that why the sheriff asked for you?" Dallas Fenmore, the last member of the gang, asked.

Jasper nodded again, grimly. "Yeah. He wanted to warn me. Now I don't know about you, but I'm not that eager to go to jail. Even for one night. So we have to keep it quiet." He looked around, making sure no-one was paying any attention to them. It wasn't the case.

"Do you think Masters suspects... something?" Johnny asked him. That was the question that was in all their minds and was making them nervous. Jasper shook his head.

"He might suspect things are not as clear as we told him," he said. "The stranger's been telling him that he didn't kill Joe and that it was *me* who did it."

"Oh no..."

"Calm down, Jamie – obviously, Masters didn't believe him: he hasn't arrested me, as you can see. He must still think the stranger's the killer – or the most likely suspect, anyway." He chuckled. "Maybe he's afraid of what my dad would do, if ever he was wrong about his suspicions too... Elections are near, and he wouldn't want to lose 'em."

"How long before he changes his mind?" Johnny asked in grim concern. "Ya know, if the stranger starts to get convincing –"

"I don't know about that," Jasper said. "And I ain't sure if I want to take that chance. Even if the sheriff doesn't get any proof, if he gets suspicious, it might get complicated for us."

"We wouldn't be able to return to Joe's place, you think?" Jamie asked.

"Not if the sheriff keeps his eyes on us," Jasper said. "And he told me he would... just to make sure we'll keep quiet."

"Damned," Dallas muttered. "Now that the old fool ain't there anymore, we would have been free to do whatever we please. *This* had to happen."

"We were lucky," Scarecrow retorted. "If that stranger had not been there to take the fall, we could have been in deep trouble."

"The sheriff wouldn't have gone to Joe's place today if not for the stranger to begin with," Jasper retorted. "It's all his fault we have to wait now. But I can guarantee you, boys, we ain't waiting for long. We'll get our business done soon. For the moment, we have to do something about the stranger."

"What *can* we do?"

"I don't know yet, Dallas... But this I know: if we do something, we have to do it fast. Y'see, Spectrum is coming over to see that guy."

Jamie, who was drinking from his bottle of Coke, nearly choked on hearing this, and put it down noisily. "Spectrum?!" he gasped in complete surprise. "What did they have to do with anything?!"

"Who's that guy, anyway?" Dallas asked in turn.

"That's another thing," Jasper said. "I overheard him talking to Masters. He says he doesn't remember a thing about who he was – and what he was doing in the bayou. He's supposed to have amnesia, after falling from a helicopter..."

Jamie raised a doubtful brow. "You believe that crap is true?"

"How the hell should I know?" Jasper grumbled. "Masters doesn't seem to believe it, mind you. So that doesn't make the stranger's credible. That gives us some time."

"Not long, I think," Scarecrow said grimly.

"The more I think about this guy," Johnny said, "the more it gives me the creeps. He's a freak all right. Nobody could revive the way he did."

"Ain't that the truth," Jasper concurred. "Y'see, I'm thinking about that stuff I read on Worldnet... about these Mysterion aliens..."

"You're serious?" Scarecrow asked with a doubting frown. "You believe all that stuff they say? There ain't no proof, you know!"

"I'm liable to believe it, when I think 'bout what Johnny witnessed," Jasper replied, scowling. "And what about what we all saw? There can't be no other explanation. This guy was dead, pure and simple. No way a normal human being can return from

death, you know that as well as I do. And now Spectrum is coming... He's gotta be an alien terrorist."

"I'll buy that," Johnny said with an approving nod. The others kept themselves from rolling their eyes. Johnny would approve of anything Jasper would say, just to stay in his good graces. "I always thought the Government was hiding the truth from everyone about those Mysteron guys. Guess that's right, then..."

"Yeah, okay," Scarecrow sighed. "So let's say you're right. Freak or not, what will we do if someone starts believing what this guy says? We'll be in trouble, big time."

"Maybe Spectrum will take this freak away?" Johnny suggested. "Then all our problems will be over."

"Ya wanna think before talking, Johnny?" Jasper grumbled. "I would prefer if they don't do that, y'know. They take that freak away, they interrogate him... and they might learn the truth about what happened. They believe him, and then they make a call to Masters... and then we're all in deep trouble, and it'll be too late to do anything about it."

"You already have something in mind?" Dallas asked in turn.

Jasper shrugged. "Not yet. But we'll think of something. In the meantime, let's keep an eye on the sheriff's office. We gotta grab any chance we'll get. And not hesitate to do whatever's necessary to keep the freak from babbling too much." He took another gulp from his bottle, and then his eyes became very cold. "And if anyone gets in the way, whoever he might be, even the sheriff or those Spectrum guys, they gotta get the same. There ain't nobody gonna get in our way now... You have my word on that, boys..."

\* \* \*

Ever so slowly, Max Labordeaux put the call he had just received on hold, a thoughtful expression on his face.

The phone call was from a little town called Les Arbrisseaux, set inside the limits of Devil's Bayou. The sheriff of the place, Leonard Masters, the only authority in the area, had contacted him about a man found in the swamp, possibly a poacher, and the prime suspect in a murder case. The man had apparently revived from death in the local clinic – and X-ray scans of his body had shown a *positive* image. Faced with these strange occurrences, the sheriff had followed standard procedures and had reported them to the nearest Spectrum office.

In this case, the New Orleans office.

A faint smile spread on Labordeaux's thin lips, as he recalled the sheriff's report: the man seemed to suffer from amnesia, not even recalling his own name, and had only given the name 'O'Hara' when he had been arrested. However, he was wearing dog tags with a serial number and a different name engraved on them.

*Scarlet.*

And, to boot, an amnesiac Scarlet.

"O'Hara indeed," Labordeaux muttered, chuckling.

There was some humour in this situation, he reflected; their quarry was in a prison cell, in Les Arbrisseaux, and only *he*, an agent of the Mysterons working inside a Spectrum office, knew about this.

Sheriff Masters had assured him of his full co-operation, and that he would keep the prisoner in custody, until Spectrum came for him.

*This is far too easy... But an opportunity like this will not repeat itself.*

Labordeaux chuckled anew, just before he took the call back, and regained his serious demeanour. "Sheriff Masters," he said to his caller, in a very official voice, "I just informed base, and received their instructions. Yes, do keep hold of your Mister O'Hara for us." His smile widened into an evil, satisfied grin. "I'll be contacting a Spectrum unit currently in your area right away. You will hand your prisoner over to them." He nodded slowly, and his thoughts flew to the Mysteronised WAAF soldiers, under the command of Major Montgomery. "I'll call you back in a short while with further instructions of how they will take delivery of him. Please, be careful... This man is to be considered very dangerous. And again, Sheriff... Thank you so much for your help. It is much appreciated."

He hung up the phone, very slowly, his smile broadening even more as he sat back onto his chair.

"The Mysterons *certainly* appreciate it," he added to himself with dry humour.

## CHAPTER 5

Rhapsody Angel stood on the bank of the river, staring dejectedly at the wild current relentlessly flowing, which was effectively cutting off her way to Les Abrisseeaux. This was a drawback she didn't expect or need – certainly not when time was such a matter of life and death. Every precious minute lost might mean losing the race – and the fight.

The river was too wide to cross, the flow too fast and wild. And even if she dared to swim across, she suspected that underneath that dark, frothing surface, there could be even more danger, that she would be unable to see before it was too late. She felt quite unable to take that risk, anyway. Even if it was not hurting, her injured arm would be a hindrance, and she felt too tired after the long race through this way-too-humid swamp.

She desperately needed a rest; but she knew she couldn't allow herself the luxury.

Annoyed, she wiped the perspiration from her brow with her forearm. In Les Abrisseeaux, she would be able to rest, and to receive proper care for her injuries. Provided she could reach the town, of course. But to do so, she needed to cross the river; obviously, she would never be able to do it at this spot.

She was so very close to her objective now, she could feel it; it was just too frustrating that she might be forced to make a large detour in order to reach it.

She closed her eyes and thought, trying to recall in her mind the map she had memorised earlier. This wasn't the same river that the enemy commandos were presently following; rather, this was some kind of backwater, a tributary of the main river. She recalled having seen it on the map, but it didn't seem *that* big; it should be more like a small stream than anything else. Obviously, it had enlarged considerably, probably following a recent flood, and had become wild and impossible to get across easily. She thought she remembered a bridge, down-river... and what looked like a road past that bridge, which seemed to lead straight into town, a few miles further.

She wondered if she was actually right – or if she was just hoping for all this. Somehow, it seemed all too good to be true.

She shook her head. *I don't have a choice*, she told herself. *I **have** to get across, and if there is a bridge – or any other means to cross – I have to find it.*

She jogged down the river. If she was to believe her calculations, she had outstripped Montgomery's commandos. But she imagined they couldn't be that far behind her. An hour, at best; ten, fifteen minutes, at worst. In any case, she couldn't

afford to lose time at all; she had to take advantage of any lead she might have.

It took her about fifteen minutes before she finally saw the outlines of the bridge through the trees; she stopped in her tracks and, breathing hard, stared at it, as if she couldn't believe she actually had been right. A smile spread across her face.

"I knew it!" she whispered to herself. She started running again, straight towards the bridge.

As she reached it, she also discovered the narrow beaten trail leading to it; but it was nearly completely destroyed by bad weather and multiple floods and certainly not usable anymore.

As for the bridge... there was barely anything holding it up. It was made of wood, all broken and distorted; most of the planks that made the path were gone, and whatever was left of the supports didn't seem solid enough to support any weight. The other end of the bridge wasn't even linked to the trail anymore. Rather, it had fallen about ten feet below, to the foot of the gully forming the bank of the river, and was leaning against rocks protruding from the raging surface of the water, the supports from that side having been taken away by the current. It was a miracle it was still in place.

Yet, Rhapsody imagined, it was a way to get across, no matter how dangerous it might look.

She only hesitated a second or two, before starting to walk carefully onto the rotten and deformed planks. They creaked underneath her steps, but they held, and holding her breath, she continued her advance, trying not to hurry in fear the bridge would crumble under her feet.

But it didn't even tremble; it was obviously sturdier than she imagined.

Encouraged, she reached the section of the bridge where there was no path at all, and peered through the hole, staring at the raging current so close beneath her. Then, she climbed the twisted wooden fence, which was now the only way to get across. It held her weight and she carefully made her way through, biting her lower lip against the physical exertion on her wounded arm as she held herself over the dirty waters flowing below her feet. She thought she saw something moving as she glanced down, but as she momentarily stopped to take a better look, she only saw ripples on the surface. She shook her head dismissively and continued to cross.

She jumped the last meter to reach the bank of the river, and her left foot slipped into the water as she landed. She scrambled up the ditch in a hurry, and finally reached the top; then, breathing hard, her brow covered with sweat, she turned

around, rubbing her sore arm, and looked victoriously at the bridge she had just crossed.

As she was telling herself that nothing else would be able to get in her way now, she heard a sound from her right, and froze. Then she turned swiftly on her heel to check, listening carefully. It was the sound of twigs breaking, as if they had been crushed by the weight of something – or someone.

There was a short moment of silence, during which there was only the sound of the raging river and birds singing; then she heard it again, coming from the opposite direction, and she whirled round – to see two men emerging from behind the trees, aiming weapons at her. Her heart started pounding when she recognized them as two of Montgomery's commandos.

Williams and Baxter...

But *how* could they have beaten her to this spot? That was impossible if they were following the bank of the other river...

She received her answer the next second, as Baxter, sneering, took a step in her direction. "Surprised, aren't you?" he said, as he read the perplexity on the young woman's face. "I heard you coming through the bushes, earlier... a few minutes after we separated from the rest of the group. Of course, we didn't know at the time who it was and so we started following to check it out."

"We thought it might be Captain Scarlet, Williams added in turn. Imagine our surprise when we realised it was you. Never imagined you would have survived that fall in the lake, to begin with." He chuckled. "You're really one tough girlie, that's for sure."

"We thought it a good idea to keep track of you," Baxter continued. "Just to know what you were up to, and where you were going. When we figured that out, it was easy get past you and reach the bridge before you would. You slowed down considerably in the last few miles... Maybe you're getting tired?" He showed her a little plastic box he was holding in his hand. She recognised it as a digital electronic map, with its small screen still powered up. "You were going to Les Arbrisseaux, right? Hoping to get some help there, were you?"

Rhapsody exhaled loudly, and looked around her. There was no possible retreat; behind, there was the gully ending in the raging river; both Baxter and Williams were now closing in on her, their weapons at the ready. She was utterly trapped.

"No place to run, eh, Earthwoman?" Williams asked mockingly. "Don't worry, we don't plan to hurt you... Not yet."

"We figure you would make an excellent bargaining chip," Baxter said in turn. He was the closest to Rhapsody, and stopped as he reached her, to look directly in her face with an evil grin. "I'm sure Scarlet will be quite willing to exchange the microchip

for you anytime. That of course... if he doesn't want for you to be killed."

Rhapsody felt her heartbeat increase, just as Baxter reached to seize her by the shoulder. She figured she had nothing left to lose and had to act now. She swiftly took a step back, avoiding his hand, and caught his wrist, pulling as she did, and tripped him, slipping under his arm. Baxter lost his footing, and slipped forwards. Williams, who was but two feet away behind him, grabbed his companion in an attempt to stop him from falling, but his own feet were on muddy ground and he was unable to keep upright; seeing them unbalanced, and with their weapons aiming away from her, Rhapsody seized the opportunity, and rammed Baxter in the shoulder with all her body weight, aiming towards the gully. He tripped, and she fell on her knees and watched while the two Mysterionised men rolled down the steep slope, straight towards the river below.

They landed roughly on the bridge, destroying what was left of it under their combined weight, and completely cutting the precarious link between the two banks. They fell through the rotten wood, and splashed into the water, getting entangled between the broken wood struts. Rhapsody had hoped that the raging current would take them away; she was disappointed when it didn't happen. Kneeling at the top of the ravine, she watched as the two commandos, cursing loudly, struggled to get back onto their feet and free themselves. She stood up, nearly slipping in the process, and just had time to catch hold of a tree to stop herself from joining her enemies at the bottom of the gully.

With Baxter still trying to free himself, Williams succeeded in getting to his feet, water up to his chest, leaning against the struts to keep his precarious footing; he looked up in anger towards the young woman, as she was straightening herself up.

"You had your chance, Earthwoman!" he snarled, raising his gun. "No more Mister Nice Guy! Now you die!"

Rhapsody stepped back, but didn't expect to be fast enough to avoid receiving a hail of bullets; but right at that moment, Fate stepped in to save her. Before Williams had time to pull the trigger, she heard his angry yell suddenly transforming into a painful shriek. She saw him lose his footing to fall deeper into the water, his gun flying out of his hand. There was a lot of splashing around as Williams desperately tried to fight against an invisible underwater foe which was attempting to drag him under. Red started to tint the dark water, mixing with the froth.

Baxter was right next to him, and his eyes suddenly grew wide with horror; he was witnessing, up close and personal, what Rhapsody herself was seeing from her vantage point. An enormous, scaly tail emerged from under the troubled and raging



water, before disappearing underneath it, as quickly as it had appeared. Rhapsody gasped in shock: Williams had been caught by an alligator – maybe even more than one – and it didn't seem like he would be able to get free.

The terrified Baxter hurriedly scaled the unsteady uprights supporting the destroyed bridge, in an attempt to get safely out of the water as quickly as possible. Mesmerised, Rhapsody watched as the muddy water stained a darker red around the screaming Williams, who was trying to hold on to the remainder of the bridge fence. His fingers slipped and he went completely under, the water stifling his cries of pain and terror. The fighting visibly carried on underwater, as the splashing continued on the surface.

Precariously hanging on to the broken bridge, Baxter yelled in anger, and started shooting blindly into the water, obviously hoping to kill whatever had taken his companion.

Rhapsody didn't wait to see more. Scrambling away from her position, she started running onto the ruined beaten path. She still could hear the furious shouting of Baxter, and the sounds of multiple gunshots. He was now shouting after her in fury, but she couldn't hear his invectives very well, as she was too busy concentrating on running away. She didn't know how long a Mysteron could panic before recovering his wits, but she sure wasn't staying around to find that out.

The gunshots died away in the distance, but Rhapsody didn't slow down. She didn't really count on alligators to get Baxter, the way they did with Williams; that would be too much luck in one day. No, it was more than probable that the man had simply stopped riddling the river with bullets, after seeing the futility of his gesture. She wondered if he would dare leave the bridge to get across the raging current in order to chase her, now knowing what waited for him underneath.

Rhapsody imagined he would probably get up the courage to do so eventually; so it was up to her to take the opportunity to put as much distance as possible between them. She knew for sure Baxter would contact his accomplices, and that the rest of the commandos would learn soon that she was alive and well, and on her way to town.

No matter, she had no choice now.

She desperately needed to find help as soon as possible, and Les Arbrisseaux was the closest place where she could hope to get some.

\* \* \*

Sheriff Masters wasn't happy with how things were going in this town.

There were angry people outside, in the streets, watching the door of the station with expressions that reminded him a little too much of vultures waiting to fall on a wounded prey. Somehow, he had the distinct impression that, despite his warning, the Holland boy and his gang had told anyone in town willing to listen about Old Joe's ruthless murder – and that the old man's alleged killer was held in one of the police station's cells.

Most of the time, Les Arbrisseaux was a quiet little town; almost too quiet, actually, where nothing very exciting would happen for months, if not years – except, of course, for the bad weather regularly hitting the area, with thunderstorms, tornadoes and floods. When those disasters were too numerous, it could easily destroy a season of harvest, or a lifetime's work, and push anyone to the edge of bankruptcy. The inhabitants had somehow learned to cope with these disasters, but Masters knew all too well that dissatisfaction and anger could ignite into violence with very little warning. And with no way to defend themselves efficiently against Nature's unexpected moods, he also knew that at times, human beings would not hesitate to seize any given excuse, whatever it could be, to vent their mounting frustration.

And unfortunately for Masters' prisoner, it would seem that Joe's murder was such an occasion.

That reminded the sheriff of the Riley affair, many years ago, which had ended up in a horrible tragedy. He was very young back then, but it had made quite an impact on him at the time, and on all the inhabitants of the area.

He would be damned if he would let the same thing that happened to Riley happen to his prisoner as well.

As Masters stood by the front window, pondering on these thoughts, the door leading to the cells opened, and Doctor Evers appeared, followed by the sheriff's deputy, Alan MacGibbons, armed with a rifle. Masters turned to face them.

"So, Doc – how's your patient?"

Evers came to the sheriff, while MacGibbons sat at his desk, and put his feet up.

"Resigned," the doctor answered. "He barely said a word to me, when I examined him. Only to tell me about those headaches of his."

"Is that what caused him to lose consciousness earlier?" Masters asked with a frown. "We were unable to wake him up, Mac and I. That's why we called you."

"Well, he's fully awake now," Evers said. "And he doesn't seem to be suffering from any headaches. For now, anyway."

"Any idea why he's having these headaches? If he's *really* having them, that is."

"I don't think he's lying about them." Evers reached for the big envelope he had left on the sheriff's desk earlier. "And I don't think he's faking any dizzy spells either." He opened the envelope and took a big picture out of it, that he handed to the sheriff. "Here. I finally figured out how to make that scanning machine work. That's the latest pic I took of the man's skull before you brought him here."

"Yes, much clearer," Masters approved. "We can see that small white spot better now." He checked the scan with attention, his eyes narrowing. "That looks odd... What is it?"

"Like I suspected, a foreign body of some sort. Maybe a slug, or something similar."

"A slug?" The sheriff looked inquisitively at Evers. "He has a bullet inside his skull?"

"It does look like it, but I can't be absolutely sure of it."

"And he's still alive?"

"Don't be so surprised. It is possible. If the bullet has not touched any vital area of the brain, that is... Although, considering where this thing is right now, that seems rather extraordinary." Evers made a short pause, as Masters continued to examine the picture. "What is even more extraordinary," the doctor continued, "is the fact that I couldn't find any sign of an entry wound for this thing."

Masters raised a brow. "Say that again?"

"No scar tissue anywhere. Nothing on the surface, nor inside. It's like this thing *grew* in there. Out of nothing."

"Another surprise from our mysterious prisoner, then," Masters grumbled, putting the picture back into the envelope. "And you think this object is what's causing him these headaches and spells?"

"More than probably, yes," Evers answered.

"He says he doesn't remember anything about himself," Masters said thoughtfully. "Assuming he's telling the truth – could this thing cause amnesia?"

"That also is a possibility," Evers admitted. "But I thought he told you himself his name was O'Hara?"

MacGibbons chuckled from his seat, causing Evers to turn to him. The tall, slim man was cleaning his gun. "Yeah. *Scarlet* O'Hara," he said. "How d'you find that?"

Evers raised a doubtful brow and looked at the sheriff who shrugged.

"I don't know if he thinks he's serious or what, but when I talked to him and he gave me that name, I had the impression he

didn't have a clue of where it was coming from," Masters explained.

"Residual memories, perhaps?" Evers mused. "So it might be possible he's truly amnesiac."

"I still say he's fakin' it, and that he's leadin' us on," MacGibbons replied. "Anythin' to make us believe he's not entirely responsible for Old Joe's death."

Evers shrugged, before turning to face Masters again. "I would suggest you give this envelope to Spectrum when you deliver your prisoner. It could be useful to them."

"Is our prisoner able to travel?"

Evers hesitated for a fraction of a second. "I would say yes. If you really must."

"I think it became necessary, yes." The sheriff turned back towards the window in front of which he was standing. "Look outside. The word about Joe's death got out. It would not be a good idea to keep this guy here." He muttered under his breath. "It feels like it did back then in '55."

"You mean after that bank robbery in New Orleans?" MacGibbons said. He had been Masters' deputy for a good four years, and he knew that sometimes, his colleague and friend could be quite the pessimist. "Nah... It's not the same. If I remember correctly, back then, there was quite a hefty amount of money involved. And that's really what people were after at the time, wasn't it?" He lowered his gun to the floor, like some kind of cane, and leaned on it, his brow furrowing. "Did that Riley guy actually tell anyone where his loot was hidden, anyway?"

"I doubt it very much," Masters replied dryly, leaving his position at the window. "Or maybe he wouldn't have ended up hanging from that oak tree in the bayou, where my predecessor found him."

"What a horrible story that was," Doctor Evers muttered under his breath, shaking his head in dismay. "We never found out who killed that guy."

"As you can see, not *everyone* was after the money back then," Masters continued, addressing his deputy. "There were those who were after blood." He thumbed towards the window. "I can read the signs. There might be people out there after O'Hara's blood right now. Maybe the same people who killed Riley all those years ago. Just for the heck of it. Or maybe someone else... seeking to hide the truth."

"You still think he might be innocent?" Evers asked.

MacGibbons raised his brow with scepticism. He shook his head dismissively. "That would mean that Jasper's gang is behind it, though. None of them ever did anything that bad before."

"There's always a first time, ain't there? Anyhow, I don't know... Feels like something is not *quite* right with all this. And I hate that. And you know what I have even more than that? The fact that when O'Hara's gone, I won't be able to continue my investigation – not as efficiently as I would like to."

"It's out of our jurisdiction, Sheriff," MacGibbons replied. "When Spectrum is concerned..."

"That's another thing," Masters mumbled with a renewed frown. "Why should we be taking our prisoner to Spectrum, instead of them coming over here to collect him?"

"Isn't that highly irregular?" Evers asked.

"Is there anything regular, with Spectrum?" MacGibbons asked with a sly smile.

"I wouldn't know. It's the first time I've dealt with them."

MacGibbons looked in the direction of the door leading to the cells. "Well, for one, I'll be glad when he's gone. That guy... he gives me the creeps. First he's dead, then he ain't dead... And then that thing he has in his head..."

"I understand, Mac. I'm just frustrated that I might never be sure if he's really responsible for Joe's death or not."

"I'm sure you'll learn the truth soon, Leonard," Evers said. "When will you be leaving, then?"

MacGibbons rose to his feet. "I think we should prepare him to go now."

"We?" Masters frowned at his deputy's words. "Weren't you supposed to leave for Baton Rouge today? Your aunt needs you to help her with the arrangements for your uncle's funeral."

"Well, I have my work to consider, Leonard, and you know I'm not one to shy away from my duty." MacGibbons smiled. "Besides, I'm curious to see these Spectrum guys. I don't expect I'll be lucky enough to meet those famous colour-coded officers, mind you. And I can always leave after we are done with the transfer. That won't take long, and then I'll be on my way to Baton Rouge." He pointed towards the window with his index finger. "And you know, if your feelin' is right, you might need me to help you get him out of town."

"He's right about that, Leonard," Evers approved.

Masters smiled, and nodded his gratitude. "That ain't an offer I will say no to, Mac. I really appreciate your help."

"Don't mention it. Just doin' my job, really. So, how are we doin' this, Sheriff?"

"How long before the prisoner's ready?"

"I handcuffed him when the doc performed his examination just now. I didn't free him as yet. So he's ready to go, whenever you give the word."

Masters nodded quietly. "Then go get him. I'll go out through the back door, go fetch the car and bring it to the back, and we'll give the slip to those people waiting up front."

"Won't you be leaving early?" Evers asked.

"We will be, and so nobody will know we're gone," Masters said with a shrug. "By the time they realise we're not even here anymore, we'll be far away – and maybe O'Hara will already be in Spectrum's custody."

"Sounds like a plan, Leonard," MacGibbons commented.

"I'm all for it."

The sheriff reached for his hat. "You'll ride in the back with the prisoner, Mac. Bill, I think you'd better leave in about five minutes, using the front door. That'll distract that band of vultures outside, while Mac and I will slip out by the back door."

"I'll be happy to help you however I can, Leonard," the doctor answered. "And the two of you will be careful, won't you?"

"Of course we will," Masters answered with a sly smile, as he walked towards the door leading to the cells, followed by his deputy. "After all, it's just a prisoner transfer. What could go wrong?"

\* \* \*

Johnny Monroe was hiding in a narrow alley between two old houses, checking the back door of the sheriff's office, when he saw Leonard Masters stepping out to go to his car, which was parked only a few meters down the dead-end street. He watched in silence as the sheriff brought the car in front of the door and, keeping the motor running, got out of the vehicle and went to open the door, looking around to make sure nobody was watching. He missed Johnny's presence, as the young man was crouching behind a garbage dumpster that smelled so bad that Johnny suspected there might be a dead dog inside.

Johnny then saw the sheriff's prisoner walking quietly out of the station, his hands handcuffed in front of him, the cuffs attached in turn to a chain belt. Behind him walked Alan MacGibbons, looking very serious, one hand resting heavily on the prisoner's shoulder, while he held a huge gun in the other. He directed the captive towards the back door of the car that Masters opened, and helped him climb in, before taking his seat by his side. Masters closed the door, and then walked around the car to get behind the wheel. The whole operation took barely two minutes, before the car finally left the narrow street, passing in front of Johnny's hiding place.

Johnny stepped out from behind the dumpster, and watched the car turn the corner and disappear into the larger street. He

doubted that anyone other than himself had seen it, as no-one probably expected the sheriff to leave with his prisoner that furtively. No-one, that was, except Jasper, who apparently had anticipated this.

In fact, Jasper had gone further than that.

Earlier in the day, Dallas had reported to Jasper that he had learned from that blabbermouth Billy Ray MacGibbons, the deputy's nephew, that Spectrum wouldn't actually come to Les Arbrisseaux to pick up the prisoner, as was previously thought, but that it was up to the sheriff and his deputy to take him to an already appointed rendezvous, out of town. At this point, Jasper already had his crazy idea to go against the sheriff's earlier warning and, with the rest of the gang, had started telling everyone in town their version of the shocking murder of Joe Benson – and the rumours had started spreading widely around. Somehow, Jasper suspected that if the sheriff thought that the safety of his prisoner might be put in jeopardy by angry townsfolk who would like to avenge Old Joe's death, then he would do everything in his power to ensure that the man would remain alive, to be taken safely into Spectrum's custody. It didn't take very long for people to start voicing their concern and anger, and to glare meaningfully in the direction of the sheriff's office, giving the impression that they would like nothing better than to get their hands on the killer kept inside, and to dispense justice their own way. As it had happened before, so many years ago.

Marvelling at how well Jasper had been able to predict what would happen, Johnny took his cellphone and quickly dialled a number. It barely had time to ring before he heard Jasper's voice swiftly answering the call.

"Yeah?"

"They're on their way. As you said they would," Johnny announced.

*"Perfect. Take your bike, then. And come join us. We have work to do."*

Jasper hung up quickly. Johnny shoved his phone into his pocket and ran out of the alley and into the main street of Les Arbrisseaux.

\* \* \*

Sheriff Masters left town using a secondary road that took him to a beaten path – which he often used as a short-cut through the bayou to access the main road – a couple of miles north from town. Once they had passed the last inhabited house that was officially part of town, and joined the road to the bayou, Masters rolled down his window and stuck his rotating light on

top of the car. Seated in the back with the prisoner who was looking out the window with an adrift expression, MacGibbons noticed the sheriff's gesture.

"Is it really necessary to put that on?" he asked. "I thought you didn't want to attract attention to us." The sheriff always used his personal car in the course of his work – the county didn't have sufficient money to pay for an official police vehicle. When he was off-duty, he simply didn't use the light, and kept it in the glove compartment. At his deputy's question, Masters shrugged in a dismissive way.

"I just put it there, I'm not planning on turning it on," he said. "Besides, we still have to meet these Spectrum guys on official business, don't we?"

"Yeah, well," mumbled MacGibbons, "I still find it pretty strange that we have to meet them in the Bayou, of all places."

"That guy from New Orleans that I talked on the phone with said they were already in the vicinity on business," Masters answered. "For some kind of investigation. I don't know what exactly."

"I'm guessin' it's probably related to our guest, here," MacGibbon ventured.

"That's quite possible." Masters looked through the rear-view mirror in the direction of their very quiet captive. "What can you tell us about all this, O'Hara?" he asked.

Scarlet barely reacted, seemingly too absorbed in his contemplation of the verdant landscape which speedily passed by through the window to actually notice Masters had addressed him. MacGibbons nudged him in the side with the muzzle of his gun, drawing him out of his reverie.

"The sheriff asked you a question, punk," the deputy said between his teeth.

The prisoner didn't seem half as intimidated by the threatening weapon as MacGibbons had hoped he would be, and simply glared at him in silence for a few short seconds, before lowering his gaze.

"Ah, forget it, Mac," Masters said with a dismissive shrug. "If it's true he doesn't remember a thing, then he would unlikely be able to answer. Isn't that so, O'Hara?"

Scarlet looked down at the weapon. "I've already told you, I don't remember," he said in a low voice.

"Right, because of that slug you have in the head, isn't it?" MacGibbons asked.

Scarlet looked straight at him, frowning at his words, not sure if he had heard well. "What slug?" he asked in confusion. "What is this about?"



"You're tellin' us you don't even know you have a bullet in your thick head?" MacGibbons asked. "Seems it's been there for a while, 'cause there's no trace of recent entry visible."

"Mac, drop it," Masters repeated from up front. In the mirror, he could see the sceptical expression on Scarlet's face. "The doctor isn't even sure it's a bullet anyway... although it sure looks like one. Nor how it got there in the first place."

"Well, I don't see many ways for a slug to get there," MacGibbons retorted.

"I have a bullet in the head?" Scarlet repeated. He seemed horrified at the thought. "How is it possible?"

"If you don't know that, O'Hara, how can you expect us to tell you?" Masters said.

"I have no idea..."

"That figures." MacGibbons sat back comfortably into his seat, sighing. "Well, one thing seems certain anyway. I don't know that many innocent men walking around with a bullet in the skull. To catch a thing like that, I'm pretty sure you did somethin' to deserve it. If you catch my drift."

"That's enough, Mac," Masters warned again. "Leave him alone. It's obvious we're going nowhere with this. We'd better leave it to Spectrum to find out the truth about this guy."

"My bet is, they *already* know the truth about him, Leonard." MacGibbons was glaring in the prisoner's direction, with a look of aversion that clearly meant that he didn't trust him in the least, and would keep his guard up with him.

However, Scarlet didn't seem to care about the policeman's obvious antipathy towards him. He was trying to make sense of what he had just learned, without really succeeding. The more he was learning about himself, the more confused and lost he felt.

His brow furrowed in concentration, he suddenly felt a twinge hitting him between the eyes, and he gave a low grunt; for a second, he thought it was yet another of those aggravating headaches that had been assaulting him since he had woken up in Joe's cabin. But he soon realised that this was different.

It was a strange sensation, an uncomfortable feeling that seemed to originate from an *outside* source.

A thought imposed itself to his mind.

"Something is wrong," he murmured under his breath.

"What do you mean, 'something is wrong'?" Masters asked, glaring once again at his prisoner in the rear-view mirror.

"I don't know, I —" Scarlet shook his head. The faint, prickly feeling was still there, and now he could feel nausea mounting in him. "It's a feeling I have. I can't explain what... It's like —" He stopped suddenly, as the vague thought became a certitude. He swallowed hard. "We're in danger," he said finally.

"Ha!" MacGibbons loudly scoffed. "That's no danger you're feelin', friend! That's fear. You're about to be handed over to people who will know what to make of you. And you don't like it one bit. Isn't that so?"

Scarlet glanced in the direction of the deputy, then at the gun constantly aimed at him. No, it wasn't that, he reflected inwardly. He didn't know, nor did he care, what Spectrum was, or what it might mean to him. Still, he was feeling very uneasy. There was definitely that sensation of impending danger approaching, but he was unable to say where it would come from and what it could actually be. Nor *why* he could sense it so palpably and be so certain of it.

They drove for a good fifteen minutes without seeing anything but the surrounding woods and green landscape. The path was becoming narrower and bumpier as they advanced into the bayou. Then at the next turn of the road, an unknown and uncontrollable urge forced Scarlet to look up front. He froze, and he felt as if his heart missed a beat, as he saw, straight ahead, standing in the middle of the road, three men dressed in camouflage clothing and armed with sophisticated weapons, seemingly waiting patiently for their arrival.

Masters hit the brake, as he didn't expect such a sudden apparition in the middle of the road. The car skidded to a halt, only a few meters away from the three men. They didn't even flinch from their spot. He glared at them through the windshield, chewing his bottom lip, wondering.

"Now, who the devil are they?" he muttered.

"Spectrum, you reckon?" MacGibbons suggested from the back. "We're at the appointed rendezvous point, after all."

"Nearly there, anyway." Masters slowly nodded at the remark. "But they don't exactly look like official representatives from any security setup I know of."

"What is exactly official about Spectrum?" MacGibbons asked with a shrug. "What they do is supposed to be secret. You know, like fightin' these Mysteron fellas who appeared a few months back... You know what Worldnet says about these guys?"

"Not you too! You're not gonna tell me that you believe they're aliens from another planet?" scoffed Masters. "You've been checking the same crazy website as the Holland boy."

"I don't know about aliens, but these guys here look like professionals," MacGibbons said. "Frankly, I'm disappointed. I really had hoped for a colour-coded agent."

"Well, that ain't colour-coded uniform they're wearing," Masters muttered. "They look more like the army, or something like that."

"Spectrum is a military-type set-up, Sheriff. So they must be it."

"Danger..." Scarlet's whisper was nearly inaudible, but Masters heard it from the front of the car and turned around to look at his prisoner. The latter's face was filmed with sweat, and very pale; he was looking haggardly at the three camo-dressed men, who were still standing like statues in the middle of the road. MacGibbons was glaring sceptically at him, his finger caressing the trigger of his gun, which was still trained on the prisoner, as if he was expecting him to make a false move at any moment.

But clearly, Scarlet didn't pose any threat. He didn't look in any condition to put up any kind of fight.

"What's the matter, O'Hara? You don't feel right?" Masters asked. "You look like you're about to throw up. Your headaches bothering you again?"

Scarlet shook his head, as much as to answer in the negative as in an attempt to clear his mind. Nervously, he nodded in the direction of the three commandos. "These men... I feel...danger coming from them." He blinked and detached his eyes from the men, to fix them on the sheriff. He swallowed hard. "We have to leave," he finally said. "Now."

"Bullshit!" MacGibbons said, with a louder scoff than before. "You're scared stiff, O'Hara, that's what you are!" He opened his door and got out. "I'm gonna go talk to them."

"Mac, wait," the sheriff started.

"Don't go near them," Scarlet advised with urgency. "I tell you, we have to leave this place."

"You're not goin' anywhere, scum, if you know what's good for you." MacGibbons brusquely slammed the door, before leaning to Masters' window. "Keep a close eye on him, Leonard. He ain't goin' nowhere, restrained as he is, but who knows... With all the strange things we know already about this freak..."

"I don't know, Mac," Masters said hesitantly. "These guys... They don't look right."

"Hey, we were supposed to meet Spectrum exactly here. And they certainly fit the bill of a paramilitary security organisation."

"You think so?"

"Who *e*lse could they be?" MacGibbons straightened up and looked directly at the three men still standing at the same place, a few meters in front of the car. They had not made a single move; they simply seemed to be waiting. The deputy raised his gun and rested the barrel on his shoulder, keeping ready to use it, should there would be a need.

"Hey there!" he called out loud. "You're the Spectrum unit we're supposed to meet?"

The man standing in the middle took a casual step forward, while the two others stayed where they were. "We've been waiting for you," he answered calmly in a clipped voice.

MacGibbons narrowed his eyes at him. "You're here for the prisoner?"

The man, who seemed to be the leader, nodded. "You're to hand him over to us," he said. "Get him out of the car."

"Uh-uh. Before we do that, soldier, you'll have to show us the warrant, properly signed, stating that you take full responsibility for him."

The man tilted his head to one side. "We have your papers here," he answered quietly.

MacGibbons nodded with satisfaction. "I'll get them." He offered Masters a confident grin. "I won't be a minute. Then we'll give this freak to them and that'll be good riddance."

Masters nodded his assent almost mechanically. His deputy left the side of the car and started walking, quietly, in the direction of the three men.

Scarlet, in the back of the car, let out a low moan. "No, don't approach them..."

Masters was about to turn around and order him to shut up when at that moment, he saw one of the two men who had stayed behind, advance two steps in front of his leader, raise his automatic weapon and aim it at MacGibbons. What followed was so very fast that the sheriff didn't have time to react – and neither did his deputy.

There was a loud crackling sound, and Masters saw fire and smoke emerge from the soldier's weapon. MacGibbons was mowed down by a series of projectiles, the force of which threw him backwards, straight onto the front of the car. Droplets of blood splattered onto the hood and windshield, making a startled Masters blink for the space of a second. Then he saw the limp body of his deputy slowly slide off the hood to drop onto the ground, out of his view, while his gun escaped his lifeless hand and clattered off to the side.

Frozen in shock, Masters kept staring at the blood-smeared spot on the hood from where MacGibbons had slid, almost unable to detach his eyes from it. The three men were still standing in the middle of the road, without any expression apparent on their faces.

"Oh my God..." the sheriff murmured.

"Look out!"

The shout from his prisoner drew Masters out of his shock, in time for him to spot the same man who had shot MacGibbons

down raising his weapon again and aiming it in his direction, through the windshield. With a curse, the sheriff threw himself onto the passenger seat, a fraction of a second before the weapon fired again.

There was one single shot this time, almost deafening, and a large star appeared on the windshield where the bullet hit. From his lying position, Masters put the car into reverse and pressed the accelerator down hard. The car started backing at full speed; but Masters couldn't see where it was going, and it quickly collided with trees by the side of the road, stopping it on the spot.

Masters pushed himself up behind the wheel; the first thing he saw in front of him, was the blood-covered body of his colleague and friend lying in the dust on the road; beyond it, he could see the three camo-dressed men coming in his direction, weapons at the ready. A cold anger gripped Masters' heart, and his mind filled with a grim determination that these men, whoever they might be, Spectrum or not, would pay for the death of his friend.

He changed gear again, and pressed down the accelerator. The car jumped forwards, in a cloud of dust. Clearing MacGibbons' body, Masters directed the vehicle towards the right, straight at one of the men coming at him. He recognised him as the one who had killed MacGibbons. Masters didn't slow down; the soldier didn't have time to get away, and the car hit him violently and threw his limp body to the side of the road. Masters barely blinked to register the loud thump; he didn't stop, looking ahead as his vehicle raced down the road, glancing only once at the two remaining soldiers who were now shooting at his fleeing car, in the hope to stop it.

The car disappeared round the next turn of the road, leaving its pursuers to vainly race after it on foot.

\* \* \*

"Damn!" Major Philip Montgomery stopped running, and watched helplessly as the vehicle disappeared from view, carrying his much-wanted prey with it. "Damn it all to hell!" he roared again in deep frustration. He turned around and aimed a furious kick at the dead body of Palmer who lay broken and bloody in the middle of the road. "We nearly had him! If only this *imbecile* hadn't shot at that policeman when he did! Why didn't he wait for Scarlet to be safely delivered into our hands?! It was only a matter of five minutes!"

"What do we do, now?" asked Petroski, standing by his side.

"What *can* we do?" Montgomery replied crisply, turning to him. "We *have* to get our hands on Scarlet! He has the microchip that we want. And we *need* that microchip!"

Petroski nodded his assent, and was about to add something, when rustling sounds made both of them turn around in alarm, their guns raised; they saw Baxter emerging from the bushes, running to join them.

Gasping for breath after a long race, he came to stand in front of Montgomery. "Sorry I'm late, Major."

The latter narrowed his eyes and glared murderously at him. At the moment, Montgomery was less than happy about the way the mission was going; and for more than one reason.

"Not only did you deliberately disobey my earlier orders," he growled icily, "but you also missed the rendezvous. Why didn't you come straight here after our last radio contact? We could have used you here."

"I had trouble finding my way," Baxter explained. "You can easily lose your way in these woods."

"Don't you think we know that?" snapped Montgomery.

"Scarlet escaped," Petroski informed. "And Palmer is dead."

Baxter looked down at the dead body at their feet. "And so is Williams," he said, returning his gaze to Montgomery. "These bayous are even more treacherous than we first imagined."

Montgomery exhaled slowly. "From what you told me earlier by radio, the bayou is not the only reason why Williams is dead." He poked Baxter in the chest with his index finger, angrily. "Next time, *you* make sure you follow your instructions, or I'll kill you myself."

"If we had followed your orders to the letter, we would not have discovered that the Angel pilot was still alive," Baxter commented boldly.

"The Angel's survival is of no consequence," Montgomery answered frostily, trying his best not to lose his temper. "What exactly can she do against us, tell me? She's a woman alone, lost in the woods. Only Scarlet is of importance to us."

"She's obviously trying to reach Les Arbrisseaux. If she tells the authorities what's going on —"

"Don't argue with me!" Montgomery roared suddenly, unable to contain his anger much longer. "That was your human counterpart's flaw, Baxter. I should have expected it to stay with you after being revived into the Mysterons' service. The sheriff of Les Arbrisseaux is on the run, we killed his deputy — and the man in charge of the Spectrum office in New Orleans is ours. Williams is dead because you both thought better than to follow your

orders, and now we've only got three men left to complete the mission, not counting Whitaker waiting for us at the helicopter. Do I have to remind you that time is running out?"

"Sir." At the call behind him, Montgomery turned around. Petroski had walked a few meters away from them, and was now crouched on the ground, checking something he had found in the middle of the road. Both Montgomery and Baxter came to him and he stood up, to show his hand, covered with fluid.

"Gas," he announced quietly. "We must have hit the tank." He pointed at a large smear right at his feet, and followed a trail with his finger, that seemed to run the length of the road in the direction the sheriff's car had taken. "The car is losing a lot. They won't get very far."

"...and there's nothing in that direction, but wilderness," Montgomery commented. "Les Arbrisseaux is the other way. They can't go back without running through us." He raised his gun. "All right, we might still be able to see this mission through, then. Let's move, men. We've got to catch them."

"What about Palmer?" Petroski asked. "His tracker's skills might still prove useful if Scarlet and that policeman leave the car and go into the woods to try and reach civilisation."

"For all I care, Palmer can rot where he is," Montgomery replied crisply. "It's his fault we lost Scarlet this time." He turned around to face the road in the direction the car had disappeared. "We're not totally inept. We certainly can follow tracks without his help."

He was about to take a step to start the chase when he heard sounds of engines coming from nearby. Not from a car by the sound of it, and not from anywhere on the road. His eyes scanned the woods, searching, but it was Petroski who first saw the three ORVs racing wildly between the trees, a few meters from them, following the approximate direction the car had previously taken. There were whooping sounds and laughing coming from the riders who didn't even seem to notice the three commandos standing in the middle of the road.

Montgomery grunted and shook his head. "Kids having fun at whatever game they're playing, that's all," he commented. "They're unimportant, and no danger to us at all. It's a shame, though... those vehicles they're riding might have been very useful to us."

Shrugging it off, he gestured forward and broke into a run in pursuit of the sheriff's car.

Petroski and Baxter followed suit.

## CHAPTER 6

After shouting his warning to Masters which prompted the sheriff to duck down to avoid being shot, Scarlet had done the same, throwing himself down onto the back seat of the car. As a result, he barely saw what happened afterwards, and could only make educated guesses, judging by the movements he felt from the vehicle and the various sounds he was hearing, as Masters put the car into gear and made good their escape.

Long minutes after the car had hit MacGibbons's killer, Scarlet was still lying uncomfortably on the seat, feeling every bump of the racing vehicle. From his position, he could see the almost indistinguishable green blur of the trees passing by the window. He tried to push himself up straight, but it was a near impossible task, with his hands restrained to his body, and the bumps in the road making it even more difficult to get his balance. He grimaced in pain when his head roughly hit the side of the door, after a more violent jump of the car.

He was even more confused with the situation than he had been up until now. He couldn't imagine who those men who had attacked them could be, nor why they had so ruthlessly killed the sheriff's deputy. He couldn't explain at all why he had this odd ominous feeling, even *before* they had appeared. All he knew was that there was a threat coming, and after the lethal meeting with those men, there was no doubt in his mind that this feeling was about them. They represented a danger – a deadly danger, for him and possibly to anyone who crossed their path.

He wished he could understand why and *how* he knew this; it was a complete mystery to him. He just was very glad that Masters was fleeing, as far away as possible and as fast as the car would allow. But this deep sensation of being threatened didn't leave him. A cold shiver ran down his spine, at the mere thought of these men. He knew with grim certainty that if they got their hands on him, it could be the end.

The way he was struggling just to get his balance was a painful reminder that there was little he could do to defend himself. If only he wasn't restrained like this... Maybe he wouldn't feel so trapped, so powerless...

He looked down at the handcuffs holding his wrists, twisting them almost to the breaking point to examine them the best he could.

*"Standard handcuffs, old-fashioned, still in use by American police departments in some remote areas. Don't let them fool you. They're quite sufficient to do the job, bearing in mind that*



*there's hardly any criminal elements dangerous or smart enough in these parts to warrant the use of electro-magnetic cuffs..."*

Scarlet frowned in surprise. These words had popped into his head, and he had *no idea* where they were coming from. *How the Hell* could he know all this about handcuffs?

He didn't know exactly, but he tried to concentrate, trying to reach that new memory so close to his grasp.

An image flashed into his mind, of a big, bulky man, walking in front of young soldiers standing to attention. *"However, unlike electro-magnetic cuffs, these can be easily unlocked. I'll show you how to do it, gentlemen, and I can guarantee you – you'll be able to free yourself in a matter of seconds, once I'm done with you."*

Scarlet blinked in surprise, as the image vanished. The man had military insignia on his sleeve. *Sergeant... No, **master** sergeant.* He seemed tough as nails, and the young men under his command looked like they were very impressed by him.

And he knew *he* was one of those young men.

He looked down at the handcuffs again; if he had learned how to free himself from these restraints, *why* couldn't he remember *exactly* how, at this moment when that information could mean the difference between life and death? It was so frustrating.

A more violent bump from the road threw him up from the seat, and his head, once again, hit the side of the door, roughly. He groaned in pain, but this latest jump had permitted him to regain at least a half-seated position, from which he was now able to see the road ahead.

This wasn't the same road; it was narrower than the previous one. It looked like a barely used beaten trail, leading deeper into the bayou. Probably, the car had taken a turn at some point, to follow this new path, without him noticing it.

Scarlet opened his eyes wide with alarm. On this very bumpy road, the sheriff was driving too fast for both their safety. And he wasn't showing any sign of slowing down.

*He's probably panicking...*

Scarlet had hardly made this assumption when he felt another bump, so violent this time that it sent the car off-road; there was a loud bang as one of the tyres suddenly exploded. Scarlet just had time to notice that the path was ending just a few meters ahead, in a narrow clearing bordering a river where a small motor-boat was docked at a wooden pier.

The sheriff struggled with the wheel to get the car back under control, but at this speed, and with a flat tyre, his efforts were fruitless. The car went down the ditch forming the river bank, and then straight toward a large tree. Masters desperately

pumped the brakes; the tyres squealed in protest, and the car slid.

It wasn't nearly enough to slow the speed down, and it was with an ear-splitting crash that the vehicle ploughed into the tree.

\* \* \*

While running through the woods to escape the last commando who had nearly captured her about two hours before, Rhapsody Angel found out that she had considerably wandered off course. Consequently, she took a good hour just to find the direction of Les Arbrisseaux; she was upset to have lost so much precious time, and she hoped that it still wasn't too late.

As much as she would have liked to use the road, she avoided it, in fear that she might stumble upon some of Montgomery's men again; she considered it safer to walk under the cover of the trees' shadows. However, she kept close by the road, even though she had soon realised it was snaking through the bayou, instead of going to town in a straight line. She was hoping to see a passing vehicle that she would be able to signal to stop. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be so; the road remained desperately deserted. It wasn't really that surprising: it looked so badly taken care of, it did seem like not many people used this road to begin with. It probably was but an abandoned beaten path, with bumps and holes that might prove lethal to the suspension of any ordinary car.

As she continued her progression, Rhapsody could hear assorted distressing sounds that appeared to be carried over the distance by various echoes. She thought she recognised the rapid crackling of automatic weapons, coming from only a few miles away, in a direction she was unable to estimate; that compelled her to quicken her pace. Of course, she knew she could be mistaken, and that sound could very well come from hunters chasing some unfortunate prey; but quite frankly, she doubted that, and she didn't want to stay around to discover if Montgomery and his men were actually closer behind than she first imagined.

When she finally heard the sound of a car engine coming from the road, she looked ahead expectantly. She saw it appear; a big, ordinary enough sedan, of a nondescript brownish colour, covered with dirt, and racing at breakneck speed on the dusty road. More importantly, she could see an unpowered rotating police light stuck on its top. Her heart flared with hope and she ran to the road, stumbling and nearly hurting herself in the process, calling and gesturing.

But the police car was going much too fast, and Rhapsody went unnoticed. By the time she reached the side of the road, the vehicle had disappeared in a dust of cloud at the next turn, and she stood there, breathing hard, disappointed to have missed this probably unique opportunity to be rescued by none other than the local constabulary.

She blew a deep sigh, and watched thoughtfully as the dust settled slowly. That car wasn't going to Les Arbrisseaux, but it probably came from there. She was still a good distance away from town and now she was torn between pursuing her course – or going after the car.

*What am I thinking of? I can't hope to catch up with it – especially at its present speed...*

Standing pensively on the road, Rhapsody considered that it might be better to actually move on with her initial plan, when new engine sounds attracted her attention. This time, it wasn't coming from the road and they weren't car engines. Her eyes caught sight of three ORVs racing and jumping between the trees; she heard the joyous whoops and laughter of their drivers and passengers, barely audible over the sounds of their engines. She watched and wondered, noting almost distractedly that one of them was brandishing a heavy calibre rifle. They didn't seem to notice her, and they disappeared from her view, following approximately the same direction as the police car a moment earlier. That observation made her frown in puzzlement: she had the definite and very odd impression that they were actually following the car.

The noise made by their engines died out rather abruptly, as if they had already reached their destination. The curious Rhapsody stood and listened carefully, but she couldn't hear anything more.

Obviously, they were youths having some sick fun chasing after a deer or something of the like, she reflected inwardly. That would certainly explain the rifle she had seen. Although, she had to admit, it would seem like slight overkill to chase ORVs. She didn't have any taste for hunting as a sport – despite the fact her father, an amateur sportsman himself, had tried on numerous occasions to interest her in it – but Rhapsody did however believe that the prey was at least entitled to what her father called 'a sporting chance'. Consequently, she couldn't see any fairness in hunting an animal with big guns and motorised vehicles.

Shaking her head dismissively, she turned around with the intention to continue her journey toward Les Arbrisseaux – when suddenly, she heard a loud cracking sound that made her freeze on the spot. It was coming from very nearby; she spun on her

heel, to look with a puzzled expression in the direction that the police car and the ORVs had gone.

It was *definitely* a gunshot; she had heard enough of those to recognise them. Probably, she thought with disgust, the youths had found their prey and had cornered it.

Then, there were more shots – followed by loud, angry shouts and that made the young woman even more perplexed.

Rhapsody was now having a bad feeling – a *really* bad feeling that there was something wrong happening. What she was hearing wasn't the sounds of any ordinary hunt. There was something else going on.

Curious as to know exactly what it could be, and sensing that it might have something to do with her present situation – she couldn't say *why*, she just had a weird, uncomfortable sensation in the pit of her stomach – she decided it would be worth investigating.

She left the road and returned into the woods, thinking it would be safer, and resumed her walk, but this time in the other direction, guided by the sounds of the strange, continuous commotion that she could hear in the distance, not that far ahead.

\* \* \*

The violent collision of the car against the trunk of the tree roughly propelled Scarlet against the back of the front seat; the sheriff, far luckier, hit the protective air-bag that deployed in front of him on impact.

Dazed after the shock, Scarlet tried to regain his focus. He was now in a very uncomfortable position, stuck between the back seat and the front seat, half sprawled on the uneven floor of the car, his feet up and his head at an odd angle. His back was hurting. He barely registered as the sheriff, cursing and groaning, pushed his smashed door open and extracted himself from the car. Then, the door against which Scarlet was leaning suddenly opened, and he felt himself falling backwards. Before he could hit the ground, strong hands caught him by the front of his shirt and pulled him out of the car, none too gently, before forcing him up to his feet. Scarlet tried to regain his footing, but Masters didn't give him the time, and dragged him away to a safe distance from the car; he then roughly pushed him against a tree. That drove the air out of Scarlet's lungs, and did nothing to improve the pain in his back. Before he could even react, the sheriff pressed his forearm against his throat to keep him still. He gasped in surprise and pain, and looked down with a haggard expression into the furious eyes of Masters.

"Now I'm through playing games!" the sheriff shouted angrily straight into Scarlet's face, showering him with spittle. "Who were those guys?"

"I don't know," Scarlet answered weakly.

"You expect me to believe that?" Masters rammed Scarlet brutally against the rough surface of the tree. "You *knew* they were a threat!"

"Yes," Scarlet admitted.

"How?"

"I don't know," Scarlet answered again, more miserably.

That didn't satisfy Masters at all, and he banged Scarlet against the tree again, more furiously, roaring: "HOW?"

"I don't know!" Scarlet repeated forcibly, looking straight into the sheriff's eyes. "I just... it was some kind of feeling that they were dangerous..."

"A feeling?" Masters was incredulous. "Like a sixth sense, or something like that?"

"Yes... No... I'm not sure..."

"You knew they were going to kill Mac," Masters accused.

"No... I didn't know." Scarlet hesitated. "All I knew was that we had to keep away from them."

"They were after you. What do they want from you exactly?"

"I... I don't know, Sheriff. I don't have the slightest idea. I'm sorry about your deputy, I..."

"Those dirty, murdering bastards..." The sheriff relaxed his grip on Scarlet, ever so slightly. "You say you don't know what they want," he said. "That you don't know who they are." Scarlet didn't reply, and could only stare back helplessly into the probing eyes of Masters. The latter shook his head thoughtfully. "Maybe you *do* know them but you don't remember. That guy who spoke to Mac – the one who appeared to be the leader. He talked like you."

"Sorry?" Scarlet wasn't sure what Masters was talking about.

"His accent," the sheriff explained. "He had the same accent as you. An English accent. Didn't you notice?" But as Scarlet kept looking back at him with a clueless expression, Masters shook his head. "I don't know about the others – maybe they were English too. Maybe you came over here with them?"

"Then why would they want to kill me?" Scarlet asked reasonably.

"As far as I know, they didn't try to kill you, O'Hara. Although, the way they shot at the car, they didn't seem like they would care that much if they were to hit you – even accidentally."

"I don't think I have *anything* in common with them, Sheriff," Scarlet replied. "It doesn't feel... right."

"Another of your weird feelings, O'Hara? Well, think about it a second. They were dressed in camo uniform... Just like *you*, when Joe found you. And those weapons they were carrying... They ain't like any ordinary weapons. And you mentioned a helicopter... Those men ain't hunters. No poachers I know of would carry such sophisticated weapons or ride helicopters to hunt 'gators." Masters' face took on a thoughtful expression. "They said they were Spectrum... But are they really?"

"I wouldn't know," Scarlet said, shaking his head.

"That doesn't make sense. They were at the *exact* location that guy at the New Orleans Spectrum office indicated. They *must* be Spectrum. But why would Spectrum kill my deputy – and try to kill me? But if they're not Spectrum, who could they be?"

"Sheriff, I..."

"And you?" Masters stared insistently into Scarlet's eyes. "They're *definitely* after you, of that I'm sure. Dead or alive, they want you. But for what reason? *Who* are you exactly?"

As Scarlet could only answer with a troubled silence, the sheriff slowly nodded his understanding. "You *genuinely* don't remember anything, do you?"

Scarlet shook his head. "I kept telling you that, Sheriff, but you didn't believe me. I can't remember a thing. I don't know who I am... even less who those men could be and what they want with me."

"Then Doc Evers must be right," Masters grumbled. "That thing in your head that looks like a bullet... That could be what's causing your amnesia."

He let go of Scarlet and the latter sighed deeply; in a way, he was relieved that the sheriff now seemed to believe at least this. However, he could see there was still some uncertainty in the other man's eyes.

"I'm... Truly, I'm sorry about your deputy, Sheriff."

"Save it. I'll have time to settle my scores with those murdering scum later. For now, I still have you to be concerned about. You're still the prime suspect in a murder, and you're still my prisoner."

"I *didn't* kill Joe Benson."

"It's not for me to decide, son."

Scarlet sighed again. "What do you intend to do now? We can't wait here until those murderers come and kill us."

"You're my responsibility, O'Hara. I certainly won't leave you to them, that's for sure. And I want to bring those bastards to justice for what they did to Mac." Masters grunted with anger. "I have to take you back to Les Arbrisseaux."

"How do you intend to do that?" Scarlet asked with a curious frown. "We can't use the road: the car is finished, and on foot, these guys would get us. They can't be all that far from us."

"That's true. And it would be too dangerous to trek through the woods to get back to town. We're deep into the bayou, and although I pretty much know my way around, there's no way I'm gonna drag a restrained prisoner in there with me. You're liable to slip into a swamp and drown there."

"Thanks for your solicitude, Sheriff," Scarlet commented dryly. "So, what are your plans, exactly? If we're stuck here..."

"We're not stuck. I drove the car here for a reason."

"That was on purpose?"

"I told you I know these parts well." The sheriff pointed to the small motorboat moored at the pier. "We'll use that. The river might be a little wild, but it's the safest way to town, considering the situation."

"And how do you propose to get the motor started?" Scarlet asked doubtfully. "You would need the key or something..."

"That's McCullen's boat. He fixed it so it the engine will start without a key." Masters grinned. "Everybody knows that, in this area."

Scarlet nodded thoughtfully. "What about those people who are waiting for me in town?" Masters stared at him anew, and he shook his head. "I heard you and your deputy earlier. I might be amnesiac, but I'm not stupid: you got me out of town in such secrecy to avoid the possibility of a lynch mob."

"Believe me, O'Hara – at the moment, the townsfolk are the least of your worries, with those murderers after your ass."

"Stop calling me that!" Scarlet snapped in annoyance. "That's not my name. My name is..." He stopped suddenly, as a violent headache hit him and he closed his eyes against the pain. The sheriff looked at him curiously.

"What is your name, then?" he asked.

There was a flash in Scarlet's mind, as the image of the same burly sergeant he had seen earlier returned to him – addressing him.

*"Come on, you Brit... I thought you were better than that! You'd better start meeting my expectations, 'cause you're not leaving this room until you get yourself out of these cuffs. Even if it takes you all night..."*

Scarlet opened his eyes as the image faded as quickly as it came. The headache was still there.

He felt frustrated.

"I still don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I don't remember that yet." He looked at the sheriff. "I think... I'm a soldier."

"Are you, now?" Masters said dryly. "Like those guys who killed Mac? Are they friends of yours?"

"No."

Scarlet's answer had been swift. The sheriff raised a curious brow. "So you remember that too?"

"No, I..." Scarlet stopped as a new image flashed into his mind. Not of the sergeant this time. But rather, of one of the men he had seen earlier on the road – the older man, who had talked to MacGibbons just before the deputy was shot, and whom the sheriff thought was the leader. In Scarlet's mind's eye, he was wearing the same outfit as when standing in the middle of the road, and was holding a handgun – that he discharged into a very young man, who fell at Scarlet's feet. The gun was then turned on Scarlet himself...

The image vanished. And this time, the headache with it.

"I *do* know them," Scarlet murmured.

"Why am I not surprised?" Masters grouched.

"... And they are no friends of mine," Scarlet added quickly.

"They... They tried to kill me..."

"Why?"

Scarlet shook his head, frowning as he tried to recall any other memories that had been escaping him. He could see nothing more. "I don't know, I..." Scarlet's words died on his lips as suddenly, something pricked his ear and he raised his head, listening carefully. The sheriff looked at him, a doubtful expression on his face.

"What is it, you're 'sensing' something again?"

The sarcasm in Masters' voice didn't escape Scarlet, but he chose to ignore it. "No, I... I heard something."

Masters looked around, a little nervously. He could see nothing out of the ordinary. "Can't be those guys already," he muttered. "They were on foot and –" Then he heard it and he froze; just over the sound of the violently rushing river behind them, he could perceive the sound of an engine in the distance, growing in intensity as it approached their position.

No. Not *one* engine, but many.

Very close, and drawing closer very fast.

"Maybe they're not on foot after all," Scarlet advised anxiously.

"Maybe you're right," Masters agreed. "We'd better get going."

He took his prisoner by the shoulder and pulled him towards the boat, only a few feet from them, while with his free hand, he released his gun from his holster. They had barely taken two steps when a loud cracking was heard. The bark of the tree in



front of which they both had been standing a second earlier exploded into splinters.

Scarlet, suddenly noticing a flash between the bushes, tackled the sheriff, accidentally making him lose hold of his gun, which flew out of reach. Both men hit the ground, into the ditch next to the pier, just as a new detonation was heard. A bullet whizzed by, just over their heads.

The engines were now roaring louder, and as they both looked over the ditch, the sheriff and his prisoner saw three ORVs emerging from behind the trees and leaping into the clearing, the boys riding them laughing with delight.

Masters muttered darkly, as he recognised the newcomers. "Gimme a break..." he said, glancing over the side of the ditch. "I don't believe it. It's Jasper Holland and his gang. I recognise them and their infernal machines."

"Hey, Sheriff!" That was the voice of Jasper, seemingly confirming Masters' statement. The call made both men prick up their ears. They noted that the sound of engines had stopped suddenly; there was little doubt that Jasper and his friends were just over there, watching and waiting for them. "What exactly happened with the car?" Jasper asked. "You had an accident?"

"You're telling me you don't know, Holland?" the sheriff barked in answer. "I bet you and your pals have been following us since we left town. So you already know what happened to us back there on the road. You probably saw everything!"

"We cut through the woods to catch up with you. So we have no idea what you're talking about."

"And I should believe you?"

"Where's MacGibbons? Is he still in the car? Is he hurt?"

"So now you care if someone is hurt, Holland?" Masters replied angrily. "After you took shots at us? What's the big idea, you stupid punk? I could have you arrested and thrown in jail for that, the whole lot of you!"

"We don't have anything against you, Sheriff. We just want your prisoner."

Masters' features became hard, as he glanced in Scarlet's direction; the latter was keeping quiet, and there was no expression visible on his face. He was simply listening carefully.

"And what exactly do you want with him?"

"You really have no idea?" Scarlet muttered darkly.

Masters ignored him. Partly, because he had figured out what it was that Holland and his band wanted, and also, because the young man was responding, with the exact answer he expected:

"We just want to give him the justice he deserves... for killing Ol' Joe."

Masters exchanged glances with Scarlet. "Since when do you care about justice?" he said, addressing Jasper anew.

"You killed Joe, you little bastard!" Scarlet shouted in frustration. "You just want to get rid of me because I witnessed the whole thing!"

"You would say that, wouldn't you, dirty liar!"

"Why, you bloody hypocrite..." Scarlet started with righteous anger.

Concerned that his prisoner would stand up, the sheriff put a calming hand on his shoulder. "I'm beginning to think you told me the truth all along," he said.

"You still had doubts, after the way they shot at us?" Scarlet replied between his teeth.

"Those slimeballs still haven't realised I'm not armed," Masters muttered. "Have to find my gun..."

He scanned the immediate area with his eyes, and raised himself a little too much to look over the side of the ditch; a new detonation resonated, and a bullet hit the ground right in front of him, making dirt and gravel fly right into his face. Temporarily blinded by the pain, the sheriff cursed loudly, and ducked back into the ditch. He fell right against Scarlet's chest.

"Sheriff, are you all right?"

For a few seconds, Masters remained motionless, eyes closed, his hand to his face, now covered with dirt and cuts, and grunting in pain. A concerned Scarlet, with his hands still restrained, tried his best to shoulder him up into a half-seated position. The fingers of his right hand grazed the silver star-badge pinned on the sheriff's chest.

Then the voice of the master sergeant boomed in his mind. *"A single pin"* it said. *"That's enough to get you free. It can be an hairpin, or come from a belt, a badge or a watch... Whatever you lay your hands on, however insignificant, use it. It could save your life."*

By instinct, Scarlet snatched the badge, and kept it hidden inside his closed fist. "Sheriff?" he asked insistently.

"I'm okay," Masters moaned. His hands left his face and he blinked a few times, trying to focus his vision as he searched around. "Where's that damned gun?"

Scarlet's eyes scanned the ground around them, in search of the missing weapon, when a clicking sound made both men freeze. Scarlet slowly turned his head.

Dallas Fenmore was standing just by the side of the river, not that far from the destroyed car, and was training the sheriff's gun on them. There was a large, evil smirk spread on his lips.

"Is this what you're looking for?" he asked, goading Masters into reacting.

Seeing the victorious expression on the boy's face, Masters went pale with anger and his mind became blank and oblivious of the surrounding danger. He sprang up to his feet. "Why you little \_"

He probably didn't even imagine that Fenmore would fire, that the boy probably only meant to intimidate him with the gun; unfortunately, he was wrong in his assumption. As for Scarlet, he realised instantly that the sheriff had inadvertently presented himself as an easy target; at the same moment, he saw Dallas' finger squeeze the trigger, and heard the deafening crack of the gun. The projectile struck Masters violently in the chest, thrusting him backwards. A grunt escaped the sheriff's lips as he staggered back. Before Scarlet's horrified eyes, he tumbled into the river behind him. The water momentarily closed on the man.

"Sheriff!" Scarlet watched helplessly as Masters' body reappeared on the surface of the water, floating on his back, his face contorted with pain. The violent current was now pulling him down river, and he was already far out of reach. Scarlet swallowed hard, and then heard the new click from the gun held by Fenmore, and the smell of smoke emanating from its muzzle. Distracted by the sheriff's fall, he had taken little notice as the young man had approached him.

"We have him!" Dallas shouted triumphantly to his accomplices.

Scarlet reacted instantly. The careless boy was standing too close to him, making him open to a surprise attack; Scarlet applied a lock to Dallas' legs with one of his feet and violently kicked the young man's legs with the other. Dallas gave a cry of pain as he felt the violent impact against his knee; he lost his balance, falling onto his back, the gun escaping his grasp to fall into the river.

Scarlet's victory was short-lived. Still restrained by the handcuffs and helpless to defend himself, he saw the other members of the gang rushing to him and surrounding him. Shouting insults, Scarecrow brutally hit him on the head with the butt of his rifle, half-stunning him and sending him sprawling on the muddy ground. He received a vicious kick in the side from another of the boys; he doubled over, in an attempt to protect himself the best he could against the blows that rained down on him.

Dallas was already back on his feet and joining his companions, started to kick Scarlet angrily.

"*That's* for throwing me in the mud, bastard!" he spat. "And that," he added with a new kick, "is for that punch you gave me at Joe's!"

From the ground, Scarlet could see Jasper Holland, keeping away from the action. For a brief moment, the two met gazes, and Jasper's eyes burned with a dangerous glare.

"Johnny." Jasper gave a curt nod to the boy who stood beside him. Johnny Monroe visibly jumped at the mention of his name and turned to his leader with uncertainty. "Go get the rope," Jasper told him in a cold voice.

"Oh, geez, Jasper..." Hesitantly, Johnny's eyes scanned the surface of the river for the floating body of the sheriff. He couldn't find it, so he turned to Jasper, who was looking down in contempt at the groaning man at their feet. "Did Dallas have to shoot the sheriff? You know that could get us in a lot of trouble..."

"You knew the plan," Jasper replied crisply. "The sheriff was in our way, we had to get rid of him. Now he's dead."

"... Killed with his own gun," Dallas said triumphantly. "So even if his body is found down river, they'll all think that his prisoner took the gun from him and shot him with it, to try and escape. That's perfect!"

"And there'll be nobody else to tell to the contrary," Jasper approved.

"What about MacGibbons?" Johnny asked, looking around with concern, as if expecting the deputy sheriff to appear from behind a tree. "I saw him getting in the car in town... He should be here. Where could he be?"

"There's no trace of him," Jamie Lewis replied, shrugging. "Not in the car, and apparently not around anywhere."

"Well, he probably only helped the sheriff get this guy in the car, before leaving for Baton Rouge," Jasper remarked. "Remember what Billy Ray told Dallas... He was going there anyway..."

"I saw him getting in the car," Johnny insisted.

"Then maybe Masters dropped him at the bus stop, or somewhere else," Jasper snapped. "You didn't keep your eyes on the car all the time, did you?"

Johnny hesitated. "Well no... I only watched as it left the station."

Jasper narrowed his eyes at him. "What's the matter, Johnny? You getting cold feet now, or what, so close to success? You know the plan... Get the damned rope."

Johnny nodded nervously, and left Jasper's side to head towards the ORVs waiting nearby.

"You stupid kids..." Scarlet groaned from the ground. "You know *nothing* about what's going on."

"Shut up, you bastard!" A new kick from Dallas hit Scarlet in the side and he grunted in pain; his right fist closed around the badge he was holding in the palm of his hand.

*"Come on, Brit, use it!"* the voice of the master sergeant rang in his head. *"What're you waiting for? You practiced it. You know you can do it!"*

Keeping the object unseen from his assailants, he pulled on the long pin, and inserted it into the lock of the shackle restraining his left hand, moving it around. He was amazed at his own expertise, at how easy and natural it seemed to be.

... And he was even more surprised to hear a faint clicking sound coming from inside the lock, and to feel the cuff loosening around his left wrist.

Something heavily fell onto his shoulders; as he realised it was a thick rope, he felt it swiftly tightening around his neck, and a sudden jerk pulled him onto his knees. He instinctively took a deep gasp of air, and kept very still, as Dallas Fenmore leaned by the left side of his head, holding the rope tight against the nape of his neck, and callously sneering into his ear: "Now who's stupid, jerk? Us... or you, who's about to dance for us?"

Scarlet's eyes opened wide with shock, as he realised what the boys were planning for him. plan; it was pure reflex from his part that he instantly freed his left hand from the shackle holding it to reach for the noose around his neck. He was able to insert two fingers between the rope rubbing against his skin in an attempt to loosen it, but it was already too late.

There was the deafening sound of an ORV's engine starting nearby, and then he was forcibly pulled to his feet, the rope tightening even more closely around his neck, squeezing his throat uncomfortably, as it gave an upwards jerk. He gasped again for air, and his other hand flew up, desperately grabbing the noose as well; a fraction of a second later, his feet left the ground, and he felt himself hauled up into the air.

He heard the audible crack of the two fingers stuck between the rope and his neck as they broke under the violent tug, and felt the pain reverberating through his whole hand. But that was nothing compared to the awful sensation of suffocating, as he hung in the air, with his feet dangling about four or five feet above the ground.

His teeth clenched, gasping and grunting, Scarlet struggled desperately to free himself. Just at the limit of his vision, he could see Jamie Lewis, seated on his ORV, looking over his shoulder, gloating cruelly. Scarlet barely registered that the engine had been turned off, but he noticed the end of a rope tied to the frame of the machine. He didn't need to look up to know that the other end of the lasso from which he was hanging had been flung over a sturdy branch of the huge tree extending its shadow over them.

Scarlet looked down with shock and disgust at the band of young men reunited underneath him, and looking up smugly at him.

They were all taking a sick pleasure in watching him die.  
And he just *knew* it would be a very slow and painful death.

\* \* \*

After a few minutes' walk through the wood, Rhapsody found herself by the river, and for a minute or two, she followed it upstream, guided by the clamour she could hear coming from close by. She came to the side of a ditch by the river bank, and nearly fell into it. Sliding down carefully into that ditch, she walked a few hundreds of meters, to discover the car she had seen racing along the road earlier, its front crushed against the trunk of a large tree. The doors were open, and from where she was standing, there didn't seem to be anyone inside the vehicle. On the other side of the crashed car, on the raging river, she could see a wooden pier, to which a motor boat was secured.

The tumult she had been hearing up until now was now much closer and clearer; and to her expert ears, it sounded like a fight or something similar was raging. It was coming from over the side of the ditch, just over her head.

The distinctive sound of an OVR's engine roaring into life almost deafened her; it was now barely covered by happy yells and bawls of laughter. She wondered exactly what could be going on. Silently, she moved around the car, and crawled up the steep side of the gully to risk a peek.

She nearly tumbled down the whole distance she had climbed at the scene that appeared before her eyes.

Captain Scarlet was hanging by his neck from the branch of a tree, gasping in desperate need of air, and was vainly struggling to release himself from the noose strangling him, while a group of young men, none of them apparently older than twenty years of age, were watching the show with obvious delight, laughing loudly and mocking him. The other end of the lasso was tied to the baggage holder of the only OVR to still have its engine running. Its driver, turning the ignition off, sat backwards on the seat, to join his cruel teasing to that of his companions, while they goaded their helpless victim to try and free himself.

For a few seconds, Rhapsody felt rooted into place, in complete shock, wondering how in Heaven's name her colleague could have found himself in such a precarious situation.

She quickly got over it, and her resolve was immediate; she had to do something fast. No matter how indestructible Captain Scarlet might be, she could imagine very easily how unpleasant

this could be for him. He was slowly choking – his face was already turning red – and it wouldn't be too long before he died, strangled by his own weight.

She looked around in desperation, searching for a way to effectively come to his aid.

Then her eyes lightened with an ominous glow; the trunk of the car, next to which she was lying, had been forced open by its earlier impact against the tree, and at the bottom of it, she could see *exactly* what she needed to execute her rescue operation.

She didn't hesitate one second more.

\* \* \*

"Have you ever heard of Jim Riley?"

Realising that his thrashing was doing nothing more than making his situation worse, Captain Scarlet had minimised his movements. His free right hand was now clutching the rope just over his head, in a desperate attempt to support his weight. The broken fingers of his left hand were still stuck in the noose around his neck, but they offered only the slightest reprieve; he couldn't use them to loosen the lasso's deadly grip. Half-conscious, unable to talk, he could only offer a strangled grunt and a murderous glare at Jasper Holland, who was quietly pacing below him.

Jasper shook his head and gave a dismissive shrug. "Of course you wouldn't know him... You're not from around here. Well, I'll be nice and tell you, then. Jim Riley robbed a bank, quite a few years ago. That wasn't a nice robbery and it didn't go very well."

"Riley killed a security guard," Dallas then added. "And a young woman who was working at the bank. However, he was able to escape. He tried to find a hiding place in Devil's Bayou, while waiting for the authorities to stop looking for him. But here's the catch: they say that Riley got away with a small fortune."

Jasper nodded approvingly. "We don't know exactly how much, but it was enough to make anyone dream of a better life. People around these parts are not very rich, so there was a *huge* manhunt to try to find Riley and his booty." The boy stopped pacing and stood in front of Scarlet. "The money was never found, they say. But Riley – they found him, all right. About two, three months later. Hanged from an oak tree, deep in the bayou. Apparently, he had been hanging there for weeks, before he was found. He didn't look too good by then, with the heat, and the rain... Smelled pretty bad too, according to those who found him. They never learned who did that to him." He grinned

mischievously. "And before you ask, we had nothing to do with it. That was *years* ago. We were *too young* at the time. But let's say that... it was an inspiration."

Jamie cackled from his seat. "When they find *you*, they'll wonder if, by any chance, after all these years, Riley's killer is not still roaming the Bayou. You know, giving his own brand of justice to criminals who dare come onto his turf? People'll get scared, and will think there's some kind of a *ghost* around here. We'll have given birth to a new legend in this area. The 'Ghost of Devil's Bayou'. Now that's a nice ring to it, ain't it? And there ain't nobody who would suspect we were behind it!"

"How the devil did he get himself out of these cuffs?" Dallas suddenly asked with obvious surprise – and something like admiration.

Jasper looked down on the ground, just under Scarlet's dangling feet; he saw a glint in the mud. "With this, maybe?" He crouched down and picked up the star-shaped sheriff badge that Scarlet had dropped just before being hauled up. The boy chuckled loudly. "Well, look at that, guys! You wanna bet he picked the lock with this? You gotta be pretty slick to be able to do a thing like that!"

"Nah, that ain't possible," Dallas said with a shake of his head. "Gotta be the sheriff who freed him before I shot him."

"What does it matter?" Jamie replied with an evil smile. "That won't save him none. He'll be dead soon."

"But why is it taking so long?" Scarecrow asked with a sigh, as Scarlet's struggles for breath grew weaker. "Shouldn't he be, like, dead already?"

"I'm afraid none of us is good at hanging people," Jasper said with a shrug. "I heard that if the neck doesn't break right away, and the noose is not done right, it could take some time. That's too bad for our friend."

Jamie cackled sadistically from his seat. "We're not in any hurry anyway, are we?"

"Who wanna to place bets on how long he'll last before croaking?" Dallas asked excitedly.

Jasper's cruel smile widened. "There's only one bet I wanna place," he said in a cold voice. "It's whether he'll return from the dead or not after this one. My bet is... if we leave him hanging to dry indefinitely, he *won't*."

There were laughs of approval following his heartless statement, and the boys started placing their bets.

A loud explosion coming from behind interrupted them; startled, they jumped, and turned on their heels.

Standing just by the side of the ditch, in front of the open truck of the damaged police car, they saw a red-haired woman,



dressed in dirty white pants and undershirt, and holding a shotgun that was still smoking. She was hurriedly pumping the weapon, before training it on them, her eyes glaring with a cold anger.

"Release him!" she shouted in a strong, commanding voice. "Right now!"

"Hey! Who's the chick and where's she come from?" asked the surprised Dallas.

The boy didn't sound suitably impressed by the powerful gun she was holding, so Rhapsody turned her newly acquired weapon on him. "The 'chick' is going to blow your head off your shoulders if you don't obey her right now!" she promised. "I said: release him at once!"

"Lady, you don't know what you're asking." Jasper took a step forward, but he stopped almost right away, when Rhapsody aimed the huge barrel straight at him. He smiled sheepishly. "This guy's a criminal... A killer."

"A freak," Jamie added with contempt.

Rhapsody's mind registered the last epithet, but thought now was not the time to elaborate on this particular subject. "And I suppose you're all law-abiding citizens only making sure that justice is served, right?"

A cold smile appeared on Jasper's lips. "Why, how did you guess that, hon?"

Disgust filled Rhapsody at the callousness she could hear in his reply. It was obvious he had no intention of obeying her; none of them was moving. They were standing there, watching her, waiting – probably patiently biding their time until their victim choked to death, and it would be too late to save him. She glanced up at Scarlet who was gasping for air, and she saw the panic and despair in his wide-open blue eyes; he was looking straight at her, pleadingly. His right hand, clutching the rope, was losing its grip; his strength was obviously abandoning him.

"Pl-please..." he gasped, managing somehow to force his strangled voice through his compressed throat. "H-help me... I can't... hold..."

His hand slipped from the rope.

Rhapsody barely hesitated; with determination, she raised the shotgun. Scarlet's eyes grew wider still when he saw the barrel seemingly directed at him for that fraction of a second before the weapon thundered. Fire spat from the muzzle.

The rope and the branch a few inches over Scarlet's head exploded in splinters; the noose loosened instantly, and Scarlet was brutally released from its deadly hold. He saw the ground rushing to him, as he fell the short distance, and he landed

roughly, with a strangled huff. He lay there, coughing, thoroughly dazed, barely able to move, and moaning miserably.

The members of the gang were stunned with surprise, looking from their potential victim to the woman who had just saved him from his fate, and back again. Jasper's face became white as a sheet. He turned angry eyes in Rhapsody's direction, as the latter, with exaggerated coolness, was pumping the gun again, before pointing it back in their general direction.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Jasper yelled in frustration. He took a step forward, but, like before, stopped right away, when he found the shotgun aimed directly at him.

"Now you know I can shoot straight!" Rhapsody said warningly. "You had all better keep your distance... or else!"

"You can't expect to stop *all* of us," Dallas replied defiantly. "Not with that gun. You wouldn't be fast enough."

Rhapsody's eyes flashed angrily. "Perhaps not all, but I will have plenty of time to blow the head off at least one of you – perhaps even two. Now I'm sure you don't want to find out which will be the lucky candidates."

She caught sight of Jasper Holland looking all around, as if in search of something, and then noticed the rifle resting against the side of an ORV. "Don't *even* think about getting that weapon, buster," she warned him specifically. "That would be a huge mistake!"

"Frankly, lady, would you *really* shoot at one of us?" Jasper goaded her. "You don't look like the killer type."

"Do you *really* want to find out?" Rhapsody replied with cold aplomb. "You'd better not try me. You'd be the first to learn how wrong you can be! Now back off! All of you!"

Glaring ominously at her, the boys stepped back, hesitantly; Jasper hurriedly joined his companions, as he suddenly realised this woman wasn't kidding around and would not hesitate one minute to use the gun to inflict some serious damage. Rhapsody carefully stepped forward, keeping her gun trained on the gang, and reached Scarlet, who was still sprawled on the ground, gasping and coughing, and trying to pull himself together. He managed to get up on his hands and knees and to raise an unsteady hand to remove from around his neck the unpleasant lasso which had almost choked him to death. He let it fall onto the ground.

"Are you all right?" Rhapsody asked him, not letting the gang out of her sight. When he failed to answer her question, she frowned, and looked down at him with a brief, but worried glance. "Captain? Will you be okay?"

Scarlet didn't quite register the way the young woman addressed him; at this moment, he wasn't feeling on top of things. His head was so heavy, it was difficult to think, and his throat was hurting like hell; he could feel something salty running into his mouth. He recognised the taste and he tiredly wiped his hand under his nose before looking at it. His fingers were covered with blood.

His nose was bleeding again. Then he felt the beginning of one of those awful headaches.

"I don't feel so good," he croaked. He looked up at Rhapsody, pleadingly. He frowned as he scrutinized her. Somehow, this young woman, still very attractive despite her sorry attire, looked vaguely familiar to him. But he really couldn't recall from where he could have known her.

Seeing Captain Scarlet so shaken and weak, Rhapsody felt a twinge to her heart. Her anger grew, and she glared with deep contempt at the gang standing in front of her.

"Don't worry. I'm getting you away from here," she promised her colleague. "You'll feel much better in a while."

Jasper was looking straight at her, his eyes narrowed to slits. He chuckled evilly. "And how d'you suppose you will do that, girlie? The car's finished... And I can't quite see you riding one of our machines with him hanging on to you. He doesn't seem in any state for that."

Rhapsody didn't have time to ponder this. Scarlet painfully cleared his throat, and gestured in a vague direction towards the river. "The sheriff... he wanted to take the boat... to go back to town."

"Yeah," Jamie suddenly lashed out, "and that's why you killed him, isn't it? You just *knew* what would happen to you if you were to return to town!"

"Shut up, you," Rhapsody snapped instantly at him.

"He's a freak, lady," Jamie continued. "A murderer! He killed an old man in the bayou... And just now, he murdered the sheriff. Right in front of our eyes!"

"That's right, we saw him," Dallas added quickly.

Rhapsody wasn't in the least impressed by these allegations. If they were true – and she had her doubts about that, considering the accusers – then she was sure that Scarlet had had very good reasons for killing whoever these boys said he had killed.

"I'll wait to hear what he has to say before passing judgment," she replied.

"You know him, don't you?" Jasper said, his eyes still narrowed at her.

Rhapsody didn't answer this question – which sounded more like an accusation than anything else. She had other things on her mind. Scarlet had just fallen flat back on the ground, with a loud moan, having visibly used up all of his remaining strength. He wouldn't be able to move without outside help. She scanned the gang with her eyes; one of the boys seemed especially afraid of her, judging by the way he avoided meeting her eyes or even looking down at Scarlet; he seemed to find more interest in looking at his dirty shoes. He had a dressing around one of his wrists. To all appearances, this boy was the least dangerous of the lot.

"You!" Rhapsody called loudly. "The one in the blue shirt." He was the only one wearing a blue shirt, and hearing himself addressed so directly nearly made him jump out of his skin. He looked up at the woman, his eyes trembling with concern. She nodded in the direction of Scarlet. "You will help him."

"M-me?" Johnny Monroe asked in a stutter, turning very pale. "But... I'm hurt, and..."

"So is he," Rhapsody replied sharply. "Get him up." She moved slightly to the side, and gave another curt nod in the direction of the nearby wooden pier, where the motorboat she had seen earlier was moored. "Help him into the boat. But be careful," she added, as Johnny stepped forwards, and her warning made him stop momentarily. "Make sure you stay between him and the gun. If you even *think* of using him as a shield..."

She let the rest of the threat hang. In any case, Johnny didn't need further warning; he got the message perfectly right. As he tentatively moved towards the still half-stunned Scarlet and leaned over him, Rhapsody kept a careful eye on him, but left the gun trained on the other boys.

"The rest of you, back off," she ordered sternly. They didn't dare to argue and stepped back; Jasper Holland was glaring at her.

Johnny pulled Scarlet up; still conscious, but weakened by his experience, and with his head now pounding furiously, the Spectrum captain had trouble staying on his feet, so the boy needed to make a considerable effort to drag the larger man's powerful frame to the motorboat. When they finally reached it, despite Johnny's carefulness – the boy was undoubtedly terrified of Rhapsody's gun – Scarlet dropped heavily into the boat and emitted a groan before falling completely silent. He remained motionless, with his eyes closed. With some apprehension, Johnny looked at Rhapsody over his shoulder.

"I think he passed out," he announced nervously.

Rhapsody received the news with the same coldness she had affected since the moment she confronted the gang. "Go back to join your chums."

Johnny obeyed, hurriedly leaving the boat. Rhapsody, her eyes and gun always set on the band, backed away slowly towards the boat. Jasper was still glowering furiously at the Angel pilot, who recognised murder in his eyes; she recognised him as the leader, and by far, he looked like the most dangerous of the gang.

"You *do* know him," he said with certainty. "I've noticed – you speak funny too."

"I speak funny?" Rhapsody gave a scoff. "That's rich, coming from the likes of you."

"Say, you're right, Jasper," Scarecrow then said in turn. "And she's a stranger to these parts too... It can't be coincidence!"

"Probably he's her boyfriend," Dallas said with a half-felt snigger. He was worried by the big gun Rhapsody was still training on all of them.

"Maybe she's a freak like him," Jamie moved on.

"Stop calling him a freak," Rhapsody said curtly. She wondered exactly what these boys could have witnessed. She would have time to ask Scarlet later. She stepped into the boat, and carefully moved around her colleague.

"Who are you and where do you come from, the both of you?" Jasper demanded.

"I don't think that's any of your business, boy," Rhapsody replied coldly.

"I'll make it my business, *girl*," he answered between his teeth. "Nobody ain't me without paying the price. You don't know it yet, but you are making a *big* mistake."

"I've made many mistakes in my life, and I've learned to live with all of them," Rhapsody answered coldly. "Maybe you should learn to live with yours. Because crossing *me* is certainly a big one, *boy*." Her gun always aimed at the group, she removed the mooring rope with one hand, and backed one step further towards the boat controls. She turned the contact and felt gratified – and relieved – hearing the soft rumbling of the engine.

Jasper shook his head slowly, his eyes not leaving Rhapsody. "You think you will be able to get away with it? You are deluding yourself, hon. Your boyfriend – he's wanted by the law for Old Joe's murder. And now that he's killed the sheriff, you can't go back to town. You'll be torn apart as soon as you get there."

"And you won't get far with *that* boat," Dallas added.

"You might be right, but I'll wager we'll get further than you will." With these calm words, Rhapsody took aim, turning the gun in the direction of the ORV Jamie Lewis was still sitting on. He paled and jumped hurriedly off his seat. His companions scattered, as if terrified she would shoot them in cold blood.

Rhapsody pulled the trigger, and the powerful gun thundered. The projectile hit the ORV that Jamie had just vacated, hitting the tank. There was an explosion of flames, and debris flew into the air in all directions. Before the fleeing and stunned boys could react, Rhapsody had pumped the gun, and was now firing on the second ORV, effectively destroying the whole front. She discharged the gun a last time on the third and last vehicle, and the force of the impact sent it rolling down into the ditch.

The five boys looked with astonishment at their destroyed vehicles, and Rhapsody took advantage of their shock to finally put the gun down and take the helm of the boat. She opened the throttles to their fullest, and the boat jumped forward, onto the river and away from the pier.

"That crazy bitch!" An infuriated Jamie Lewis ran to the pier, followed closely by Jasper and the rest of the gang, and he shook his fist at the departing boat. "You destroyed my bike! I'll get you for this, girl! You'll pay with interest, I swear!"

Jasper Holland had picked up his rifle, which had been thrown on the ground after the second ORV had been destroyed. It was still working, and so, taking aim, he fired one shot at the boat racing upstream. But it was already too far away, and the projectile flew harmlessly wide.

"Dammit!" Jasper muttered, lowering the gun. He gave a wild kick to the nearest, destroyed ORV. "I won't let them get away with this!"

"She destroyed our bikes," Johnny moaned. "What will we do now?"

"Stop snivelling, you sissy!" Dallas Fenmore snapped at him. "It's your fault they got away!"

"My fault?!"

"If you had not done what she asked..."

"Hey, the girl had a gun, remember?"

"You didn't have to be so compliant," Jamie added in turn.

"I don't remember any of yous trying to stop her!"

"That's enough!" Jasper shouted at all of them. He looked on as the boat disappeared from their view at a turn of the river. His jaws were still clenched in anger, but he was slightly more composed, already planning what needed to be done. "They're not going to town," he noticed.

"Yeah, well, she's not from around here," Jamie said. "She probably doesn't know what direction to take."

"Or they simply don't wanna go to town," Dallas added. "This guy can't show his face there... Not without the sheriff."

"You think he's dead?" Johnny asked. "The sheriff, I mean..."

"Of course, he's dead," Jasper snapped. "He can't have survived a bullet in the chest and a dive in the river."

"But if his body's found..." insisted Johnny.

"It's like we said. They'll think the stranger killed him," Jasper said.

Jamie frowned at this. "But if the guy talks... or the girl?"

"You think anyone will believe them?" Jasper remarked. "The freak's already got a murder rap on him." He looked again in the direction in which the boat had disappeared, narrowing his eyes. "But anyway, we can't take any chances. They won't get very far with that boat. We gotta find them and get rid of them quickly. Before they talk to anyone who *might* listen to them."

"And how are we going to do that?" asked Dallas. "We don't have any weapons – except your rifle. We need more."

"We're not that far from McCullen's house," Jamie then suggested. "We can find what we need there. McCullen's got a nice collection of hunting weapons. And he's away from his home these days."

"Then let's go," Jasper said coldly. "And then let's quickly hunt those two down. We're too close to success now, after all this time working so hard, and finally getting rid of Joe. We won't let these two strangers get in our way." His eyes became ominously cold. "They have to disappear – without nobody finding any trace of 'em."

## CHAPTER 7

The last words that Rhapsody heard from the boys proved prophetic. Barely twenty minutes after the boat had left dock, she heard distressing spitting sounds coming from the engine. She steered the boat towards the embankment; wisely, she chose the other side of the river, to make sure neither the Mysteronised commando nor the murdering band of young creeps they had just escaped from would catch them unaware. She piloted the boat behind thick bushes, making sure they were invisible from either banks or water.

After killing the engine, Rhapsody scrutinised the area and listened carefully; all she was hearing were sounds of nature: the wild current of the river, birds chirping, wind blowing between trees. No engine noises could be heard, either from boat or land vehicle, nor voices – or even crackling from firing weapons. Ten minutes earlier, they had passed under a wooden bridge, which seemed to mark the limit of human civilisation. Now only the wild surrounded them, as they had returned nearly as deep into the woods as they had been at the start of their mission.

Although they were a long way from being able to contact base and ask for help, Rhapsody reflected that being away from any living soul was, for the moment, the best way for them to keep safe. She decided it should stay that way until she knew from her compatriot exactly what their situation was with the inhabitants of this area.

Rhapsody carefully moored the boat to a thick root emerging from the surface of the water. She then checked for the problem with the engine. She quickly discovered that the tank was almost empty; the boys probably knew that fact for some reason – perhaps they used this boat on a regular basis. They certainly had been right in saying it wouldn't go far. She estimated there was about five minutes of fuel left in the tank; ten, if she was optimistic.

She searched the various compartments of the small boat; there was little of much use. A small toolbox, half-empty, offered very little help. Another small box was stacked under her bench and she opened it to examine the contents. She found a razor-sharp knife in its leather sheath, probably used to gut fish. The sheath was attached to a crude piece of rope, long and sturdy enough so that it could serve as a shoulder strap, so she slung it across her shoulder. There also was a paper map of the area, well protected in a plastic bag. She partially unfolded the map and glanced at it quickly, before deciding that it was also worth



keeping, and put it back into its pouch and then into the large pocket of her trouser. Also underneath the same bench, she found a flask full of water, and she took a large gulp of it, before choking in disgust; the water was warm and bland. She put it aside and, searching further, found a single fuel can. Hope flared up in her heart, but quickly died out when she opened it: it was dry empty. In frustration, she almost threw it overboard, but stopped herself just in time.

The last thing she examined was the shotgun that had served her so well up until now; unfortunately, there was only one projectile left in it. She put it back in the bottom of the boat, chewing on her bottom lip.

*Why couldn't we have it easy for a change?* she asked herself. There was no oar in the boat – and even if there had been any, she knew they would not have done her any good; she wasn't enough of an expert to be able to row into the wild currents of this river. And she doubted that Captain Scarlet would be that much good at it either.

She gave one glance at her companion, who lay on his back at the other end of the boat, his head at a crooked, apparently uncomfortable, angle. He had not regained consciousness since he had fallen there, and that was starting to worry her. She carefully moved towards him and crouched by his side. His eyes were closed and he was breathing regularly; he seemed so peaceful, more like he was sleeping rather than being unconscious. Rhapsody noticed the handcuff hanging loosely from his right wrist, as well as the length of chain hanging loosely around his waist. She frowned, wondering what exactly could have happened to him since the moment they had parted. He was wearing civilian clothing, instead of his camouflage uniform, except for his boots – which, she noticed straight away, were not Spectrum issue. The jeans were worn and faded, and that hideous black and red chequered shirt he wore was dirty and torn in places.

At first glance, he didn't look like he was injured; the collar of his shirt was currently hiding his neck, where Rhapsody had seen an ugly reddish bruise earlier on. She reached with her hand, with the intention of pushing the collar aside to get a peek.

Scarlet suddenly opened his eyes; with lightning reflexes, his hand caught her wrist, as he recoiled from her; he was visibly startled, and was watching her with widened, wary eyes. Rhapsody blinked at his uncharacteristic reaction; he was holding her so tight, he was hurting her. She presented her free hand in a calming gesture.

"Hey, take it easy. It's only me. You know I'm not going to hurt you." She saw the expression in his eyes change, as he

apparently recognised her. She offered a reassuring smile. "I only meant to check you out."

Scarlet had recognised in the shadow leaning over him the beautiful young woman who had saved him from Jasper and his gang. Certainly, he imagined, after such a feat, she couldn't be a threat to him; beside, that smile of hers was as reassuring as can be. He let go of her wrist, and she grimaced a thankful smile, while reaching for it with her other hand to rub it.

"You've got quite a grip," she said with just a note of reproach in her voice. He felt contrite, but didn't have time to apologise, as she approached him, and her hand reached once more to his neck. "Now, hold still, please." He let her examine him, watching her closely, as her fingers gently stroked his skin. He first noticed the concern on her face, which then gradually morphed into an expression of wonder.

"It's already gone," she commented. Scarlet gave her an enquiring look and she explained: "That rope burn you had, only a couple of minutes ago. It's completely faded – without a single trace."

His hand reached up and rubbed his neck; he didn't feel any bruises under his fingers; she was right.

And more... His two broken fingers seemed to be healing as well; they were still red and swollen, but he could move them.

He couldn't help a shiver going through him, concerned that witnessing this strange phenomenon might distress her in some way. However, he saw neither apprehension nor distrust in her beautiful features. That gave him some assurance, and he slowly pushed himself into a seated position.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better," Scarlet answered. He was surprised that his voice sounded this good, after his throat had nearly been crushed so brutally. However, it was dry as sandpaper. "Thirsty, though..."

He saw the young woman take an old leather flask from the floor of the boat; she presented it to him, removing the plug. "I found this. We're in luck; it's full of more-or-less fresh water. Well, it's drinkable, anyway."

Scarlet nodded his thanks, took the flask with both hands and drank greedily. The water was stale, and not very cold, but as she had said, it was drinkable, and it did his sore throat a lot of good.

"Take it easy," the young woman advised. "Between the two of us, we have to make it last. We don't know how long we'll be stuck in this swamp, and I'm not quite sure we'll find water we'll be able to drink in this area."

Scarlet lowered the flask and handed it back to her.

"Thanks," he said, "for saving me from those vultures."

She shook her head, while pushing the plug into the flask, before putting it down against one of her feet. "What else could I have done? I couldn't very well leave you with that rope around your neck, could I? That didn't look very comfortable."

Scarlet smiled weakly, and passed his finger round inside his collar, making the handcuff attached to his wrist jingle. "No, it certainly wasn't."

"Here," she offered, pointing to the shackle. "Let me get this off you."

Scarlet glanced at the handcuff, then back at the young woman; he marked a second's hesitation, before presenting his hand to her, a little uncertainly, wondering why it didn't seem to alarm her. He watched as she took a pin from her hair, untwisted it and inserted one end of it into the lock. He looked, mystified, as she expertly moved it around, and then he heard a faint but very distinct click. The metal band opened around his wrist and she delicately removed it.

She had done it even faster than he had done it himself with the other wrist.

"That's quite a skill you have there," he said matter-of-factly.

Rhapsody stared at him, wondering if by any chance it was the first time he had witnessed her pick a lock; she couldn't recall having done it in front of him before, so she shrugged dismissively.

"How did you come to wearing these?" she asked, showing him the handcuffs. "They are obviously police-issue."

She saw Scarlet hesitate. "The sheriff of Les Arbrisseaux... he arrested me," he confided.

Rhapsody nodded, recalling: "Those boys said you killed him – the sheriff. Is it true?"

Scarlet frowned. "No, I did not." She had asked that question, in such an oddly natural voice; again, she didn't seem concerned. For all she knew, he could be a very dangerous murderer. He found it curious – and even a little disturbing.

"Why did he arrest you?" she persisted.

Scarlet hesitated again. "It's rather a complicated story."

She sat on her heels. "I'm listening."

"Well... It's more than likely that I *did* look guilty in the sheriff's eyes," he confessed clumsily, "considering the events, and the boys' accusations..." Seeing his companion's inquiring look, he explained awkwardly: "they told him I had killed Old Joe Benson."

Rhapsody, of course, had no idea of whom he was talking. "Who is – or rather was – this Joe Benson?"

"An old man... who lived alone in the swamp. I don't know that much about him, frankly. Except that he found me, when I was injured – and that he took me to his cabin, and took care of me. He told me he saw me falling from a helicopter."

Rhapsody nodded once more, thoughtfully. So this was the reason why neither Montgomery's commandos nor herself had found Scarlet where they knew he was supposed to be after that terrible fall. This Joe Benson had beaten them to him and had taken him away. That explained the traces they had seen. "And did you kill *him*?" she asked.

"No, of course I didn't!" he vehemently protested. Rhapsody noted that he sounded irritated by such an assumption – which, from her point of view, was a natural one – and she wondered why exactly. He gave a low snort. "*They* did – the boys. Jasper – the leader – he shot Joe with his own shotgun. I saw the whole thing."

"They shot him in front of you?"

"They didn't know I was there at the time. But when they realised it... they decided to pin the murder on me."

Scarlet noticed the strange way the young woman was now looking at him. He thought he saw scepticism in her eyes, as she thoughtfully stroked her chin. He frowned with exasperation. "You don't believe me."

"It's not that." Rhapsody wondered why Scarlet seemed so on edge. He was on the defensive, appeared wary of her. That wasn't like him at all.

"I can see you're unsure," he moved on. "Why would have I killed Joe, to begin with? I couldn't do such a thing! The man took care of my injuries."

Rhapsody sighed. "Look, it's not that I don't believe you... Excuse me, but you have to admit it could be possible. This Joe could have been a Mysteron, for all I know. You would then have had cause to kill him."

The word 'Mysteron' piqued Scarlet's curiosity. He had no idea who or what a 'Mysteron' could be, but he had heard the word before. It was MacGibbons who had pronounced it, just a few minutes before those strangers, who claimed to be Spectrum, had killed him.

He didn't know why, but hearing that word again was making him feel very uneasy.

"Mysteron?" he repeated, watching the woman closely – and even a little suspiciously – watching for any reaction she might have.

"Yes... And the same goes for the sheriff, as a matter of fact. That would explain why he arrested you in the first place... and chose not to believe you. He could have been a Mysteron as well."

Rhapsody noticed the odd way Scarlet was now looking at her. It was beyond being wary; she could read distrust in his eyes, and she couldn't understand why. Maybe he was thinking *she* might be a Mysteron?

She sighed again. "Look, this is all so confusing. I feel like I've stumbled right into the middle of a film. I'm really having trouble following your story. And I *really* can't work out why the sheriff would believe those boys over you."

"Is it so surprising?" he replied. "I'm a stranger in these parts, with no identification... Those boys are from around here. That said, the sheriff did say they were usually bad news."

Rhapsody shook her head. "Maybe you didn't have your I.D., but still, didn't you try to explain to the sheriff *who* you were?"

Scarlet quivered at her words. "Who I am?"

"Why, yes. Once he had realised who you were, the sheriff would probably have acted differently towards you. All he needed to do was to check you out with a Spectrum office –"

This time, Scarlet tensed, staring intensely at his companion, and interrupted her in mid-sentence: "Spectrum?"

She frowned, surprised by his reaction. "Captain... Are you sure you're feeling better?"

"I am wondering that," he answered truthfully. He ruffled his hair, trying to make sense of her words, and then, suddenly realising something, he stared straight at her. "You called me 'Captain'."

"Yes..." she answered, visibly uncertain what he was driving at.

"And I think... you called me that, when you came to my rescue earlier."

That was more a statement than a question. Rhapsody was now totally perplexed. "Well, what should I call you?" she asked. "We're on assignment. I think I should address you formally. I can't very well call you by your name and –"

"You know me." Realisation had suddenly dawned on Scarlet.

The young woman facing him frowned deeply. "What?"

"You know me!" Scarlet repeated, excitedly, shifting his position on the boat so quickly that he made it rock dangerously. He leaned towards her and she almost drew back in surprise. "The way you speak to me... the way you're acting... It's not how someone would behave with a complete stranger! Thank you, God – you really know me!"

"What is this nonsense?" she asked, a little irritably. "Of course I know you! We've been working together for years!"

"Really?" Scarlet was ecstatic. He chuckled. "Oh, this is too good to be true! Am I glad I found you!"

"It would rather seem to me that it's *me* who found you, and not the other way round. Come on, Paul... Will you tell me what you're on about?"

"Paul?" Scarlet repeated with even more excitement. "Is that my name, then?"

Rhapsody opened her eyes wide. There was something really *wrong* going on. She couldn't explain the reason behind Scarlet's uncharacteristic behaviour. "What *is it* with you?" she finally asked.

Scarlet became hesitant; he slowly shook his head, trying to avoid her eyes, almost embarrassed to speak out. "I've... er... I've kind of lost my memory."

"Kind of –" Everything seemed to freeze in the short seconds that followed. Rhapsody stared at her companion with uncertainty, as her mind was trying to process what he had just revealed her. She found it difficult to swallow. She gave a nervous chuckle. "You are kidding, right?"

He looked hurt that she doubted him. He sat back in frustration. "Nobody seems to believe me, each time I tell them I don't remember anything," he grumbled. "I was hoping it would be different with you."

"You are *not* kidding?" Rhapsody repeated, in shock. When he shook his head, she insisted: "You're amnesiac? Really? I mean... You don't remember... *me*?"

"No... I can't even remember who I am – let alone who you might be." Scarlet smiled thinly, looking her up and down, and finally giving her an appreciative nod. "To my regret, I have to say."

Rhapsody rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, don't be like that... It's not really the time." She glared at him suspiciously. "Are you *sure* you're not pulling my leg?"

"Now this is something I can't remember, but am I really the kind of person who would joke about as thing like this?"

"For such a serious subject, no... At least I don't think so. And you certainly wouldn't fool around in the middle of an assignment. You're too professional for that."

"Thank you – I think." Scarlet paused a second, pondering. "That's the second time you've mentioned an... 'assignment'? What does it mean?"

"You really don't remember then," Rhapsody said with a frustrated sigh. "Oh that's great... Really, really great."

She noticed the way he was looking back at her, with that confused expression on his handsome face. He was dying to have answers from her. She hesitated, wondering how she should enlighten him.

"It's rather complicated to explain," she finally said. "I don't know exactly where to start."

"How about by explaining to me who we are?" Scarlet suggested. "What is your name?"

"I'm Rhapsody Angel."

He scowled. "That's not your real name," he reflected. "It's pretty, but doesn't sound very serious."

She rolled her eyes again. She had the definite impression he was sweet-talking her. "That's my *codename*," she clarified. "I'm a pilot in the Spectrum Angels fighter squad. My real name is Dianne... Dianne Simms."

Scarlet smiled lightly. "That's more like it." He frowned anew. "Spectrum? We are Spectrum?"

"We're agents of Spectrum," Rhapsody explained. "You're Captain Scarlet. You're a colour –"

"... A colour-coded officer of Spectrum," Scarlet completed for her, nodding thoughtfully.

"You remember that?" Rhapsody asked hopefully.

Scarlet hesitated. "Not exactly, no... I heard it being said by someone."

"Did you? And in what circumstances?"

"I..." Scarlet stopped, hesitating again. He looked straight at Rhapsody. "Maybe I can explain that later?" he suggested. "First, I would like to know about myself. *Please*. I'm desperate to know exactly who I am. Scarlet... That's my name, then?"

Rhapsody stared pensively at him. She had to admit, she was eager to know exactly what had happened to him, since the moment they had lost contact; but he looked so helpless and his expression was so pleading right now that she felt she couldn't deny him his request. He was right, anyway. He deserved to know about himself, and that was certainly where she needed to start.

She sighed and nodded her agreement.

"Your real name is Paul Metcalfe," she started softly. "Captain Scarlet is your Spectrum codename." Rhapsody waited, hoping that this revelation would jog his memory. He was scowling deeply, making an obvious effort to remember. "That doesn't remind you of anything?" she finally asked.

"I wish it would," Scarlet replied, scratching his head, feeling a slight discomfiting headache coming, as he was trying to recall something from his memory. "Paul... Well, that sounds common enough. I did remember the name Scarlet."

"Did you?"

"No." He shook his head. "No, that's not quite true. I didn't actually remember it. I saw that name... on small metallic tags that were hanging from my neck."

"Your Spectrum dog tags," Rhapsody realised. Her hand went to her neck, and tugged on a small chain, pulling out her own tags hidden under her sweater. She showed them to Scarlet. "Like these?"

He nodded. "Exactly, yes. I don't have mine anymore. The sheriff kept them. I don't know where he might have put them." He scratched his head again. The slight discomfort transformed into a swift and sudden twang of pain. He grunted, screwing his eyes shut, clenching his teeth.

"What is it?" Rhapsody asked, witnessing this. "Are you all right?"

"I have headaches whenever I try to remember," he explained.

"Headaches?" she repeated, frowning in perplexity.

Scarlet wasn't a man to get headaches. Except, possibly, when he felt some danger coming or there were Mysterons in the vicinity. She found herself looking around, surreptitiously, but she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary; her companion didn't notice anything.

"Yeah... They're a nuisance sometimes. It's not too bad, at the moment. It's dissipating, anyway." Scarlet opened his eyes to face a concerned-looking Rhapsody. "I do have a vague recollection of being a soldier," he said. "I saw myself following some kind of... training, I believe."

Rhapsody nodded thoughtfully. "You are a soldier," she confirmed. "Or rather, you were. You were an officer in the World Army Air Force, before you were recruited by Spectrum. What you recalled might have been your training in the army. Or the further training you were given, when you joined Spectrum."

"Spectrum is a military outfit?"



"Para-military. We're an international anti-terrorist organisation, answerable only to the World President."

"Sounds very serious... and important. And these Mysterons you mentioned – they're terrorists?"

Rhapsody hesitated once more. "Of a sort. But please, continue... what do you remember, exactly?"

"Not much..." He looked down at the handcuffs lying at the bottom of the boat. "Just enough to know how to unlock these. But that was purely instinctive."

"Military training would do that to you," she reflected with a faint smile. "You would do things out of instinct."

"Is that where *you* learned it, too?"

"No, my training was different. I was a kind of detective... a few years back."

"A police detective?"

"No... more like the private sort."

"And you're a pilot now? You certainly get around."

She frowned. "Please, don't digress. Tell me what else you remember."

"As I said – not that much. Only flashbacks like this one... Unfortunately not enough to help me work out who I really am."

"You had other flashbacks?"

Scarlet hesitated. "They were only a few images..." He shook his head. "Most of them of violence and pain. I... saw myself falling. Maybe it was that fall from the helicopter?"

Rhapsody nodded thoughtfully. The thought came to her that it was also quite possible that Scarlet might have recalled his first deadly fall, many months back – the one that had freed him from Mysteron control. But just as she considered that, she wondered how much he remembered of that 'incident' in the first place. He had always said that he couldn't recall anything of the time he was a slave of the Mysterons. Maybe that specific memory was not exactly absent, but simply buried deep within his mind. And in his effort to remember about himself, he could have accessed it somehow – or at least a particularly acute moment of this hidden memory.

In frustration, Rhapsody threw her hands up in the air. "HOW could this have happened? *Why* can't it ever be easy, for a change?"

"Do you mean to say it's always like this?" Scarlet inquired worriedly.

"When it comes to you, more often than not."

He scowled. "Now, that's reassuring."

"How could this even happen to *you*?" Rhapsody continued. "Do you know how you could possibly have lost your memory?"

He hesitated again, thinking. "I thought that maybe that fall could have caused it?" he suggested.

Rhapsody was doubtful. "I don't think that would be sufficient."

She seemed so certain of what she was saying that again, Scarlet regarded her suspiciously. She knew something she wasn't telling him. "Why? Wouldn't that be sufficient to kill anyone, to begin with?"

"Captain, in your case – that would take far more than that." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. Scarlet was now staring at her with a deepened frown.

"What do you know about my case?" he asked her, rather roughly.

It was Rhapsody's turn to hesitate. "It is... difficult to explain..."

Scarlet realised that his suspicions about her, after what she had just said, were right: she *did* know something about him. "There's a lot of that with you, isn't it? Or *with me*, to be exact." He narrowed his eyes, watching her attentively. "Does it have to do with this... *peculiar* condition of mine?" he asked in a low voice. "You know about *that* too, don't you? The way I... heal fast?"

Rhapsody noted Scarlet's sombre and cagey expression. She paused for a moment, wondering how exactly she should tackle the subject. There was no point denying the truth that she indeed knew, but in his present state, should she tell him *everything* there was about himself? She doubted he would be able to understand it all – or even accept it.

She opted for caution, and simply nodded at his question, very slowly. "I imagine that, being amnesiac, finding out about your... condition was pretty much of a shock," she said musingly.

Scarlet blinked, now having the confirmation that she knew. It was surprising to realise she didn't seem bothered by this; she seemed to find it very much normal.

This was a curious, yet fascinating, young woman.

"What is it with me?" Scarlet asked. "This is not... natural. Right?"

Rhapsody smiled lightly. Seeing him so confused was certainly disconcerting. She wasn't used to it. "For you, it is. You are... well, as you said, you heal fast. Faster than any other human being. And you're tougher than most. It takes... a lot to hurt you."

He scoffed. "I think I already worked that out! But *why*? *How* is it possible?"

"That's a power... a gift you have received."

"A gift?"

She nodded, her expression growing sombre. "One that was given to you by the Mysterons."

"Them again," Scarlet grouched. "Who are they? Exactly what do they have to do with this?"

Rhapsody paused slightly. "Well, this is rather –"

"... A long story, yeah," Scarlet interrupted with some irritation. "Okay, I get it, already." He leaned forward, and scrutinized her. "Why do I get the uncomfortable feeling I would not like whatever explanation you give me about this?"

"Because you're probably right?" Rhapsody smiled, almost apologetically. "You usually are... especially when it comes to the Mysterons."

"I don't know why, but I don't find that reassuring in the least." Scarlet sat back, scowling deeply. "Well, at least, I know now I wasn't going crazy. After what I experienced, with all those wounds healing so unnaturally fast... I was beginning to think I was losing my mind."

"What did you experience, exactly?" Rhapsody asked him. "How did you find out about this?"

"Accidentally, of course. The first time I woke up, I had a broken leg – I remember that vividly. I must have lost consciousness after that... But when I woke up again, my leg was healed. More than that, there was no scar, no mark, nothing on my body to indicate I had taken a fall from a helicopter. If *that* really happened, that is."

"It did. I saw it all." Rhapsody shook her head. "There was nothing I could do to help you. Mind you, at that point, I had problems of my own, trying to evade missiles that same helicopter was shooting at my plane."

"Is that where you got hurt?" he asked, pointing to her wrapped arm.

She waved dismissively. "When I ejected and ended up here, yes. But that's only a scratch."

"So that means you're not like me."

Rhapsody chuckled. "No, I'm not." Getting her seriousness back, she looked him in the eyes. "What else happened to you?"

"I got shot –" Scarlet began.

"... You got shot?"

"By the sheriff. And the wound healed itself. Apparently, I woke up – yet again – in the hospital's morgue, and scared a nurse stiff. I don't remember that."

"Someone else witnessed your healing abilities?" Rhapsody asked in alarm.

"Why do you think those boys were calling me a freak?" Scarlet replied with a frown.

She answered with a scowl of her own. She suspected something must have happened, but she never imagined it had gone to that extent. "*Who else* knows?" she asked.

"The sheriff," Scarlet answered after a second or two. "And his deputy..." He hesitated a moment longer. He could see this subject was bothering the young woman seated in front of him. There was now a dark, concerned expression on her beautiful face.

"Is there someone else?" she asked insistently.

"There was the doctor," he finally said.

Rhapsody stared at him in disbelief. This was even worse than she imagined. "You saw a doctor?"

"I told you I scared a nurse in the hospital's morgue," Scarlet reminded her.

"He must have examined you," Rhapsody remarked.

"I imagine. I mean... I don't really know exactly. Apparently, they must have believed me dead, if they put me in the morgue. And he did come to see me when I was in jail."

"Great," Rhapsody grumbled. "The sheriff, his deputy, a doctor and a nurse... And these murdering bastards who tried to hang you. That's way too many people. The colonel will not be happy."

"The colonel?"

"Our commander, Colonel White. He insists – *quite rightly!* – that knowledge of your retrometabolism must be Spectrum's best kept secret. That so many prominent people have witnessed what you can do will not please him."

"What kind of a word is that, 'retrometabolism'?" Scarlet shrugged almost irritably. "It's not as if there was anything I could do to prevent them seeing it, you know – I didn't even know about it supposedly being a secret to begin with."

"I know. Sorry, Captain, I didn't mean to blame you –"

"And I wouldn't be too quick to call Les Arbrisseaux a 'prominent place'," Scarlet continued without giving her the chance to speak further. "From what I could judge of it, it's a very small town, which has very little truck with civilisation. Beside, I'll remind you that the sheriff is dead – although it's quite sad, he was a brave man, all in all. And his deputy is dead too."

"The deputy is dead too?" Rhapsody repeated after him, opening her eyes wide. "Don't tell me you're accused of his death as well!"

He looked even sombre than before. "Seeing how my luck is going, that's probably what will happen. No, it was those guys on the road, who the sheriff thought were Spectrum –"

Rhapsody cut him off, perplexed by his words: "Hang on... What guys?"

"They were dressed as military commandos – and they were armed with heavy weapons. They –"

"Montgomery and his men!" Rhapsody realised quickly.

"I take it you know them, then?"

"I do know them... and you do too. And they certainly are *not* Spectrum."

Scarlet nodded. "I think I'd worked that out already. I had this strange feeling about them – that they were bad news. Who are they? What do they want from me? I –"

"Paul, stop." Interrupting him anew, Rhapsody extended her hands and took Scarlet's; she looked straight into his eyes, a new sense of urgency now imposing itself on her. Silenced, he looked back at her, his expression one of loss and bewilderment. She felt her heart going out to him, deeply aware that this amnesia was an unusual experience for him, which was making him unexpectedly vulnerable.

This was making their mutual situation even worse than she originally thought; and they still had their mission to complete. She had yet to ask him about the microchip; somehow, she had the distinct impression he would not even know what she was talking about.

"You're understandably confused," Rhapsody told him gently. "And quite frankly, I am too. I think we'd better start at the beginning... Each of us, telling our part of the story in as much detail as we can. Maybe then, we'll get a better understanding of exactly what's going on?" She gave him a kind and encouraging smile. "And maybe that would help jog your memory?"

He paused, pondering, and then agreed in a very low voice: "I would very much like it if that happened." He nodded at her. "I think you should go first. You're the only one of us who knows *who* we are, and *why* we're here, to begin with."

She agreed, and started her story.

\* \* \*

It only took two or three violent shoves from Jamie Lewis, easily the strongest member of the gang, before the door opened wide, and the boys were able to gain access to the small isolated

house by the river. As Jamie had said earlier, there was no-one present, so the gang entered as if they were in their own home, dirtying the floor and carpet with their muddy feet. Just for the fun of it, Dallas Fenmore gave a slap to a nearby lamp that went crashing down loudly, while Scarecrow grabbed a beer from a half-used six-pack left by the sofa's side.

Jasper perused the place, and then went directly to the weapons cabinet, which stood at the far end of the living room; the rifles and handguns were displayed through the glass windows like so many trophies. When he tried to open the small doors, he found them locked; he quickly found a solution to his problem, and slammed the butt of his own rifle against the window, which shattered into countless shards. He put his rifle down and started selecting weapons from the collection.

While Jasper went in search of ammunition in the drawers of the desk by the cabinet, Jamie stood in awe in front of a crossbow and a quiver full of arrows, hanging on the opposite wall. He removed both items from their hooks, grinning approvingly.

"I bet this beauty does damage," he said, putting his eye to the eyepiece and casually taking aim at Johnny Monroe.

The latter snapped at him angrily: "Point that thing elsewhere, you jerk! What if it goes off?"

"Now who's the jerk?" Jamie laughed, lowering the crossbow. "The damned thing is not armed, stupid! It certainly can't hurt you!"

"Stop bickering, you two." Jasper distributed weapons and ammunition around, keeping for himself a gleaming, brand new rifle that obviously had not been used very often. "Break a few things, guys. Make it look like this place was robbed. And make sure not to leave any fingerprints."

The others approved, and Johnny and Jamie started turning the furniture over, and throwing things against the walls. Dallas was quietly inserting bullets into the rifle Jasper just handed him. "McCullen won't be back for a week or two," he commented. "It'll be a long time before someone notices we came here at all."

"So what do we do from here?" Scarecrow asked, using his knife to puncture the sofa. "Where do you think the freak and the doll have gone to now?"

"Well, they certainly can't return to town," Jamie remarked.

"They might try to leave the area?" Johnny suggested. "I mean, they don't need to go to town for that. They just need to find the main road, and then they can be off to any big city they want."

Jasper shook his head. "They went upstream, towards north, going deeper into the bayou. They're a long way from

civilisation there. Considering they don't know the area, they could go in circles a long time, or even die there before they found their way out."

Jamie scoffed. "They wouldn't do us that service..."

"That's why we need to find them." Jasper loaded his newly acquired rifle. "We know the place better than them."

"But that's a big swamp," Scarecrow reasoned. "We don't know where they would be heading."

"You know McCullen is an old miser," Jasper replied. "He never puts too much fuel into his boat, 'cause he knows people around here might use it instead of him."

"Yeah, like us!" laughed Dallas.

"... So they'll run out of gas pretty soon. They're probably already out as we speak. They can't row on that river, even if they had paddles to begin with; it's too wild. So the only solution they'll have will be to beach the boat, and go on foot."

"The question is what side of the river will they choose to come ashore?" Jamie remarked.

"That's why we'll split into two groups," Jasper moved on. "We find the boat, and then we'll look for their traces. My guess is they're not stupid enough to dare get too far away from the river and beside, there's not that many footpaths they could use. So they'll be following those, to avoid stepping into whatever danger the swamp might be hiding. We'll simply do the same. We'll find them, kill them, and throw their bodies into the deepest quicksand pond we can find. Nobody will ever hear of them ever again."

"It might still take some time to get our hands on them," Scarecrow insisted.

"Look, if you have a better idea —"

Scarecrow backed away a step, as Jasper turned fiercely towards him; he didn't like the flash of anger he could see in his friend's eyes. He could easily read murder in them.

He reckoned it was far better that the strangers receive the full brunt of Jasper's rage than himself.

"No, no," Scarecrow replied hastily. "Just thinking out loud, that's all. I'll follow whatever plans you have."

Jasper scoffed angrily. "We don't have a choice, anyway."

"So we do what exactly?" Jamie asked. "Follow the river upstream, until we find them, or the boat?"

"Yeah, that's what we'll do. Jamie, you and Scarecrow will cross Devil's Bridge and follow the bank on the other side. Dallas and I will check this side."

"What about me?" Johnny suddenly said, noting he was left out. "Which team do I go with?"

"None. You'll go back to the sheriff's car. I want you to clean up the mess."

Johnny frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Hide the ORVs where they can't be found. Throw them in the river if need be, and erase all traces of 'em."

"Throw them in... Wait a sec, one of them is mine!" Johnny protested.

Jasper turned angrily to him. "You want to run the risk of ending up in jail?" he barked. "They find the machines, they'll know we were there! They're useless anyway, the state they're in right now."

"Yeah," Jamie grumbled, "thanks to that crazy chick..."

"We have to get rid of them machines. That's small price to pay, Johnny-Boy, and besides, when this is all over, you'll have enough dough to buy yourself ten bikes!" He pushed a handgun into his friend's hand. "Here! This might be handy if you find yourself in front of unwanted witnesses."

"Think you can handle it?" Jamie cackled behind him. "So far, you've been pretty much useless."

Johnny gave him a murderous look. "Shut up, Lewis. I can use this as well as you." He cocked the hammer. "If anyone sees me, he'll be history."

Jasper smiled evilly. "That's a good boy. Oh, and check the sheriff's car as well. See if there's anything in there that might be either useful... or incriminating. If you know what incriminating means!"

"I do know," Johnny replied heatedly. "I'm not *that* stupid!"

Jamie chuckled. "You're certainly hiding it well."

"Watch it, you –"

"That's enough!" Jasper snapped again, irate at his companions' bickering. "We have stuff to do, and we'd better make it fast, if we want to have this done before nightfall." He flicked his cell phone. "We'll keep in touch with this. The first team to find either the boat or our two lovebirds will call the other."

"I might have some fun before I call you," Jamie said with an evil sneer. "That girl owes me a bike, and I promised her she's gonna pay with interest."

"Don't be cocky," Jasper advised, pointing a warning finger at him. "They're armed, and she already showed she can handle that shotgun. And we know her boyfriend can be a handful. You just follow them and keep them in your sight. Wait for us before moving in."

Jamie shrugged dismissively. He slung the quiver over his shoulder, and rested the crossbow across his arms. "Whatever you say."



"We'll soon get our hands on what we've been working so hard to get," Jasper added, "but that won't be before we tie up all our loose ends. Now let's go and get this business settled."

\* \* \*

"I can scarcely believe the mess we're in," said Rhapsody Angel, in reaction to Captain Scarlet's story. He had just completed it, seconds ago, just after she had given him her own account of their situation.

Upon hearing her words, he stared at her in bafflement.

"*You* can't believe it? You do realise, of course, that *your* story is even harder to believe than this whole affair?" He shook his head doubtfully. "Earth, at war with aliens from another planet? From... *Mars*, specifically? Come on..."

Rhapsody had told him about the Mysterons, and he had listened to her with absolute perplexity. She could see in his face that he could hardly believe his ears, but he had not interrupted her. He had no reaction when she mentioned – without going into too much detail – how they had 'used him' for their own purposes, and that it was on that occasion that he had received that ability he had discovered – to heal from any injury, however severe it was. He had waited until now to voice his doubts; considering his usually impulsive temperament, that was something of an achievement.

He was sceptical, of course, but he couldn't very well deny the truth.

"If not for those healing powers I have – that you said they gave me..."

"Unwittingly, I'm sure," Rhapsody quickly pointed out. "They wouldn't have given them to you if they thought you would have used them against them. Or that you would escape them."

"Even so, you have to admit this is still very hard to swallow."

"Do you have a better way to explain your powers, then?" Rhapsody challenged him.

He pondered that. "Genetic engineering?" he suggested. "And I don't mean, performed by aliens... something more down to Earth?" It was her turn to give him a doubtful look. He shrugged. "Or maybe I'm some kind of mutant."

Rhapsody chuckled, almost despite herself. "You read too many comic books, Captain."

"Well, I wouldn't know about that, obviously. Remember? I'm amnesiac."

She smiled, compassionately. "Paul, this is real. All of what I told you. The Mysterons. The War of Nerves. What you experienced in their hands changed you forever. I am not pulling your leg, this is the truth. You have to believe me." Seeing him so sombre and pensive, she reached out and took his hands between hers, like she had done before. "You have to *trust me*," she said, with more emphasis.

He lowered his eyes, chewing on his bottom lip. "All right," he said in a low voice, before looking at her again. "I believe you, however preposterous this all seems. I don't know why, but even if I don't remember you, I feel like I should trust you."

The intense way he was looking at Rhapsody made her lower her eyes slightly. "I don't think it will be long before you remember me," she said. "Then you'll see you were right to trust me."

He smiled laconically. "If you say so. These Mysterons... I guess you don't know *how* they actually managed to do this to me? You said they took control of my body and mind, so that I would follow their orders. They brainwashed me, in some way? But I think I'm right in saying that's obviously not all they did to me, for me to end up the way I am now."

Rhapsody hesitated. She had told but a fraction of the story to Scarlet. How could she explain to him that the Mysterons actually had *killed him*, in order to take control of him? That this body wasn't his original one – but an exact replica that his persona now accidentally inhabited? That he not only 'healed fast', but that he was virtually indestructible, that he could also cheat death itself, and return to life, if he should 'die'?

As she recalled, it had not been easy to explain to him the first time around, when he had awakened in sickbay, after the Car-Vu incident. It also had been difficult for him to actually accept what he had become, and for a long time, he had held himself apart from the others, brooding on his condition. He only had started to come to terms with it quite recently.

Going through it again would probably be worse this time around, as he didn't even have any recollection of *who* he really was to begin with, and no idea what the Mysterons were capable of. Considering all this, it seemed a better idea not to reveal everything to him. That might be too distressful for him at the moment.

In any case, Rhapsody also considered that it might not be that necessary to tell him everything at this point, and to give him unwarranted cause for concern; as she said, he would probably regain his memory soon, and would remember it all, anyway.

At least, she fervently hoped so. Because at the moment, she was unable to explain exactly *why* he couldn't remember anything to begin with. This was a little worrying.

She smiled lightly at him, again apologetic. "Sorry, I can't say exactly how they did it," she answered, grateful that it was partly true, as nobody knew what exactly the Mysterionisation process was, and how it worked. "Maybe it was genetic engineering, after all?"

"Performed by aliens?" he said. "That sounds suspiciously like one of those unbelievable accounts of alien abductions that sometimes pop on the news." He stopped to think it over, and noticed the way Rhapsody was looking at him. He frowned at his own statement. "Now where did that come from? *How* can I remember hearing about those stories, when I can't even remember who I am?"

"Some stuff may be so beyond belief that they would stick in your mind, I suppose," Rhapsody reflected. "Or maybe – it's simply too close to your own experience for comfort? That would have marked you."

He shook his head, mystified. "Failing a better explanation, I will buy that. There are probably things more difficult to believe than that... Although I can't think of any at the moment."

"I can think of one," Rhapsody said with an amused smile, as she rolled her eyes at him. "For example, I find it very hard to believe that you seriously told the sheriff your name was 'Scarlet O'Hara'."

She chuckled at the thought, and her colleague looked at her quizzically. She suddenly realised he had no idea why this seemed so funny to her. Her attempt to ease the tension for a minute or two had fallen short.

"It suddenly came to my mind in a flash," he defended himself. "The sheriff was interrogating me, trying to find out who I was. It popped up – and I *naturally* assumed it was my name. Since the name 'Scarlet' was on those tags..."

"Well, it *isn't* your name," Rhapsody said, her smile broadening, if only a little. "Not your *real* name, that is."

"So I know now. And how could I have known it was a codename? I mean, I *know* it's a colour, but I didn't know of Spectrum at the time. And anyway, I would never have made the connection. But what is it about that name that's so funny? I know the sheriff also gave me an odd look."

"Geez, I wonder why." Rhapsody rolled her eyes again. "I'm guessing you don't remember 'Gone with the Wind'? It's a very popular American novel... and an even more popular film. Everybody knows its main character, Scarlett O'Hara. It's like

saying you were..." She searched for a name at random, "... Napoleon Bonaparte."

Scarlet frowned. "Who?"

Rhapsody groaned. "Well, if you, the historian, don't remember that one, we're certainly in trouble. The point it, *nobody* would have believed it to be your name. *Especially* considering it's the name of a woman."

"Napoleon was a woman?"

Rhapsody looked at him a little anxiously. "*Scarlett O'Hara* was a woman," she specified. She noticed his amused smile. "You are pulling my leg now."

"Hey, I might not remember who Napoleon is or was, but I certainly know that it's a man's name," he said. "Sorry, I couldn't resist... You say I'm an historian?"

"You have a degree in History. And you're an expert in military history, specifically."

"I do wish I could remember all this. How long do you reckon it would take for me to regain my memory? You seemed so sure earlier that it would come back soon."

She shrugged slightly. "It's just a guess, and I *hope* I'm not wrong. You see, you usually heal very fast, Captain. And really, I can't explain why this amnesia of yours isn't already taken care of. What is happening to you right now is... well, it's not normal."

"You mean, not normal *for me*." Scarlet gave it some more thought. "Have I experienced amnesia before?"

That was a tricky question, Rhapsody thought. After all, he didn't remember the six hours he had been under Mysteron control. And it was likely he would never remember them. "To my knowledge – not since you were freed from the Mysterons," she answered, going around the question.

Scarlet nodded. "So according to you, we just have to wait and see when this particular problem will clear itself? *Hoping* that it will."

"You do seem to continue to heal quickly, if I can judge by what you told me," Rhapsody observed, in an attempt to reassure him.

"Do you think it could be the bullet the deputy sheriff said I have in my head that might be causing this?"

Rhapsody gave it some thought. Scarlet had told her of the projectile in his head; she found this curious.

"I don't know. I don't even *think* the bullet should still be there, to begin with. I think it should be gone already."

"*How?*" Scarlet inquired with curiosity. "I mean... if nobody extracts it – how can it go away by itself? Would my body expel it somehow – like, will I spit it out...? Or does my body – I don't know – absorb it, or dissolve it – or something?"

Rhapsody hesitated. She looked helplessly at Scarlet. Somehow the image his words conjured in her mind – him spitting out a bullet he might have caught during a mission – was something of a funny vision. But at the same time, she didn't feel like laughing at all.

"Quite frankly, Captain... I don't know. I mean, I *really* don't know how your retrometabolism works. I'm sorry to say I wasn't curious enough to ask the question."

He squeezed her hands, looking down again, and asked, a little sheepishly: "From what you told me, I gathered that... there isn't anybody else like me, then?"

She frowned. "You mean... retrometabolic?"

"Yeah, that word, if that's what you call my healing powers."

"Yes – it's referred to as 'retrometabolism'. As the Mysterons put it themselves: it's 'the power to reverse matter'."

"Whatever that means exactly."

"Your guess is as good as mine." Rhapsody shook her head. "No. I – we don't know of anyone else but you having that power. As far as we know, you are the only human being who possesses it. Aside from you –" She stopped and hesitated again, and Scarlet looked at her closely, noting that she didn't seem willing to continue.

"What?" he inquired insistently. "Aside from me – what?"

"I was thinking of Mysteron agents," she said, again apologetic. "We know that they *can* be like you, but we haven't seen many cases, since the War of Nerves began. We don't even know if Captain Black himself possesses that power."

"Captain Black?" he repeated.

She shivered. "The commander of the mission to Mars, which caused the mess we're in. He's the man who's responsible for it all: the War of Nerves with the Mysterons."

"The name suggests he was part of Spectrum," Scarlet noted. "Am I right?"

"Yes – yes, he was. But it's another long, complicated story. Suffice it to say – he's now totally under Mysteron control. He's their prime agent, the most dangerous and wanted man in the world." Rhapsody shook her head. "In your present condition, it wouldn't be very good if you were to meet him. Fortunately, at the moment, nothing indicates that he's involved in this current Mysteron threat."

"Only this... Montgomery, and his men, right?"

"Yes... and they're apparently after you."

"What do they want with me?" Scarlet asked. "Do they want to kill me? If they wait long enough, maybe Jasper's gang will do the job for them. They nearly did already."

"Hanging you wouldn't have been enough to kill you."

"Yeah, well – I sure wish I could be as sure of that myself."

"It's not only to kill you that Montgomery and his men want. They're after something else. If they had it already, they wouldn't bother to go after you, and would already be away. From what we know of Mysterion agents, their mission always comes first. As it is, they believe you have what they want, so getting rid of you would be a welcome extra."

"And what they want is the microchip you told me about – for which we were sent here?"

Rhapsody acquiesced: "Those two guys who almost caught me earlier? They said they would use me as a bargaining chip to get it from you."

"But I don't have it!" Scarlet protested. "I don't remember even finding it in the first place!"

"If they think you have it, then you *must* have found it."

"How can you be so sure?"

Rhapsody hesitated. "I'm not. The last I knew of you before we lost contact was that you were still looking for it. I left to try and make contact with base at that point. But you were on the ground then, and when I returned, you were back in the chopper, with all the others. So I must deduce that you'd probably found the microchip by then."

"You like to play detective, don't you?"

Rhapsody offered him a gracious smile. "I told you I was one, remember?"

"Well, let's suppose I found it then. I certainly don't have it *now*. I could very well have lost it when I took that plunge from the helicopter. When I woke up at Joe's place, I had nothing on... I found what I thought were probably my clothes in a basket. They were camouflage clothing."

"Your Spectrum-issue camo uniform," Rhapsody confirmed.

"Right. It was in tatters and only good to be thrown away. Except for the boots..." He pointed to one of his feet. "These same boots, that I'm currently wearing. There was nothing else on me, except for these dog tags I told you about and – " He stopped in mid-sentence, as something suddenly came to his mind.

Noticing his expression, Rhapsody frowned. "What?" she asked, hopefully. "You remember something?"

"The box," he answered almost absently. He stroked his brow, thoughtfully. "I remember – there was a small box, in one of the uniform's pockets. Quite like a jewel box, except it was metallic. I thought it contained a ring, or something similar..." He shook his head. "I don't know what it was exactly; it looked like some kind of tiny electronic device... Smaller than the tip of my

little finger.” He glanced at her hands. “Smaller than the tip of *your* little finger.”

Rhapsody straightened up. “That must be it,” she said excitedly. “The microchip.”

“That’s possible...” Scarlet said, thinking about it.

“When was the last time you saw it?”

Scarlet hesitated to answer, then reddened slightly. “I – erm – I didn’t think it was that important. I threw it back into the basket, with what was left of the uniform.”

“You didn’t!” Rhapsody exclaimed.

“That was minutes before I saw Jasper and his gang kill Joe. They were outside the cabin, and I saw the whole thing through the window. I rushed out... and then the sheriff arrived, and...” Scarlet shrugged. “... Well, you know the rest.” He offered a bashful smile. “Seriously, if I had known it was *that* important –

”

“It must still be there,” Rhapsody reflected. “At Joe’s...”

“Probably, yes. At the bottom of that basket.”

Rhapsody’s features became hard. “We must go and retrieve it.”

Scarlet stared at her incredulously. “You’re not serious?”

“I am. Captain, our original mission was to find this thing. According to what Colonel White told us when we left, this microchip is of vital importance. Well, it would be, if it was found intact.”

“Considering the time you told me it’s been in this swamp, don’t you think it might not be intact anymore?”

“That was always a possibility, even before we were assigned this mission, but now that we know it still exists – do you want to assume it’s not?” Rhapsody grunted. “I don’t know what it contains, but since it looks like the Mysterons are after it, then you can be *sure* it only can be dangerous data. We *must* get it back before Montgomery and the others. We have an advantage over them, too. We know where to look for it.”

“Do we really?” Scarlet asked gloomily. “Even if we know where the microchip is, it would seem to me that we have a similar kind of problem as Montgomery: we don’t know where in this swamp *Joe’s cabin* might be.”

Rhapsody smiled. “That’s where you’re wrong...”

Her hand went into the pocket of her trouser and she took the map she had previously put there. She extracted it from its plastic pouch and unfolded it to put it down onto the vacant seat between the two of them. Scarlet looked down at it, and Rhapsody pointed to each of the areas marked with a red pen.

“This is Les Arbrisseaux... Here, this is the spot where I found you, and where we took the boat... See this X nearby? It

says 'home' – so that's probably where the owner of this boat lives." Her finger followed the river on the map. "This is Devil's Bridge... We passed underneath earlier, while you were still unconscious. At the moment, we're approximately here..." She went further north on the map, still following the river upstream, and her finger stopped to tap on another mark. "See what's written there?"

"Joe's." Scarlet shook his head disbelievingly. "This guy has Joe's cabin marked on his map. Talk about dumb luck..."

"That's not that far from where we conducted our search for the microchip," Rhapsody continued, waving her hand over an area a little north of the mark indicating Joe's home. "You fell over here, on the other side of the river. It's not difficult to imagine that Joe indeed saw you from where he lived." Rhapsody examined the map further, her brow furrowed. "It's deep into Devil's Bayou. There's swamp and quicksand all over the place... Not to mention dangerous wildlife. I know, I walked all the way from there to where I found you." She shivered inwardly, thinking of the way Williams had died, in the jaws of alligators. She pushed the thought deep into the back of her mind. "We're in luck, though... the cabin is on this side of the river. We just need to leave the boat here, and follow the indications on this map to get there." She made a quick calculation. "Considering how much time it took me to travel that distance already, I'd say we might get there a little before nightfall."

"Okay... but once we have this microchip, what do we do? We're still stuck here. We can't waltz into Les Arbrisseaux after what happened to the sheriff." Scarlet's hand went to his neck, and he rubbed it uncomfortably. "I'm liable to get hanged again."

"We'll tackle that problem in due time, Captain." She hesitated for a moment, realising that she was suddenly taking all the decisions, without leaving him much choice. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, I realise that, technically, you should be calling the shots, you being the superior officer..."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Hey, that's okay. I may be amnesiac, but that doesn't mean I'm a fool. It's sensible to think that, in my current condition, I would be quite unable to make proper decisions regarding what we should do. So it's better you take over, actually. I'm just concerned that I might not be much of a help. Actually – I might be more of a hindrance."

"I don't think you would. Amnesiac or not, you're still Spectrum's best field agent."

"Am I, really?" Scarlet asked, raising a sceptical brow.

She nodded vigorously. "Beside, it isn't as if we have much choice, is it?"



Scarlet shook his head. "No, you're right. I'd rather do that with you than returning to Les Arbrisseaux and into the lion's den. If you think we should go get that microchip then..." he smiled lightly, "... let's go get it."

"Then you don't think me a heartless bitch?" she asked, a little coyly.

Scarlet tilted his head, looking at her with curiosity. "Now why should I think such an ugly thing of you?"

"Isn't it obvious? Here I am, dragging you in pursuit of this mission – while you barely remember anything about yourself. I realise this must not seem very charitable of me."

"I would never think badly of you."

"Right. You would say that. But in your current state, you don't know me. For all you know, I might be the enemy, trying to drag you into some kind of a trap."

Scarlet chuckled. "I don't think you would have bothered saving my life earlier, if it was the case."

"That might not really count, you know..."

"You mean, taking into account my healing abilities?" She didn't reply and Scarlet shook his head. "You still helped me over there, and for that, you have my undying gratitude." He smiled. "I said it before, Rhapsody – Dianne: I trust you."

"And what if you shouldn't trust me?" Rhapsody insisted, looking gravely at him. "After all, I *might* be a Mysteron agent. Trust is not something you should give implicitly."

He considered this, staring at her calmly. Then he nodded, slowly. "No," he said.

"No, what?"

"Look, I still have difficulty believing it – all of what you told me, and what I can do. However, I do think I'm still a good judge of character. I'm thinking of what you told me about Mysteron agents, and how I can 'feel' them – which explained why I felt so sick when I met this Montgomery and his men earlier." He paused a second. "You definitely don't feel the same. So you can't be a Mysteron agent."

"That sixth sense of yours doesn't always work, Captain..."

"Paul."

She looked at him quizzically. He smiled. "You said my name is Paul. Please – call me Paul, then. Hearing you calling me 'Captain' while I'm in this situation... It just feels weird."

Her hesitation lasted only a second. "All right. Paul."

"And regarding this 'sixth sense', as you call it..." He shrugged, his smile broadening. "Well, perhaps it doesn't always work well, but I'm sure it's working fine right now. And taking *that* into consideration, to me, you feel... right."

The intense way he was now looking at her brought red to Rhapsody's cheeks, and she found the need to look the other way to escape his eyes. "Let's see what we can take with us," she said by way of changing the subject. "Then we should get going. If we want to arrive before dark..."

He nodded in silence, before helping her make a smart selection of the objects they could find in the boat.

## CHAPTER 8

"Are you sure we're on the right track?"

Rhapsody Angel rolled her eyes at her companion's recurring question; it was only the third or fourth time he had enquired upon that same subject – each time formulated differently.

"According to the map, we are," she answered, her voice dripping with impatience.

Following behind her, and carrying the shotgun Rhapsody had left in his care, Captain Scarlet shook his head dubiously. He still wasn't sure.

"I don't know. It seems to me we should have kept following the river. From what I remember, the cabin is close by it, and we would definitely have stumbled upon it sooner or later –" A large branch, heavy with leaves, whipped into his face, brutally interrupting him. Exasperated by his constant questions, Rhapsody had let go of it on purpose, after pushing it aside to pass through. She had made no attempt to make it look like an accident.

Scarlet frowned in annoyance and brushed the branch aside to follow her.

"I'm only saying that because in the last hour, we nearly stepped into two patches of quicksand, had a close encounter with an angry-looking black bear, and almost fell into a dangerously steep ditch. Not to mention that we have to cross pond after pond of muddy water... I almost lost one of my boots in the last one. This is definitely *not* the most secure path we could have chosen." He received a new branch across the face and grunted in irritation. "I wish you'd stop doing that."

"Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't question your sense of direction," Rhapsody replied edgily. "But you have to admit, in your present condition, it probably isn't very reliable."

"I certainly can't argue with that. But I'm only saying that there must be a better way to reach our destination. And following the river would also ensure that we won't get lost."

Rhapsody suddenly stopped in her tracks and spun around; Scarlet had to step back to avoid colliding with her. He could see by the way she was glaring at him that she wasn't very happy and obviously had quite enough of his recriminations.

"Look, I've trekked through these woods since this morning, so I'm sure of the direction we're currently taking," she explained, trying to keep her cool. "*This is* the most direct path. The river snakes through the swamp, and following it would mean wasting

an awful lot of time. We can't afford that. Believe me, give or take a few meters, we should reach Joe's cabin before nightfall."

"Which shouldn't be too long now," Scarlet commented, raising his eyes to the patch of sky they could see above, to evaluate the sun's position. "But Dianne —"

"And," Rhapsody interrupted him before he could argue again, "following the river would have put us too much in the open, and would make us vulnerable to surprise attacks. Remember that Montgomery's men will still be looking for us."

"As well as for the microchip," Scarlet commented. "And you want to arrive at the cabin before they work out where we've got to."

Rhapsody approved with a nod. "And don't forget your other friends," she added sourly. "I'm not exactly sure of those young thugs' intentions, but I'll bet they haven't given up. You saw them murdering two men; they would not want to take the chance of seeing you get away and telling anyone what you witnessed."

Scarlet nodded. "And that includes you."

"Believe me, I'm quite aware that I'm as deep in this as you are."

"That's a nice way of saying it," Scarlet commented. He looked down at his feet as emphasis, as he was standing ankle-deep in thick mud — which, he realised, was the reason his companion was able to look almost levelly into his eyes, as she was standing on higher and dryer land. He grunted in annoyance and disengaged himself before taking a step forward out of the mud. Rhapsody stepped back to permit him to join her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to doubt you," he apologised, standing once again in front of her. "I know I said you were in charge — so I really shouldn't argue so much."

She acknowledged his apology. "I understand this isn't easy for you. You're more used to taking charge than simply following."

"Am I always this difficult?" he asked, with a curious frown.

Rhapsody answered with a light smile. "Colonel White would argue that you are... but then again, he would also say that you're one of the best officers he has under his command."

Scarlet raised a dubious brow. "Really?"

"I mean, you're a soldier — that would mean you're accustomed to following orders... most of the time, anyway." She turned around, and continued to walk, with him following behind. This time, she took care not to let any branches hit him. "But I do know you can be difficult when you consider that an order is not... reasonable."

"Such as?"

Rhapsody sighed, trying to recall from her mind one of the many infamous examples of what Scarlet himself described as 'using one's initiative'.

"Such as the time when Colonel White was threatened with assassination by the Mysterons. You blatantly went against his orders, and clandestinely followed him to his hiding place to protect him."

"Did it help?"

"It did – you saved his life."

"It was a good decision then."

Rhapsody chuckled, without turning around. "It was – except that to do so, and to lure the assassin out, you actually knocked the colonel out and took his clothing to assume his identity."

Scarlet frowned, pondering this. "Isn't that slightly against military regulations? Knocking out a superior officer?"

"It's *highly* against regulations," Rhapsody confirmed. "Not that it stopped you."

"But it was to save his life. So I suppose that the ends justified the means. And surely, Colonel White agreed with that – especially considering it avoided him being killed."

Rhapsody smiled to herself. "That's quite possible. Although he would probably deny it if you ever ask him. He's very keen on discipline."

"Is he? So why does he put up with me, then?"

"Because, as I said earlier..." Rhapsody turned to him, forcing him to stop again in front of her. "... You *are* his best man."

They had stopped at the edge of a large clearing, and they could clearly see the sky above. For a moment, there was silence between them, as Scarlet looked at the young woman, pondering her words. He finally shook his head, a new doubting scowl marking his brow.

"I don't feel like the best of anything right now. Not with this dodgy memory of mine."

"It'll come back to you," Rhapsody reassured him.

"You always seem so sure of yourself when you say that, but I can't help feeling doubtful, Dianne. What if it doesn't come back? Or takes an awful long time to come back? If it's indeed that thing I have inside my head that's depriving me of my memory –"

"Whatever that thing might be," Rhapsody replied, "I'm sure Doctor Fawn will get rid of it for you."

Scarlet stared at her, looking suddenly uncomfortable. The full implications of what she was saying had an ominous and somehow scary ring to him. "Doctor...? I'm sorry but you'll

understand that I'm not really looking forward to someone operating on the inside of my head. However necessary it might be."

Rhapsody reached to give him a comforting pat. "You shouldn't worry unduly. Doctor Fawn's the best doctor in the world – and I'm not just saying that, it's the truth. And he's the ultimate specialist when it comes to your unique condition."

"Well, that offers a bit of reassurance. Just a bit." He shrugged. "There is an awful lot I wish I could remember... about myself... About this condition of mine. About the job I do... People I work with... People like you." He looked straight into her eyes, and frowned anew, pondering. "I do feel that I know you... I mean, I *know* I know you, but it's all out of my reach for now. I would like so very much to know *more* about you."

He was looking so desperately at her that she couldn't ignore his plea. "What would you like to know?"

"You said... that we work together. That we are... friends?"

"Yes. Yes, we are colleagues." Rhapsody smiled lightly. "And friends."

Scarlet's frown deepened, and his stare became more intense, as he made a new, desperate attempt to remember. Silence hung between them again; out of a sudden compulsion, he raised his hand, with the obvious intention of reaching for her, and Rhapsody followed his movement with her eyes. He thought he saw disapproval, and he hesitated, stopping just short of touching her cheek.

Rhapsody then saw his frown turning into a grimace of pain, and he squeezed his eyes shut, grunting between his clenched teeth. It was her turn to reach for him, and she touched his shoulder in concern. She felt him shiver under her fingers.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Headache," he moaned, his hand going to his head. "Again."

She nodded her understanding. "You told me you had them every time you try to tax your memory."

Scarlet nodded. "Yeah. Maybe it's –" He gave a louder grunt and clutched his head with his hand; he wavered on his feet, and Rhapsody's hold on him became firmer.

"Paul?"

Scarlet could hear the young woman's voice, but over it there was another voice – a male one, filled with the same concern. There was a flash in Scarlet's mind, coming with the pain, and then, a brief vision – the face of a blond man, of about

thirty, with pale blue eyes, looking seriously at him. "*Captain, are you all right?*"

The image was gone as quickly as it came, and Scarlet shook his head, the pain clearing. Rhapsody was looking at him, an expression of worry on her face. "What is it?" she asked. "You're as pale as a sheet."

"I had a... new flashback, I think."

"A new flashback?"

"Yeah, but it was very brief... like the blink of an eye. And... it was different this time. It wasn't of pain or violence, like all the other flashbacks I had before."

"What was it about?"

"I saw the face of a man. A blond man." Scarlet frowned. "He looked friendly. I don't know, I feel like I should know him. He seemed familiar to me. But I have no idea who it could be."

Rhapsody nodded slowly. "Was he wearing a blue uniform?"

"I don't know if it was a uniform..." Scarlet frowned, trying to recall what he had seen. "Yes, some kind of blue tunic, I think."

"Captain Blue," Rhapsody said with a slow nod.

"Captain Blue... another colleague in Spectrum?"

"Yes. Your regular partner, on assignments. And also – your best friend. His name's Adam."

"Adam," Scarlet echoed pensively. He made further effort to remember, to get hold of this elusive image that had disappeared so quickly, but his attempts were rewarded with a new sudden pang of pain and he grunted, reaching for his head.

"What's the matter?" Rhapsody asked. "Did you remember something else?"

"No, but I should stop trying for a while... unless you want to pick me up from the mud. I've... er... fainted, from trying too much to remember already."

"Then stop," Rhapsody suggested firmly. "There's no point in causing yourself further pain."

"But I want so much to remember everything you're telling me, and –"

Scarlet's voice broke. The splitting headache was threatening to overcome him and it was all he could do to keep on his feet.

At this point, Rhapsody didn't realise the severity of his predicament, as she suddenly became aware of an approaching danger; just at the limit of her hearing, she could hear something – a faint buzzing, the sound of engines that she recognised instantly. She raised her eyes to the sky over their heads, searching anxiously.

She saw the dark shape of a helicopter appear over the treetops and fly over the clearing; instantly, she recognised that craft, with the WAAF markings on it; realising that any second now, they might be spotted, she instinctively reacted.

Unaware that Scarlet was the victim of yet another spell, she forcefully pushed him back under the shade of the trees and bushes they had just left a moment ago, and forced him down to the ground. He fell, not offering any resistance, at the same time surprised by her action and preoccupied by his own dizziness. The shotgun escaped from his grasp and he crashed on his back, onto the leaf-covered ground and she landed practically on top of him; he held on to her on pure impulse, to avoid both of them getting hurt.

She scrambled to lie by his side, leaving her right arm across his chest to compel him to stay down. With her left hand, she reached for the shotgun, lying on the ground nearby. "Don't move!" she ordered him.

Scarlet feebly nodded, indicating that he would follow her instructions, but just as he did, there was another violent flash of light, and the pain in his head became more violent. He swiftly closed his eyes, as if his mind suddenly tore itself open, and a new image appeared to him.

Again, it was a very brief image.

He could see himself, holding a young woman in his arms; he was kissing her, and it was an intense kiss. The woman's long hair flowed over her shoulders...

*Red hair...*

The image disappeared as quickly as it came and darkness then engulfed Scarlet's mind.

As she was flat on her belly, Rhapsody needed to twist her neck around to look above. Through the thickness of the branches and leaves hiding them, she could see the helicopter hovering in the sky, apparently scanning the area. As it approached their position, she lowered her head close to the ground, her heart pounding, wondering if they had been seen already – and hoping that if it wasn't the case, it would remain so. Her hands tensely clutched the gun, her right index finger stroking the trigger.

The helicopter didn't spot them, and it continued on its course, going in the opposite direction they had been heading. Rhapsody anxiously followed it with her eyes, until it disappeared over the treetops, and the sound of its rotor faded in the distance. She then exhaled loudly, reassured that they were safe for the time being.



She had not expected this. According to what she had overheard that very morning, the helicopter wasn't to participate in the search for Scarlet, in order to save fuel to return to New Orleans. Obviously, it now had joined the hunt, and she imagined that the only reason why there had been a change of plan was that the Mysterons were now desperate to find the microchip. Maybe there was a deadline to their new threat, or maybe Spectrum was closing in on them. Or maybe both.

She hoped that Spectrum was indeed close by, which meant that Scarlet and she stood a chance of being rescued, but she was deeply aware that now, their pursuers were even more dangerous than before.

She and Scarlet had to be extra-careful.

Putting the shotgun down on the ground, she turned to her companion, lying on his back by her side. Contrary to what she expected, he wasn't looking to the sky, in the direction the helicopter had disappeared to. His eyes were closed, and he looked unconscious.

*He couldn't have hit the ground that hard*, she thought, concern filling her. *Or maybe he did.* He had cushioned their fall with his body, but surely that wouldn't be enough to knock him out. She recalled his dizzy spell just as the helicopter had appeared. Might he have lost consciousness due to that?

Those attacks were becoming more than an annoyance – they were now downright worrying.

She crawled to him and leaned over his chest, shaking him gently, but firmly. She was about to call his name, when he groaned and his blue eyes opened. At first, they seemed confused, but then, they looked straight at her and they cleared of all confusion.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded, taking a deep breath. "I am," he answered in a low voice. "Pain's gone now..."

"You lost consciousness, didn't you?"

"Yeah. But I'm okay now. I'm sorry I scared you." He was looking at her in a very odd way.

"Damn right you scared me." Rhapsody sighed in relief. She then realised he had his right arm around her, in an almost protective way, and didn't seem inclined to remove it. She wondered at what moment exactly he had got hold of her like this.

She tried to ignore the arm.

"You saw the chopper?" she asked, and when he nodded, she explained: "That was Montgomery's chopper. The one you fell from."

He nodded again. "I'd worked that out."

"It was obviously searching for us," she moved on. "It's gone now, so we're safe... at least for a little while."

He nodded again in answer, and she frowned at him, puzzled by his uncharacteristic silence. Up until now, she had had so much trouble getting him to shut up. And now, the way he was staring at her was making her a little ill at ease.

"I think it would be better if we keep under the trees," she continued, "and avoid coming out into the open as much as possible."

"Seems like the sensible thing to do, yes," he responded.

Rhapsody's frown deepened. He was a little too calm and docile, and that worried her. He didn't appear as concerned as he should be about this close call. His reaction – or rather lack of – was rather bizarre.

"Paul... Are you *sure* you're all right? Did you hurt yourself when we fell?"

"No, I didn't hurt myself. I'm okay. As fit as a fiddle, actually."

Rhapsody wasn't convinced.

"Come on. Get up from there." She rose into a sitting position, freeing herself of his arm, and pulling him up by her side. He brushed dead leaves off his clothes, absently, and she looked at him attentively. She touched his rough cheek. He stopped brushing himself and their eyes met again.

"I'm not sure you're as fit as you pretend," she insisted. "Does your head still –"

"I don't have a headache right now," Scarlet answered swiftly. His voice softened. "You don't need to worry about me."

"I can't help it," she replied. "You've not yourself at the moment. I've never seen you so helpless and –"

"So that must mean you care about me?" Scarlet asked.

Rhapsody frowned. *What a silly and strange question...*

"Of course, I care about you. You're –"

Scarlet put a finger to her lips, shushing her. Then he reached to cup her cheek with his hand, and Rhapsody felt his thumb warmly stroking her. He was looking at her so intensely again, the blue of his eyes turning to a darker shade, as he gazed into hers. A very thin smile tugged his lips.

"I'm fine," he said softly, as he leaned closer. "Quite fine..."

The next thing Rhapsody knew, his lips were on hers, and she opened her eyes wide with surprise.

There was a moment of timid hesitation, as Rhapsody's hand hovered uncertainly over Scarlet's chest, undecided whether she should push him back or not; but it barely lasted a second or two, before she laid it against him and she found

herself willingly responding to his kiss. That seemed to encourage him, and he wrapped his arms around her to pull her closer to him. Again, she responded in kind, almost out of reflex, and her arms slid around his shoulders.

Rhapsody tried to recall how many times she had dreamed – *hoped* – that one day he would be holding her in his arms so closely, and kissing her like this. It seemed to her that it had been an eternity since the first moment she had laid her eyes on Paul Metcalfe and had felt something stir inside her. Since the first time she had realised it, she had tried to deny it – in her opinion, pursuing a relationship other than friendship with a work colleague *wasn't* the best of ideas, even without considering the strict military regulations of Cloudbase. But she couldn't deny she felt something for this man. A physical attraction – certainly. A deep affection – more than probably. Love... She was still wondering about that.

She had never truly opened up to him, because she wasn't that sure how he truly felt about her in return. Oh yes, he liked to tease her – most of the time, he drove her crazy, often on purpose, knowing full well that it didn't take that much for her temper to flare up. And he had flirted with her on a few occasions, but she had caught him flirting with other women as well. Especially with Destiny, and that had made Rhapsody wonder about the depth of his feelings for their French colleague – although Destiny would deny that there was anything romantic or sexual between them. She had always pretended they were now just good friends. But Rhapsody had yet to learn if this was the kind of friendship she herself had with Scarlet; and most importantly, was it really what she wanted to content herself with?

He had not kissed her like this since the previous Christmas, when she had fallen from a stool straight into his waiting arms, and they had found themselves under the mistletoe. No, this wasn't really true; he had *never* kissed her quite like this before, nor held her this way – with such passion, such possessiveness. The way he was stroking her, Rhapsody had a very strong feeling that simply kissing and holding her wasn't the only thing on his mind.

She had confirmation that he indeed wanted more, when she felt his hand slipping between their bodies and slowly wandering up her sweater, stroking her naked belly. An involuntary shiver passed through her skin, and she realised, without much of a surprise, that she shared his much too palpable desire.

And somehow it scared her.

She reached for his hand and stopped its wandering before it went too far, while with her other hand, she gently pushed Scarlet off her. She broke their kiss, reluctantly but firmly, disengaged herself from his arms, and, breathing hard, turned away to avoid looking at him, making a show of smoothing her sweater down.

She could feel his eyes on her, and she had no trouble imagining how perplexed he might be at her reaction. She had a hard time not to shudder when he gently touched her shoulder. "What is it?" he asked softly.

She turned to look at him; there was indeed a puzzled expression on his face. "I don't think this would be a good idea," she explained, offering a rueful smile.

The answer seemed to add to Scarlet's confusion. He then appeared to suddenly realise what could be wrong. "You mean – now is not really the time to..." He let the rest hang.

Rhapsody hesitated for a fraction of a second, before answering, "Well, yes, there's a bit of that. But that's not the only reason. Or even the *main* reason."

His perplexity growing, Scarlet frowned, looking at Rhapsody. He was sure he wasn't mistaken: she was the woman he had seen in that flashback. That long red hair was a dead giveaway.

Was it? Perhaps it was another woman. Or perhaps what he had seen wasn't exactly what he imagined it to be.

He felt himself a little embarrassed. He sat up straight. "I'm sorry... I just assumed..." He cleared his throat, unsure how to voice his apologies. He didn't want to embarrass her by uttering some thoughtless idiocy. "I should have realised... A woman like you – you must have someone in your life."

"No. No, it's not that."

"No?" Scarlet gave it some quick thought, and another explanation came to him. He let go of her shoulder, looking even more apologetic. "I think I see... It's like I'm taking advantage of you, and of the situation, and –"

She put a hand on his chest, stopping him in mid-sentence. "No. No, you don't get it at all." She looked at him even more confused expression and shook her head slowly. "It's not you who's taking advantage of the situation. It's *me*."

\* \* \*

It wasn't the first time that Johnny Monroe felt his friends had shunned him.

Of course, he knew he was different from them; he wasn't as eager as they could be when it came to getting whatever they wanted. He wasn't as tough, mean, or brutal as them. Even Scarecrow could be really nasty when he wanted to, and he certainly didn't need that much incentive. For Johnny, it was different. He would follow the others' lead because he had to, if he wanted to be part of the gang. And because he desperately wanted to be accepted by them, he would do whatever they asked of him. He followed them in any of their deeds – however bad they seemed – although he would sometimes have second thoughts. *Not* because he felt it was wrong to do those things, but because he would often consider the consequences of his actions, if he ever got caught.

At heart, Johnny Monroe was a coward, and he knew it. And what was even worse, the others knew it as well.

He wasn't that much against the killing of Joe Benson; after all, he had no sympathy for the old man, who had been nothing to him, and done nothing for him. Old Joe lived alone, like a hermit in the bayou, and had very little contact with anyone else, so it mattered little if he disappeared. And there was the reward they would eventually be able to claim, now that the old man was out of the way. Jasper had told them about the secret Joe had kept for years, the fortune he was sitting on. The old man never really made the most of it, so it really was a total waste. So why couldn't they just have it themselves? It wasn't as if Joe would miss it anyway.

But Old Joe refused Jasper's demands, and in no uncertain terms had made it very clear that he would never accept any offer. So there was no other way for Jasper and his gang to get what they wanted but to get rid of him. That proved easy enough to do, and it would not have been so bad if there had not been a witness to the killing. That's where everything started going badly.

Unlike to the others, Johnny never was that sure that the stranger would make such a good patsy. Sure, he was amnesiac, and nobody knew him, and the sheriff did seem satisfied that he had a culprit – although Johnny had a strong feeling that Masters didn't entirely believe Jasper's version of events. And the guy was supposed to be dead, so he couldn't really defend himself. But that was the problem: the guy *wasn't* dead. He freakishly seemed to 'revive' in the morgue, taking everyone by surprise, and throwing a wrench into Jasper's plans. And then, it looked like the stranger was wanted by Spectrum. Johnny didn't know for what reason, and quite frankly, he didn't care.

Things kept going from bad to worse from there. They were forced to get rid of the sheriff – Dallas had killed him – and the

freak was free in the bayou... with an unknown woman who might actually know far too much for comfort. In any case, if she didn't know anything at first, the freak was sure to tell her all that had happened. Johnny was sure she would believe him implicitly.

Both were unwanted witnesses, and both needed to disappear; Johnny couldn't deny that fact. But he didn't like that they were roaming free, and could, at any moment, encounter anyone to whom they might tell their story. However unlikely that story seemed, there was the risk that it would be believed. What would Jasper do, then – make these new witnesses disappear as well? The way things were going, Johnny had no doubt that it was Jasper's solution for everything. He hadn't hesitated one minute to give Johnny a gun with instructions to use it if he should need to.

When it came to standing back and watching as someone else did the killing, Johnny had little problem with that – as long as there was no risk of him getting the blame for it. But to actually murder someone himself... Johnny had yet to make that step. However, if he had to do it to prove his worth to the rest of the gang, he would; he didn't have to like it, but he would get his hands dirty as well.

When he reached the site by the river, where they had left the sheriff's car along with what remained of the ORVs, Johnny stopped to consider his next action. He decided to first check on the bikes, assessing the damage done to them. Jamie's machine had been totalled by the shotgun discharge, and would never be repaired, whatever amount of work was done to it. There was a wheel missing, and Johnny even wondered how the hell he would be able to move it. He imagined that the best he could do was to cover it up or push it into the river, if he was even strong enough to make it budge.

As for the other ORVs, they still had wheels, and so it would be easy enough to push them onto the road, walk them some distance away and hide them. Johnny knew of a pond of dark water nearby, and it looked like a perfect place to throw them in. Cleaning up their traces wouldn't be too difficult either. Brushing the dusty road with branches should take care of any imprint left by the machines' tires.

His decision of what to do with the ORVs made, Johnny turned his attention to the sheriff's car. The boot was open, so he checked the contents out. There wasn't much in it, except for a gasoline container, and an empty rack, which was obviously intended to hold a rifle. In his mind's eye, Johnny recalled how the red-haired girl had appeared from behind the car with her

shotgun, and he thought he'd figured out where she had got that weapon.

Johnny eyed the gas container. 'Destroy the evidence', Jasper had said. Suddenly, the young man knew exactly how he would do that. He pulled the container out of the boot, and weighed it in his hand; it was almost full. He grunted with satisfaction. He had a lighter in his pocket; setting the car alight would be the best way to make sure there was nothing incriminating to be found in it. And the surrounding area was moist enough to prevent a fire propagating further than the clearing itself.

He opened the container, and started splashing its contents into the boot and then all over the car, while quickly walking around it.

When he had nearly completed a circuit of the car, he reached the open front door and stopped his splashing, casting a curious eye inside; there was something lying on the passenger seat. It was an empty folder, and Johnny could see the papers it used to contain spread out on the floor. He put the now half-empty container onto the ground and leaned into the car to take the documents, curious to know what they could be. He found a medical report, signed by Doc Evers, as well as black and white mug shots of the man his friends were hunting. He tried to read the report, but couldn't make anything out of it; not only did the doctor's handwriting leave a lot to be desired, but the words aligned on the paper made no sense to him at all.

As he was still trying to read, Johnny noticed a large brown paper bag on the floor; he picked it up and put it onto the seat to check what was in it. He found a big transparent plastic bag, containing clothes – some kind of camouflage costume, like those worn by hunters. There was an awful smell pervading them, and by what Johnny could see, they were in pretty bad shape, with tears all over the place, and dark stains that the boy could only presume were blood. He grimaced and threw the plastic bag aside.

He went on with his examination of the bag's contents; there were still a few items in there, all individually packed in smaller transparent bags. There was a broken compass that Johnny snorted at. In another bag, there was what looked like dog tags, similar to those worn by Army guys. Johnny could see a tiny round logo printed on one of them, but it was so damaged that he couldn't figure out what it could be exactly. He shrugged it off, negligently tossed it away onto the back seat and continued his investigation.

As Johnny's hand reached inside the bag for the next item – a tiny box that was lying at the bottom – he heard a sound behind

him, like a twig snapping under a heavy step; he stopped his searching instantly and was about to turn around, when something cold came to rest against the nape of his neck, and he heard the click of a hammer being cocked. He froze.

"Don't make a single move, boy, or I'll blow your brains out."

Johnny blanched and his heart started to beat wildly. Someone grabbed him by the shoulder to extract him from the car, and he instantly let go of the bag, which landed on the floor. He was pushed against the hood, where he landed roughly, and he felt hands frisking him none too gently, to finally relieve him of his gun.

"Tsk, ts, ts. What are you doing with artillery like that?" he heard the same voice as before. "And you didn't even have the safety on. You know you could hurt yourself, just by carrying it that way?"

Hands turned him around and again, he was roughly pushed against the car, but this time, facing his assailants. They were two men, stone-faced, dressed in camouflage uniform. They were heavily armed, like soldiers would be. Johnny was shaking in his boots; whoever they were, they looked dangerous to him, and the cold way they were staring at him didn't bode very well. He also didn't like the fact that they were wearing the same kind of clothing as those he had just found, and which he suspected belonged to that O'Hara guy.

While the first man, tall and slim, was putting his own gun back into his holster to aim Johnny's gun under the young man's nose, the other one, standing just behind his companion, was shaking the gasoline container. Johnny could hear the hollow splashing of the liquid against the metallic surface.

"What were you planning with this, boy?" the man asked casually. "Something naughty, no doubt..."

Johnny swallowed hard. "Who are you?"

"We are asking the questions, boy," the man facing him snapped so roughly that it made Johnny jump. "Tell us about the man who was in that car."

"What man?"

"The man who was the sheriff's prisoner. The stranger who got arrested for murder." There was a dangerous glow in the man's now narrowed eyes. "Where is he?"

"How the hell should I know?" Johnny replied, trying to keep his aplomb.

The soldier stepped forward, squarely levelling the gun between Johnny's eyes. The boy tried to step back, out of fear, but his back was already against the car behind him.



"Don't play with me, kid. Seeing as you were about to set fire to that car, I'm pretty sure you know whom I'm talking about. You will tell me you don't know what happened here either?"

Despite his fear, Johnny found in himself the courage to deny everything. "That's right – I don't know. Look, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's why you're trying to destroy the evidence?" the other man said, waving the gasoline container. "Aren't you the smart-ass..."

"Is one of these yours?" the taller man asked again, nodding in the direction of the closest ORV.

"No," Johnny replied quickly.

"You're lying," the first man remarked quietly. He took aim. Johnny paled and his jaw dropped. "If you know what's good for you –"

"Don't shoot!" Johnny closed his eyes, almost panicking. "All right, all right... There was an accident... The sheriff's car went off road. His prisoner killed him and ran off into the swamp!"

"Ain't it the truth?" the second man muttered.

"Shut up, Baxter," his companion growled. "So Scarlet killed the sheriff, kid?"

"Yeah – yeah, that's the guy's name... He killed him... In cold blood. I saw it!"

"Did you? And he escaped all on his own?"

"He had an accomplice who helped him." Johnny opened his eyes to stare at the tall man with the implacable face.

"Who?" the man insisted.

Johnny nodded nervously. "A girl... A pretty girl... with red hair."

"*The Angel*," Baxter spat. "I told you she would be trouble, Major."

"Angel?" Johnny repeated, stuttering.

"You were not alone," the major moved on. "You had friends. You didn't ride all of these bikes on your own. Where are they?"

Johnny hesitated, unsure how to continue his story.

"And what happened to these bikes?" the man continued with insistence. "How did they end up this way?"

As Johnny continued to keep his mouth shut, Baxter snorted with derision.

"This kid obviously knows more than he's letting on," he said. "If you give me a minute with him, Major, I'll make sure he'll tell us everything we want to know."

Johnny paled, but the slim man standing in front of him shook his head at the suggestion. "That won't be necessary,

Sergeant.” He looked straight at the trembling Johnny. “You’re afraid of us, aren’t you, lad?”

“I have a gun aimed in my face...” Johnny swallowed hard. “Who wouldn’t be afraid?”

“Point taken.” The major nodded, and lowered the gun, but only slightly. That was enough to give Johnny some courage.

“Who are you people, anyway?” he asked abruptly. “What are you doing here?”

Major Philip Montgomery glared at the frightened young man standing in front of him. He was everything Montgomery despised the most: a cowardly, cowering boy who would do nothing right with his life and eventually end up on the wrong side of the law. His human self had met many of that kind – young men who had no choice but to enlist in the Army, or had been forced into it, either to avoid trouble with the authorities, or simply to do something worthwhile with their lives. And now, Montgomery had one more reason to look down on this boy: he was an *Earthman*, which, for a Mysteron agent, was something akin to a capital crime.

“We’re asking the questions here, lad. Not you,” Montgomery said, trying to conceal the edge in his voice. “Now: you say that Scarlet escaped and ran off – with that red-haired girl who helped him?”

Johnny nodded vigorously in answer.

“Into the swamp? Wouldn’t they head to town instead?”

“No, they went up river.” Johnny nodded towards the violent stream running beside them. “They stole a boat, but they surely didn’t go far with it.”

“How can you tell?” Montgomery asked.

Johnny shrugged. “It was McCullen’s boat they stole. McCullen never leaves much fuel in the tank, ‘cause he knows people would be taking rides in it for free. Everybody knows that.”

“I see.” Montgomery narrowed his eyes at the young man, before glancing back at his companion, still standing behind him and looking at Johnny with contempt in his eyes. “What do you think of this, Baxter?”

The latter shrugged. “Scarlet – killing the sheriff in cold blood? That part doesn’t compute, Major. But for the rest... I think some of what the kid says is true... If Scarlet is back in the swamp, it’ll be easier for us to get him there. Not as many unwanted witnesses around than there would have been in town. And as long as he or the Angel hasn’t made contact with his base...”

"According to our last report from New Orleans, neither of them did," Montgomery commented. "But we *still* have to find him – and the Angel too, of course. And this swamp makes for a lot of ground to cover."

"You're after them too, then?" Johnny asked, his curiosity suddenly stronger than his fears and his good sense to keep quiet.

Montgomery scrutinized him. "Who's after them, beside us?"

"The law, of course," Johnny added quickly, realising he might have said too much. "He killed a man already – that's why the sheriff had him in custody. And now that he killed the sheriff too – the townsfolk at Les Arbrisseaux will want his skin."

"I doubt very much that people in town already know about the sheriff's demise," Montgomery noted coldly. "What happened here was quite recent, and I doubt you or your friends had the time to warn anyone – even if it had been your intention. And it was *not* your intention, was it?"

Under Montgomery's scrutinising gaze, Johnny only lowered his eyes, unwilling to offer any answer. The major snorted, and stepped back. He put the gun into his belt in a casual gesture, spying at the same time the glitter of relief that passed through the boy's still lowered eyes. He ignored it.

"You're not telling me the truth. Or at least, you're not telling me everything. Something else happened here, that you and your friends were involved in. We caught you as you were preparing to destroy the evidence and that tells me you don't have a clear conscience."

Montgomery looked at the boy with a cold stare. Johnny could feel his knees shaking. This guy was a little too perceptive for his taste.

"Where are your friends now?" Montgomery asked again, in a slower voice. "By any chance, wouldn't they be after the fugitives themselves? And for what reason, exactly, hmmm? What happened here, and why were you trying to set fire to this car?"

Johnny couldn't stop himself from shaking; he didn't answer, and Montgomery frowned deeply, annoyed at the young man's silence. He glared coldly at him, standing like an unmoving statue, while Baxter, losing his patience, took a step forward.

"I can still make him talk, Major."

Johnny became even paler than before, seeing the evil glow in the man's eye. But just as Baxter was about to put his hands on him, Montgomery intervened. "I've got a better idea." Baxter backed away, and the major kept looking at Johnny.

"You know the swamp well, son?"

"Well enough." Johnny eyed the military man suspiciously. "Why d'you ask?"

"I was thinking that maybe you would be able to help us."

Johnny opened his eyes wide with surprise. "Me... help you? How?"

"That should be easy to understand. We don't know this swamp, but it's easy to see that someone could hide there for days, before they could be found. And there are many dangers all around the place that we wish to avoid while we search. Since you seem to know your way around... you could be our guide."

"Your... guide?"

"Are you deaf as well as dumb, boy?" Baxter snapped at him irritably.

Johnny swallowed hard under the remonstrance. He found the courage to ask the question that was burning his lips, addressing Montgomery directly: "Why are you after them, to begin with?"

"They have something of ours – something of great value that we want to retrieve. If your friends kill them – and I believe that's what they're planning to do – we won't be able to get what we want."

Johnny narrowed his eyes. "So by that, I think you mean... you need me, right?"

Montgomery glared at him. The tone the boy was now using was bordering on insolence. He nodded slowly. "Yes, you can say that we indeed need you," he said, keeping the edge off his voice.

Johnny pondered this a moment. "What's in it for me?" he finally asked.

"You mean as a reward?" Montgomery asked.

"Yeah... You asked me to help you, so I think that I should deserve –"

"I'm not saying I'm *asking* you, boy," Montgomery interrupted. "I'm *telling you* you will help us. And don't worry, you'll have your just reward."

"It'll be night soon. You know, it ain't safe to go into the swamp at night... Too many dangers."

"You'll tell us you're afraid of the dark, lad?" Montgomery scoffed.

"The swamp *is* dangerous at night," Johnny insisted. "It's not called Devil's Bayou for nothin'. Nobody with any common sense will venture into it after dark. It'll be suicide. Everybody around here knows that. You're not from these parts, you said so yourselves. So you'd better take my word for it."

Montgomery mused on the young man's words. For the first time, there was a ring of truth in what he was saying. "How about your friends?" he asked. "Will they continue the hunt for Scarlet and the girl?"

"At night?" Johnny snorted. "Even they're not that stupid. They'll set up camp somewhere and wait until morning to continue their search. And if your Scarlet guy and his girlfriend don't do the same, they'll be goners. They'll end up at the bottom of a pit or in the jaws of a 'gator, that's for sure."

Montgomery nodded. "Baxter?" he asked his companion.

"Kid seems to be talking sense here, Major," Baxter approved. "He has some good points."

"All right then," Montgomery approved. "We'll make the most of what's left of the day and will start again in the morning, if we have to."

"I'm not sure I should trust you, man," Johnny replied. "I haven't said 'yes', yet."

"You will trust me," Montgomery replied coolly. "So much so that you will tell me *everything* that's been going on, including what happened here and why you tried to destroy the evidence. You'll be one of us, boy." Slowly, he took Johnny's gun back from his belt and raised it, to take careful aim at the young man. "Now don't move. It'll only hurt for a second."

Johnny froze and became white as a sheet; he didn't even have time to cry out, before Major Montgomery pulled the trigger.

The single detonation rang through the swamp, and the impact drove Johnny's limp body back; it fell into the car and slumped onto the back seat. The young man was dead long before the echo of the shot faded into the distance.

Coldly, Montgomery looked down at the dead young man; then, with a casual gesture, he threw Johnny's gun into the car, right next to the body, before turning to Baxter.

"Call back Petroski," he instructed. "It's not necessary for him to check the town any more, since Scarlet is not there. And we will need everyone to track him and the Angel down."

Baxter nodded. Having been sent barely an hour earlier to scout ahead and survey Les Arbrisseaux before they would reach it, Petroski wouldn't take much time to rejoin them. "We may have to consider that Scarlet is not amnesiac anymore, Major," Baxter remarked. "Knowing him, he might have healed from that by now. And as the Angel's with him now, she probably helped him remember."

"That's possible," Montgomery mused. "If he has recovered his memory, that'll make it easier for us to get the chip from him. He will be able to tell us about it when we find him." He gave the damaged car a cursory glance and then took the gas container

between his hands, looking at it thoughtfully. He threw it into the car.

"That was a good idea," he commented, turning to Baxter. "Light it. Get rid of the evidence."

"Sure..." Baxter said casually. "I imagine I shouldn't bother with the bikes, though?"

"It's not necessary, no."

Baxter took his lighter from his vest pocket, and lit it, before nodding casually in the direction of the footsteps he could hear coming from behind him. "And what about him?"

Montgomery looked on as the approaching newcomer came to stand in front of him.

"Am I correct in assuming that *now* you will answer all my questions – and that you will help us willingly?"

The new Mysterion agent wearing the face of Johnny Monroe simply nodded at the question, as a cold and evil smile slowly spread on his lips.

\* \* \*

"Why don't you have anybody in your life?"

Rhapsody rolled her eyes at the sound of her companion's query. Following their near-miss encounter with the WAAF helicopter, she and Scarlet had started walking again, in the hope of reaching Joe's cabin before nightfall. Scarlet had stayed mostly silent, letting her lead the way, and this time, refraining from complaining as he had done during the first half of their trek through the swamp. These were his first words in nearly an hour; she wondered if she didn't prefer him complaining than asking a personal question like that.

She felt highly annoyed.

"I never said I didn't – and I don't see why it's any of your business." She didn't turn around when she answered, but by the sound of his voice when next he spoke, she understood he was a bit surprised by her harsh reply. And certainly contrite enough.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude in your private life." He casually rested the shotgun on his shoulder. "I just thought... well, since you said we were friends..."

"We are," Rhapsody answered swiftly. She then hesitated slightly. "But I don't think that friends should ask questions like that."

"Again, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Rhapsody heard his steps hurrying from behind, and he came up beside her. The path was widening, allowing them to now walk side by side. She didn't look at him, as he continued: "I'm just... Well, there's something I don't quite get."

She wondered what he meant by that; although it didn't seem very wise to raise to the challenge, she replied, "A woman like me, you said... What did you mean?"

"Well, you're a strikingly beautiful woman..." She waved the remark aside, but he insisted: "No, really, you are. I'm sure you realise that. I naturally assumed that you would be romantically involved with a man." Scarlet looked at her, but she didn't look back. "Is that not the case?" he asked carefully.

Rhapsody shook her head. "I don't really have the time for romance in my life at the moment," she replied emphatically.

"Okay, I get it. Work gets in the way?"

"Romantic involvements between colleagues are frowned upon on Cloudbase."

"That sounds like an answer drilled into you."

"Those are the rules. There isn't much that can be done about them."

Scarlet chuckled, almost despite himself. "Now which imbecile thought of rules like that, and imagined that normal people would stick to them? I may be amnesiac, but I'm not stupid." His comment made a smile appear on Rhapsody's lips, but she quickly wiped it away, hoping he had not noticed. She was pretty sure he had, anyway, when she heard his next question: "Do I have someone in my life?"

"No," she answered with a shake of her head.

The reply had been swift, which again seemed to render Scarlet perplexed. "No? That sounds very definite. Are you sure?"

"If you were involved with someone, I'm pretty sure I would know." Rhapsody bit her lip. *Now why did I have to say that?*

It was, of course, too late.

"Why? Am I the kind of man who has the habit of laying out his private life – or conquests – for everyone to know and see?" He mused on it and shrugged. "Not that I *think* I am..."

"You're not," Rhapsody said, offering him what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

She caught then the way he was looking at her, and quickly averted her eyes. She started walking faster, as if trying to put some distance between herself and her colleague; before she could get very far, he seized her by the arm and stopped her in her tracks, forcing her to turn to him; it wasn't a brutal gesture, and he wasn't holding her too forcibly. When she faced him, annoyed, she found him smiling, with that roguish kind of smile that sometimes could either disarm her or infuriate her.

She didn't quite know where to stand, when he spoke again:

"If you know that much, then it must mean that you do feel something for me, I reckon."

"I've never said that," she replied bluntly.

"Then –"

"If I know that much, it's simply because *everyone* on Cloudbase has noticed how hard you've been working these last few months."

He looked at her sceptically. "So I've been working so hard that I couldn't find time to spend with someone?"

No, Rhapsody reflected inwardly. *There was something else*. But what could she tell him? She couldn't very well say that from what she'd been able to gather, he didn't seem to want to get involved in a romantic relationship with a woman because of his condition. Not that she agreed with that – she did not, in fact, and found it profoundly ridiculous. She preferred not to say anything at this point and simply looked back at him in silence.

"You actually haven't said either that you *don't* feel anything for me," he continued, more as a remark than as a question. "The way you responded to my holding you earlier –"

"I pushed you away," she reminded him.

Scarlet conceded that fact. "Because you said it was a bad idea at the time, and I admit that it was, considering our current situation. But before you pushed me away... you didn't seem to mind that much." The intensity in his blue eyes seemed to glow just a little brighter, and that made Rhapsody uncomfortable. "I would even say that you might not be... that indifferent towards me?"

Rhapsody raised a brow. "If I gave you that impression –"

"You did. But –" Scarlet stopped, hesitating.

Rhapsody scrutinized him. "There's something else, isn't it?" she asked suspiciously. "Where did the impulse to kiss me come from, exactly?"

He chewed on his bottom lip. "Remember just before that helicopter appeared?" he said. "The dizzy spell I had? I was having another flashback. And not of Montgomery... or of that Captain Blue I just saw before."

*Now that's interesting*, Rhapsody thought. "What kind of flashback?"

"About us." Scarlet pointed to himself and then at her. "You and me. I saw us. We were kissing."

He noticed her swift blink of surprise; but she quickly picked up the ball. "Friends do kiss from time to time, you know."

It was his turn to raise a sceptical brow. "The kind of kiss I remembered?" He shook his head. "Uh-uh. I don't think so." He waited for an answer and received none; if he hoped her eyes would betray her thoughts, he was disappointed. She was just looking back at him in silence. He frowned. "Are you *sure* we're *just* friends?"



"You're jumping to conclusions," Rhapsody finally answered, in a poised and calm voice, as a thought came to her mind. "Tell me – in that flashback of yours – how were you dressed?"

"Dressed?" he asked with a frown.

"What were you wearing? Do you remember?"

"I don't know... Well... It certainly wasn't the same tunic as your Captain Blue."

"Civilian clothes?"

"I guess." Scarlet made an effort to recall the image he had seen earlier. "All I can remember now is a red sweater... Yes, I was wearing a red sweater. A woollen sweater. And you..." He scratched his head. "Something white... maybe *you* were in uniform..."

"I see." Rhapsody nodded. "Was there a Christmas tree? Some mistletoe hanging over us?"

He stared at her, unsure, frowning as if trying to recall something of what she was describing. He stopped quickly, as he feared a headache might come to interrupt the present discussion. "I'm not sure... Maybe."

"Last Christmas, you were ill, and rather down – for some reason. I gave you a gift, a book, hoping it would raise your spirits. When you finally got through your bad patch, and decided to join the Christmas celebrations, you kissed me – I imagine, as a way of thanking me." Rhapsody smiled lightly. "I remember the woollen sweater. It was a very nice sweater and you told me about it: it was a gift from your Mum, a few years back. You always wear it around Christmas, because you think it's kind of Christmassy."

"So that would just be it, then? I simply gave you that kiss... to thank you?" Scarlet seemed perplexed – and still doubtful.

"I admit it was a pretty intense kiss. But then again, you never do anything by halves."

"Look..." Scarlet sighed and lowered his gaze. "Whatever that kiss was meant to be... I didn't kiss you earlier just out of gratitude. I would be lying if I denied feeling strongly attracted to you. And I thought, by the way you responded to me..." He let the rest hang and looked at her, waiting for an answer.

Rhapsody drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid it's all my fault. Your attention was quite flattering, I can't deny that. But further than that... there *isn't* anything between us."

She smiled, seeing him suddenly awkward, as he stood in front of her. He suddenly looked akin to a shy schoolboy. She gently reached to touch his arm.

Scarlet tensed, and uneasily looked back at her; he wasn't so sure he had jumped to conclusions, as she was implying.

There definitely was something between them, he was almost certain of it, and the electricity he could feel pass between them at the mere touch of her hand was enough to make him believe he was right. He had not dreamt the way she had abandoned herself to his embrace earlier. She was as attracted to him as he was to her. But why would she deny it now? Was it only because of those stupid rules she mentioned? Somehow he doubted it was the case.

And that thing she had said... about her taking advantage... What did she mean by that exactly? She wouldn't want to get further involved with him because he was amnesiac?

*Damn your conscience, girl... What if I wanted you to?*

He breathed out, slowly.

"All right," he finally said, looking closely at her, watching for her reactions, "if you say so, I will accept your explanations... however far-fetched they might sound."

"Paul..."

He quickly interrupted her before she could protest further: "For now, anyway. But I certainly won't forget to come back to the charge with that question..." He smiled, almost wickedly. "... At a more appropriate time."

Rhapsody frowned deeply, annoyed at these words. He sounded as if he didn't believe her. Her temper rose. "See here, Captain, you would be wasting your time if —"

But Scarlet wasn't listening to her. He seemed somehow distracted and wasn't even looking at her, but over his head, fixing a point in the distance. "Dianne..."

Rhapsody wasn't about to allow him to interrupt her. "Now, Captain, you *really* should give me the courtesy to speak so I would explain to you that —"

"Rhapsody," he said insistently, "I think you should look behind you."

Scarlet took her by the shoulder and gently coerced her to turn around.

She saw, not that far away from where they stood, an old, man-made, wooden construction. A cabin, half hidden behind the trees.

"Joe's cabin?" she asked her companion.

Scarlet shook his head. "I can't say for sure."

He narrowed his eyes as they stepped forward and emerged from behind the trees to stand in the small clearing. The cabin did look like what he remembered of Joe's place... And there, closer still, he saw the outline of a smaller wooden building. Listening carefully, he heard a very distinctive sound.

Scarlet then nodded. "There's a river nearby... And I remember that shed over there. Joe was cutting wood not far from it when he got killed. So that's got to be it."

"So we've reached our destination," Rhapsody said, heaving a deep sigh. "Finally. Do you recall if there's any kind of communication in there? Something we can use to call Spectrum?"

"Probably." Scarlet shrugged. "Remember, Joe alerted the sheriff after he found me? He might have had a radio, or a phone. Mobile, maybe, as I don't see a land-line."

"Then maybe we'll find that as well and see the end of this dreadful adventure," Rhapsody said, turning to Scarlet with an encouraging smile. "Come then. It's time to collect our prize."

Scarlet smiled in answer and just as they took their first steps towards the cabin, coming out from under the shade of the trees to step more into the open, he heard something that made him tense. He stopped and took Rhapsody's arm, compelling her to stop in turn. She turned a curious gaze at him.

"What is it?" she asked, spying the apprehensive expression on his face.

"Shh," he said, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Listen." He leaned his head to the side, brow furrowed and looked around, pricking up his ears. "I *heard* something."

Rhapsody became alert. Amnesiac or not, Captain Scarlet would not joke about a thing like that. She scanned the area with her eyes, listening carefully.

"I don't hear anything—"

She was cut short, as Scarlet roughly pushed her aside. She stumbled, and heard something fast whistling by her ear; almost instantaneously, she saw the object strike her companion in the left shoulder. The force of the impact was such that it pushed Scarlet off his feet and he hit the ground on his back with a force that knocked all the breath out of him. The shotgun flew from his hand to fall some distance from him. The Angel pilot froze momentarily.

"Paul!" Her first move was to rush to him, but she only took two paces before stopping, upon seeing the fletching of an arrow sticking out from where he had been struck. Instantly realising there was still danger, and that she might become the next target, she threw herself down on the ground, and slithered towards the fallen shotgun, trying to convince herself that Scarlet would be all right for the time being and that her first priority was to protect both of them from the invisible foe attacking them.

He didn't stay invisible for long; just as she was about to reach the gun, a booted foot viciously stamped on her hand. She cried out in pain and raised her head to look straight into the cold eyes of Scarecrow.

"Hi, girlie," he said with a malevolent smile. "Thought you had seen the last of us, didn't ya?"

Saying these words, the boy raised his foot with the intention of kicking Rhapsody under the chin. She saw it coming and she instinctively protected her face with her free arm. The foot connected with her forearm, with less force than Scarecrow intended, but it was violent enough to send the young woman rolling on her side, half-stunned.

With bleary eyes, she saw a second youth coming out of the woods, carrying a crossbow and whooping with joy over his victory.

"I've got him! I've finally got him, that son of a bitch!"

Jamie Lewis pranced over to where Scarlet lay on his back and delivered a violent kick, which drew no reaction from the victim, except for a low moan; he took aim again with his crossbow, intending to finish him off. This sight gave Rhapsody the strength to attempt to rise in order to intervene. But Scarecrow, swiftly dropping on his knees behind her, picked up the shotgun and passed it over her head, pressing the barrel across her throat and pulling her back. She choked, reached for the weapon with both hands, and fought back to free herself, but to no avail. She watched, helplessly, as Jamie released his new bolt, straight into his victim's chest. Scarlet's body shivered under the impact, before falling back motionless to the ground.

"That takes care of the freak." The struggle between Rhapsody and Scarecrow had not escaped Jamie. Dismissing the now silent and still Scarlet, he lowered his crossbow and turned all of his attention to the young woman, sneering evilly. "Now, as for you..."

He casually crossed the short distance between them, and threw his crossbow to the ground, obviously finding no use for it anymore. Instead, he pulled a jack-knife from his pocket, and then crouched in front of Rhapsody, clicking it open and flashing the blade before her eyes.

"Fancy finding you here, doll," he said casually. "Now I wonder... why did *you* and your boyfriend come back to this God-forsaken place when you could have headed toward civilisation? You were here for Joe's treasure as well, weren't ya? The old man told the freak about it and you wanted to beat us to it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, you murdering little creep," Rhapsody said between clenched teeth.

"You're lying," Jamie retorted. "We heard you, 'Crow and I. You said you wanted to collect the prize. Well, you can think again, bitch. The prize is ours and you're not gonna get it. We haven't found it yet, but it's only a question of time before we do. As for you, well... maybe, if we feel inclined to, we'll let you live just long enough for you to get a look at it."

When the knife came to rest on her cheek, Rhapsody stopped struggling; she glared with fury at the young man.

"I won't make it easy or quick for you, bitch," Jamie said between his teeth. "You destroyed my bike, and I promised myself I was gonna make you pay for it... And I'm gonna take my sweet time enjoying it."

His eyes changed focus and lit with covetousness, as he lowered his knife to rest it casually against one of her breasts; the smile on his lips became a crooked one. His intentions were painfully clear.

"Hang on, Jamie," Scarecrow then said from behind her. "We should call the others. Jasper said —"

"Screw Jasper!" Jamie snapped angrily. "He might kill her before we get a chance to have a piece of her." He paused a second. "Beside," he added, "it might make him a bit suspicious to know we found them here, so near Joe's place. He'll wonder why we were here to begin with, and might get idea that we intended to double-cross him for the dough."

"But we *just* wanted to have a first look for it, didn't we?" Scarecrow retorted.

"Yeah, 'Crow... Like you say." Jamie chuckled. "Come on, 'Crow... We can have some fun with her before we call the others, and then, that'll make no difference, one way or the other." He raised his eyes over Rhapsody's shoulder to look into his friend's face. "I can see it in your eyes, 'Crow. You want it as much as I do."

As Scarecrow was considering his companion's words and his mind was sidetracked, Rhapsody felt his grip relax, ever so slightly. Without either of the boys noticing it, she surreptitiously changed her position, and was able to slide her fingers behind the gun barrel, and her hold became firmer. All the while, she continued to glare coldly at Jamie Lewis. She had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of seeing any fear in her eyes.

He saw the way she was looking at him, and he cackled evilly.

"Tough broad, aren't you?" he said. He lowered his knife, and his free hand came up to fondle her.

Rhapsody gritted her teeth, loathing the touch of his hand on her body, and trying to ignore it. There was a far more

important consideration in her mind now: the knife wasn't threatening her anymore; she could make her move. She took a deep breath, preparing herself.

"Tougher than you, creeps!" she seethed between her teeth.

The words had barely flown from her lips than she violently jerked her head backwards, and hit Scarecrow dead on the nose; he yelled in pain, and his hold on the gun relaxed completely. Using all of her strength, Rhapsody pushed the weapon straight into Jamie's face.

The latter didn't even have the chance to gather his wits back and use his knife. Under the suddenness of her attack, he only thought of backing away to avoid the barrel, and raised his hands in an attempt to protect himself. The gun knocked his knife out of his fingers. He lost his footing and fell back, desperately taking hold of the gun at the same time. He pulled Rhapsody down with him, as she didn't want to let go.

The Spectrum Angel was fighting like a she-devil, and it was all the boy could do to keep her from getting complete control of the gun, all the while protecting himself from her wild kicks. Only a few paces behind her, Jamie could see Scarecrow holding his bleeding nose and moaning piteously. He didn't seem inclined to offer any help.

"Get her off me, 'Crow!" Jamie shouted, his voice mixed with anger and desperation. "Don't let her take the gun!"

Finally shaking himself, Scarecrow took but one step towards the two fighters.

Rhapsody just had the time to glance and see him coming; she felt his arms as they wrapped around her waist and pulled her up. She stamped on his toes, and that made him let go almost immediately, but it was enough time for Jamie to decide to change his strategy. Instead of pulling, he pushed the gun's barrel towards her; she was so surprised, that she failed to guard herself efficiently, and it was by pure luck that he hit her over the brow, so violently that she saw stars. With a victorious shout, Jamie struck her again, this time with more strength. That made her let go of the gun she had been so desperate to get, and she fell back and sprawled on the ground. Her mind clouded.

Jamie quickly scrambled to his feet, stumbling as he did so. "Bitch!" he yelled, standing over the now motionless Rhapsody, and pumping the gun. "I'll blow your head off and be done with it!"

He didn't even have time to take aim, as suddenly, a strong hand pulled him from behind and made him spin on his heels; he just had the time to see a fist coming at his face, before he felt

the pain of its full impact. The gun was forcibly torn from his hands as he fell to the ground.

Stunned, Jamie shook himself and looked up – and opened his eyes wide with astonishment upon seeing the man he thought he had previously killed standing awkwardly between him and the unconscious girl, the shotgun now at his feet.

“Don’t you come near her!” Scarlet warned angrily.

Jamie could only watch, barely believing his eyes; with two arrows stuck in his body, the stranger was still alive and standing on his own two feet. And he seemed quite determined to protect his woman.

Scarlet swayed on his feet, but it was not as hard to stand as it was to think. He had trouble using his left arm; the first arrow he had received, stuck in his shoulder, hurt every time he tried to move. His right hand reached it; he could feel the hard tip there, just beneath his skin; it wasn’t stuck very deep. His fingers curled around the arrow and he pulled hard, gritting his teeth against the pain. He gave a low grunt as the arrow emerged from his flesh.

Jamie’s eyes grew wider at the scene, and he watched, slack-jawed, as Scarlet glared at him with righteous anger burning in his now feverish eyes. The young man was frozen into place.

“Oh Hell... He’s still alive...” That was Scarecrow’s whimper, and glancing over his shoulder, Jamie could see that his companion was staring at Scarlet with the same astonishment in his eyes. Furthermore, he looked completely horrified. “That guy ain’t human...”

“Certainly more human than you,” Scarlet replied harshly in a stressed voice, causing Jamie to turn his attention back to him. He threw the blood-covered arrow to the ground with a disgusted gesture. “You boys should find a new pastime, other than trying to kill people.” He took one threatening step, overcoming the pain from his injuries. “I have had quite enough of you all.”

Scarecrow gasped loudly at the sound of this ominous threat and Jamie looked back in time to see his already terrified companion bolting away behind the trees. Jamie thought it was the best idea Scarecrow ever had in his life, and decided he should do the same. He didn’t want to be the only one on whom the freak exacted his vengeance. He swiftly scrambled to his feet to take the same direction, shouting after Scarecrow to wait for him.

He reached the trees, and noticed Scarecrow rounding a huge, fallen, dead trunk, before darting to the right as fast as his legs could carry him. Afraid that Scarlet would be giving chase, Jamie glanced over his shoulder, just as he jumped over the trunk. Too late he realised why Scarecrow had decided to go round it, as his feet hit the ground and he felt the mud closing around his ankles: he had completely forgotten the pond of quicksand just on the other side. He yelled in horror, stumbled forward, and quickly sank to his waist.

"Help!" he shouted, his heart pounding. "Crow! Come back! I'm stuck!"

He saw Scarecrow slowing down just a little and looking in his direction; for a split second, Jamie thought that his friend might actually return to help him out. But he could only see the terror in his eyes, even from this distance, and then Scarecrow turned around and ran away, disappearing quickly behind the trees.

"No!" In despair, Jamie could feel himself sinking even deeper. From behind, he heard movement, and as he turned around, he saw the stranger emerge from the bushes and stop as he reached the dead tree, to look at the young man's predicament. Jamie turned pleading eyes on him. "Don't leave me in here, man! Please, get me out!"

Scarlet froze for a moment. He was torn between the temptation of leaving the boy to the fate he so richly deserved, and his conscience, faced with the deadly danger threatening the life of another human being. His hesitation lasted only a brief second, and he shook himself; he rounded the trunk of the dead tree, trying to get closer to the boy who was still sinking, and was now up to his armpits.

"Help me!" Jamie bellowed desperately. "I beg you!"

"Calm down," Scarlet called to him in a stern voice. "I will help you. Just don't move and try to calm yourself."

"Please, man... I don't wanna die!"

Scarlet frowned. Joe Benson didn't want to die either... and neither did the sheriff. Nor that young woman this cowardly boy wanted to have his way with before he murdered her.

"I told you to stay calm." Scarlet came to stand at the very edge of the quicksand. He looked around, looking for something to throw the boy; he didn't have a belt, and he doubted that Jamie would be able to undo his in time. He found the solid low branch of a tree, to which he anchored himself with his right hand and he leaned over the pond, as close to the boy as he could. His left foot slipped in, but he found solid ground underneath it and leaned closer, stretching out his left arm towards Jamie. He



grunted. The wound in his shoulder was making it difficult, and he still had a bolt high in his chest, impeding his movement. He couldn't reach as far as he normally would.

"Reach out for my hand," he instructed the boy, between clenched teeth. "Come on... try to catch it!"

With his right arm heavy with mud, Jamie was frantically stretching as far as he could; he was now up to his neck and kept on sinking. His fingers touched Scarlet's, and the latter made another effort to catch him. When both their hands hooked, and Jamie held on with a strength born of desperation, it sent a wave of pain through Scarlet's shoulder and he cried out in pain, his vision blurring momentarily.

"I've got it! I've got it!" Jamie cried victoriously. "Don't let go, please!"

Scarlet shook his head to regain his vision, and held on. "I can't pull you... Hang on tight. Try to come to me."

"Man, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I swear to you, I'll make it up to you... I'll tell everything... I'll tell everyone the truth..." Jamie was now crying; out of gratitude, out of fear, probably both. Scarlet couldn't decide, and frankly he didn't care. He was just too disgusted.

"Just hold on," he said between his teeth. "You're not out of the woods yet..."

Slowly, Jamie was making his way towards him, but the mud was obviously pulling him down and it was a tiring effort for both the boy and the man trying to save him, just to keep him from sinking beneath. All this exertion was hurting Scarlet, and he could feel the sweat dripping down his face. His hands were sweaty; he wasn't sure how long he would be able to hold on, either to the branch anchoring him to the safe ground, or to Jamie's hand; he hoped the boy would be able to get out soon.

And then, his left foot skidded deeper into the quicksand and the hand he was holding slipped out of his grip; he heard the desperate and terrified cry from Jamie. He tried to reach for the hand again, and was about to catch it, when suddenly, he felt strong arms catching him from behind and pulling him back brutally, making him let go of the bough he had been holding on to. As he fell on his rear, the last he knew of Jamie Lewis was the sight of his terrorized face as he disappeared into the quicksand, and the sound of his scream just before it drowned under the muddy surface.

"No!" Scarlet crawled on hands and knees to reach the side of the pond, but it was already far too late. His heart sank; he looked at the disturbed, but empty, surface of the quicksand that had swallowed the boy, searching for an answer, trying to comprehend exactly what had just happened.

Someone had just prevented him from saving the young man, but who –

He saw a pair of booted feet appear by his side.

“Don’t feel sorry for the boy, Scarlet. As I understand it, he really wasn’t worth your efforts.”

Scarlet raised his head at the sound of this callous voice. The man standing there was wearing a camouflage military uniform, and his face, although young and unseasoned, was looking down at him with a coldness that matched his earlier words. A cruel smile spread on his lips, and then he kicked Scarlet in the chest; the impact made the bolt shift. Scarlet cried out in pain, and he fell on his back, fortunately at a safe distance from the quicksand pond. Reaching for his wound with his left hand, he looked at the approaching soldier with dazed eyes. A sudden pang of pain hit him between the eyes. He blinked several times.

This young man’s face was familiar...

“I... I know you...”

The man pulled Scarlet up to his feet and brutally punched him in the stomach, before thrusting him beyond the bushes, back into the spot where he and Rhapsody had been attacked. Scarlet rolled onto his side, trying to protect his wound and fell on his back again. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Rhapsody lying motionless in the mud, just a short distance from him, her face turned to the other side. She was still unconscious from Jamie’s earlier blow. For a brief moment, concern that she might be seriously hurt crossed his mind, but he didn’t have much time to dwell on it. The young soldier had approached, and was now standing over him.

“Make an effort to remember, Scarlet. I’m sure you can do better than that.”

There was a flash before Scarlet’s eyes, and suddenly, his head threatened to split, as an image appeared in his mind.

*He saw a gun, in the hand of the man Rhapsody had identified as Montgomery, aimed at this same young man. A detonation echoed through his skull... and then, the young soldier sank to his knees...*

*Scarlet saw him lying at his feet, dead, his eyes empty...*

“Mahoney,” he croaked. “You’re Mahoney...”

“Bingo.” The same crooked and cruel smile appeared again on the soldier’s face.

Scarlet frowned with incredulity. “But that’s impossible. I saw you dead... How –”

"You remember that too? So I guess your memory isn't completely gone, then. The major will be pleased."

Scarlet didn't have the strength to resist when the man pulled him to his feet. He was roughly shoved against the bark of a tree, and almost at the same time, the soldier struck him in the chest, with his palm open, with all of his weight, driving the arrow deeper into his flesh. The pain paralysed Scarlet and he was unable to make a single move to defend himself when Mahoney seized the fletched end of the arrow – and brutally pulled it out, tearing through the flesh of the Spectrum officer.

A wave of excruciating pain went through Scarlet's body and, with a now muffled cry, he fell face first to the ground.

Fighting hard not to lose consciousness, Scarlet raised his heavy head. Mahoney leaned over him, and roughly turned him on his back, before putting a booted foot on his chest to keep him down. Instinctively, Scarlet grabbed for the booted feet with both hands, but he was too weak to remove it. He then saw the barrel of a pistol aimed at him.

"There's only one reason why I didn't throw you into that quicksand with the boy, *Earthman*," the soldier said in a cold voice. "And I think you know what that reason is. You're going to hand me the microchip. The Mysterons have need of it."

Scarlet shook his head. "I don't... I don't have it..."

"Wrong answer." Viciously, Mahoney pressed his boot against Scarlet's wound. Blood oozed under the pressure and the Spectrum captain yelped, writhing under the pain. His fingers curled helplessly around the soldier's boot. "You had it on you when you fell from the chopper, just after the major put that bullet into your head. You *must* still have it. Or you must have a pretty good idea where it is."

"You're wrong," Scarlet said, gasping for breath. I don't –" He muffled a cry as Mahoney pressed harder on his shoulder.

"You're lying. But that doesn't matter. I just need to contact the others now, and tell them I found you. When the major is here, he'll know how to make you talk." Mahoney produced an evil smile. "You're indestructible. We can torture you as much we like. It won't matter if we kill you: you'll just come back and we'll go on until you spill the beans. That is, until we decide to put a definitive end to your miserable life."

Scarlet blinked, his mind a confused haze. "What... what are you talking about?"

"Maybe you don't care what we do to you," Mahoney pursued, seemingly not listening. "But there's the Angel pilot to consider..."

That seemed to make Scarlet come out of his confused state. "Stay away from her," he moaned between gritted teeth. "Or I'll... I'll kill you."

Mahoney scoffed derisively. "You're really not in any position to make threats, Captain Scarlet! Your attachment to your more fragile colleagues seems to be your Achilles' heel. The girl will make a perfect bargaining chip to obtain what we want."

"I told you... Keep away from her!" With a supreme effort, Scarlet pushed on the feet, lifting it from his chest. His left leg snaked around Mahoney's other foot, and he tripped him. Unbalanced, the soldier stumbled back.

Scarlet's now free hand blindly reached for anything that might be within range and his fingers curled around a dead bough lying on the ground. As quickly as he could, he drove himself up; he was still on one knee when Mahoney swiftly came back, pulling the hammer of his gun and aiming it at the Spectrum officer's head, at nearly point blank range. Scarlet struck at his arm with the bough, which broke under the impact, but successfully disarmed the soldier. The latter retaliated, hitting Scarlet in the face with a swift reverse kick that sent him down once more.

That last blow had been so violent that Scarlet had trouble keeping focus. Stars were flashing in front of his eyes and his head was killing him.

Mahoney recovered his gun and came to stand over Scarlet with anger burning in his eyes. "Enough games!" he yelled. "You will tell me where the microchip is, Captain Scarlet, or I swear, I will kill the Angel in front of your eyes, before I start cutting you into little pieces to make you talk!"

"Mahoney, I keep telling you..." Scarlet gasped, his eyes bleary, "I don't have any idea where it is..."

"Well then, maybe I should just kill her right now, since she's no use to us."

Mahoney turned around, aiming his gun in the direction where he had last seen Rhapsody lying on the ground, right next to a clump of bushes, barely four meters behind him. He was startled to find she wasn't there anymore; all he could see now was the flattened grass, marking the place of her earlier presence. He frowned.

"Where the hell did she go?"

"Over here, creep!"

Mahoney turned around; Rhapsody was standing there, what remained of her uniform filthy with mud and dirt, her red hair a mess, barely hiding a reddish bruise over her left cheek; she

was aiming the shotgun straight at him, with a menacing glow in her blue eyes.

"You think you're such a big man with your little gun?" she asked defiantly.

Mahoney gave an incoherent growl of anger and raised his handgun, in an attempt to aim it at Rhapsody.

There was a deafening thunderclap as the Angel pilot stoically pulled the trigger and discharged the last of the shotgun's ammunition straight at the Mysterion's face. The impact blew half of his head off; literally swept off his feet, his body fell many feet clear of Scarlet. The latter couldn't do anything but watch powerlessly, as a rain of blood sprayed over him.

The body had barely hit the ground before Rhapsody threw away the now empty and useless shotgun, still smoking from its use, and ran to Scarlet. She knelt by his side and helped him up, as he was attempting to pull himself into a sitting position. He grunted with the effort, and looked into her face; the grimace she produced upon seeing his bloodied shirt and the end of the broken arrow emerging from his wound looked as pained as his own.

"Are you okay?" he asked her between two breaths.

"I've had worse," she replied. "I'm in a better state than you..."

Scarlet shook his head, his teeth clenched. "Somehow... I'm sure I'll be okay." He slowly turned his head to look at the half-decapitated body of the Mysterionised soldier, bloodying the mud underneath it. "I remember that guy," he said in a low voice. "That was Mahoney."

"Mahoney..." Rhapsody recalled the name. "That's the guy you tried to hook me up with? Thank you, Captain, but I can do without a murderous boyfriend."

"S-sorry?" he asked in confusion.

"Sorry – I guess you don't remember that part. And I guess he wasn't that way before the Mysterions got their hands on him."

"He was dead before," Scarlet said. "I remember... I saw him dead. How can he still be alive and walking around?"

Rhapsody turned a cold look at the dead Mysterion agent. The grisly sight didn't seem to bother her at all, and Scarlet thought she had to be one of the strongest and fiercest young women that existed on Earth. "Well, I don't think he will get up and walk after that," she said.

Scarlet realised she wasn't joking in the least; her words made him shiver. He didn't know exactly why.

"Dianne... what's exactly going on?" He asked in confusion. "No-one can come back from the dead like that, can they?"

Rhapsody hesitated. "Captain –"

"Is that... Is that what happened to me?" Scarlet asked with a bleak voice, interrupting her. "When I woke up in the morgue in town... They hadn't just *thought* I was dead? I really *was* dead?"

"Now might not be the ideal time to discuss this," Rhapsody replied in a firm voice.

"But..."

"Later, Captain. We'll talk about it when you're less distraught. Right now, the night is coming. We have to reach that cabin and take cover before dark. It's not far... can you walk?"

Scarlet shrugged. "I suppose I will have to..."

"Come on, then. I'll help you up."

Rhapsody took him by the shoulders and he leaned on her, pushing himself up. Once he was on his feet, he stumbled, and caught himself against a tree, so not to fall back. He blinked several times to stop the salty sweat of his brow from falling into his eyes. His head was pounding wildly, and he had trouble thinking. Through it all, he could hear Rhapsody's voice talking:

"Come on, Captain. We can't stay here."

Scarlet opened his eyes and started walking, the young woman supporting him. As they made their way towards Joe's place, he glanced again in the direction of the dead Mysteron, in a worried way. "Are you *sure* he won't come after us, even after that?"

"I would say he's as dead as a Mysteron can get," Rhapsody replied in a cold voice.

"And his friends?" Scarlet insisted. "Major Montgomery?"

"You heard Mahoney: he didn't have time to call them, so they won't know where to find us. We'll be safe."

They were approaching the shed, and Scarlet took a few, hurried steps in its direction. He felt that his strength was about to betray him. He could barely stand, and he knew he was weighing heavily on Rhapsody. He reached the wooden wall and supported himself against it, just in time to stop himself from falling. His head was spinning wildly.

Rhapsody was looking at him in concern.

"Captain?" she asked him. "Please, we have to move on..."

"Give me a minute to catch my breath," he requested, leaning against the wall. "I... don't feel too bright."

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind which was gradually becoming hazy. It didn't work too well.

"What about Jasper and his gang?" he said, trying to keep his focus. "One of the boys who attacked us is dead, but the other... he escaped. He will warn his other friends..."

"Which is a good reason for us to take cover as soon as we can. We'll be able to protect ourselves."

"You're the expert..." Scarlet said weakly.

"Assuming they're close by, to begin with. Those two boys – from what they said, they were not really supposed to be here, and were surprised to even find us. They were... looking for some kind of treasure, or something. They assumed that we were here for the same thing."

"The microchip?" Scarlet asked with a frown.

"No, not the microchip. They were not Mysterons. They were looking for something else... whatever it might be. I think it might be the reason why they killed Joe." Rhapsody looked around, assuring herself that nobody would come out from behind the surrounding wood. Satisfied that they were safe, she continued: "So if the others are not in the vicinity, we'll have to assume they're not stupid enough to be out in this swamp after dark. There's danger waiting for you round every corner in this bayou. Imagine how much more dangerous it could be at night." She looked back at Scarlet. "That should give us some time to rest... and for you to recuperate."

"I'd... like that very much, yes," Scarlet murmured tiredly. "My head feels like it'll explode."

Rhapsody noticed how pale he had become. "Can you lean on me?" she asked him. "We still need to get to that cabin. Come on, Paul, there's only a few more steps..."

"I... I can try."

Scarlet pushed himself from the wall and Rhapsody gently took his arm with the intention of supporting him again.

The arm slid off her shoulder, and Scarlet, with a last groan, collapsed, Rhapsody being unable to stop him.

He was already unconscious before he hit the ground.

## CHAPTER 9

Scarlet woke up with a start and quickly rose to a sitting position, a cry mounting to his lips. He sat there, breathing hard and looking into the empty space in front of him. He hugged himself; he was shirt-less, covered with sweat and shivering uncontrollably. In the semi-darkness surrounding him, he could see only a flickering light, coming from an old oil lamp.

He realised he was indoors, seated on a thick blanket spread on a hard floor where he had previously lain half-covered by another blanket, which now lay in a heap across his lap.

He heard a creaking sound that made him swiftly turn his head to his right. Standing not far from him, Rhapsody Angel was activating an old manual water pump set over a large steel basin. When water started to pour, she quickly filled a metal cup and crouched by Scarlet's side. She gently touched his bare shoulder and offered the cup. He shivered under her touch.

"Here, take some of this, you must be thirsty." He eyed the cup then the old pump with suspicion and she smiled at him reassuringly. "Don't worry, the water is good. I think there's some kind of filter inside the pump system. It's the same kind of pump inside the cabin."

He nodded absently, barely taking her words in, and accepted the cup. He drained its contents with one large gulp. Rhapsody took the cup, filled it again and returned to him. He drank half of the water this time.

"Are you all right?" the young woman asked softly, as he put down the cup.

Scarlet shook his head and closed his eyes; he felt nauseous just at the thought that was coming to his mind. The nightmare he had just had was so vivid, he was certain it wasn't *just* a nightmare, but instead a very unpleasant memory.

"I killed a kid," he said between two breaths.

Rhapsody frowned at his words. "Do you mean one of those two boys who attacked us?" she inquired. "You said that one of them had escaped. So the other –"

"... Is dead, yes," Scarlet confirmed with a brief nod. "But I didn't kill him. He fell into quicksand and I tried to save him, but... I couldn't. I'm talking about another boy." He opened his eyes. "I had another flashback... something new this time. Something... horrible."

Rhapsody sat in front of him. "Tell me about it?"



Scarlet stared at her for a few seconds, hesitating. He didn't know if he wanted to burden her with such a story. He didn't know what she would think of him. He saw her encouraging smile and finally, he nodded, if still reluctantly:

"I was in a war... wearing a uniform, quite similar to those men who are after us. I was isolated, walking in a deserted village; all around, there was only destruction and death. I had a small child in my arms... a little girl of about three years old. I think she was the lone survivor of a massacre. I didn't know who she was, but I knew my duty was to protect her and see her to safety." He swallowed hard. "Then someone – a soldier I think – appeared out of nowhere and charged us. He had a sword taped to his rifle, and was trying to use it as a bayonet. I don't know if he was trying to kill me or the child I held in my arms... In my mind, I know he was part of those who had attacked the village and killed everyone."

"What happened?" Rhapsody asked softly.

"I got hurt by that blade of his. Not too badly, but I knew it would only be a question of seconds before the soldier would hurt me more seriously, or the child. So I shot him, almost instinctively. And then, as he fell dead at my feet, I saw his eyes, filled with hatred and rage... and I realised he was only a boy." Scarlet shook his head again, his eyes fixed into emptiness. "He must have been fifteen or sixteen... I can't say for sure." He shuddered and turned to face a grim-looking Rhapsody. "Dianne... What kind of a man am I?"

She frowned at his question. "A good man," she said without hesitation.

"A good man?" Scarlet looked at her fixedly. "Who doesn't hesitate to kill children?"

"Paul..." Rhapsody sighed deeply and reached to squeeze his hand between hers. "You're a soldier – you've been one all of your adult life, and trained to be the best there is. I know you've been in many hot spots around the world. I think the boy must have been a child soldier. Those unfortunate children who've been trained, and forced to kill with total ruthlessness in many Third World countries? Many of them can't help themselves... It's like they're brainwashed, used by unscrupulous people, threatened into obeying their orders and making war, and sometimes, they don't even know any other life."

"Like the Mysterons do to their agents," Scarlet said in a bleak voice.

"Well, not quite, but the same results of spreading death and destruction are there, yes."

"How can people be so cruel as to do that to kids?" Scarlet murmured. "And how could I have agreed to wage war on children?"

"I don't think you would agree to do this willingly. Paul, the event you've described seems to me like an unfortunate chance encounter. I know you well enough to know that, given the chance, you would never have killed that boy. You did it because you probably had no choice."

He nodded slowly. "He was trying to kill me – I just reacted to save my life, and that of the little girl I carried. When I saw he was just a boy – I was horrified."

Rhapsody smiled sadly. "That's the reaction I would expect from you. You don't talk much about your life as a soldier – actually, you don't *like* to talk about it. So I presume there was some experience you don't even want to think about. You always said that war is hell, and that there was nothing glorious about it. You did what you had to do because of your sense of duty – not because you enjoyed it."

"And why's that?" Scarlet asked briskly. "Why would I put myself through it?"

"Because you reckoned someone had to do it – and you were willing and able to?" Rhapsody squeezed his hand. "I don't know all your motivations, but as I said – you're a good man, as well as a man of duty. It runs deep in your family. Your father, your grandfather, your great-grandfather... They were all willing to do what they believed to be right, for the benefit of the greater good. And from what I understand, the same could be said of either your father's or mother's side."

"My family," he whispered in a voice filled with regret. "I wish I could remember them right now... But I can't even remember their faces, or their names. Do I have a large family? Brothers? Sisters?"

"You only have your father and mother. You're an only child, just like me. But you once told me you have many cousins, with whom you grew up. Your parents... they think the world of you."

"I suppose that's a normal reaction of any parent towards their child," Scarlet commented. "Especially if it's an only child."

"Perhaps. But they're particularly proud of you, and of the work you're doing. They know you're making a difference." Rhapsody smiled reassuringly. "Never doubt you're one of the original good guys, Paul Metcalfe. Remember what you said yourself earlier – you tried to save that boy's life when he fell into quicksand, despite all he might have done to you."

"Not only to me, but to Joe – and to you as well." Scarlet nodded again, trying to take in all of this new information. Somehow, Rhapsody's words felt right to him. He could

remember the horror he had felt during this terrible nightmarish flashback – how the thought of having killed a boy filled him with such revulsion. He would not have reacted this way if he had been a cold-blooded killer.

He was calming down and his breathing had returned to normal; he shook himself, feeling that it might not be the time right now to feel sorry for himself and to brood over some uncomfortable, past memory, that he could do nothing about. They had enough problems to consider for the moment.

He looked at his surroundings with curiosity. He and Rhapsody were in a small room, with the walls made of half-rotten wooden boards; the piece of blanket they were sitting on had been thrown directly onto a hard, beaten mud floor. In one corner, just by the water pump he had seen earlier, there was a small boat, turned upside down, set on trestles.

Scarlet remembered Rhapsody's earlier words about the cabin having a similar pump. He frowned.

"We're not in Joe's house."

"No, we're not," Rhapsody confirmed. "We're in the shed, not far from the river."

"Why not the cabin? Seems to me, we would be more comfortable there than here."

The Angel pilot raised a perfect eyebrow. "Indeed, we would. But perhaps you recall you lost consciousness just outside this shed? You're a bit too heavy for me to haul all the way to the cabin, Captain. Getting you in here was easier. And beside, strategically, taking cover inside the cabin would have been an unwise move. We're much safer here."

"We are?"

"Either Montgomery or that Jasper boy – when they arrive, they'll expect to find us in the cabin."

Scarlet nodded. "I see. They won't surprise us if they should barge in there."

"No. And the joke'll be on them," Rhapsody said with a faint, mysterious smile.

"What do you mean?"

"I left a surprise in the cabin. Let's say that if someone *does* indeed barge in – he might regret it deeply."

Rhapsody left it there, and Scarlet didn't pursue the subject. Instead, he looked down at himself. He couldn't find any injury on his naked chest; his skin was unmarked where the arrows had hit him. There wasn't even a single scar. "This thing you call retrometabolism... It seems to be working overtime," he groused. "How long was I out?"

"About four hours. It's night right now."

"Our 'friends' haven't shown up yet, I take it."

Rhapsody shook her head. "No. And I expect we'll be quiet until morning. But just in case, I took some safety measures." She pointed towards a thick blanket which was hanging from one of the walls, next to the door. "That's the only window. I covered it and filled all the cracks in the walls, so that the light won't get out and give away our position. I also surrounded the place with tripwires, fixed to empty cans and bottles. The noise that will make should be enough to wake the dead, let alone alert us to anyone sneaking up on us."

Scarlet gave her a fond smile, nodding appreciatively. "You have been busy. Where did you learn these tricks?"

"From you, actually. You were our instructor in survival within enemy territory, when we were training in Koala Base, two years ago. You always told us to make sure our position was secured. Especially when you're left on your own, and don't expect any back up to come to your rescue."

"So I take it – you didn't find any communication device that you might use to contact Spectrum, then?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Rhapsody replied, grimly shaking her head.

"Joe must have called the sheriff with a portable or similar device which stayed with him when they took his body back to Les Arbrisseaux," Scarlet mused.

"At seven tomorrow morning, it will be twenty-four hours since we reported to Cloudbase," Rhapsody commented. "We'll be considered missing in action."

"They're probably looking for us, aren't they?"

"Possibly, yes. That is, if they're not too busy with the Mysterons. I don't know what their latest threat was all about. However, considering current events, it seems to implicate the microchip we were sent to retrieve in the first place. Normally, if Spectrum knows this, this area would be swarming with agents, looking for us and the microchip as well. I haven't even seen or heard an Angel jet anywhere around here. And believe me, there's no way we would miss that sound."

"So that makes you wonder if Spectrum does know of our situation?"

Rhapsody shifted her position to make herself more comfortable before answering: "Yes, it does. And that's odd in itself. I wouldn't think the storm that interfered with our communication in the morning is still raging over the Atlantic. Mind you, it was a monster storm, and it's *still* a possibility, however unlikely. In any case, "It looks like we're on our own for a little while longer."

She picked up from the floor behind her the knife she had found in the boat earlier that day, the crossbow with its quiver of

arrows, and a handgun that Scarlet recognised as Mahoney's. She put all that between the two of them.

"At Koala Base, you also told us to be prepared with whatever weapons we had to hand," she explained. "That's all we've got to defend ourselves with. There are still ten rounds in the gun, and I found a full clip in Mahoney's equipment. Oh, by the way..." She twisted around and picked up a neatly folded shirt that she handed to Scarlet. "Here, put this on. I threw the other one away. And," she added, taking a small basket from behind her again, putting it on the floor between them, right next to the weapons, "I also have something for you to eat."

"Thank you, I'm famished." Scarlet slipped into the shirt, without bothering to button it up, and noticed she was also wearing one, quite similar to his own and far too large for her. He realised she must have taken both from inside the cabin, from Joe's clothing. "You took the opportunity to change as well, I see."

She smiled thinly. "My sweater was totally disgusting," she said, grimacing at the mention of it. "And I also thought that this would be warmer for the night."

Scarlet opened the basket and peered into it to find small pieces of roast meat that looked inviting. He took one drumstick and bit into it. "Cold chicken?" he asked, chewing vigorously.

Rhapsody shook her head. "It tastes like it, but I doubt it's chicken. There might not be many running wild in the bayou, if you ask me."

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"I ate earlier, while you were unconscious."

Scarlet nodded. "Which is why you know this tastes like chicken," he commented, taking another bite. "Not bad, I must say – even if I'm not sure exactly what it might be. Maybe it's swamp lizard?"

Rhapsody made a face again. "I'm not sure I *really* want to know." She watched her companion with fascination, while he devoured the drumstick. He certainly looked like he was starving.

Scarlet swallowed the last bite from the drumstick and fished another from the basket. "How about your arm, Dianne? I trust you changed the dressing on it as well?"

She nodded slowly in answer to his question, and to show him, pulled up her left sleeve to show the new, clean bandage wrapped around her arm. It seemed like an odd coincidence that he should ask, as it was her next topic of conversation.

"I did more than that, actually," she said, pulling down the sleeve. "I was lucky enough to find a fully-stocked first-aid kit and medicine cabinet inside the cabin... which includes antibiotics."

So I took the opportunity to clean my many cuts and bruises properly.”

“Antibiotics?” Scarlet echoed, raising a brow.

“And not the kind of antibiotics you find on the shelves of a pharmacy, either. Rather the kind you would need to have access to a hospital or a doctor to get.” Rhapsody tilted her head to one side, scrutinising Scarlet intensely. “What do you know of this Joe Benson exactly? Was he some kind of doctor?”

“I asked him the same question, actually,” Scarlet said, swallowing his latest bite. “When I first woke up, and discovered how he’d patched me up. Very professionally, it seemed to me. He said he wasn’t a doctor, but... I had the impression he wasn’t being entirely truthful.”

“Well, he might have had some training – and some contacts, certainly, to have the kind of medicine he kept in his cabinet.”

“That seems odd, for a man living as a hermit in the middle of the bayou.”

“Very odd indeed. But useful, when you think about it. I imagine you would be exposed to all sort of illnesses living in here. Or expect to have some dangerous encounters. And I’m not only talking about animals, either.”

“Human as well, yes,” Scarlet grumbled.

“What is it those boys want from him?” Rhapsody added musingly. “The two who attacked us... they mentioned some ‘dough’.”

“Money,” Scarlet realised.

“Yes – they thought we might have been after it ourselves.”

“It’s insane. Joe didn’t strike me as a rich man. He lived very simply here, in the middle of nowhere. He wouldn’t have any... ‘dough’, these boys would want to get their hands on.”

Scarlet threw away what was left of his drumstick and picked another piece from the basket. Rhapsody followed him with fascination as he bit into it.

“How can we say, Paul? You didn’t know that old man very well. You only met him a few hours ago – just before he was killed.”

“True,” Scarlet admitted with a slow nod. “And he wasn’t very talkative about himself. I remember – when he died, he asked me to ‘not let them get it’.”

“‘Them’, the boys – and ‘it’... the money?” Rhapsody suggested.

Scarlet shrugged. “I can only guess, yes. But still, it seems so unlikely.”

"Joe obviously knew the exact reason why he was killed," Rhapsody commented. "I guess the only other people who know that would be his killers."

"If I ever get the opportunity, I'll make sure that little bastard Jasper tells me," Scarlet promised in a growl. "If I can keep myself from wringing his miserable neck, that is." He looked straight at Rhapsody. "When you checked Joe's cabin earlier... I imagine you also searched for the microchip? You haven't mentioned it yet."

She nodded, a little hesitantly. Indeed, if she had not talked about it before, it was for a good reason. "I went in there specifically to search for it, yes."

"Did you find it, then?"

Rhapsody chewed on her bottom lip. "No," she said after a brief moment of reflection. "I didn't find it."

"It wasn't in the basket where I threw it?" Scarlet asked with puzzlement.

"The basket was empty. The remnants of your uniform weren't in there either. Oh, I know they had been there," Rhapsody quickly added as she saw her companion ready to argue. "I found traces of blood on the basket. But I'm guessing someone took them out of there."

"Well, it sure wasn't Joe," Scarlet replied.

"Maybe it was the sheriff, then," Rhapsody suggested. "They would be viewed as evidence."

"Perhaps," Scarlet said pensively. "Masters knew I was wearing some kind of camo uniform when Joe found me. Joe must have told him when he called him. So he actually might have taken the uniform from the basket... and the microchip as well?"

"That's quite possible, yes. I almost turned the cabin upside down to find the -microchip - thinking that it might have rolled on the floor, maybe... I found no trace of it."

"So now we don't know where it could be. Maybe it's still in Les Arbrisseaux... at the sheriff's station."

Rhapsody shook her head. "That's possible, but I rather think he might have brought it with him, along with the rest of the evidence, when he was on his way to deliver you to Spectrum - as he imagined he was doing."

"You mean - it could still be in the car?"

"Very likely. Do you remember seeing anything in the car that might have contained it? A box, a bag...?"

"No, but I was sitting in the back, with the deputy. Masters was driving. If the evidence, as you call it, was there, it was with him on the front seat. Or in the boot."

"I don't remember seeing anything like that in the boot. That's where I found the shotgun I rescued you with."

Scarlet grunted with irritation. "Talk about rotten luck. We were so close to it... all we had to do was check that car and —"

"Don't beat yourself up," Rhapsody interrupted him. "We didn't really have time, did we? And beside, we have no way to know for sure the microchip was there, to begin with."

"No... But if it was in there, and still is, and the Mysterons find it —"

"They surely don't know it could be there," Rhapsody reasoned. "No more than they would think it could have been here either."

"But they're probably still after us, because they think we know of its whereabouts." Scarlet sighed, shaking his head pessimistically. "This really is a fine mess we're in, Dianne. What should we do now?"

"For tonight? Nothing."

Scarlet stared at the young woman questioningly and she shrugged. "For the moment, we shouldn't worry needlessly. We're safe right now, with a roof over our heads, and our wounds tended to."

"Your wounds, you mean," Scarlet retorted, a little dryly.

"Our location is secured," Rhapsody continued, ignoring his interruption. "We have food, water and weapons, and we'll be able to get some rest, by taking turns to keep watch. Just in case someone takes advantage of darkness to sneak up on us. Though I think it very unlikely. Then in the morning — we'll be able to work out what to do next."

Scarlet grinned at her, if a little weakly. "You're an optimistic kind of girl, aren't you?"

"I certainly am. I've always looked on the bright side of things — every cloud has a silver lining."

Scarlet grimaced at these words. "I'm looking hard, but I fail to see where it could be exactly in *this* cloud. It seems pretty dark to me!"

"Not that much. We can eat to our hearts' content, for example." Rhapsody pointed to the basket between her and Scarlet. During their conversation, he had managed to eat half of its contents. "Pass me some of that bird while there is some left... If it really is a bird. Looking at you eat like an horse is making me hungry again."

Scarlet chuckled and reached for the basket; but in the same movement, he knocked over the half-filled cup by his side, next to the blanket they were sitting on. The water splashed on the ground, running towards Rhapsody who instinctively shifted her position to escape getting wet.



"Oh, sorry, how clumsy of me –"

Scarlet interrupted himself when he heard the sharp yelp from Rhapsody; he looked at her in concern, and saw the scowl on her face as she squirmed from her sitting place. She seemed in some sort of pain.

"What is it?" he asked. "Were you hurt earlier? Your arm –"

"I wasn't hurt earlier and my arm is all right," she retorted promptly. "No, I... sat on something..."

Rhapsody rose to her knees and altered her position again, looking at the spot where she had previously sat. There was a bulge under the blanket, and she pulled back the fabric to check what it could be.

A metallic ring, as large as a hand, all rusted and half-covered with dirt, protruded from the ground where it was half-buried. Rhapsody brushed from it what remained of the dust and tried to pick it up, only to realise it wouldn't budge. It seemed fixed there, in something invisible.

By her side, Scarlet had knelt as well, and was also looking down at the curious object. "What the devil is this thing?"

That's when he noticed the spilled water was drawing rivulets in the layer of dirt, before finishing its course, trickling down into a very narrow gap in the ground.

Scarlet narrowed his eyes, as he checked the phenomenon more closely. This crack didn't seem natural to him. He helped Rhapsody sweep more of the dry dirt aside, digging around the ring. Barely two or three centimetres beneath the surface, they discovered three ranks of old wooden planks, laid out flat side by side.

"Looks like floorboards," Scarlet commented.

But Rhapsody shook her head. "Not exactly."

Brushing away more of the dirt, she discovered the boards were not covering the entire floor. There were only five of them, and the ring was fixed to the one in the middle. She swiftly got up and went to fetch the old oil lamp, along with a flashlight, that she had found earlier in her search of the cabin. She returned and put the lamp between them, and kneeling next to her companion, she used the flashlight to highlight their discovery.

"It looks more like a trap door," she commented. She knocked her knuckles on one of the planks, and it gave a hollow sound. "It seems to cover a hole in the ground."

"Probably meant to hide it?" Scarlet suggested. "Or something *in* it? Shall we find out?"

Rhapsody only hesitated a second or two. She was as curious as her colleague to discover what could be beyond these planks. "At this point, why not?" She seized the ring embedded in

the middle board, all the while grouching: "I certainly hope it isn't a coffin, and that we won't find a dead body in there..."

"There wouldn't be such an obvious ring to open it if that were the case," Scarlet reasoned.

His companion nodded, agreeing on this conclusion. She pulled on the ring, but nothing move. "It hasn't been opened in a long time," she commented.

She tried again, with no more success. Scarlet moved to her side.

"Allow me."

Crouching near her, he seized the ring and pulled on it with all of his strength; the board creaked and shifted slightly. With a second, stronger tug, the ring tore itself from where it was fixed, taking a large piece of board with it. Scarlet nearly fell on his rear, and it was Rhapsody who helped him keep his footing. Both looked down at the large gap in the broken board.

Scarlet threw the ring aside and inserted both of his hands into the hole to pull the broken board out of its place. Already dislodged by his earlier efforts, it came out more easily, breaking at the end on which he was standing. He moved aside to remove a second board, which stood a good four feet long. The third came off effortlessly, and they now stood next to a gaping, dark opening of about two feet wide and four feet long.

They peered into the hole, but it was so dark that they couldn't even see the bottom. Rhapsody lighted the interior with the flashlight. The light shone on two large, bulky, spherical objects, about three feet down, covered with dirt; at first glance, they looked like huge round boulders.

"There's something in there," the Angel commented. "But... I can't see what it could be."

Scarlet lay flat on his belly and tried to reach for one of the objects; his fingers only grazed the surface, drawing three streaks in the thick dust covering it. From the texture, he realised it was made out of fabric. They were not stones at all.

He sat up, and swung his feet into the hole before lowering himself into it. Rhapsody handed him the flashlight and he crouched down to ground level, his body entering the hole completely.

The space underneath the remaining planks was narrow, the sides all covered with spider webs, and the air musty, and Scarlet had the impression of being inside a grave. Not wanting to stay in here longer than was really necessary, he reached the same object he had attempted to catch earlier. It was a large bag made of sturdy cotton-like material, plump with its contents, and tied at the top by a rope. He pulled on the object to find it was heavy; dust fell from it as he lifted it to the floor above his

head. Rhapsody was waiting for it, and helped him roll it onto the floor. He grabbed the second object – another bag – and brought it up as well. He found a third and a fourth bags at the bottom of the hole, similar to the first two. He lifted them up as well, one by one, and then checked the bottom of the hole with attention, to see if there weren't more of them. That was all there were.

Scarlet stood up from his crouching position, extricating himself from the hole to join Rhapsody. He was covered with cobwebs and dirt, and he dusted himself vigorously.

Rhapsody was examining the four bags with curiosity. She looked at Scarlet with an inquiring look and he shook his head.

"I wonder what's in them?" he said musingly.

Rhapsody was sweeping the dirt from the side of the first bag. The thick layer fell to reveal words printed on the fabric:

***Property of the World Bank of New Orleans***

Both Spectrum officers exchanged glances and out of impulse, simultaneously and hurriedly reached for the rope holding the bag closed. Scarlet undid the knot and loosened it, opening the bag. Rhapsody shone the beam of the flashlight right into it.

They gasped when they saw the contents.

There were literally thousands of World Government banknotes, bundled in thick wads in the bag.

"Oh my God..." Scarlet breathed, attracting Rhapsody's attention, and causing her to turn the light on him. "This must be Riley's loot!"

\* \* \*

It wasn't exactly the first time Jasper Holland had stayed out in the bayou for the night. The danger wasn't exactly with staying there, as long as you had a fire to keep the predators away, but in trekking through it by night, when you could have hazardous encounters or fall into a bottomless pit. Fond of the fact that nobody would risk coming into the swamp to bother them, he and his gang had set up various rudimentary camps such as this one, all over the area, that they would invariably use whenever they felt like it. Usually, they would settle around a fire, drink beer and other alcoholic beverages, have a smoke or two, even entertain themselves with a couple of girls, when the occasion arose. The camps were well-adapted to their needs: a couple of shelters made from lopped off branches, a thick bed of leaves, dispersed around a fire set in the middle of the clearing and at a safe distance from it, were all the boys needed for their temporary comfort. When they finally settled in for the night, exhausted by

their pursuit of fun, that would normally be after they had consumed such a quantity of booze that they could barely feel the chills of the night.

Tonight, it was totally different.

Having downed only a couple of beers each, Jasper Holland and Dallas Fenmore were not inebriated enough to be well-protected against the cold. That particularly got on Dallas' nerves: Jasper would not allow them to get drunk, as he had the feeling that they might need all their wits in the morning to resume the hunt.

And that was what concerned Jasper the most and made him very bad company that night. The two strangers had successfully evaded him, and he had no idea where they could be, though he felt pretty sure they were still somewhere in the vicinity. They couldn't have returned to town, and the direction they had chosen with the boat could only get them deeper into Devil's Bayou and further away from any civilisation. Jasper and his companions had covered all the possible tracks their prey could have used to retrace their steps, and there had been no trace of them.

They couldn't have gotten very far, and Jasper didn't dare call off the hunt so that he and his friends could temporarily return to the comfort of their respective homes and start again in the morning where they had left off. Any time lost could give the strangers the opportunity to escape and Jasper couldn't afford that.

"They probably died in there," Dallas commented. He was seated in front of the other shelter, sucking on his last bottle of beer, and didn't seem as concerned as his leader was. That annoyed Jasper, to realise how oblivious his companion was to the menace hanging over their heads.

"Would you really count on it, Dallas?" he asked with only a hint of irritation in his voice. "Maybe they don't know Devil's Bayou as well as we do, but they're not stupid. They wouldn't roam around the place after dark. So they probably settled somewhere for the night. Much as we're doing right now."

"I'm cold," Dallas complained. "We should have returned to Ol' McCullen's place to spend the night there. It isn't that far, and \_"

"Don't be stupid! You want the freak and the girl to escape us?" Jasper threw a piece of dry wood into the fire. "Damn them," he muttered darkly. "I'm gonna make them pay for makin' us look for them for this long."

"I bet you anything 'Crow and Jamie are there, with Johnny as well," Dallas commented. "At McCullen's, I mean."

"They better *not* be," Jasper growled ominously. "But it worries me that we ain't heard from them yet."

Rustling of leaves and snapping of twigs coming from behind the trees nearby startled both boys and they swiftly jumped to their feet, reaching for their weapons. At night, nothing good could come from the bayou, and so they were ready to meet any unwelcome visitors coming their way. They raised their guns in the direction of the noises, fingers on the triggers.

They were surprised to see Scarecrow, springing out of the bushes. He was panting hard, his clothes were dirty and torn in places, and he had scratches all over his face and arms, obviously made by the lashing branches he had run through. He gasped in alarm when he saw the guns aimed at him and he raised his hands in fear.

"Don't shoot, it's me!"

Jasper lowered his rifle, imitated by Dallas; he glared with vexation at the newcomer who was stumbling towards one of the shelters. "*Where were you, you idiot?*"

Scarecrow slumped onto the bed of leaves, seemingly not having heard Jasper, nor recognising how furious he sounded. He was breathing hard, and looked haggard and exhausted. "Thank God I found you," he moaned piteously. "I ran all the way trying to find this camp... I hoped I would find you here, but I lost the trail... I thought I would go in circles in the bayou until I fell into some pit of quicksand..."

"I've been trying to call you all evening on your cellphone," Jasper snapped, approaching him quickly. "You and Jamie... But none of you answered! Where did you come from?"

Scarecrow reached for the flask of water resting against a stone just within reach and swallowed a large gulp. Feeling he was being ignored and not liking it at all, Jasper tore the flask from his friend's hands.

"I asked ya a question, 'Crow! Why didn't you answer when I called?"

"My phone... must have run out of juice," Scarecrow answered, his hand reaching frantically for the flask. Jasper pulled it out of his reach. "Please, Jasper, I'm so thirsty," Scarecrow pleaded, trying to catch it. "Give me some."

"You'll answer first, you sissy," Jasper seethed between his teeth. "Where's Jamie?"

"Please, Jasper..."

"I said – *where's Jamie?*" Jasper shouted with exasperation.

"Jamie's dead!"

The exclamation surprised Jasper so much that he stopped making further effort to stop Scarecrow from taking the flask out of his hand. He watched in complete shock while his seated

friend greedily drained half of the flask's contents. Dallas swiftly approached them and came to stand by Jasper; he looked down at Scarecrow with disbelief.

"Dead? How come he's dead?"

Scarecrow, his thirst satisfied, lowered the flask; he was still breathing hard. "The freak," he explained. "He must have killed him."

Jasper tore the flask from his hands again. "You mean you're *not* sure?" he asked impatiently.

Scarecrow shook his head nervously. "The last time I saw Jamie, he was up to his waist in quicksand and he was begging the freak to get him out... I ran like hell... I could hear Jamie pleading and crying behind me. And then, I heard a horrible scream... and then nothing." He looked up at Jasper in desperation. "Jamie's dead, I'm sure of it."

Jasper looked down at him with a hard expression. "So you found them. The freak and the girl. Why didn't you call us? You're telling me Jamie's phone ran out of juice too?"

"We didn't have time. The freak surprised us –"

"You mean *he* was the one to find you, then?"

"No, we found them. And we tried to get them, and it looked like we had them where we wanted... But everything went wrong suddenly and –"

"*You* tried to tackle them by yourselves!?" Jasper interrupted him in so forceful a voice that it startled Scarecrow. "You *idiots!* Why did you need to do something so stupid!? You *knew* the freak was a handful! I *told* you, if you should find them, to *call* us! All together, we could have taken them easily!"

He stood over Scarecrow at his full height, raising the butt of his rifle, obviously tempted to hit him with it. The other boy cowered in fear, raising his arms in a futile gesture of protection.

"I – I'm sorry, Jasper. We thought – that is, Jamie thought –"

"I *don't* care what Jamie thought! Jamie was a moron!" Jasper yelled at him. "A complete, idiotic bonehead, who had *no* business going against my instructions! He thought he knew better and it got him killed! And you're *very* lucky I don't *kill* you myself, for good measure!"

Scarecrow blanched at the threat. Dallas blinked, feeling suddenly nervous.

"Hey, Jasper, take it easy, man."

"You *shut* up, you!" Jasper warned, turning to glare angrily at Dallas. "You're telling me you're *happy* those two morons let our prey escape and that one of them got killed in the process? We're down one man, and we'll be lucky to find the freak and the

girl now!" He turned back to Scarecrow, eyes glowering. "Where did you two find them?"

Scarecrow hesitated to answer right away. He swallowed hard. "At Ol' Joe's place," he revealed reluctantly.

Jasper narrowed his eyes at him. "Joe's place? What the hell where you doing so far into the bayou? That's not exactly the parts I told you to check!"

"J-Jamie had a thought... That maybe the freak was going back there?" Scarecrow suggested. It was obvious he was trying to find a pretext, and he wasn't succeeding very well.

"Is that so? So why didn't Jamie tell me about that?"

"I- I don't know," Scarecrow said, stuttering.

"*Don't lie to me, 'Crow!*" Jasper roared, standing menacingly over him.

"I'm not lying!" the other boy cried out, in near desperation. "It was Jamie's idea, I swear! We went there, and... and we did well to go, you see? We did find the freak! And we heard him and the girl talk." He rose to his knees and leaned towards his friend, to add in a lower, almost conspiratorial voice: "They were talking about Riley's loot."

That drove Jasper into silence and he simply glowered down at Scarecrow with a look so fierce murder could easily been seen in his eyes.

As for Dallas, the revelation had astonished him so much he simply couldn't believe it. "No way!" he countered sharply. "How would they know about that?"

"I don't know," Scarecrow quickly got to his feet and stood in front of his companions. "Maybe Joe told his secret to the freak? Remember what the old geezer said to him when he died, Jasper?" he added, turning to address the blond boy directly. "He asked him to not let us get it... Riley's loot, of course! So he must have told him already! That's why he went back to Joe's place with the girl – to get the money for themselves! And they must still be there right now. I'm sure of it!"

"Why would Joe tell a complete stranger about Riley's money?" Jasper asked with suspicion.

"Maybe he wasn't a complete stranger to Joe, after all," Dallas suggested quickly. "Remember, the guy doesn't remember a thing about himself. Maybe he was already a friend of Joe's."

"Doesn't quite add up," Jasper grumbled. "But that ain't important, right now." He glared again at Scarecrow. "You're sure these two are still at Joe's cabin?"

"I'm positive, Jasper," Scarecrow answered with a nervous nod. "They couldn't be anywhere else. The freak was wounded –

and I think the girl was too. They needed shelter... at least for the night."

"If they went to Ol' Joe's place to get Riley's money," Dallas then reasoned, "they won't leave without it."

"When we found them, it was already late," Scarecrow added energetically. "They wouldn't be able to cross the bayou before nightfall."

"Especially knowing we were after 'em," Jasper concluded ominously.

He mulled over this new information, thinking of what needed to be done now. If the strangers were after Riley's loot, then it was all the more reason to get rid of them. Not only were they unwanted witnesses, but they also were potential competitors the gang could do without.

He didn't care about Jamie Lewis' death; on the contrary, it rather suited him fine. Jamie had a wild streak that had always made him difficult to manage; it was never really certain what he would do next, or what kind of trouble he would get himself into. He was as immoral and vicious as Jasper himself, but he wasn't very bright, and his lack of scruples made him potentially dangerous. Jasper was sure that one day he would have had to kill Jamie himself, if only to avoid being killed by him.

He rather enjoyed the irony that O'Hara had done the deed for him; this way, he wouldn't need to dirty his hands. Besides, with Jamie gone, it meant there was one share less to worry about.

Jasper was convinced that Jamie had ulterior motives to go to Joe's cabin in the first place; it certainly wasn't because he thought that O'Hara and his girlfriend would be there. Something else was on his mind, and Jasper had a pretty good idea what this something was. And he also suspected that Scarecrow knew all about Jamie's reasons to go to Joe's.

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the taller boy, looking deep into his eyes; he could see fear in them, and extreme nervousness. Scarecrow's mind was far from being at ease.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, 'Crow?" Jasper asked him very slowly, almost sweetly.

"No, Jasper. Of course not."

"Because I wouldn't like it if you were lying to me. And if I ever find out you were lying, you wouldn't like it either, that you can be sure of."

Scarecrow looked deep into Jasper's cold eyes and could see the barely concealed threat hanging over his head. He swallowed hard, and tried to present a brave façade. "You know you can always count on me, Jasper."



He was relieved to see it seemed to be sufficient for Jasper, as the latter gave him the flask of water in an almost friendly gesture. However, there was still the same coldness in his eyes when he spoke: "Good then. 'Cause we'll need you, 'Crow. You, Dallas and me, we'll go to Joe's cabin, first thing tomorrow morning. And we'll kill the freak and his girl and will finally get our hands on Riley's money. We've been working too hard to get it – we *won't* let a couple of strangers run away with it."

"How about Johnny, Jasper?" Dallas asked him. "Shouldn't we wait for him? We could use his help too."

"That useless bum ain't answering his phone either," Jasper snapped. "I've been trying all day to reach him to ask if he had done what he was instructed to do. I hope he didn't mess things up... 'Cause he sure will be regretting it. I won't let him get between us and the money either." He nodded quietly. "We ain't got time to wait for him, anyway. We'll have to leave at first light, if we want to surprise our prey."

Dallas chuckled. "As you said, Johnny is useless. I rather think he got lost in the bayou."

"Good," Jasper said with an evil sneer. "If he fell in the same quicksand as Jamie, that sure would suit me fine. I can do without another bonehead and that'll make more money to share between the three of us."

If these last words made Dallas cackle wickedly, it sent a shiver down Scarecrow's spine, and he felt his throat tightening so uncomfortably that he was unable to take the gulp of water he was about to drink from the flask.

The thought that Jasper's comments could also include him sank into his mind and suddenly made him feel very concerned about his own safety.

\* \* \*

"Riley?" Rhapsody repeated, frowning at Scarlet's words. "Hang on a minute... you mean... that thief those murderous young bastards were raving about when they tried to string you up?"

Scarlet nodded slowly, shivering despite himself at he recalled those uncomfortable moments while he was dangling from the rope that was slowly strangling him. "You heard?"

"Some of it, yes. Though I was a little preoccupied in finding a way to help you at that moment. As I understand it – he was found hanged himself in Devil's Bayou, years ago?"

Scarlet nodded again, as he tried to recall the exact words of Jasper and his friends. Somehow, the clues were now slowly coming into place. "He was killed by an unknown killer – and his loot was never recovered."

"That would mean..."

"Joe," Scarlet realised. "Joe was Riley's killer." He looked at the bags with disbelief, and then glanced at the hole beside which he and his companion sat. "And he kept the loot under there, all this time."

"And that's the 'dough', Jasper and the others want," Rhapsody added in understanding. She looked into the open bag between the two of them, and took a wad out to check it out, shaking her head in wonder. "There's about twenty thousand in that lump," she said. "There must be a little over a million in this bag alone. How much did this Riley steal exactly?" She looked again into the bag and saw something else that attracted her attention, and made her frown in puzzlement.

"I don't know," Scarlet answered to her question. "But if it must be a small fortune." He was puzzled by the discovery. "But... why? Why did Joe kill that man, only to keep the money hidden and not use it at all? It doesn't make any sense!"

"Perhaps we'll have the answer to that question with this."

Scarlet stared inquisitively as Rhapsody produced from the bag a folded newspaper that she showed him. Together, they looked at the name and the date marked in the corner.

"The *Time Picayune*, Thursday, July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2055. It's nearly fifteen years old..." She unfolded the paper and took a look at the front page headline. "'Daring attack on the New Orleans World Bank'," she read. "'Three dead. Robber on the run with six million dollars.'"

"Six million?" Scarlet repeated, opening wide eyes. "Wow."

"A small fortune indeed," Rhapsody muttered.

"Jasper did say he and his friends were very young at the time of the events," Scarlet commented dryly. "Too young to have been involved in them. But Joe would certainly have been around when it happened." Something suddenly occurred to him. "Hang on... Three dead? I remember the boys mentioning two."

"Apparently, Riley had an accomplice who didn't make it," Rhapsody explained, reading the article by flashlight. "He was shot by a security guard just as the two thieves were about to make their escape. Riley killed the guard in retaliation and an employee of the bank got caught in the crossfire."

"A young woman, if I remember correctly."

Rhapsody nodded in silence, pursuing her reading. Her eyes alighted suddenly at the discovery of new information, and she quickly put the paper on the floor, between her companion

and herself. She pointed at one of the small pictures accompanying the main article. "Here. That's the picture of the young woman in question. Check the name."

The perplexed Scarlet looked down at the paper; there were two pictures side by side, those of the two victims of the robbery. One was of a man, dressed in a smart uniform – obviously the security guard. The other was of a young woman, in her early twenties, smiling happily at the camera. "Anita Benson," he read slowly. The penny dropped and he looked back at Rhapsody. "Benson?"

She stared back at him. "How much are you willing to bet she was related to Joe Benson? She might have been his daughter, perhaps."

Scarlet was sceptic. "Wouldn't that be too much of a coincidence?"

"I've seen much more surprising coincidences, Captain... either while I worked in FAB as a private investigator or with Spectrum. I think this is highly possible. That would explain why Joe might have killed Riley. He didn't kill him for the money, since he apparently didn't make use of it. He killed him to avenge the death of this girl. Whoever she was, she probably meant a great deal to him. And then he hid this fortune. Because the money represented the girl's death, to him it was tainted with blood."

"And somehow, Jasper and his gang found out," Scarlet said with a slow, understanding nod. "They wanted the loot for themselves. They demanded it from him..."

"And when he refused, they killed him," Rhapsody concluded. "You see, it's all adding up."

"I see, yes... and I don't like what I see, Dianne." With a deep sigh, Scarlet sat back, a sombre expression spread across his face. "Here we are, without the microchip that we want to find, and that the Mysterons are desperate to get – and sitting on money that we *don't* want, and that a gang of murderous young thugs badly want to get their hands on. It's a toss up between which of these two groups will find us first. And neither of the options is really enjoyable." He looked back at the young woman. "And I fear you're in far more danger than I am."

Rhapsody seemed puzzled by this statement. "What makes you say that? From my point of view, we're in the same boat."

"You think?" Scarlet retorted. "I don't see it that way. Take the Mysterons for example. If they find *us*, and decide to hurt you to force me to tell them where the microchip is... I might not even be able to save you."

"You would tell them if you knew, in order to save me?" The young woman asked with a frown.

"Yes. No... I'm not sure." Scarlet sighed again, this time in desperation. "I know that if I knew, telling them would sign our death warrant just as well," he said, staring into her eyes. "But I can't bear the thought of you being hurt... and of me, being totally helpless to stop it."

"I can take care of myself," Rhapsody retorted.

"Yes, I think you demonstrated that pretty well. But you're not like me. You're not indestructible. You can't return from the dead."

Scarlet stared at his companion even more intently. She became ill-at-ease under his intense scrutiny, and now seemed to try to avoid his eyes.

"You remember that too, then?" she asked after a moment's hesitation. "About you being indestructible?"

"Not exactly. Call it a hunch, if you will. All the clues were there and I worked it out. I, too, can be a good detective when I put my mind to it. Indestructible, you say. So not only can I heal from any wound – I will return from death itself. Isn't it what it means?"

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "So far... you did."

"So in truth, I cannot die." A deeper frown creased Scarlet's brow. "You left that out when you told me the Mysterons unwittingly gave me 'healing powers'. What they did to me had a much profound impact than that."

"I didn't know how to tell you all there was about you," Rhapsody defended herself. "I didn't want to totally freak you out. And I wasn't quite sure you would believe me either."

Scarlet grunted. "Yes, well... I suppose you meant well," he muttered. "But given the circumstances, I think I would have believed you, however odd or preposterous it would have seemed at first." He turned his eyes away, and fixed the emptiness in front of him. "Let me guess how it works: the Mysterons use dead people and turn them into their agents. Am I right?"

"You guessed that too?" Rhapsody asked in a downcast voice.

"Mahoney was dead, and then he came back as a Mysteron agent," Scarlet replied laconically. "I might be amnesiac, but I know ordinary people can't come back from the dead. It doesn't take a genius to realise it would need an alien influence to do that." He stared at Rhapsody again. "So if I understand correctly, the Mysterons did the same to me. They killed me to make me one of their slaves, forcing me to do their bidding, hurting people... like they did with poor Mahoney."

Rhapsody confirmed this with a sad nod. "I'm sorry, Paul," she said in a contrite voice. "Really, I am. I didn't want to confuse you more than you were and to cause you unnecessary grief."

"And they did the same with your Captain Black too. I suppose he was a good man, to begin with. Before the whole affair with the Mysterons, I mean?"

Rhapsody nodded again. "He was. From what I knew of him, he was a man of high ideals, who wanted to make a difference in the world. He was very involved with the creation of Spectrum. The members' selection, the recruiting, the training... He was Colonel White's right hand man – a position nobody else has filled since he was taken over by the Mysterons. Although, one might consider that you and Captain Blue are making good stand-ins."

"And he was a friend?"

"To you?" Rhapsody shook her head. "I guess you were, but not in the sense you are friends with Captain Blue, that's for sure. It was obvious you respected each other greatly. As for me... well, let's say that Captain Black and I didn't exactly get along."

"Why's that?" Scarlet inquired with curiosity.

"Mmm... He never took me seriously. I'm the youngest pilot in the Angel flight... Not by much, mind you, Melody is only three months older than me. But I guess that the fact that she had a previous career as an elite test pilot for the WAAF played in her favour. That probably made her worthy in his eyes. I think he only saw me as a thrill-seeking, little rich girl with a title, whose parents had paid for flying lessons at some point in her life, and who couldn't commit fully to any cause."

"Little rich girl with a title?" Scarlet repeated with a raised brow.

She chuckled. "Oh, that... That was Black's perception, I'm afraid. He assumed that, because my father, Lord Robert Simms, has the money that comes with the title. Well... Dad does have some money, and it does give the family some advantage. But we never took it for granted."

"Lady Dianne Simms, then," Scarlet said with a slight smile.

"Don't start, please," Rhapsody pleaded. "You've teased me quite enough with it in the past."

"I'm not teasing you now," Scarlet said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Did he realise he was wrong about you? Black, I mean... Before the Mysterons took him over?"

"I don't know, but you certainly told him off," Rhapsody replied, smiling fondly at the thought.

"Me?"

"Yes. That was not very long before he left for Mars. You told him that the fact that I had been chosen to be a part of

Spectrum should be more than enough for him to realise that I was in my rightful place.” She looked straight at him. “You reminded him that the selection committee didn’t just pick anyone at random. They had very rigorous criteria. Especially when it came to selecting those who would comprise Spectrum’s senior staff.”

Scarlet smiled. “I knew you were an extraordinary woman.”

Rhapsody flushed. “So are you. An extraordinary man, I mean,” she amended quickly. “And that was well before your... encounter with the Mysterons.”

“They took Black as their main agent on Earth, you told me. But to all of their other agents, they normally give specific assignments. What was supposed to be my mission for them?”

Rhapsody hesitated anew, like she did before. Seeing Scarlet’s pleading look, she sighed. “You were charged to kill the World President,” she finally admitted.

His expression became bleak. “Oh wow.”

“But you only had time to kidnap him,” Rhapsody added swiftly. “And you were stopped before you could do something irreparable. You didn’t kill anyone.”

“That’s a relief. But even so, what I did under the Mysterons’ influence was very serious,” Scarlet reasoned. “Even amnesiac, I can realise that kidnapping the World President is an action that would be frowned upon. I’m glad Spectrum stopped me before I could go too far.”

“Captain Blue did, to be specific. He saved the World President and you...” Rhapsody sighed again. “... You were killed in the process.”

Scarlet blankly stared at her. “Oh. Killed twice, then?”

“Well, you were dead when your body was recovered. But you revived afterward, and you were free of the Mysterons’ influence. And we discovered then that you were indestructible. So when you returned to active duty, you became our best asset against the Mysterons.”

“How could Spectrum have been so sure I was free, to begin with?” Scarlet asked bleakly.

“I don’t know how exactly,” Rhapsody replied honestly. “I know you were subjected to tests of various kinds. And the results of those tests said without a doubt that you remained the same man you were before... aside from your indestructibility, and the fact that you couldn’t remember at all what you did under Mysteron influence, that is.”

“I didn’t remember I kidnapped the World President?”

“You remember nothing from the moment the Mysterons took you over, until you woke up in Cloudbase’s sickbay, a few hours after the World President was rescued.”

"You mean – I remember nothing between those two first deaths." Scarlet became pensive. "So I've already had at least one occurrence of amnesia, if I understand correctly."

Rhapsody mulled that over. "To my knowledge, since that first occurrence a year ago, you never had any other incidence of amnesia. But Paul, I don't think what happened then and what's happening now are related."

Scarlet nodded, very slowly, pensively. "How do they do it?" he asked in a low voice. "I mean... How do they transform a human body like that, taking control of its mind and giving it these incredible powers? I mean, it's so incredible, that –"

He stopped himself suddenly, as he felt a familiar twinge of pain that made him scowl deeply. His mind seemed to tear open in a flash of light and he saw a man, wearing a white coat over a black and light brown uniform, pacing up and down in front of him and talking to him. The words the man was pronouncing were mostly drowned by the pain, but Scarlet's mind was able to grasp some of them:

*"...Original body destroyed..."*

*"Retrometabolism..."*

*"This new body you now inhabit..."*

*"Exact copy..."*

The memory vanished in a clasp of thunder that reverberated through Scarlet's skull and he reached for his head with a moan, closing his eyes.

Concerned at seeing him suddenly in pain, Rhapsody reached for him. "You're okay? You've been having a flashback, haven't you?"

"Yes," he said through clenched teeth. "I think I just saw your Doctor Fawn." He opened his eyes and looked at her and before she could say anything, he added: "I am not the original Paul Metcalfe, am I?"

He saw her hesitation, and felt his heart sink.

"So that's how it was done: the Mysterons killed the original Paul Metcalfe and made a copy out of him. That copy is me."

"That's not entirely true," Rhapsody replied quickly. "Technically, it's only the body which is not original... A body, which is an exact replica of the original."

"Exact replica, you say," he repeated with bitterness. "Not quite exact, if you ask me. *This body can't* be destroyed. Not like the original."

"Paul, that doesn't change anything about *who* you are," Rhapsody said with insistence. "The Mysterons made a mistake when they created one of their first agents of destruction, all those months ago."

"You mean me."

"They copied the body, gave it retrometabolic powers... but they also, inadvertently, transferred all of what made Paul Metcalfe the man he was into this new body. Your mind, your personality... your soul, so to speak, all of this is now residing inside this new body of yours. *You are* the same man, the same person you were before the whole ordeal with the Mysterons. Remember the tests I told you about. There could be no doubt left on that question."

"How do you know, Dianne?" Scarlet replied a little harshly. "How can we know that, without a *single* doubt? It seems impossible to me to take the measure of a man's soul. And that raises questions about my current condition. About the fact that I can't remember a thing about myself."

"What about it?" she asked with a frown.

"How do we know it isn't somehow a scheme of the Mysterons'? The mind of Paul Metcalfe might be gone, and it might be an opportunity for them. They created this body – they might try to take it over again. That might explain the amnesia. That might also explain that each time I try to remember, I get those awful headaches. *They* might be stopping me from remembering. What if –"

"Paul, please stop it."

Rhapsody reached to touch Scarlet's face with her hand to interrupt him. That silenced him instantly, and he turned to look straight into her blue eyes, which were now filled with sorrow for him.

"I wouldn't worry about that unduly, if I were you," she said in a voice as calming as she could muster. "I know that falling back under the Mysterons' hold is your worst nightmare, and they did try at least once, to our knowledge. They failed, because of this indomitable will of yours. They probably made that will even stronger, by making you indestructible."

"Dianne –" Scarlet started.

"I know you feel vulnerable right now," Rhapsody interrupted, not allowing him to continue. "But you're far from totally helpless. Your will to live is still there, and you proved it more than once since this assignment turned so bad. Besides," she added with conviction, "if the Mysterons were really trying to take you back under their yoke, they wouldn't have been trying to kill you since yesterday morning."

"That might be beside the point, since I am indestructible to begin with." Scarlet saw the reproachful way the young woman was looking at him, and he added, quietly: "Forgive me. You're probably right on all points, but I can't help feeling confused and worried. I saw how those men who killed the sheriff's deputy were acting – so mercilessly, and without any remorse. I saw



how ruthless young Mahoney was. He was prepared to do *anything* to get the microchip from me. If I was like that when the Mysterons took me over, and I suppose I was..." He stopped, shuddering at this single thought, and sighed deeply, lowering his eyes. "I guess what I'm trying to say is... the last thing I want to do is hurt you, Dianne."

"You won't," Rhapsody said with a reassuring smile. "I don't worry about that, Paul. I trust you."

"You trust me..." Scarlet scowled in deep frustration. "Me, the man who cannot remember his own name. The man who can barely defend himself..."

"That's not true and you know it."

"...Am I still a man, to begin with?"

Rhapsody frowned at these last words which were added in a morose voice, more as an afterthought than a real question. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"You know *exactly* what I mean," Scarlet retorted bluntly, raising his head to meet her eyes again. "With what I've been learning about myself – what the Mysterons did to me... how they transformed me into this... indestructible, unkillable being..."

"Man," Rhapsody corrected. "You're definitely a man, Paul."

"Oh yeah? How exactly can you tell, Dianne?" he challenged her. "Even if inside I'm the real Paul Metcalfe, this body of mine was created by an alien entity. It can't be destroyed. It can heal itself from any wound. Does that sound human to you?" He swallowed hard, and added in a low voice: "Face it, Dianne. You've certainly been wondering about it – just as I'm wondering about it right now."

"What makes you say that?" she asked with a deepening, suspicious scowl.

"You said it yourself earlier: I don't have anyone in my life. I know I have feelings... I know I care deeply for you, for instance. Those feelings must have been there before, but, I don't know, maybe I'm holding back. Maybe I'm stopping myself from acting on them, because I feel like I don't have the right to."

"That's utter nonsense," Rhapsody retorted.

"Is it?" Scarlet breathed out. "You will tell me that, deep down, you're not having doubts about it yourself? Not even in the slightest? Maybe it's even the reason that held you back as well, earlier when I kissed you."

Rhapsody glared at him with disbelief. "Are you *really thinking* it would be the reason why I didn't respond to your advance earlier?" She shook her head dejectedly, an expression of hurt in her eyes. "You think so badly of me?"

"I would never think badly of you," Scarlet protested in a low voice. "I'm only saying that I fully understand if –"

"Paul Metcalfe," she interrupted him firmly, "that's certainly not the reason why I held back and you should know that. And if you believe otherwise, then you're as dense as any other man I know... Which fully proves, without a doubt, that you are indeed a part of the human race."

And with that, she kissed him full on the mouth, with such fire that it made Scarlet gasp in surprise. It didn't take long for him to answer to this ardent kiss, though, and he did it with the same fervour, his hand reaching to stroke her cheek. Then, as a doubt crossed his mind, his palm cupped around the outline of her jaw and he gently pushed her face away from his.

As they both gasped to regain their breath, Scarlet looked deep into Rhapsody's eyes, searching them, wondering if her gesture was sincere, or if she had only kissed him out of sympathy, without truly meaning it.

He couldn't see any uncertainty or pretence in these eyes. They were burning bright with barely contained desire, a yearning that he too felt deep within himself.

"What are you doing?" he breathed out, with uncertainty.

"Do I *really* have to explain it to you?" she retorted in a voice as low as his.

He thought he understood then that she meant for this to be more than a kiss. He shook his head with hesitation. "Earlier, you said it wasn't a good idea. Are you sure...?"

"That was earlier. Now it's different." She tilted her head to the side, resting her cheek in his hand. "You don't *really* know me at all if you're asking if I'm sure."

He swallowed hard, and shook his head again, very slowly. "That's right, I don't know you. But I'd certainly like to know you now..."

Rhapsody's hand gently touched his bare chest, and he shuddered almost despite himself, as if electricity had passed through every nerve of his body; he felt his desire for this woman mounting in him, and he knew she was fully aware of what this simple touch had awakened in him.

He promptly pulled her lips to his and they kissed again, with deep passion. Scarlet felt Rhapsody's arms slide under his open shirt to snake around his back and shoulders, as they drew closer to each other. Clumsily, impatiently, his fingers fiddled with the buttons of her shirt; she probably found him too slow, as she came to his rescue to unfasten the remaining buttons. They didn't even stop kissing as he slipped the sleeves off her shoulders, being mindful of her wounded arm. As she discarded the shirt, she rose to her knees, and Scarlet did the same, to enfold her in a strong embrace.

They broke the kiss only to take breath again. Squeezing her eager, slender body against his, Scarlet nuzzled against her neck, feverishly kissing her bare and tender skin. He heard her sharp gasp of delight and felt her naked breast pressing harder against his chest. She was so close to him that he knew his desire was too obvious for her not to notice, just as much as he couldn't ignore the plain evidence that she wanted him just as much. And clearly, they couldn't deny it any longer.

He was still hugging her neck, and it was at this most inopportune moment that he felt it again.

The awful headache pain hit him between the eyes, so agonising, so much worse than any he had felt before. It was a pain such that he had trouble thinking straight. He moaned, closing his eyes, and he desperately clutched the young woman in his arms, like a man about to drown, holding on to a lifeline.

"Dianne..." he whispered into her ear. "I'm sorry..."

Rhapsody heard the deep pain in that hoarse, shaky voice and knew instantly that something was wrong. Scarlet was shivering in her arms and it wasn't out of anticipation. Gently, she pushed him from her and took his head between her hands to look into his face. It was pale as death itself and was a total mask of pain; his nose was bleeding.

The sight of it tore her heart apart.

"Paul – what is it?"

Rhapsody's gentle yet anxious voice reached Scarlet's mind and he made an effort to answer, to explain how sorry he was to be unable to meet her expectations. It was as if his head was filled with cotton, with the pain increasing at each passing second. His ears were ringing and there was a coppery taste in his mouth. His hands let go of her, and he tried to reach his head but found he couldn't; he was now shaking too much.

"... Headache... Too strong... I can't..."

That was all Scarlet managed to say before darkness engulfed his mind and his head lowered against Rhapsody's shoulder. He barely emitted a groan before passing out.

When she felt Scarlet's arms losing their hold on her to drop seemingly inert by his sides, Rhapsody gently but firmly held on to his limp body which was now leaning against her, and she sat down heavily onto the ground. She looked into his face again, to realise he had lost consciousness. She could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest and knew he was still alive, but in a bad way. A lump formed in her throat and she felt tears pricking at seeing him so helpless.

Fighting off her tears, she cradled him protectively, stroking his hair, kissing his forehead, and rocking back and forth as if he was but a sleeping child in her arms.

*It's so unfair,* she told herself with bitterness. *Why does he have to suffer so? He's the last person on Earth who deserves such grief.*

"Sleep," she whispered in his ear. "Get some rest, Paul. You'll be better in the morning... We'll get you back home soon, and then we'll get you sorted out. Don't worry, you'll see – everything will be all right."

Rhapsody promised herself, there and now, that she would guard him fiercely from anyone who might want to hurt him. She would see that he got safely through the night, until he recovered. And perhaps well after that, even.

\* \* \*

Seated at his desk, Doctor Evers looked up at the two men his secretary had introduced into his office and who now stood in front of him. Like many of the inhabitants of Les Arbrisseaux, Evers didn't like any strangers in the area to break the peace and monotony of everyone's quiet life. The events of the last twenty-four hours had certainly proved the townspeople right, and these two new visitors could only mean more bad news.

They looked very solemn in their uniforms, as they officially handed him their credentials. He had never met the likes of them before, and really, he should have been impressed; but somehow, at this late hour of the night, he failed to feel anything but weary. The previous day had been a long and harrowing one.

"Spectrum, huh?" he said, clearing his thoughts and looking down at the identity cards and then the papers displayed in front of him. "About time you finally showed up, too."

The taller of the two – a blond man with a distinguished accent – tilted his head to one side and looked at him with curiosity. "We're sorry, sir. We were on red alert, and rather busy with some pressing matters. We didn't become aware of your call to our New Orleans office until a few hours ago."

"Really? So in order to attract your attention, maybe we should have reported that we were invaded with terrorists. With these... how do the newspapers call that group? Oh yes, Mysterious."

"You mean 'Mysterons', Doctor," said the other officer, a dark-haired man, who was obviously an American.

"Mysterious, Mysterons, for me it's all the same." Taking a file from his desk, Evers stood up, to eye the two officers more

levelly. He was a short man, and both of them were much taller than he was. "The point is, gentlemen, that we expected you much sooner. A lot has happened between the first call the sheriff made to you yesterday morning and the one I placed later in the evening. If you would care to come with me..."

Both men nodded at his invitation and followed Evers out of his office, to stroll down the silent main corridor of the small clinic.

"You're doing the night shift, Doctor?" the blond officer asked as they climbed a staircase to reach the second storey.

Evers scoffed. "Night shift, you're kidding me? This is Les Arbrisseaux, son, not a big city. This isn't a proper hospital, as you can see, but I'm doing my best. When there's an emergency at night, the attendance nurse gives me a call and wakes me. If it's a *real* emergency – something beyond my modest talents – we call Baton Rouge and we have the patient transferred there."

They walked down another corridor, passing by a series of doors, until they reached the one at the very end, in front of which Evers stopped and turned to his visitors.

"I'm only here tonight because I was told to expect your arrival soon after my call. He glanced at the closed door. "And also, because he's my oldest friend in town, and I wanted to keep close to him. Now please, be quiet while in there, will you?"

"Of course, Doctor."

Evers turned the handle and slowly pushed the door open. The three men entered the small room quietly, and then approached the bed, where the patient, a burly black man, hooked to tubes and monitors, was resting with his eyes closed.

A nurse was seated on a chair nearby, reading a book, and she raised her head at the three men's arrival.

"How is he, Willa?" Evers asked her.

"The same, Doctor," she said quietly. "He hasn't awakened yet."

Evers thanked her with a nod and went to check the information from the machine by the side of the bed, which was beeping constantly and regularly. He nodded with satisfaction, and then turned to address the two Spectrum officers waiting patiently behind.

"This is the town's sheriff," he explained in a low voice. "He was found on the river bank a few hours ago – just before sundown. Drenched to the bone and suffering from hypothermia. He had a bullet in his chest, and his clothes were torn. We figured his body had been dragged down the river by the wild currents. Obviously he's the victim of some kind of attack. He's very lucky to still be alive. A weaker man would have surely died but..." He looked at the man lying on the bed. "... Leonard Masters is made of sterner stuff. His condition is stable now, and

he should make a full recovery. But he has yet to wake up to tell us what exactly happened to him. He's been unconscious since we found him."

"Do you know what happened to him?" the dark-haired officer asked.

Evers shrugged. "One can only guess. Last afternoon, he and his deputy, Alan MacGibbons, were on their way to deliver a suspect into Spectrum's custody, as instructed by your New Orleans office. But of course, you know about this, right?"

The blond officer chewed on his bottom lip, hesitating to give an answer. Evers watched them carefully.

"You don't have the suspect in your charge, right? Leonard never got to meet with you at all?"

"No," the blond man replied, and he didn't seem inclined to extrapolate on the question. "Please, continue, Doctor."

Evers sighed. The officer's answer confirmed his suspicions.

"Later in the day, we found MacGibbons dead on the road passing through the woods and leading out of the parish. His body was riddled with bullets. Next to him, there was another dead man, a stranger to anyone in town. He looked like he had been run over by a car. He was dressed in a uniform... You know, those kind of uniforms hunters or soldiers wear when they want to hide in the woods?"

"Camouflage uniform," the blond man said grimly.

"Yes, one of those. Actually, quite similar to what the suspect was wearing when he was found in Devil's Bayou by Joe Benson – a recluse who lived there on his own... before the suspect allegedly killed him."

"Allegedly?" the dark-haired officer repeated.

"The sheriff had his doubt about his guilt. Despite the fact there were witnesses to the murder."

"Sounds to me like your sheriff didn't find these witnesses credible," the dark-haired man continued.

"They might not be, but considering the events..." Evers glanced at his patient. "I'm guessing that the unknown man who was found with MacGibbons was the suspect's accomplice, trying to help him escape."

The two Spectrum officers didn't show any visible reaction to the doctor's assumption.

"And what makes you say that?" the blond man asked evenly.

"The sheriff's car was found by the river by fishermen in a boat, a few miles upstream, just at the boundary of Devil's Bayou. It wasn't difficult to find, actually: the smoke could be seen from miles around and indicated its position quite clearly."

The blond officer tilted his head again. "I don't follow you."

"The car had been set on fire... by whom, we don't know. There was a dead body inside, burned to a crisp."

"A body?" The blond man showed a concerned frown. "The suspect, you think?"

"The body was totally unrecognisable. But no, I don't think it was the suspect. He's a tall man, and the body is very visibly that of a much smaller individual. Also, there were three off-road vehicles at the scene, badly damaged. It looked like there had been a war there, by the looks of things. We couldn't find the riders."

"And do you know who these riders are?" the blond officer asked.

"Well, we think those vehicles are those owned by some of the boys who were witnesses to Joe's murder in the first place. Young men who spend their time riding across the county on those infernal machines of theirs. We haven't seen them around town since around noon, so we don't know where they could be and what could have happened to them."

"And the suspect?" the dark-haired man asked. "Where do you think he is now?"

"He must be hiding in Devil's Bayou. That's where he would go, after escaping the sheriff's custody. Prints were found leading in that direction anyway. Multiple prints. They were so muddled up that it was impossible to actually know how many people went through there or what happened exactly."

"Devil's Bayou," the blond man repeated thoughtfully, exchanging glances with his companion.

"The sheriff was found afterwards. It was a relief to realise he had survived whatever happened. Maybe the suspect escaped and the boys, who saw the whole thing, followed him in Devil's Bayou? They were all over town earlier in the morning, saying how they were big heroes by helping the sheriff arrest him. Maybe they wanted to repeat the exploit?"

"Doctor, please stick to the facts," the blond man said with a frown which showed his irritation. "It'll make our job much easier if we don't have to deal with speculation."

"You want facts?" Evers said roughly. "I'll give you facts, officers: the boys' parents are worried, and the townsfolk are restless at the moment. What, with the thought of a murderer running around freely in the area... I've never seen unrest like this for the last fifteen years, since that robbery in New Orleans, when the thief hid out in Devil's Bayou. If the body found in the sheriff's car should turn out to be one of those missing boys – I can only imagine how people around here will react!"

"Let's not get carried away," the dark-haired officer swiftly interjected. "Doctor, when you called our New Orleans office, you mentioned pictures of the suspect. Can you show them to us?"

"Yes, of course."

The tone of their voices had risen, and Evers was beginning to feel concerned that it would disturb his patient. He addressed one last look at the still body of Masters, and then gestured in the direction of the door. "I think we'd better leave first," he said, lowering his voice.

The two Spectrum officers nodded and they left the room; the doctor closed the door behind, and turned to his visitors again. He opened the folder he had in his hands and took out one large picture that he gave to the blond officer who was standing closer to him. "You might not believe it, but those are X-rays pictures we took of the suspect when he was taken into town by the sheriff last morning. He was apparently dead at the time, but obviously... he wasn't. Scared the hell out of one of my nurses when he woke up in the morgue too."

The blond officer glanced at him, before looking at the first picture; it showed a clean, regular picture of Captain Scarlet's face. He handed it to his colleague, who nodded upon seeing it. "I believe you, Doctor," he said, checking the other pictures. He discovered the first of Scarlet's proper scan pictures and he carefully checked it out before looking inquisitively at Evers.

"That was taken with one of those newest machines," the doctor explained. "I've always been reluctant to use it – always preferred X-rays. But seems like I didn't have any choice in the matter. It's of the suspect, of course. You'll probably notice the grey mass in the middle of his skull... It's not clear, but it looks like some kind of projectile. I think it might be responsible for his amnesia."

"Amnesia?" the blond officer said with a frown of perplexity. "You say this man is amnesiac?"

He exchanged glances again with his companion, who looked just as doubtful as he was. Evers was watching their reactions carefully.

"Why, yes. He said he couldn't remember a thing... Why he was here, why he killed Joe Benson... He did say his name was O'Hara, but I doubt even that was true."

"O'Hara?" the dark-haired man echoed, raising a brow.

"Yes. 'Scarlet' O'Hara, actually."

The Spectrum officer shook his head. "Man, and I thought he had no sense of humour..."

"You know that man, then," Evers then realised. "When I saw the results of the first X-ray scans and after he woke up in the morgue like he did, the sheriff and I remembered the



Spectrum communiqué we received some months ago... so we knew we should contact you."

"Who else has seen these pictures, aside from the sheriff and yourself?" the blond officer asked, while checking the other pictures.

"No-one else. I gave a set of the suspect's pictures to the sheriff, so he could give them to Spectrum, when he left to meet with them. I guess they must have been destroyed along with the car. Will you tell me what's going on, officer...?"

"Captain. Captain Blue." He pointed at a third picture with his finger and showed it to Evers. "This is not your suspect – O'Hara, as you called him."

"This one? No, it's a pic of the unknown dead man we found with MacGibbons. The one wearing the camouflage uniform. As you can see, he showed a regular picture under the X-ray scans as well. Which made me think he and O'Hara were somehow related."

"In a way." Captain Blue showed the picture to his colleague.

The latter nodded vigorously upon seeing it. "Jack Palmer," he said matter-of-factly. "According to our files, he was part of Major Montgomery's team."

"Right, Captain Ochre. This seems to confirm our suspicions." Captain Blue turned to Evers. "Were other strangers sighted in the area, Doctor?" he inquired. "Other men dressed like this one?"

"Or a young woman?" Captain Ochre suggested in turn. "Nice-looking, red hair, blue eyes?"

"No, nobody else but O'Hara and that other guy," Evers replied. He noticed how his answer seemed to cause concern in both officers. "Are you saying there are more of these people around? What's going on, Captains?"

Blue closed the folder. "I'm afraid I will have to confiscate these pictures, Doctor Evers, and I will have to request that you hand over any copies you might have kept in your files."

Doctor Evers was looking from one man to the other, with deepening confusion. "Captain... will you *tell me* exactly what's going on?"

Blue hesitated, unsure how to answer. "I'm afraid, Doctor, that this is confidential information."

That wasn't exactly the response Bill Evers expected; he didn't like it one bit.

"Confidential information? How can you stand there, and give me such bull? A killer is on the loose, the sheriff is seriously wounded and his deputy is dead! Added to that, there are some kids missing for hours! Why, this whole mess is partly Spectrum's

fault to begin with! If you had come to town to take custody of the suspect instead of instructing Leonard to bring him to you when he called you earlier today, this would never have happened!"

Captain Blue heaved a deep sigh. He couldn't very well tell the truth to this town doctor – that Spectrum had never received the sheriff's call to begin with and that it had been intercepted by a Mysteron agent implanted at Spectrum's New Orleans office – and that Spectrum actually only discovered that very much later.

Since this very morning, Spectrum had been kept on their toes by the Mysterons, answering a threat to Futura City. It was now perfectly clear that it was nothing more than a wild goose chase – Spectrum had never suspected that the aliens were making their move here, in Louisiana, trying to get for themselves the very thing that Scarlet and Rhapsody had been sent to retrieve. The Mysterons had made use of the violent storm that had raged over the Atlantic – effectively cutting contact between Cloudbase and its missing officers. Blue didn't dare think they had actually influenced the weather itself – he didn't want to imagine that their powers would extend that far – and instead, preferred to think that Nature had thrown a fluke they had used to their advantage.

As time passed, Scarlet and Rhapsody's extended radio silence had started to cause concern. Deprived of his best agent, and despite the threat seemingly hanging over Futura City which should have, in all rights, gathered all of Spectrum's attention, Colonel White had instructed Lieutenant Green to conduct an investigation, to learn what could have happened to the two missing agents.

Green's research had been relatively swift; he first discovered that Major Philip Montgomery, the leader of the W.A.A.F commando team Scarlet had been assigned to accompany to Louisiana, had not reported to his superiors either, for a long time. Further research by the W.A.A.F at the major's residence had led them to find Montgomery's dead body, lying in his bath, with a bullet through the head. The discovery had caused some confusion within the W.A.A.F., because Montgomery was supposed to have left for his assigned mission with his team – and had even signed the flight order before leaving New Orleans, shortly before dawn. Spectrum, of course, understood immediately what had happened.

In parallel to this discovery, Green also found out that a call had been received at the communication office of Spectrum New Orleans, originating from the small town of Les Arbrisseaux, only a few miles off the location to which Montgomery's team, along

with Scarlet and Rhapsody, had been sent. Green only had to check the communication kept on file to realise that it was indeed related to the missing officers' disappearance – although he didn't have all the details. Following this, the inter-administrative liaison and communication officer in New Orleans was revealed as a Mysteron agent and disposed of accordingly.

Now guessing that the Mysterons had taken Spectrum for fools with a decoy threat on the capital city of the World, Colonel White had then decided to send Blue and Ochre to investigate in Les Arbrisseaux, all the while keeping the main body of Spectrum forces in Futura, just in case it might yet be another distraction.

It turned out now that it wasn't the case.

Blue didn't know exactly what the object of Scarlet and Rhapsody's assignment was. He could only imagine that it was something very important and potentially dangerous too, if Colonel White suspected the Mysterons wanted to use it to carry out their current threat.

"Doctor Evers," Blue said in a calming voice, "let me assure you that Spectrum takes the situation very seriously. You do not have to worry about anything. We'll deal with the situation and will see justice done."

"That'll better be the case, Captain," Evers growled ominously. "Because the people in this area might just do things their own way, if they feel you are not taking care of things. If ever they should get their hands on O'Hara –"

"O'Hara, as you call him, isn't your concern," Blue interjected, a little more roughly than he intended. "And I would advise your fellow citizens not to take any action against him or anyone else. It might have serious consequences."

"Is that a threat?"

"You misunderstand me, sir. It's just a piece of advice."

"Hang on..." Evers eyed Blue with suspicion as something suddenly occurred to him. "Scarlet, that's a colour," he said, almost accusingly. "That's not his actual name, it's a codename. That guy's one of yours. Isn't he?"

At first, Blue was reluctant to answer the question. Then finally, he gave a brief nod, staring intently at the physician. "Things are not what they appear to be, Doctor," he said in an uncompromising voice. "He is indeed a Spectrum officer, and he was here on assignment when we suddenly lost contact with him."

"In Devil's Bayou?" Evers said with scepticism. "What could possibly have brought him to that hellhole?"

"I cannot tell you the nature of this assignment, Doctor, I'm sorry. However, what I can tell you is this: it's likely that very dangerous men are currently roaming around the area. It would

be a good idea if people stay clear of these men for their own safety."

"And report any sighting of these strangers," Ochre added in turn. "Discreetly and without taking any risk. You should have a town meeting called so that the population is informed."

Evers was now beyond confusion. "At this time of night? You're kidding, right?"

"It's very urgent, Doctor," Ochre insisted. "And it's imperative that we go to Devil's Bayou as soon as possible in order to —"

"Now I know you're kidding," Evers interrupted swiftly. "Nobody travels into Devil's Bayou at night, Captain. No-one in the area will guide you there, if that's what you're thinking about. It's too dangerous. However urgent it might be, you will have to wait until morning."

Blue scowled. "It might be too late in the morning. Not only for our agent. For those boys you mentioned earlier too."

"Don't you think I know that?" Evers snapped. "They know the dangers of Devil's Bayou as well as anyone else around here. If they're in there tonight, they would have settled down for the night somewhere to wait until daylight. And your officer would be wise to do the same himself. But quite frankly," he added with a sour accent to his voice, "I must say I don't care much what might happen to him. Because I still have doubts about his involvement in what happened to Leonard and —"

"Doctor Evers!" The door leading to the sheriff's room suddenly opened, interrupting him, and Willa the nurse appeared in the opening, all excited. Almost startled by her sudden appearance, the three men turned to her and she addressed the doctor directly, frantically: "You better come, Doctor. It's Sheriff Masters. I think he's about to wake!"

For a split second, obviously surprised by the news, Evers hesitated. Then, he turned to both Ochre and Blue, standing behind him. "Wait here, gentlemen. I have to check on my patient."

Both Spectrum officers nodded and they watched as Evers followed the nurse, carefully closing the door behind him.

"About time he woke up," Ochre said in a low voice. "And I hope he'll be able to talk. We might finally understand exactly what has been going on." He looked straight at his companion's grim expression. "You're concerned about Scarlet."

"I am. I'm still trying to figure out how he can be amnesiac. In any case that explains why he hasn't tried to make contact with base to begin with. He might be very vulnerable right now."

Ochre hesitated to voice his own apprehension. "You don't think, by any chance, the Mysterons might have taken him back

under their control? When he came back to us, last year, he didn't remember a thing about what he had done as a Mysteron agent. That might explain why that Palmer guy might have tried to help him escape."

Blue shook his head. "I don't think that's the case. If there is one thing we know about Mysteron agents, it's that there's no loyalty between them. Despite Doctor Evers' assumption, I don't think Palmer was there to help Scarlet escape."

"Then why was Palmer there, with the dead deputy?" Ochre asked. "Kill him? Capture him? Make him tell him and his friends if he found that thing he came here to find?"

"You're a better detective than I am, Ochre. You might find that answer before I do. For now, I don't want to jump the gun and think the worst might have happened."

Both friends knew that 'the worst' for Scarlet, was indeed to return to Mysteron control. Neither of them really wanted to think it could really happen.

"Actually, I'm more concerned about Rhapsody," Blue moved on. "When Cloudbase was finally able to receive the transponder signal from her Angel fighter, it was to tell us that her craft had crashed."

"She's a resourceful girl," Ochre commented. "With any luck, she would have bailed out before it was too late."

"Let's hope for that, yes. And if she did, and she's alive out there, we have to find her - and Scarlet as well. When we do, we'll also find the explanation for his amnesia, and for all that's been going on in this area since they came here on assignment."

Ochre stroked his chin thoughtfully. "The doctor seems to think Scarlet returned to Devil's Bayou - and we ought to assume Montgomery and his men might be there too. Maybe even Rhapsody."

"Maybe the object they're looking for is still there? Maybe that's why Scarlet has returned there - to complete his mission?" Blue suggested. "That is - if he went there of his own accord. Montgomery and his men could have taken him there by force."

"To get the object?" Ochre asked. "Do you have any idea what is it exactly?"

"Colonel White mentioned a microchip. But further than that... I don't know. The colonel wouldn't tell. It seems it's highly top secret."

"It must be something huge, if the Mysterons thought of using it for their current threat."

Blue nodded thoughtfully. "In any case, I don't think the Mysterons have it yet. They wouldn't still be in the area. And we know they're still around." He looked at his colleague. "Their helicopter was sighted about one hour before sundown by the

W.A.A.F surveillance satellite and according to the signal from its transponder, it's currently landed somewhere in the middle of Devil's Bayou... apparently waiting."

"Might be a good idea to have the Angels pay it a visit..." Ochre commented thoughtfully. "But in the morning, when we start our search, since we can't count on going into the Bayou tonight. We should contact base to get a helicopter. We'll cover more ground faster."

"Good idea." Blue was now looking straight at the door leading into the sheriff's room. "If Masters is in any state to talk, I want to speak to him. While I contact the colonel, I think you'd better go get the Mysteron detector from the SPV outside. Considering his current state, I don't think the sheriff is a Mysteron agent, but —"

"— As we know Mysterons are not always retrometabolic, it's something to consider," Ochre concluded. "Better be on the safe side, yes." He paused for a second. "The doctor won't like it at all, Blue."

Blue's expression became hard. "Probably not, but you know what? I don't give a fiddle what that doctor might like or not."

"No," Ochre replied, smiling as he turned around to slowly walk down the corridor. "I never thought you would."

## CHAPTER 10

The early light of the morning found Jasper Holland already up and getting ready to leave. He had barely slept at all during the night and could only think of finally getting his hands on the treasure he had dreamed of for so long and of getting rid of the two unwanted witnesses that posed the threat hanging over his head.

He had reloaded the weapons, making sure they would work perfectly when the time was right, and then proceeded to wake his two accomplices. Scarecrow proved a little too slow to rise, so he roughly kicked him in the shoulder. Abruptly jerked out of his slumber, the young man, yelping in pain, sat up quickly. He addressed a reproachful glare at his companion, while behind him, seated on the trunk of a fallen dead tree and checking on his rifle, Dallas was cackling wickedly.

"Why d'you do that for?" Scarecrow protested. "That hurts!"

"You should have gotten up the first time I woke you, you lousy bum!" Jasper snapped at him. "It's time to go! We've gotta move, before our two birds leave the nest. We know where they are, it'll be easy to get 'em." As Scarecrow reluctantly got to his feet, Jasper pushed a gun into his hands. "Here, you might need this later!"

Scarecrow looked down at the weapon with uncertainty, moaning: "Man, you really want to go through with it?"

"And exactly what do ya mean by that?" Jasper asked, glaring warningly at him. "You got cold feet now?"

Scarecrow was at first hesitant to answer. "I've been thinking, Jasper –"

Jasper scoffed, interrupting him. "*You've* been thinking? *You?*"

"Well, yeah – it happens sometimes," Scarecrow retorted, looking offended by the implication. "You see, Jamie's dead already. Which one of us'll be next, d'you think? Do we want to take the risk?"

"And do *you* want to take the risk of letting those guys live?" Jasper snapped angrily. "O'Hara knows too much already! And the girl knows too much too! Beside, you told us last night, they're also after *our* treasure! You wanna tell me you don't wanna get any of it anymore?"

"It's too late already, 'Crow," Dallas said in turn. "Joe's dead. Sheriff Masters's dead. No way we can turn back now. We're all in this together."

"No, *you* did it," Scarecrow protested, swiftly turning to him. "You did it, the two of you. The rest of us did nothing. *I* did nothing!"

Dallas raised a sceptical brow. "*You* did nothing? Think carefully about that, 'Crow. You were there with us when Joe and the sheriff got killed. You were there with us when we tried to hang the freak. Yeah, you did nothing. *Nothing* to stop us. I'd say you were a willing participant."

Scarecrow stood there, unable to answer this harangue; unfortunately for him, it wasn't finished yet, as Jasper walked to him and poked his chest with his finger, looking straight into his eyes and hissing through his teeth: "*You're* implicated as much as we are, you coward."

"You was willing to kill them," Dallas continued, as he rose from his sitting place and approached from behind. "Joe, the sheriff... And the freak and the girl too. What's the matter now, 'Crow? When it gets tough, you want to quit?"

"I'll see those two dead," Jasper added ominously. "And I'll see you dead too, if you don't do as I say, 'Crow."

Scarecrow paled in terror, and seeing the genuine threat to his life in Jasper's eyes, he backed away a step, only to bump into Dallas, who was standing right behind him. He felt exactly like a trapped animal, with no options left to escape.

"Hey," he protested weakly, "I'm not going anywhere, guys... I was just sayin' that... it might be a good idea to consider being careful. The freak's dangerous and we know he's hard to kill..."

"That's putting it mildly."

The cold voice coming from behind the trees bordering the clearing startled the three boys and they turned around, just in time to see a tall, thin man, dressed in camouflage gear, stepping out into the open. Out of instinct, both Jasper and Dallas made a move to raise their weapons, but the man had already his handgun casually trained on them. He softly tutted at them.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, boys. I've got my men covering you."

The three boys heard the menacing clicks of weapons being armed, and nervously they looked around. Showing from behind the bushes, they saw two other men, dressed in similar fashion to the one standing in front of them, who were taking careful aim at them with automatic weapons. The three of them had all the look of professional soldiers and didn't seem to be in any kind of joking mood.

"You heard the major!" one of them barked. "Drop the guns!"



The three boys looked at each other and, after a short hesitation, they obeyed reluctantly. Casually, the one the other man had called 'the major' put his handgun back into its holster and approached them.

"That's more like it, boys. There's no reason to act like wild animals, is there?" He stood straight in front of Jasper. "After all, we're on the same team, aren't we?"

Intrigued by the man's comment, Jasper narrowed his eyes at him. He glanced suspiciously at the other men, as they stepped into the clearing, their weapons lowered, and then turned his attention back to the tall man.

"Who the hell're you?" he asked abruptly.

Major Philip Montgomery considered the young man with a critical eye. Instantly, he recognised that this one, the leader of the group, was dangerous and that he was to be approached cautiously. Even if the commandos currently had the advantage, this Jasper Holland could prove unpredictable, and difficult to manage.

But with his effectiveness currently reduced, Montgomery needed reinforcements, and these three immoral youths could very well prove useful if he wanted to accomplish the Mysterons' will. Time was running out, with the deadline now quickly approaching, and they still didn't have the object that Scarlet had taken from them.

"I told you, lad. We're on the same team," Montgomery said in an almost syrupy voice. "We're after the same quarry."

Jasper eyed him suspiciously. "And that would be?" he inquired without committing himself, and keeping his voice harsh. "I sure don't know what you mean, man."

"Oh, please. Don't play games with me, Mister Holland."

The fact that this man knew of his name made Jasper twitch. He didn't like it one bit. Something was going on here...

"How d'you know my name?" he asked carefully.

Montgomery shrugged, turned slightly and made a gesture towards the bushes behind which he had been hiding until a few minutes ago. "Your friend here told me about you. He gave me all of your names." Another person appeared from behind them and stepped into the clearing. "And he told me a few things about your business here," the major continued.

Recognising Johnny Monroe, standing there, looking blankly at him, Jasper became absolutely livid. He realised then that someone he had trusted had deceived him. Twice in as many days. However, if Jamie Lewis' attempt to double-cross him had not come as much of a surprise, he frankly didn't expect

that Johnny Monroe – cowardly Johnny Monroe – would even *think* of betraying his confidence.

He didn't have any idea who these soldiers were, nor where they came from, but it seemed obvious to him that Johnny had told them things he shouldn't have. That explained his prolonged silence, and why he didn't see fit to answer any of Jasper's calls. The creep had hooked up with these strangers for his own reasons.

That made Jasper furious.

"Johnny, you bastard, exactly what did you tell these guys? Who are they and what —"

"Shut it, Jasper!" Johnny sharply interrupted him, his voice harsh and scowling with irritation.

That instantly caused Jasper to stare at him, open-mouthed in complete surprise. Never before had Johnny dared talk back to him the way he just had. Even Scarecrow and Dallas were looking at him in astonishment; they obviously couldn't believe their ears.

As for Johnny, the reaction he had caused seemed to fully satisfy him. He continued, in a voice that wouldn't admit any reply: "You'd better listen to what the major has to tell you. You might consider it interestin'."

"Indeed, you would," Montgomery said calmly. "If I were you, I'd listen to your friend."

"He's no friend of mine anymore," Jasper growled, glaring murderously at Johnny. "And you, I don't know who you are. Why should I listen to you?"

Montgomery shrugged, almost indifferently. "Let's say we have... arguments, to which you can't say no." As he spoke those words, he stroked the handle of his gun, in an almost off-hand way.

The gesture didn't escape Jasper – nor the meaning of it.

"All right," the young man said grudgingly. "What do you have to say?"

Montgomery took a step closer to Jasper. "That man you're after – we are looking for him too."

"I told ya I don't know what you're talking about, man," Jasper replied defensively.

"And I told you..." Montgomery stepped even closer to Jasper to stand menacingly over him, "... *not* to play games with me, *boy*."

Jasper lowered his eyes under the intensity of the man's eyes, and noticed his knuckles were white, so tightly was he holding the handle of his gun. He meant business.

Jasper swallowed hard. "What do ya want, exactly?"

Montgomery grunted with satisfaction. "You're being reasonable, that's good. I think we can help each other, lad. You want to get Scarlet, and we want to get him too. So if we join forces, we'll have a better chance of getting results." He glanced over in Scarecrow's direction. "Your friend spoke the truth, earlier: Scarlet's a dangerous man. As dangerous as anyone can be. And you boys can't hope to get him all by yourselves. You'll be killed trying."

"We already lost a guy because of him," Scarecrow added quickly.

"Shut up!" Jasper snapped at him. But it was too late, of course, and Montgomery was now looking at him with an expression that clearly meant his point had been proven.

"Jamie is dead?" Johnny then said casually enough. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy..."

"Whose side are you on, exactly?" Dallas said, turning angrily at him.

"Obviously, he's not with us anymore," Jasper added bitterly. "He found a new team to play on."

"We're all on the same side, kid," Montgomery then said. "As long as we work together... and trust each other."

Jasper snorted. "And why should we be trustin' you, man? I have no idea who the hell you could be. I just notice you talk the same as the freak does. And like the girl too." He glared at Johnny. "I would very much like to know exactly what that jerk's been telling you."

"Listen, boy – I don't give a damn what you and your chums are after. All I want is to get my hands on Scarlet."

Jasper looked back at him with curiosity. "Scarlet... You mean that's really O'Hara's name? Who *is* this freak, anyway?"

"His name never was O'Hara," retorted Montgomery. "And you shouldn't care who he really is to begin with. That's not important to you. What's important is this: from what I've just heard while hiding in the bushes, I'm guessing you *know* where we can find him. So you'll be taking us to him."

"So that's what you want from us," Jasper said with an understanding nod. "You need us. To find him."

"Yes, and I also need you to follow my orders when we *do* find him. I know you want him dead, but me, I want him alive. At least, for a short time. So I want to make sure you won't kill him on sight."

"Now I know what you want from us. But what is it you want from *him*, exactly?" Jasper asked, frowning his brow.

"That's none of your business, boy," Montgomery replied sharply. "Don't ask me any questions, and I won't ask what your reasons for wanting him dead are."

"What d'you mean?" Jasper protested innocently. "We're just good citizens, trying to capture a criminal who killed our sheriff. There's nothin' more to it."

Montgomery chuckled. "Kid, do you *really* expect me to believe that?"

"I don't know what Johnny's been telling you exactly... But you might consider he's been lying to ya."

"Oh, he told me plenty. But even if he had not, or if he had lied to us... Remember – I heard the three of you talk. I heard *everything*."

At this revelation, Jasper kept quiet for a moment; he wondered if it was a trap, if Montgomery was lying by saying he had heard them. One look into the major's expressionless face told him he wasn't lying. The young man swallowed hard again. "Everything?" he asked, as if needing to make sure.

"Every single word." A thin, cruel smile appeared on Montgomery's lips. Jasper thought he looked like a cat who was about to swallow a defenceless mouse, and seemed to enjoy every moment of it. "But I'm liable to forget what I heard – if you agree to give us a hand. Maybe I misunderstood what you meant, after all... It might be you are indeed good citizens, trying to catch a dangerous criminal." He glared meaningfully at Jasper. "Let us be clear: I'm not interested in what you might have done, or that 'treasure' you mentioned. I don't care about any of it. All I'm interested in is to get Scarlet – alive, as I said earlier. At least, to begin with, for long enough for him to tell us where we can find the thing he stole from us. And then, you'll be allowed to kill him. I'll even help you, for that matter." He shrugged indifferently. "With him dead, that ought to make you happy. And me as well."

Jasper nodded at this proposition, giving it some thought. There was certainly something attractive in it.

"There might be a little something that little nitwit Johnny didn't tell you about," he then said suddenly. "Your guy? He's got amnesia. He doesn't remember a thing about himself. So if you expect him to tell you anything about whatever you're looking for, you might be in for a big surprise."

"We can be very convincing," Baxter then said ominously. He was casually leaning against the dead tree Dallas had been seated on earlier, and his interjection made the boys turn towards him. There was a cold expression in his eyes, as he continued, in a stoic voice: "We have ways to make even amnesiacs talk. And he might not realise it, but Scarlet has with him just the bargaining chip we need to insure he regains his memory."

"You're talking about the girl," Jasper realised. "You'll kill her too?"

"I'm not mistaken in saying she's as much a liability to you as she is to us, am I?" Montgomery said, more a statement than a question.

Jasper nodded slowly; he would have been stupid not to understand the subtext behind the major's cold comment. A thought came to his mind:

"And what about us? You won't tell us what you're after... So what's to tell us that you won't turn against us once you have your guys? I'm guessing you don't want to leave witnesses around."

Montgomery shook his head. "You're getting this wrong, kid. You've obviously mistaken us for criminals. We're not; we're soldiers, carrying out the mission we've been assigned."

Dallas scoffed. "Ain't that a load of bullshit," he muttered.

"Hey, kid!" Petroski warned him in a loud voice that made the young man jump nearly out of his skin. "Are you calling the major a liar? 'Cause if that's the case, you'd better keep your reflections to yourself!"

"Take it easy, Petroski," Montgomery advised his man. "It's understandable that these young men don't trust us."

"That's right, we don't," Jasper said quickly. "If you're soldiers, you might want to turn us in."

"Then you're mistaking us for policemen as well, boys," Montgomery retorted. "It's not our business to have people arrested by the law. And why would I do that to comrades-in-arms, who helped us? You've got my word of honour: we only need your help getting Scarlet. If you go out there, trying to catch him on your own, you won't stand a chance."

"One of your friends has been killed already," Baxter then continued. "So why would you want to add someone else to that list? You, perhaps, boy?"

Jasper shuddered at the implication. He saw Montgomery approving of his man's involvement with a slow nod. "So you need us as much as we need you, Mr Holland. Guide us to this criminal, help us get him... we do our little business and we go our separate ways. No question asked, and no looking back."

Jasper was still eyeing him suspiciously. "I guess we don't have any choice, do we?"

As he saw the imperturbable way Montgomery was looking back at him in silence, his eyes bright with that unfathomable coldness that was a sure indication that this man was as dangerous as hell, Jasper understood that indeed, all he could actually do was accept his offer. It was, as they say, 'an offer that couldn't be refused'. However, he wasn't very reassured about the outcome of this hunt. Things weren't that clear, and no matter what they wanted with Scarlet – which they didn't want to explain

– Jasper was sure it wasn't something legitimate. And if it was the case, then he, Scarecrow and Dallas could very well be in danger once they had helped the soldiers capture the fugitive.

Jasper could see their game clearly; he wasn't going to be fooled and let these three men – these three soldiers, as they called themselves – get the better of him and surprise him when he least expected it. He would keep his eyes on them, and never turn his back.

"All right, it's a deal, then," he said. You've got us enrolled into your army – Major."

"Talking like a man, my boy." Montgomery gave a vigorous thump on Jasper's back, nearly sending him sprawling to the ground. "Now, where can we find Scarlet?"

"At Joe's cabin," Scarecrow then said, speaking for the first time since the soldiers' arrival. "From here, it's about an hour and a half walk deeper into Devil's Bayou." He pointed in a northerly direction. "That way."

"You know where it is?" Montgomery asked, turning to Johnny.

The latter shrugged. "Everyone living in this area knows where it is. There's two paths leading there: one cuts through Devil's Bayou and is more direct. That's the hour and a half walk Dallas is talking about. The other way is to follow the path by the river and go upstream."

"How much time to get there following the river?"

"For them," Johnny said nodding towards Jasper and his two companions, " 'bout two hours. For you..." He grinned wickedly. "Maybe an hour and a half, with the right guide."

"And I suppose you're that right guide, Johnny?" Jasper cynically asked him. "What makes you more qualified than any of us, exactly?"

"For starters, I can keep up with them," Johnny retorted coldly. "Something none of you would be able to do." He took a malevolent pleasure in watching his former friends' confusion at his words, and wondering exactly what he meant by them.

Jasper glowered at him. "That's certainly fresh coming from you, jerk. So you finally decide to grow some backbone?"

"Enough," Montgomery interrupted before Johnny could reply. "Monroe, you'll follow the river. Take Petroski with you. Baxter and I, we'll go with your friends and follow the path through the bayou. That way, if Scarlet and the Angel try to escape, we'll be able to intercept them. If one of our teams meets them, call the other team. Is that clear, Baxter?" he added, turning to his irrepressible soldier.

The latter grinned. "As crystal, Major."

"Right, let's get on our way, then. We don't want our prey to escape us. We'll meet at the cabin in an hour and a half and we'll set up a trap to surprise them."

"If they're still there," Dallas commented, almost exclusively to himself.

"Which is why we have to go right away," Montgomery added. "And if they are not there, we will be able to find them easier if we follow fresh prints. Now let's move it, men!"

"Johnny," Jasper then called as the two groups separated as instructed.

Johnny turned on his heels and the two boys glared at each other. Jasper's eyes were burning with uncontained resentment and irritation. If he thought that it would make any kind of impression on Johnny, he was mistaken – the other boy's face remained totally unreadable.

"You and I are not done yet," Jasper promised. "We'll have a little talk later in private, about loyalty... and how bad it could be for your health to betray the trust your friends put in you."

Johnny answered with a smile that could have frozen a campfire. "Trust? Loyalty?" he repeated cynically. "Those words have a strange ring when they come out of your mouth, Jasper."

"Why you jerk..."

Johnny casually turned his back on his former friend. "I'm sure that talk of your will be very interesting," he added evenly. "I sure can't wait for it."

He left Jasper standing there, and led Baxter towards the river.

\* \* \*

When Captain Scarlet awakened this time around, it was from a dreamless sleep. He didn't feel as refreshed as he would have liked; his head was buzzing, but it was far from the overwhelming pain he knew all too well and that often caused him to lose consciousness. He felt terribly hot, almost feverish; the heat in this room was very uncomfortable, and the air was dank, with a tinge of dampness that made it unpleasant to breathe. A few seconds after opening his eyes, he was disoriented by his dark surroundings, as his mind struggled to recall his latest memories.

Then it all came to him: the events of the night before; the discoveries he and his companion had made together. The closeness they had felt for each other, just before pain and oblivion.

*Dianne...*

"Dianne?" he called hoarsely.

Almost immediately, a hand came to cover his lips and he heard a soft voice, shushing him.

Confused, he searched the darkness with his eyes; there was but one ray of sunlight piercing it, coming through the window near which he was lying. Barely lighted, he could see the hard features of Rhapsody Angel, crouched by the window, with Jamie Lewis' crossbow resting on the windowsill.

It was her hand that rested on his mouth; seeing his opened eyes fixed on her, she removed it, and brought a finger to her own lips.

"Shhh," she whispered. "We have visitors."

Scarlet nodded his understanding and slowly, silently, rose to his knees; keeping low, he came next to Rhapsody. He noticed she had dragged the heavy bags of money against the wall beneath the window, and that she was resting on them while looking outside, through the small gap she had opened in the blanket which served as a curtain.

Scarlet stretched his neck to check outside as well. All he could see was the empty clearing of dry mud in front of the house, leading down to the river, and the edge of the wood, with its trees and bushes. There in the middle, there was the cord of wood that Joe Benson had been cutting the previous day. Scarlet could even see, leaning against it, the axe the old man was using before being murdered.

A righteous anger mounted in Scarlet's heart and he clenched his teeth. He couldn't see anybody. "Where?" he asked in a voice as low as Rhapsody.

The Angel pilot pointed to the bushes bordering the clearing, about twenty meters in front of the house. Scarlet turned his eyes in that direction, in time to see two silhouettes leaving the bushes and running in a half-crouched position in the direction of the cord of wood, before leaping behind it to take cover.

"I see them," he said between his teeth. He realised then what he had actually seen: a tall man, dressed in a camouflage uniform, and armed with an automatic weapon – and Jasper Holland, armed with a shotgun.

"There are more of them," Rhapsody whispered.

She pointed towards the other side of the clearing; Scarlet narrowed his eyes and saw a flash of sunlight reflecting off something metallic. He then noticed the top of a blond head just over the barrel of a gun aimed directly at the door of Joe's cabin.

There was another movement in that same direction, and Scarlet saw another man in uniform cross the clearing to take cover behind a tree, close to his companions hiding behind the cord of wood.



"I counted seven," Rhapsody explained, not taking her eyes off the clearing. "Four of the boys who tried to kill you yesterday, and Montgomery and two of his men."

"They've joined forces," Scarlet realised.

Rhapsody nodded slowly. "Looks like it. I don't know if the boys have been Mysteronised, or if they're acting on their own accord, for whatever reason."

"Mysteronised or not, they're still dangerous." Scarlet sighed and shook his head, looking down at the crossbow she was holding tightly in her hands. "That makes a lot of them to face, with the little we have to defend ourselves," he commented. "Their firepower is vastly greater than ours."

"Someone told me once that it isn't the firepower you have that counts, but the use you make of it," Rhapsody replied quietly.

"And who's the idiot who said that?"

"You." She turned to him with a fond smile. He was scowling deeply. "And I would contest that you're an idiot. You're the experienced soldier of the two of us."

"If you say so," he grumbled.

"How are you feeling?"

Scarlet shook his head slowly. The buzz in his head wasn't going away, but it was more annoying than really painful. He decided it wasn't worth telling her about it. "I'm fine. Better than I was last night, at least. Dianne... About what happened –"

"Now's not the time to talk about it," she interrupted him suddenly, returning her full attention to what was going on outside. "We have more pressing business to attend to for the moment." She seemed to give it a second thought. "We can talk about it later."

Scarlet looked at her determined face and realised she was right. *If there is a later*, he added inwardly, without daring to speak it out loud.

He reached for the handgun, resting on the ground by her feet, and removed the safety catch, as silently as he could. It barely clicked. He presented the weapon to Rhapsody.

"Here," he said. "Use this. I'll take the crossbow."

She addressed him an inquiring look, hesitating slightly. "Do you know how to handle it?"

He looked at her, as if she had said something immensely ludicrous. "I think I will manage," he said with a faint smile. He took the crossbow from her hands and gently pushed her aside, to take her place at the window. Rhapsody looked at him for a moment, and nodded her appreciation, as he placed the weapon against the windowsill and rested himself against the heavy bags filled with money.

*Of course*, she realised. Captain Scarlet was Cloudbase's resident weapons expert. He knew how to use hundreds of weapons, no matter how sophisticated – or ancient. It was probably instinctive in him; even if he didn't realise it fully, he would remember the skills he had honed during his military training – and beyond. It was best to trust him to use this crossbow much better than she would herself.

She positioned herself on the other side of the window and together, they watched in silence, waiting for the enemy's next move.

\* \* \*

From their hiding place behind the cord of wood, Major Philip Montgomery and Jasper Holland had an excellent view of the front door of the cabin. They were soon joined by Sergeant Baxter who ducked down by their side, after completing a survey around the location. He nodded at the major's questioning gaze and pointed towards the front door.

"No doubt they're in there, sir," he reported. "Look at all those traces leading up to the door. They must have stayed in for the night." He looked directly at his leader. "I tried to check through the windows but I couldn't see a thing. They blocked the windows and covered them. I couldn't hear a sound either."

"They could be asleep and not suspecting we're here," Montgomery commented thoughtfully. "After yesterday, Scarlet and the Angel must be exhausted." He shook his head, sceptically. "It seems too easy..."

"We will surprise them if we barge in," Baxter added. "They won't know what hit them. We have the advantage of numbers, too."

"I kind of like how your man's thinking, Major," Jasper said with an evil smile. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

Montgomery nodded very slowly. "I'm glad you agree, Mr Holland. Because you'll be Sergeant Baxter's back up in this assault."

Jasper's smile fell. "Me? You mean... I'll be going with him?"

"You'll follow him and cover him," Montgomery explained. "That's what back up means. As for the rest of us, we'll be covering the house from our stations – in case someone takes aim at the two of you from the windows."

"That's very reassuring," Jasper grouched.

"You have something to say about it?" Montgomery said, glaring warningly at him. Casually, he was holding his gun half-

aimed in the direction of the boy, who recognised the threat instantly.

"I'm just thinking your plan is mighty dangerous, Major," Jasper replied. "I ain't no soldier, like your man. Me and the others, we didn't sign up for this."

"You signed up to do what I tell you to do," Montgomery coldly retorted.

"Come on, don't be a girl," Baxter snapped at him. "I'll be doing all the work, so you won't have nothing to worry about."

"And remember," Montgomery reminded them, "I want both of them alive. Don't hurt the girl; we can use her to make Scarlet talk. Feel free to maim Scarlet if you need to. He can take it."

"That's certainly something I'll be considering, Major," Baxter replied with a satisfied grin. He thumped Jasper's shoulder. "Come on, kid. Follow my lead and keep your head down. And don't get in the way."

Thinking it was a useless recommendation and that he really had no choice but to get himself involved, Jasper reluctantly got to his feet and left his position to follow Baxter towards the cabin.

\* \* \*

Scarlet and Rhapsody saw two of their adversaries moving fast towards the cabin, keeping their bodies as low to the ground as was humanly possible so they would make less of a target. The young woman slowly nodded, carefully following them with her eyes.

"They're probably thinking we're asleep in there," she whispered to her companion, "and that they will be surprising us."

"Last night, you told me the surprise will be on them," Scarlet recalled.

She nodded. "And how..."

"What did you do exactly?" Scarlet asked, suspiciously.

"You'll see. But after that, we'll have to be ready for anything. So keep your finger on that trigger, Captain." She raised her handgun. "We might be in for the fight of our lives."

\* \* \*

Baxter and Jasper sneaked under a wooden fence and headed for the door; Baxter swiftly reached the wall on the right side, and leaned close to it, while Jasper took position on the left side. Keeping their weapons close against them, they exchanged glances. Baxter motioned with a brief gesture of the hand that he was ready; heart beating wildly, Jasper nodded that he was too, swallowing hard as he did.

Baxter leapt in front of the door and broke it down with a powerful kick. It creaked on its hinges and opened wide in front of him, and he stood, ready to fire.

There was a thunderous detonation that nearly deafened Jasper. He watched with horror as Baxter's chest seemed to explode under a massive blast, blood splattering all around him, as he was swept off his feet and repelled several meters back. His body hit the ground with force and stayed there motionless.

Frozen in place and slack-jawed, Jasper couldn't detach his eyes from the body lying in the dirt, with the massive wound bleeding profusely in the middle of his chest. It didn't take a genius to realise the man was dead; the young man had no idea exactly what could have killed him, except that it seemed to be a very powerful weapon – that he expected would be turned against him any time now.

Breathing hard, his heartbeat so loud he thought anyone could hear it, he closed his eyes, waiting for death. In the seconds that followed, nothing happened, and at the sound of a voice that reached his mind through the thumping of his heart, he opened his eyes.

He saw Major Montgomery's head over the cord of wood, could hear him shouting something at him, but couldn't figure out the words. A little further away, scattered around the clearing, there were Dallas and Scarecrow, looking straight at him with horror, and Johnny, and the major's last man. All of them had their weapons aimed at the cabin – in *his* direction. But no-one was firing. Not them, and not even those who had shot Baxter from inside the cabin.

That got Jasper curious, and despite his fears, he risked a peek inside, through the opened door.

He saw a huge shotgun, with its barrel smoking from its recent use, solidly fixed to a chair, and aimed directly at the door; he saw the line, with one end attached to the trigger, and the other end, tied to the handle of the door.

At the sight of this discovery, Jasper stood in the entrance, almost without thinking; he looked at the shotgun with mystification. He realised instantly what had happened: when Baxter had kicked the door down, the sudden motion had pulled on the line, and triggered the discharge from the shotgun. At point-blank range, the shot had killed Baxter instantly.

Jasper could see no-one in the cabin; it was empty.

He didn't know if he should feel relieved or angry; at least, he considered, there was no-one here to shoot him down like a dog. But their prey seemed to have escaped them.

He turned around towards his companions:

"It was a trap!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "They played us for fools! There's no-one in there! They're gone!"

\* \* \*

"Oh wow."

Scarlet was watching with fascination the result of Rhapsody's 'surprise', with Baxter's body now lying dead in front of the cabin, swept away by the devastating blast, and the rest of their opponents left in confusion as to where their prey could have gone to. From their position, he and his companion had a good view of Jasper standing in front of the door, looking completely dejected; Montgomery and the others were still keeping cover, but were nevertheless visible to both Spectrum officers.

"I *really* taught you a trick like that?" Scarlet whispered to the grim-looking Rhapsody.

"You taught us to be prepared for every situation," she said quietly, "and to take any opportunity to take out an enemy."

"I'm impressed."

"There's nothing to it, really. And I was lucky. When I visited the cabin yesterday, I found ammunition that could be used for the shotgun. But unfortunately, there were only two cartridges. So I rigged the shotgun to discharge completely at the opening of the door. I left traces leading to the cabin, but erased all those leading out. The rest..." She shrugged. "Well, you saw what happened."

"That guy was literally blown away by that shot."

"And that makes one less Mysteron to worry about. I sincerely hope he won't rise from the dead after that."

"What about the others?" Scarlet was sorely tempted to use the crossbow and send an arrow straight at Jasper who was carelessly standing there, looking about in confusion. However, he wasn't sure that at this distance, he would be able to make a killing shot, or even hit his target. Beside, he still had in his mind the vivid memory of the nightmarish flashback he had had the night before; despite fully deserving of his fate, from Scarlet's point of view, Jasper Holland was still a boy, barely old enough to be considered an adult. That made him hesitant to shoot.

Rhapsody, however, didn't seem to share his opinion, and had her handgun squarely aimed at the young man. But she didn't use it, and turned to her colleague.

"We should wait before opening fire," she said. "As soon as we start shooting, they'll know our position. We should see what they're going to do first."

Scarlet nodded his agreement, and leaned against the crossbow, getting ready to use it as soon as it would become necessary.

\* \* \*

"Damn it, I should have realised!"

Montgomery was staring with irritation at the body lying on the ground and covered with blood, only a few meters away from his position. *Another man wasted*, he groused inwardly. Baxter, of course, even as a Mysteron agent, was a pain in the arse, but he certainly knew his job and could always be counted on. Now he lay there, dead, victim of his own rashness. He probably should have approached the cabin more carefully and expect that Scarlet would have been waiting for him, one way or the other. The apparent calmness within the cabin was only a deceptive illusion that had served the Spectrum officers well.

And Montgomery realised that he wasn't totally blameless himself in his assessment of the situation; it wasn't just any mercenary he was facing right now, like those he used to fight in hot spots in Africa, Asia or the Middle-East. These were two desperate Spectrum officers, cut off from any contact with their base, trying not only to counter an attack from the Mysterons, but to survive. Even amnesiac, Captain Scarlet was an enemy to reckon with – and the Angel pilot had also shown her worth since the previous morning.

Now, Montgomery only had one soldier at his disposal; he didn't really count on the boys he had recruited to follow his orders blindly – perhaps with the exception of the Mysteronised Johnny. At best, Holland and his gang could provide a distraction to his enemies.

He slowly rose from his position, unafraid that he might be taken as a target. If Scarlet and the Angel were still around and watching them, they wouldn't fire right away, for fear of giving their position too quickly. Firing would be poor strategy, and he knew his prey: they were efficient soldiers, and they wouldn't make that kind of mistake.

"Check around!" he called in a loud voice. "They can't be very far and they probably left traces behind them. We must find where they might have gone to!"

He watched as Petroski left his cover, and the other boys did the same, to spread out and search their surroundings; then he turned sharply towards Jasper who was coming down the one step leading to the door of the cabin. The boy was shaking, shocked by what he had witnessed – and perhaps realising that he had just narrowly escaped death. Briskly, Montgomery

walked to him and stood over him; the boy looked up at him with fear in his eyes; he was obviously feeling threatened.

Good, thought Montgomery. *That'll make him more docile.*

"Is there another way to leave this place beside the two paths we took to get here?" he asked sharply.

"What? No, man, just like Johnny told you, those are the only ways," Jasper replied, almost stuttering. "We used either one of those to come here with our bikes. Any other path is either too dangerous, or impossible to trek through."

Montgomery grunted with frustration. "How about the river?" he asked, glancing back to the rapidly flowing waters a few meters behind him. "They could have gone that way, couldn't they?"

Jasper shrugged dismissively. "The rowboat's still there," he replied, pointing to the small piers erected by the water.

"Any other boat they could have taken?"

For a second or two, Jasper paused, thinking. "Maybe. The guy living here had an old motorboat." He pointed to the small shed, not that far from the river, with its door closed. "Last time I saw it, it was in there. Ol' Joe had burned the engine and he was trying to repair it."

He smiled inwardly. In reality, it was he who had destroyed the engine, by pouring sugar into it. It was part of his pressure strategy, to force the old man into selling him his land. He and his friends had a good laugh when they watched Joe from a distance, as he cursed and hollered while trying to get the motor starting, and afterwards, when he exhausted himself hauling it to his shed for repair.

"It might still be in there, for all I know," Jasper concluded.

Montgomery considered the shed thoughtfully. "Petroski!" he called in a loud voice. He saw his man turn to him and he pointed to the shed. "Check in there. See if there's a boat of any kind. Take one of the boys with you!"

Petroski nodded his approval and turned to Dallas who was standing the closest to him, holding his gun negligently and looking around aimlessly, obviously unsure of what he should do. Petroski narrowed his eyes when he noticed the boy glancing not so surreptitiously in the direction of the trees bordering the clearing. He was obviously tempted to make a run for it.

"Hey, kid!"

Startled, Dallas turned around at the sound of the voice calling from behind him; he saw Petroski coming his way. "You talkin' to me, man?"

"Yes, I'm talking to you. You seem to be at a loose end right now."

Dallas refrained from swallowing hard. Up until recently, as long as there wasn't any risk to himself, he didn't mind doing what Jasper told him to do; in fact, he rather enjoyed living on the wild side. But since the previous day, things were starting to get a little too heavy for his taste, now that Jamie was dead, and that soldier had been killed by falling into a trap obviously laid by their prey. With this Major Montgomery 'recruiting' them to his service in a way they couldn't refuse, the situation had rapidly deteriorated, and was becoming very unhealthy. Even Johnny – that gutless, useless waste of space – was worrying him. He was so willing to follow Montgomery's lead, without question, and the expression of coldness and callousness that could now be seen in his eyes was creepy. It wasn't only as if Johnny had suddenly found some nerve just by his association with these soldiers – it was as if he didn't have any remorse and conscience anymore.

It was scary; and Dallas even started considering that maybe it would be a good idea to get out of this at the next opportunity.

However, with Petroski now standing in front of him, it looked like he wouldn't have that chance for now.

"I'm not," he defended himself at the soldier's accusation. "I'm looking, just like you are."

Petroski offered a crooked smile that showed the depth of his doubt. "Yeah, right. You heard the major's orders? You'll be coming with me to check that shed."

Dallas gave a glance at the small building; it looked pretty much inoffensive. He shrugged dismissively. "Sure, why not?"

"Follow my lead, then. And keep your eyes open and that gun ready, just in case."

Almost casually, Petroski started to make his way towards the small wooden shed, with Dallas walking at some distance behind him.

\* \* \*

"Uh-oh. Looks like we won't be able to stay hidden for long."

Rhapsody and Scarlet were closely watching their opponents' search operation. With a sense of increased foreboding, they looked as Petroski and Dallas slowly approached the shed.

"You think they've already found where we are?" Scarlet asked his colleague.

Rhapsody shook her head unhappily. "I don't know. I made very sure that there were no traces leading to this shed."



However, that doesn't mean they aren't smart and have not worked out our position."

"They don't look as if they suspect we're here, though."

"Perhaps. But that's little consolation." Rhapsody looked gloomily through the small gap, not letting Petroski and Dallas out of her sight. "I had hoped we would have some time in front of us. But it doesn't look like we'll be that lucky. As soon as they try to open the door and find it jammed, they will know we're in here and will raise the alarm."

Scarlet watched them both approach; he had no trouble recognising the young man as the one who had shot Sheriff Masters before the latter's body fell into the raging waters of the river the day before. He gritted his teeth; this boy was nothing like the child he had seen himself shoot in his flashback. That boy was about fourteen or fifteen; this one was older – nineteen, maybe. He was a murderer, fully aware of the consequences of his acts and revelling in them; nobody forced him, he wasn't brainwashed. Unless he was a Mysteron of course, but if that was the case, there was nothing to be done about it.

"Then we have no choice but to defend ourselves." He handed back the crossbow to Rhapsody. "Mind that sight. It leans slightly to the left."

She looked at him with curiosity. That he knew with such precision that the sight was faulty didn't surprise her that much. "I thought you wanted to use it?" she asked with a raised brow.

"I changed my mind." Scarlet reached for the knife she had at her belt and showed the blade to her. There was a cold determination in his eyes as he gave a curt jerk of the chin in the direction of the approaching enemy. "I've decided to go with a more direct approach."

\* \* \*

Montgomery was searching through the ground in the hope of finding any trace of his quarry; he was growing increasingly frustrated. There wasn't anything to be found, not a single indication of where Captain Scarlet or Rhapsody Angel could have gone to. He would admit freely that he wasn't as good a tracker as Palmer had been, or even Baxter for that matter. But to him, it was obviously impossible for two people to have gone through this spot without leaving any trace behind them. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air.

The evidence was clear to him: they had more than certainly erased all traces of their passage. If they were efficient enough to have tricked Baxter with false prints leading to the

cabin, then they were certainly able to cleverly hide their real traces.

And that meant that they could be either very far away from this location – or very, very close by.

Montgomery was betting on the second option. The Spectrum officers were close, indeed, and possibly watching their every move. They hadn't taken the boat Jasper Holland claimed was in that shed.

*The shed...*

Suddenly, Montgomery realised how careless he had been. If he were right, then the fact that there was no traces leading to that shed wouldn't mean there was *no-one* hiding in it.

He turned on his heel and saw that Petroski had reached the door; he was approaching it cautiously, his gun at the ready. And yet, he was dangerously out in the open. The boy, Dallas, walking a few feet behind, wasn't even keeping his rifle aimed at the door.

"Petroski!" Montgomery shouted forcefully, a sense of impending doom falling on him. "Watch out for yourself!"

His call only had the result of startling Petroski and the man turned to his commander, forgetful of all caution.

It was a fatal mistake.

\* \* \*

Montgomery's call for prudence had rung exactly at the same time Captain Scarlet opened the previously un-jammed door. It was too late now to have second thoughts; in any case, he and Rhapsody had no choice anymore. He stood in the frame, facing the commando who had his back half-turned to him, distracted by his commander's shout. As soon as he realised there was a danger threatening him, the commando turned back to face it; but he wasn't fast enough.

Scarlet seized Petroski by the throat with one hand, squeezing so hard that he nearly crushed his windpipe, and forcefully pushed him against the wall with all of the weight of his body, making him lose his footing. At the same time, with the other hand, he pushed the knife to the hilt into the soldier's side; he wasn't even surprised to realise he knew precisely between which ribs he needed to plunge it to reach the heart directly. Petroski emitted just a grunting moan and Scarlet saw his eyes opening wide. Mercilessly, the Spectrum officer twisted the knife and pulled it out; he had not a single hint of regret, as the soldier's knees buckled underneath him and Scarlet, seeing he was dead, roughly pushed his body away from him, in the direction of the boy standing a few feet away.

Dallas Fenmore had frozen into place at the sight. Everything had happened so quickly that when Petroski fell nearly at his feet, only three to five seconds had passed. It was only then the young man finally found his voice and reacted.

"Oh, shit..."

He could only fiddle with his rifle, attempting to aim it at Scarlet who was still standing there. He didn't have time to make use of it, as, right at that instant, he heard a whistling sound, and felt the impact of a bolt penetrating his right thigh at great speed. The pain made him holler and, suddenly unable to stand on his right leg, he collapsed on his side.

\* \* \*

The pained cry coming from the boy was nearly covered by the sudden sound of multiple gunshots; Montgomery and the remaining boys, regaining their wits, had opened fire in the direction of the shed. Scarlet felt a bullet whizz past him, while two others hit the side of the shed. He quickly retreated inside and closed the door behind him.

He was busy jamming it back to ensure it would stay closed when Rhapsody, stationed at the window and putting another bolt into the crossbow, offered him a reserved apology. "You were right, the sight is crooked." She took aim again outside. "I'm sorry I missed him."

"You just missed killing him," Scarlet replied, returning to her side. "I think he's well incapacitated now."

"Wounded beasts are the most dangerous." Rhapsody didn't have time to release the new bolt. A bullet came ricocheting on the window frame, sending splinters nearly into her eyes. Scarlet pulled her down quickly, fired three shots blindly with the pistol and ducked down by her side when a volley of bullets broke panes and frame into dangerous which flew wildly over their heads. The wall, however, seemed to hold, and continued to protect them from the shots. The shed might have been old, but it was obviously made with solid pieces of wood.

However, neither of the Spectrum agents would have bet on their chances on holding this position for long. Scarlet glanced at Rhapsody. For himself, he wasn't afraid. Whatever might happen, in view of what he had learned about himself, he suspected there was a high possibility that he would survive. But for her, it was totally different.

He stared murderously at the door. "The first of these bastards who attempts to burst in here will suffer the same fate as that soldier at the cabin," he promised.

Rhapsody shook her head. "I doubt they'll try to physically come in here to get us out," she commented in a grim voice.

He looked at her, inquiringly. She swallowed hard.

"More likely... they'll attempt to force us out."

At that moment, just as if her words had been prophetic, the shots died suddenly, and after a few brief seconds, amongst the cries of pain of Dallas Fenmore, the voice of Philip Montgomery rang out.

\* \* \*

Getting the boys, who now were all that was left of his makeshift crew, to stop firing blindly at the shed and to work as an organised unit in order to keep their shots concentrated at the front door and window had proven for Montgomery much more difficult than handling his own men. Only Johnny was obeying his orders instantly. For the two others still in a state of holding a gun, the only thought present in their mind was to get themselves rid of their adversaries, now that another member of their group had fallen prey to them. They were wild and undisciplined, and knew nothing about strategy. They couldn't see that this old shed, even though looking rickety and obviously aged, could hold a long time.

And time wasn't something of which Montgomery had the luxury.

He glared at Jasper who was lying by his side, hiding behind a fence. "Keep your gun on this shed and cover me," he instructed. "When I give you the order, hold fire." Then pointing to Scarecrow not that far from them, he added: "And get your friend to do the same."

"What're you gonna do, Major?" Jasper asked.

"Just follow my orders," Montgomery replied. "I'll be trying to talk to them. If they start firing, then you fire back."

Jasper answered with an evil, satisfied grin. "With pleasure, Major."

"Johnny," Montgomery then called out. "Come with me."

Johnny was on his feet and out of his hiding place without any hesitation, standing out in the open; that made Jasper wonder what kind of influence the major had on him to have transformed him so. It was like he didn't have any fear anymore. He watched with mystification as Johnny, holding his gun aimed at the shed, followed Montgomery to the middle of the clearing, nearly to the place where Petroski's body lay, with the wounded Dallas sprawled on the ground nearby, holding his thigh and crying out.

Montgomery gestured to stop firing; he was relieved to see that both Jasper and Scarecrow consented to obey.

Dallas Fenmore's cries suddenly became clearer; he was wailing like a woman about to give birth.

"I'm hit! I'm hit, guys! I'm bleeding all over the place. I'm dying!"

Montgomery glared at him with disgust, but ignored his laments, to turn to the shed and call loudly: "SCARLET! Do you hear me?"

He received no answer; nor did he expect he would at first.

"I just want to talk to you! My men are covering the house! Try to shoot and they'll shoot back!"

This time, he heard an answer coming from inside the shed: "Your men?" the voice of Scarlet called with obvious derision. "What did you promise these murderous scumbags for them to enlist in your outfit?"

Montgomery couldn't stop a grin from briefly appearing on his lips; he couldn't deny Scarlet's judgement of the company he was keeping.

"They have their own reasons to come after you, and they are more than willing to see you dead, you and the Angel. She's there with you, isn't she?" There was no answer to that question. "I can stop them, you know."

\* \* \*

In the shed, lying on the floor right under the window, Scarlet exchanged glances with Rhapsody Angel. The same doubts were in both their minds.

"And why would you do us that favour?" Scarlet asked in a loud voice.

"Do you remember me, Captain?" Montgomery replied. "I was told you had lost your memory, but surely, you do remember that I'm an officer, just like you, and that my word is my bond. If I promise your lives will be spared –"

"That's enough, Montgomery," Scarlet cut in suddenly. "Your word means zilch now that you've become an agent of the Mysterons. You know that as well as I do."

"You know that even the Mysterons have only one word."

"I would dispute that," Rhapsody whispered to Scarlet. "They have shown already they cannot be trusted."

"I had the impression it was the case," Scarlet answered back in the same tone.

He silently rose to his knees and leaned by the side of the window. Making sure his shadow wouldn't be seen, he risked a peek outside. Montgomery was standing in the clearing with

Johnny, a few meters away from the door, right next to the dead Petroski and the wounded Dallas. They were armed but at the moment, they didn't seem inclined to use their weapons.

Scarlet could just make out Jasper and Scarecrow, keeping under cover further away behind Montgomery and Johnny, with their weapons aimed directly at the shed.

"Scarlet, you hear me?" the voice of Montgomery rang out again.

"What do you want, Montgomery?"

"Even with your faulty memory, you must know the answer to that question. The Angel surely told you. I want the microchip."

"And if I were to tell you I don't have it?"

"That would be a bad answer, Captain. And very unfortunate for you."

"What can we do?" Rhapsody whispered to her colleague. "We can't give him what he wants. Whether we tell him we do have it or not, we are condemned nevertheless."

"I realise that fully, yes," Scarlet said. "At this point, I have no idea what we should do."

"Scarlet," Montgomery called once more, "I think you're lying to me right now. If you and the Angel came to this place, it's because you expected to find the microchip here and to recover it. If it wasn't the case, you would both have returned to Spectrum a long time ago."

"How right he is," Rhapsody growled between her teeth.

\* \* \*

Montgomery glanced at his watch; his frustration was growing. Time was running out for the assignment, and he now had little hope of seeing it through as the Mysterons had ordered.

If he couldn't get the microchip, at least he would see his opponents dead, and two less Spectrum agents to bother his masters. And if one of these Spectrum agents was Captain Scarlet, then this mission wouldn't be a total failure.

He looked down at Petroski's corpse lying in the dust nearly at his feet. He saw three grenades hooked to the dead man's belt and suddenly, the solution of how to draw Scarlet and the Angel out came to him. And if they did not come out of their hiding place, then they would surely die.

Dallas Fenmore, in the meantime, couldn't stop wailing. It irritated Montgomery greatly, but he thought this could be used to his advantage.

"Johnny," Montgomery muttered to the impassive young man standing by his side, "check on your mate, please." He didn't turn around, but he could easily guess the questioning look

Johnny was casting at him, as if not understanding the request. "At the same time," the major added in a voice even lower, "get those grenades off Petroski."

Johnny gave a brief nod, realising what his leader had in mind. "The Mysterons' orders will be carried out," he muttered under his breath.

Johnny took a careful step forward. Nothing came from the shed; not a shout from the trapped Spectrum officers, nor a shot to stop his advance. They didn't know he was an agent of the Mysterons, so they probably didn't consider him a dangerous liability; for them, he was just a young man checking on a fallen comrade. Their misplaced sense of honour would not permit them to fire on him.

*Foolish Earthmen...*

"Johnny," Dallas wept, seeing his friend crouching next to him. "Johnny, thank you. I'm hit, man. Those bastards shot me with an arrow. It hurts, man. It hurts like hell..."

To Johnny's ears, the rapid flow of Dallas's babbling was most exasperating. He frowned deeply. "Quiet, you fool." He deliberately grazed the arrow imbedded in the young man's thigh, making it shift ever so slightly. Dallas let out a cry at the suddenly increased pain, and his body flinched. "Don't move and you'll be all right."

"Will I?" Dallas stuttered, his face now white as a sheet.

But Johnny wasn't even listening to him. All of his attention was drawn to the grenades hooked to Petroski's belt; they were there, just within his reach. He glanced up to Montgomery.

The major addressed him an almost imperceptible nod. "At my signal," he said under his breath.

He turned his attention back to the shed, eyes flashing with a cold determination. The Spectrum officers were at his mercy. They were as good as dead.

"Captain Scarlet," he called again, "I've been as patient as I can allow myself to be. I require that microchip. But I can't afford to give you too much time to decide if you should give it to me. I will have to force you to make up your mind."

\* \* \*

Inside the shed, Rhapsody detected a definite hint of threat in Montgomery's last words. "What does he have in mind?" she whispered.

She glanced at Scarlet; he was like a statue, kneeling rigidly in front of the window, keeping a watchful eye on what was going on outside. He too seemed ill-at-ease, sweat pearling at his

brow. Rhapsody wondered if his sixth sense had not kicked in, warning him of an impending danger. In his present state, he might not recognise the signs.

She rose to her knees and came by his side. "How are you feeling?" she inquired.

"Fine. I'm feeling fine." Scarlet's answer had been too swift, and Rhapsody knew instantly that he wasn't fine at all. Just by the way he looked, so pale and drawn, it was obvious he was lying. He noticed the way she was staring at him and he shook his head. "There's been a buzzing in my head since I woke up," he said in a gruff voice. "But it's nothing I can't manage. It's not nearly as bad as those other times."

Rhapsody answered with a silent nod, not wanting to question him deeper; at this point it was unclear if it was indeed Scarlet's sixth sense – or a malaise related to his current condition. Considering the situation, for now it wasn't important; especially if he was able to function properly.

For now, they had other, more pressing considerations to attend to.

She turned to the window, and squinted her eye through a hole made by a bullet in the makeshift curtain. Seeing Montgomery arrogantly standing there, in the open, wasn't that much of a surprise to her; Mysteron agents weren't much concerned about their own safety to begin with – and if it meant getting results, they wouldn't mind dying for their cause. However, the presence of Johnny, crouched down by his wounded friend's side was something unexpected. Despite the fact she had met the young man only once before, she had quickly assessed him as nothing more than a coward who needed the presence of others to find a certain level of courage. He would certainly not risk his life to help a fallen comrade, by giving himself up as a potential target.

Rhapsody frowned, suspecting there was something afoot.

"Captain," she started, "I think we must be careful with –"

She was abruptly interrupted when the voice of Montgomery rose again:

"Your time is up now, Scarlet. If you can't provide the microchip to me, then I will take your life and that of the Angel in its place!"

When she saw Johnny's next move, fast as lightning, Rhapsody knew her instincts were right; but just as she started putting the young man into the line of her fire, she knew it was already too late.

\* \* \*



At the swift order of "Now!" Johnny promptly acted; each of his hands closed on a grenade and snatched them from Petroski's belt. Johnny Monroe had always been good at playing base-ball – if nothing else, he was a mean pitcher. Today, this skill would serve his Mysteron reconstruct. While waiting for the major's signal, he had time to assess his distance, and to determine the force needed to throw his first projectile exactly where he wanted it.

The grenade pierced one pane of the window at such velocity that it only left a hole of the same size in the glass.

\* \* \*

Scarlet and Rhapsody just had time to hit the deck on each side of the window to avoid the large projectile that came through it. It didn't even slow down upon its entry, and hit the far wall; there was a dull explosion, and it spat smoke and fire, which immediately started spreading along the wall, in front of the Spectrum agents' horrified eyes.

The second grenade flew through the window and passed between them before bouncing on the ground, with the same results as the first one.

"Incendiary devices!" Rhapsody shouted.

Scarlet fought not to roll his eyes. At times, that woman certainly knew how to state the obvious.

They took one step to try and stop the fire from spreading but a series of shots through the windows zipped past them and forced them to throw themselves to the ground and to keep their heads down. They heard thuds coming from the roof, and new explosions, and they knew that other grenades had landed there and had detonated. They saw smoke starting to penetrate through the gaps between the wooden boards.

Then they heard the voice of Montgomery again:

"This is your last chance, Spectrum! Either you get out and hand me the microchip, or you stay in there and burn with it! The choice is all yours now, but decide quickly – you don't have much time!"

Rhapsody didn't know if she should feel desperate or totally outraged.

"Oh yeah... like they wouldn't shoot us like dogs the minute we show our faces through the door!"

## CHAPTER 11

Johnny threw the last grenade from Petroski's belt; he grunted with satisfaction as it landed right against the closed door – which burst into fire upon the explosion. Satisfied with his work, he stood next to Montgomery, who was watching the burning shed with a cold expression in his eyes. Behind them, Jasper and Scarecrow got up from their hiding place, and slowly, their weapons at the ready, approached the scene, watching with mystification as the fire quickly spread across the shed and a thick cloud of smoke mounted towards the sky, darkening it.

"Stay alert," Montgomery advised Johnny, and the latter turned an inquiring look towards him. "They're in a desperate situation now, they might attempt anything."

"You really think they will try and get out of there, Major?" Johnny asked, doubtfully. "They must know they're trapped now."

"By now, you should know better than to underestimate Spectrum officers' capacity for survival," Montgomery replied coldly. "These two have demonstrated it over and over again, during the last twenty-four hours. Yes, they know they're trapped. But that makes them all the more dangerous. If they think they have only one chance, they might attempt to charge their way out. And if they do, then maybe we'll be able to recover the microchip. If not... Well then, for them, the results will be the same."

Calmly, he drew his pistol out of its holster, and turned on his heel, to address both Scarecrow and Jasper who were now standing behind them.

"Spread out," he instructed them in a very ominous voice. "Keep your eyes on that shed, and shoot anyone who tries to get out of there. No-one must get out alive."

"Is it true, then?" Jasper asked him with a frown. "You are an agent of the Mysterons?" He pointed to the shed. "And they are Spectrum?"

Montgomery's expression became hard. "Does it make any difference to you?"

"Not really, no," Jasper said with a shrug. "That is, if you're not an alien from outer-space."

"Do I look like I have green skin and antennas, boy?" Montgomery replied stoically.

Jasper chuckled. "That was a stupid comment, wasn't it?"

"Quite ludicrous, yes. So are you with me or not? Do you have problems with killing two Spectrum officers, who might have you arrested if they have the opportunity?"

"When you put it that way – no, I don't have a problem with that." A cruel smile appeared on Jasper's lips as he raised his rifle. "I actually like your plan, Major. You certainly can count on us!"

He didn't bother to consult with Scarecrow who stood by his side, certainly looking much more hesitant about the situation than he was himself. He felt for sure his friend would follow his lead.

If he knew what was good for him, that was.

\* \* \*

Inside the shed, Captain Scarlet and Rhapsody Angel were deadily aware that the precariousness of their situation was rapidly becoming worse as the seconds ticked away. At least, for the moment, no bullets were flying around them, which was rather a weak consolation, all things considered, but allowed them to move more freely in their attempts to put out the fire.

It was a futile effort, however, as even as they tried to smother the flames with the blankets at their disposal, they could see the fire and flames spreading across the walls and the smoke thickening around them.

"It's no use," Rhapsody said as she stood in the middle of the shed, holding the blanket helplessly in her hands. "There must have been some kind of chemical inside those grenades which make those flames more resilient. All we're accomplishing is spreading them even more." She coughed and Scarlet stopped his efforts to turn concerned eyes towards her. "It's a toss up between being fried or choking to death."

"I can't believe it's going to end like this!" Scarlet replied angrily, throwing his blanket down onto the ground with a furious gesture. The buzzing in his head was increasing, but so far, it remained more of an annoyance than anything truly concerning. He certainly couldn't let himself get distracted by it. He coughed in turn and cleared his throat, before speaking again: "There must be a way for us to get out of this jam!"

"Well, I might have something that *could* be of some help against the smoke," Rhapsody offered in a strangled voice. Scarlet watched with curiosity as she fished in one of the multiple pockets of her trousers; she took out a small cylinder and showed it to him. "It's not much to rely on," she admitted. "And quite frankly, I'm not sure I want to use it and wait until the flames get me."

"What is it?" Scarlet asked with a frown.

"A miniature respirator," she explained. "Courtesy of Captain Grey. It's been part of Spectrum standard equipment for

about four months. It contains a capsule of concentrated oxygen. There must be about twenty or twenty-five minutes left of it, by my own count. Between the two of us, it would be even less. I used some of it earlier to escape Montgomery's commandos by hiding underwater when I ejected into that pond of water."

"Water," Scarlet muttered suddenly, as a thought crossed his mind. "God, water! *Why* didn't we think of it before?"

Quickly, he strode to the old pump Rhapsody had used the previous night. He activated it; the flow of water emerged to spill into the sink. Rhapsody, who was watching him, shook her head dejectedly.

"We'll never pump enough of it in a short enough time to put out that fire," she pointed out. She coughed. The smoke was starting to get very uncomfortable. "And we'd need to keep pumping."

Scarlet looked around and discovered a large sledge hammer resting against the wall only two feet from him. He seized it with both hands and swung it in a large arc, before slamming it straight down on the pump valve, with all of its weight. The blow was enough to break the valve, and water came bursting out in a strong, horizontal jet that bounced off the side of the boat lying nearby, splashing against the wall and down to the floor. The flow doused the flames it came into contact with, but it was obvious it would be far from enough to extinguish the fire entirely.

"The system is linked to a strong underground stream," Scarlet realised. "Maybe a tributary to the river outside – or maybe, it's even linked to the river itself. The pump was just keeping the pressure down. Without the valve, the water will flow freely."

"But what good will it do us?" Rhapsody replied. "We can't even use it to put out the fire."

With his eyes, Scarlet was following the course of the stream flowing across the ground, creating a mix of dirty water and mud. Pensively, he watched as it flowed right into the hole in the middle of the shed, next to which Rhapsody stood, and where they had dug out Riley's stolen bags of money.

His eyes narrowed. "There might be a way," he murmured.

Quickly, he picked up the blanket from the floor, and putting it in front of the jet escaping from the pump, doused it generously with water, until it was totally soaked. Then he went to Rhapsody, and, before she could ask what he was up to, wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She gasped in shock at the coldness of the drenched fabric, and looked at him in confusion. He took the respirator from her hand.

"Get into that hole," he ordered her firmly. "Keep the blanket around yourself, and put this thing in your mouth. Try to make it last as long as you can."

She started to protest: "But —"

"The water will continue to pour down into the hole," Scarlet interrupted quickly. Along with the mud it'll create, that should provide enough protection against the flames. Hopefully." As Rhapsody kept staring at him in confusion, he continued, gesturing in the direction of the boat behind him: "I'll drag this thing over the hole to cover it. With any luck, that'll be some added protection — for when the shed collapses. And this," he added, putting the respirator back into Rhapsody's hand, "will help you breathe, even if that hole fills completely with water."

"Only me?" she stammered. "How about you? We can share —"

"You said it yourself, Dianne. There's only about twenty minutes of oxygen in this. Barely enough for you, so imagine if we were to use the respirator in turn." Scarlet coughed and shook his head. "There's no time to argue. Get down there quickly!"

"Only if you join me," she insisted.

"Don't worry, I will join you," Scarlet reassured her. "But not before I move that boat over the hole, or we won't stand a chance of surviving."

Rhapsody stared at him, as if she didn't believe him. She obviously thought he was planning to sacrifice himself for her sake; it made him scowl in annoyance.

"Do you think I'm looking forward to being burned alive in this furnace?" he asked her impatiently. She didn't answer his question and coughed instead. "Please, Rhapsody," he insisted, "get in that hole now! Lie on your back, put that respirator in your mouth, and don't get out, no matter what happens! And *that's* an order!"

"An order?" she repeated with a frown, her voice catching in her throat.

"I'm your superior officer, am I not? Obey me now, Dianne. I would never forgive myself if I let anything happen to you!"

She nodded, but was still somewhat hesitant when Scarlet steered her forcefully towards the hole. When she finally lowered herself down into it, and he was sure she would follow his orders, Scarlet left her and quickly strode to the boat.

He found an old rag lying on top of its hull and after soaking it thoroughly, tied it around his mouth to protect himself as much as he could from the now thicker smoke. Then he set himself to the task.

While working to get the boat off its trestles, he found himself heavily drenched by the water still emerging from the

broken pump. It suited him fine, despite the coldness of the water, as the heat was becoming unbearable in this place.

It took all of his strength to heave the boat high enough to lift it clear from one trestle. He let go of his end and it fell heavily to the ground; the rest of the boat followed, rolling on its side with a loud crash, and he was satisfied that it was now nearer to the hole into which Rhapsody had disappeared. He felt rather concerned that the enemies outside could have heard the sound, but he tried to discard the thought from his mind as he heaved and pulled the boat closer still to the hole.

He was coughing and gasping, sweat covering his brow and his hands, the smoke getting thicker and the flames more intense by the second. The acrid smell was making it more and more difficult to breathe, and his eyes were watering so much he could barely see. The buzz in his head had increased another degree and was becoming a dull thumping, but he did his best to ignore it. He knew it was just a question of minutes before either the shed would collapse on him, or he would choke because of the smoke, and that made him work the more desperately.

As he hauled the boat over the hole, with its hull up, he glanced down to make sure Rhapsody was still okay; he could barely make out her outlines, as she lay still in the thick mud at the bottom, with the respirator in her mouth. He saw her blink her eyes against the smoke as she looked up at him and he addressed her an encouraging nod before coughing loudly. He just had time to see her nod in answer, before she disappeared from his view as he gave a tremendous tug to pull the boat over the hole, leaving a space just large enough for him to slip through.

This last effort had exhausted him and he fell on his knees, groaning, as a sudden pain in his head awakened and nearly blinded him. The thumping had suddenly reached a crescendo he had not known before; his ears were ringing and blood was running down from his nose. He was almost surprised that spell had waited all this time before it hit him, but at the same time, he was relieved he'd had time to put Rhapsody somewhere safe.

*Almost*, he told himself, as he gazed at the remaining gap. He still needed to close it, after joining his companion down in the hole.

He was about to do just that, when through the crackling of the fire consuming the shed, he heard sounds of commotion outside. Gunshots... But no bullet hit the side of the shed or broke the window to fly past him.

*What could be possibly going on out there?*

It didn't really matter to him at this point. He didn't have the time anymore to investigate; his strength was quickly abandoning

him, so he didn't lose another moment and slithered through the narrow gap and into the hole, taking great care not to step on Rhapsody. He was standing ankle deep in the cold mud and water, and he knew she must have sunk halfway into it; but should the hole fill to the point of covering her, she would be able to breathe with the help of her respirator.

With his last remaining energy, his head spinning, he struggled to close the lid over his head, as best as he could. The hole was filled with smoke and was as dark as a grave, and indeed, it felt like one; his task done, coughing, he lay down in the narrow space, covering Rhapsody's body with his own. He heard her gasp in the darkness when she felt his weight against her, and then she whispered to him, in a weak and concerned voice:

"Captain? Paul..." She coughed. "Please, you must use the respirator and —"

"Keep it," he interrupted her with a strained voice. He coughed again and felt the choking taste of the smoke in his throat. "You need it more than I do, and you know it." He coughed one last time. "Just try to relax and to keep calm... so not to waste your oxygen... And pray that it will be sufficient to keep you alive, until we're out of here."

Rhapsody swallowed hard at the sound of his pained voice; she nodded, even though she knew he couldn't see her in the darkness, and put the respirator back into her mouth. Scarlet wrapped his arms around her to hold her close, and right away, she knew what he was planning.

She knew he was offering himself as a last barrier to protect her against the fire raging over them.

But she wondered if even this ultimate sacrifice would be enough to save her.

\* \* \*

"I don't think anyone is gonna get out of there alive, Major."

Johnny Monroe and Montgomery, standing side by side at the same place as before, were watching the fire spreading rapidly across the walls and roof of the shed; in less than ten minutes, it was now nearly completely engulfed in flame. Jasper and Scarecrow were standing at some distance from either side of them, and were keeping their weapons aimed in the direction of the burning building, ready to shoot at a second's notice.

"They'll be roasted Spectrum officers in no time," Johnny concluded with confident finality.

Montgomery nodded grimly at this statement. "It does look that way. They were not going to give us the microchip anyway.

At least, this assignment won't be a total failure if we get rid of Captain Scarlet."

Still lying on the ground where he had fallen, Dallas was watching the burning shed, eyes wide with disbelief and a certain amount of horror. Despite the pain he was in, he had heard most of what the others had said around him. The gravity of the situation did not escape him and added to his mounting concern. How could things turn so quickly from bad to so much worse?

"So those two really *were* Spectrum?" he said, breathing hard, as he turned enquiring eyes to the two Mysteron agents standing over him. "You're kidding me... Johnny, do you know what it's gonna cost us for killing two Spectrum agents?"

Johnny narrowed his eyes at him. "Don't tell me you're getting cold feet, Dallas. You already killed the sheriff yesterday. Did you think they were gonna give you a medal for that? Why would the death of those two be any different to you?"

"We had a patsy then to pin the sheriff's death on – but now, that patsy turns out to be a Spectrum officer. That's bad, Johnny. That's bad for us."

"Jasper didn't seem to mind."

"Jasper's an idiot. He doesn't seem to realise how deep in trouble we could be." Dallas grimaced as he reached to grab Johnny's trouser leg and the movement sent a wave of pain through his thigh. He gasped. "Please, Johnny – help me. Jasper can hang for all I care. Let's get away from him... Let's get away from that other guy... He's as crazy as Jasper."

"You mean the major."

"Yeah... He's gonna get us all killed, man."

Johnny seemed to give it some thought; he exchanged glances with Montgomery who shrugged dismissively and turned around to walk some distance away from the scene. There was a dangerous glow in Johnny's eyes as he returned his attention to Dallas.

"The major's not crazy, Dallas," he said in a cold voice. "He's just a guy on a mission. And he does what needs to be done to see it through."

"That doesn't make sense, Johnny," Dallas moaned. "He killed two Spectrum officers. That Scarlet guy – he said he was an agent of the Mysterons. Aren't they, like, bad guys?"

"That's a matter of opinion. And you're a murderer, Dallas. Doesn't that make you a bad guy too?"

Dallas started to weep. "He's gonna get us hanged, man. He's gonna get us hanged for what he's making us do."

Johnny nodded slowly at these words; and even more slowly, he removed his handgun from his belt. "I wouldn't worry



about that if I were you, Dallas. You're not gonna hang. That, I promise you."

He pointed his gun straight between Dallas's eyes; the other boy stared at him with horror and disbelief.

Without showing any emotion whatsoever, Johnny pulled the trigger and the gun spat fire.

Dallas Fenmore's body flopped to the ground, dead.

"You bastard!"

A thunderous detonation answered the gunshot. Johnny Monroe was hit from behind and his knees buckled, before his body crumpled and fell next to Dallas's. Surprised by the sudden turn of events, Montgomery spun on his heels, in time to see Jasper pumping his still smoking gun and walking swiftly towards him. He started raising his handgun.

"Don't move, you creep!" Jasper warned. "Or I'll fry your brain, just like your buddy Johnny."

Montgomery froze and looked the young man straight in the eyes as the latter stopped in front of him before roughly snatching the pistol from his hand. Hearing hurried footsteps, Montgomery glanced back and saw that Scarecrow strode towards them. Ignoring the second young man, he returned his attention to Jasper, and glared angrily at him.

"What do you think you're doing, you stupid young fool?" he seethed between his teeth.

"Stupid, uh?" Jasper retorted with a crooked smile. "Did you really think I was gonna wait until you order your goon to kill me, just like he killed Dallas?" He nodded in the direction of Johnny's dead body. "How d'you manage to win that coward to your side, anyway?"

Scarecrow came to stand next to his friend; he was keeping his rifle aimed at Montgomery as well. There was panic in his eyes, and incomprehension as well, as he looked first at the Mysterionised WAAF major, and then at the two dead bodies at their feet.

Two dead bodies – who happened to be two of his closest friends.

"Johnny killed Dallas," he said, the words catching in his throat. "Shot him through the head, just like that. Why did he do that, man? Has he gone crazy?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Jasper spat, his eyes not leaving Montgomery. "Care to answer that, 'Major'? What did you promise Johnny in return for his loyalty? And to make such a killer out of him? He was so stupid, I often wondered if he knew how to use a gun to begin with. And there he was, throwing grenades and shooting someone between the eyes."

"Whatever he did to him, it ain't natural, man," Scarecrow added in turn.

"Shut up, 'Crow," Jasper growled at him.

Montgomery slowly shook his head. "You boys are making a mistake," he said in a low voice.

"Are we?" Jasper replied, raising a brow.

"It could be that your friend found a cause to fight for," Montgomery replied evenly.

Jasper scoffed. "A *cause*? Johnny wouldn't recognise a cause if it bit him in the ass!" He shook his head. "Whatever the reason you're here, Major, I think Johnny opened it and told you all about Riley's money. You wanted it too, didn't you? Six million dollars – that's pretty inviting, and much, much higher than a year's pay for a major, ain't it?"

"Money has no interest for me, boy," Montgomery snapped at him. He pointed to the shed, which was now nothing more than a giant torch burning in the middle of the clearing. "My mission was to retrieve what these two Spectrum officers stole from me. Failing that, my sole remaining aim was to see them dead." He nodded slowly. "And thanks to you and your friends, at least that last part is done."

"Which suits me fine, as they won't be around anymore to bother me." Jasper smiled wickedly. "Before I heard you say they were Spectrum, I already figured there was something fishy about this whole 'mission' of yours. But quite frankly, if you don't care about money, me, I don't care about your stupid mission. You're just another obstacle in my way, man."

Montgomery didn't reply and kept staring at him, with the same aloofness in his eyes, and the same unwavering expression, showing no fear while facing these two weapons threatening him at such a close range. Feeling nervous just at standing so near to this apparently unemotional man who seemed so indifferent to his own impending death, Scarecrow came closer to Jasper.

"I tell you, this guy ain't human, Jasper," he said near a whisper. "Look at him. He ain't afraid of nothin'. What if you were right about it all? What if these Mysteron guys really are from outer-space?"

"Don't talk nonsense, 'Crow," Jasper retorted sharply. "Those were only stories from Worldnet."

"You said you believed them."

"Yeah, I did, but it was just talk, 'Crow, nothin' else. You can see he's as human as we are. Well, maybe not quite. I'm thinking he must be a freak, just like that Scarlet guy he was after, don't you see?"

Montgomery offered him a cold smile. "You don't know how close you are to the truth, boy."

"Shut up. For all I care, you're all freaks to me, Spectrum or Mysterons, or whatever you might be. I don't care those two in the shed were Spectrum and that you had them killed. In fact, I ought to thank you for that. Makes two witnesses less to worry about." Jasper smiled wickedly. "I also ought to thank you for reducing the shares of the treasure. Six million between 'Crow and me, that's more interesting than five shares."

"Why am I not surprised you would be happy to see things that way?" Montgomery said indifferently. "Of course, you *Earthmen* have a fascination with money that we can't hope to understand. You would kill your own brother if it would mean possessing more wealth."

"Why is he calling us 'Earthmen'?" a frowning Scarecrow asked edgily.

"He's just trying to unnerve ya, that's all."

"Am I?" Montgomery continued with the same coldness.

His attitude and unemotional voice unsettled Jasper somewhat, and the young man shifted on his feet; his crooked smile lost some of its assurance, but remained arrogant. "And so what if you're an alien terrorist or something? What does it matter to me? If that's true, I mean really true, and that's a long shot – then like Scarecrow said, you ain't human and I shouldn't have any scruple in getting rid of ya."

"You don't need that excuse to kill me," Montgomery replied, his smile matching Jasper's in aloofness. "I can see your game, boy. Perhaps you will not be content with one-half of that money you are so eager to get your hands on." He looked directly at Scarecrow and could see by the troubled expression of the youth that he had succeeded in planting the seed of doubt in his mind. "Perhaps you have decided to get rid of every unwanted witness and partner in order to keep all that money for yourself."

"Jasper –" Scarecrow started with an unsure voice.

"Don't listen to him," Jasper said quickly. "He's trying to pit us against one another." He raised his gun and took aim at Montgomery. "Any last request before I blow your brains out, Major?"

Montgomery stared for a second at the barrel pointed at him, still without displaying any apparent emotion. To the boys facing him, it was as if he didn't care about dying.

There was a sudden loud rumbling coming from the shed, which attracted the three men's attention. Montgomery slowly turned around; the small building had caved in on itself, its still burning, weakened beams unable to support its own structure

any longer. There was only a heap of rubble where it had previously stood, still consuming itself with the same intensity as before.

The shed was so old, so decayed, that it had taken merely minutes for it to burn down.

Montgomery smiled thinly; it didn't look as if anyone could possibly have survived that fire. He hadn't retrieved the microchip, but he was satisfied nonetheless. The Spectrum officers were surely dead, and he hoped that even Captain Scarlet's retrometabolism wouldn't be enough to help him come back to life after this.

He turned back to face Jasper with a serene expression. "The Mysterons' will has been carried out," he said quietly. "My mission here is done."

Jasper shook his head in incomprehension. "You're really a crazy freak. You asked for it, Mysteron man."

"Jasper, wait –"

Jasper didn't take any notice of Scarecrow's call and pulled the trigger. The gun thundered and at close range, hit Montgomery in the chest, throwing him off his feet. As if he didn't want to take a chance, Jasper fired a second time, hitting his victim in midair. There was a rain of blood as the Mysteronised agent fell to the ground, seemingly in slow motion, to fall nearly on top of Johnny Monroe's body.

For a moment, his gun smoking, Jasper stood there, and looked down at the multiple bodies at his feet, a satisfied smile spreading on his lips. As far as he was concerned, all of those who stood in his way were now gone; Joe, the sheriff, the freak and his girlfriend, the major and his men... even those with whom he would have had to share the money he was so eager to get his hands on. He would be rich, he would be able to leave this hellhole he despised so much, those little people he had been forced to live with all of his life when his father had left his mother for the big city those many years ago. He wouldn't need the pocket money his father grudgingly gave him – he would be his own man and would tell his old man to go straight to hell.

Jasper only became aware of Scarecrow's presence when the latter put his hand on his shoulder; that drew him out of his reverie. He turned around to his friend who had a look of panic in his eyes.

"What d'you do that for?" Scarecrow asked pointing frenetically to the dead body. "We don't even know who this guy was and you just –"

"He said it himself," Jasper interrupted him. "He was a Mysteron, 'Crow – a terrorist. A killer too, you saw what he did to these Spectrum officers. He had them burned alive!" He

shrugged. "After that, you know he couldn't let us live. We were liabilities to him – witnesses to get rid of. We had to kill him before he killed us. It was survival, 'Crow. Don't you see?" He grunted. "He was after the treasure too, I bet he was."

Scarecrow shook his head. "I knew it. For once in your life, Jasper, be honest. Your main reason for killing him wasn't to protect yourself in case he killed us. You killed him for that darn money. You'd already decided to get rid of him before knowing he was dangerous to us!"

"And what if I did? Ain't no-one getting between that treasure and me, 'Crow. I know you worked as hard as me, so you must understand. Now there's nothing, no-one, to stop us from getting the money. We just need to look around, search for where Ol' Joe has hidden it. And when we find it, we'll be rich, man. Richer than we first thought. 'Cause there's only the two of us, now. Six million, 'Crow! That makes three for each of us!"

"But look, Jasper. Look at that!"

Scarecrow gestured at the dead at their feet and then at the shed, where the fire was dying out. The few remaining wooden beams still erect were finally collapsing, and there was now nothing left standing of the small building. Not that far from where a wall previously stood, there was an old rusted pipe, protruding from the rubble, and from which sprouted a strong spray of water. It was obviously the source of the flow of water which currently ran from beneath the debris and streamed down the slight incline of the ground, almost straight to the two boys' feet.

"Look at all this destruction," Scarecrow said miserably. "Look at all those deaths... It's a massacre, that's what it is. I don't know how many people died for that money, Jasper. I'm not sure I wanna know. I'm starting to think it must be cursed, or something."

"Don't be an idiot, 'Crow. Of course that money ain't cursed. It's *money*, for crying out loud."

"Well, whatever, I think there's been more than enough disasters associated with it. I'm through, Jasper. I've got enough. I don't want to be involved in any of this anymore."

"You don't want any of the money?" Jasper asked in a cold voice.

It was only then that Scarecrow realised that his friend had now his gun – his still smoking gun which he had used to kill the major – aimed at him. He swallowed hard, and his heart started pounding faster, as he now became afraid for his safety, unsure what he should do or say next.

But he soon reflected that, no matter what he said, if Jasper had got it into his evil mind that he should kill him, nothing would save him.

Scarecrow then wondered if by any chance it wasn't Jasper's plan all along anyway. At this point, he felt for sure that, even if they were to search for Riley's money together, once it was found, Jasper would assuredly get rid of him, and that way, become the only one to get his hands on the treasure. There would be no-one left to share it with, and he would be even richer than in his wildest dreams.

"No," Scarecrow finally said with a sense of finality, but at the same time, with a mind clearer than it ever had been in the last few days. "No, I don't want any of it. It's stained with blood, and it causes only death or pain to anyone attached to it."

Jasper's eyes narrowed to slits as he glared dangerously at him and his jaw tightened with determination. Scarecrow saw his friend take a single step back, his gun still aimed at him.

"Let go of your gun, 'Crow."

Scarecrow felt his heartbeat increase. *I'm dead*, he thought, *now I'm sure of it*. He had no choice but to obey, knowing that even if he tried to use the gun to defend himself, he had not a single chance: Jasper would have killed him before he could even move. His shaky fingers opened almost of their own volition, and his rifle clattered to the ground.

"Jasper, wait," he said in a little voice, in an ultimate attempt to save his life. "There's no need for you to do that. I won't say a thing, I swear..."

"But I *must* do it, 'Crow," Jasper answered quietly. "Surely, you must understand that?"

"You're really gonna kill me?" Scarecrow said, his voice shaking. "Like you killed Joe, and the others? Jasper, I thought we were pals, man..."

"We *were* pals, 'Crow, we really were. And you were very helpful, I've got to tell you that." Jasper shook his head in an almost sad way. "That's a shame, 'Crow. That's a real shame. Of all the lot, you're the one I liked best, you know?" He pumped his weapon, his eyes becoming implacable. "I'll remember you, man. When I find that money, and count every last bill of it, I'll think of you. And remember what a fool you have been."

"Jasper, please..."

"Goodbye, 'Crow."

"FREEZE!"

The sound of that stentorian voice made both Jasper and Scarecrow shivered and they turned in the direction it came.

From beyond the edge of the clearing emerged a man, wearing a flat hat and the khaki uniform of a sheriff. With both

hands, he was holding a handgun that he was aiming straight at Jasper. The latter had frozen in place, and his face paled; his gun was still trained on Scarecrow, whose legs were shaking uncontrollably.

From behind the sheriff, two other men appeared, wearing uniforms that the boys recognised as those of Spectrum colour-coded officers. One was pale blue, and the other of a golden yellow colour. They were also armed with handguns with a strip of colour at the top which matched that of their uniforms.

As if it wasn't enough, behind the three of them, came at least four other men, all holding weapons, all ready to use them. Scarecrow and Jasper recognised them instantly: they were citizens of Les Arbrisseaux, and they didn't seem to be in any kind of joking mood; there was the same hard expression of loathing and anger displayed on their faces as they watched the two boys closely.

"Don't make a single move, boy," the sheriff said in a harsh voice, addressing Jasper directly. "There's enough guns aimed at you to blow your brains out if you should try anything foolish." He went directly to Jasper, and roughly snatched the gun from his hands.

The tension left Scarecrow, and suddenly, his legs refusing to support him any longer, he let himself down to the ground, and he sat there, gasping for air. He had narrowly escaped death and counted himself lucky to still be alive; but he was very aware that he was now far from out of trouble.

Now he knew he would have to pay for all the harm and suffering he had helped cause – and caused himself.

The sheriff, a heavily built white man in his fifties, sporting a shaggy moustache, stood menacingly in front of Jasper and looked him squarely in the eyes. "You know who I am, boy?"

Jasper swallowed hard; up until the appearance of all these men, he had found himself unable to speak, so shocked he had been. Now he shook his head nervously and answered, trying hard not to stutter: "You're Stan Huxley – the sheriff from the next parish..."

"That's right I am, and I have full authority to arrest you, Jasper Holland."

"Whatever for?" Jasper asked, making a show to roll unbelieving eyes.

"Murder and attempted murder, to begin with. Maybe multiple murders at that, if we are to believe what we just heard. We'll make the count of your victims in due time."

"What are you –"

"Don't try to take us for fools," the sheriff snapped roughly, cutting Jasper off even before he could start to defend himself

with ludicrous excuses. "We heard everything you and your chum said, as we got here. *All* of us." He gestured towards his companions, who were now standing all around. "So you see, there are enough witnesses here who can testify against you."

"I'll testify," a small voice then piped up.

The sheriff turned to Scarecrow, seated on the ground with his head between his legs. The boy looked defeated and very tired. "You were saying, boy?" the sheriff called loudly.

Scarecrow heaved a deep sigh and raised his head. "I said I'll testify," he repeated, his voice firmer. "I'll tell everything you want to know. It was Jasper who killed Joe Benson. He also killed Johnny Monroe and that major, over there..." He pointed in the general direction of the bodies nearby.

"You dirty..." Jasper choked on the insult and turned to the sheriff. "That's all a lie, Sheriff!"

"You forget what we heard, Holland," the sheriff replied impassively. "Ain't no sense you denying the truth."

"You snitch!" Jasper yelled, turning to Scarecrow. "You think you can save yourself by selling me out?"

"I'm not trying to save myself," Scarecrow replied. "I know I won't cut it, Jasper. I've been there for everything, and I didn't try to stop any of it. I've got a lot to answer for too." He turned to the sheriff. "Dallas Fenmore killed Sheriff Masters," he added. "You might find his body in the river, not far from Devil's Bayou Bridge."

"Sheriff Masters is alive," Huxley then replied, causing Scarecrow and Jasper to look at him in surprise. "He survived the gunshot through the chest and that dive into the river. The little he was able to say upon waking up last night was enough to make people realise that your little gang of thugs were behind many of the things that's been going on around here." He turned to the now despondent-looking Jasper, who was still glowering murderously at Scarecrow. He gestured to the two men closest to him. "When these Spectrum officers called for my cooperation last night, I deputised some volunteers from Les Arbrisseaux, who were only too happy to come after you. Leonard Masters is not only a good man, but a friend to all of us."

"So you all ganged on me, didn't you?" Jasper hissed between his teeth. "When my father hears about it..."

"Your father already heard about it, Holland," Huxley interrupted him. "He arrived in town this morning. I wouldn't count too much on him to help you out, this time. He was none too happy with you – and didn't seem very surprised you had turned into a murderer. Probably figured out for a while you were a bad seed."



Jasper looked up at him. "Oh yeah? Well, I'm not too happy with my old man either. He can rot in hell, for all I care."

"I believe you'll be the one who'll rot, boy. You'll pay for what you did. To Sheriff Masters and to Joe Benson. And all those others as well."

"How did you know where to find us?" There was still some defiance in his voice, but it was now obvious to Jasper that he had reached the end of the road. He could see there was no way to fight this any longer.

"We were searching for you when we saw the smoke coming from this place," the Spectrum officer in the blue uniform said. "When Sheriff Huxley told us what this location was, we called for a helitanker and headed this way. Fortunately, we weren't that far."

He took a step forward to stand in front of Jasper who, almost despite himself, stepped back at his approach. The man was tall and well-built and his presence was not only intimidating, but somehow threatening. He was looking at Jasper with an ominous glow in his clear blue eyes that entailed nothing good for the young man.

"Where's Captain Scarlet?" Captain Blue asked, glaring down at the boy who was looking up anxiously at him. "And Rhapsody Angel? What have you done to them?"

Jasper swallowed hard. Somehow, despite the threat he could feel hanging over his head, he found in himself a spark of his innate arrogance, as he looked up into this man's face, visibly concerned and angry regarding his friends and colleagues' fate. Jasper considered that, with Sheriff Huxley and all these other people surrounding them, this Spectrum officer wouldn't dare hurt him in anyway, despite his obvious desire to strangle him.

He chuckled nervously, thinking that at least, he would be allowed one little victory in this whole disaster. "Funny you should ask," he said with a taunting smile. "You just mentioned the fire." In a nonchalant gesture, he pointed at what remained of the burned down shed. "You should look under that," he added, as Captain Blue and Captain Ochre turned horrified eyes in the direction of the smoking and still burning ruins. "You might be able to find what's left of 'em."

"Oh no..." Captain Ochre gasped in shock.

Captain Blue didn't say a word, but became completely livid. He turned murderous eyes towards Jasper.

"Wasn't my doing," the young man protested swiftly, reading the accusation in the Spectrum officer's expression. "Was all the major and his minions' doing..."

"But you did your worst helping them, I bet, didn't you, you little creep?" Blue seethed between his teeth. His fists were clenched in rage, and he was doing his utmost not to let go of his righteous anger and punch this devious bastard in the face.

"That'll be close enough, Captain," the sheriff then said, interposing himself between his prisoner and the Spectrum officer. "This punk isn't worth you getting your hands dirty on him."

"Where's that helitanker?" Blue snapped heatedly.

"Last I spoke to the pilot, he was to arrive here in five minutes," Captain Ochre answered. By the sound of his voice, it was obvious he was working very hard in trying to keep his cool.

"Call him back, and tell him to hurry!" Blue swiftly replied. "We need to search the ruin as quickly as possible, but we won't be able to approach that furnace until the tanker drops its contents onto it. I'll call Cloudbase, and ask for a medicopter to be sent over right away."

Sheriff Huxley stared at Blue as if he had suddenly gone mad. "Surely, Captain, you're not thinking that someone might still be alive under these ruins? I'm sorry, but your two friends are goners for sure."

Blue turned to him, with a grave expression. "Sheriff, you might not believe it, but I have my reasons to think there might still be a chance to save at least *one* of them! And I swear to you, I won't rest until that person is pulled out from under there. Even if I have to do it all alone!"

\* \* \*

Within the next five minutes, the helitanker was on the site. Everyone quickly vacated the premises, putting themselves at a safe distance when the tanker did its job by pouring the contents of its bucket straight onto the spot. It was a small helicopter and as such, could carry about a half-ton of water in its cable-suspended bucket fixed underneath its belly. Yet, it was sufficient to stifle most of the flames still ablaze amongst the shed ruins. Under the weight of the water, the ruins caved in completely to the ground, making Captain Blue and Captain Ochre cringe. If Captain Scarlet had indeed survived the fire, he might very well have been crushed by the final collapse of the shed.

The place was still steaming, and there were still some small flames emerging here and there, when Captain Blue rushed in, quickly followed by Captain Ochre. Sympathetic to the

anguish of the two Spectrum officers, Sheriff Huxley and his volunteers came along behind, bringing their two prisoners along. None of them could fathom why both men seemed in so much of a hurry to find their colleagues – who, more than likely, lay dead beneath the rubble. And if anyone had the luck to survive the fire, then that person would be in such a state that it would be preferable for him or her to be dead. Yet, they were willing to offer a helping hand – even if it was for nothing.

Blue was the first to step amidst the ruins which once were the old shed in which Scarlet and Rhapsody had taken refuge. The ground was covered with ashes and cinder, and what remained of burned wooden beams which still crackled under each of his steps. He could still feel the fire burning underneath, and smell the acrid scent of the smoke. It made him cough and watered his eyes, as he looked around desperately for any trace of his friends and colleagues. For Rhapsody, he had no hope at all; for Scarlet, if they were to find him, if his body had not been irretrievably reduced to ashes, then there remained hope.

But he could see nothing; and when he exchanged glances with Ochre, who was already moving the blackened beams around by hand, he could see in his friend's eyes that he didn't have much hope either – and that hope was quickly evaporating.

Sheriff Huxley came up to him and was now looking at him with a compassionate and sorrowful expression. "Captain, I'm sorry, but it doesn't look like any of your friends might have survived this fire." He waved at the highest heap of wreckage, where the roof of the shed had collapsed, and put a comforting hand on Blue's shoulder. "I'm afraid we'll only find their bodies under all of this." He looked the Spectrum officer squarely in the eyes. "Are you really sure you want to see what they look like now?"

Blue looked back grimly at him. No, he wasn't really looking forward to discovering both of his friends' dead bodies. While it was obviously too late for Rhapsody, finding Scarlet, however, was always a necessity, each time he 'died'. He knew far too well that, for his friend, death didn't have the same finality as for any other human being. He didn't want to take the risk that his body would be taken back to yet another morgue, and that the incident that happened in Les Arbrisseaux just the day before would occur again.

He was about to answer Sheriff Huxley that he wasn't giving up until he found his friends, dead or alive, when a call from Ochre, who stood on the other side of the pile of ruins, suddenly interrupted him and made him turn in his direction: "Blue! Over here!"

Ochre was gesturing to him, and leaving the sheriff behind, Blue quickly joined him, striding around the high pile of debris as quickly as he could, despite the uneven surface he was walking on. He stood in front of his colleague.

"What is it?" he asked hopefully.

"Listen."

Blue kept quiet and strained his ears, listening intently. At first, he didn't hear anything, and then, he perceived it.

Just at the limit of his hearing. Faint tapping noises.

Both Spectrum officers looked around, with anticipation. They were at a loss; they couldn't figure out where the noises originated from.

"It sounds like it's coming from underground," Ochre muttered.

"Wait..." Blue stood in front of the heap of burned planks and narrowed his eyes. Just underneath there, he could just distinguish the blackened outline of a small boat, hull upwards. The weak, hollow knocking he and Ochre were hearing seemed to come from there.

From *under* the hull, more precisely.

Blue pointed to it excitedly. "It's coming from there!"

Hurriedly, the two Spectrum officers started clearing the burned beams and planks out of their way, and the sheriff, at first startled at their behaviour, suddenly realised they genuinely were on to something. He motioned to two of his men to come join him, leaving the others to keep guard on the prisoners, and the three of them went to help Ochre and Blue.

As the five men worked their way through the ruins, the thumping stopped; fearing the worst, they redoubled their efforts. In no time, they had removed all the debris and uncovered the boat; it was half-embedded in the sticky mud which was made of a mix of ashes and dirt; it had obviously been driven into the mud when the roof had collapsed on it.

The thumping was heard again, clearer, closer, and there was no doubt this time it was coming from underneath the overturned boat.

"There *is* someone alive under there!" roared Sheriff Huxley in a tone of disbelief. "All together, let's get that thing off!"

Ochre and Blue exchanged concerned glances; even if they had wanted to, they couldn't stop these men: they were determined to lend a helping hand, if it meant saving a life. Blue shrugged inwardly; if Scarlet was attempting to attract their attention by knocking against the side of the boat, that surely meant he was alive – and relatively well. They wouldn't find a corpse that would suddenly revive, scaring everyone out of their

wits. Spectrum's best kept secret didn't run the risk of being uncovered.

All of them struggled with all of their strength to remove the boat, fighting against the suction of the mud keeping it in place. It was Blue who was rewarded with the first result, as after long seconds, he was able to heave the boat a few centimetres from the muddy ground. There was now enough space for him to slip his fingers underneath the boat and to get a better grip. He pulled harder.

As he heaved the boat higher, he saw a mud-covered hand slither through the gap, and he almost jumped in surprise.

They then heard the hoarse cough of a man.

"Oh, Sweet Jesus," one of the sheriff's volunteers said, to Blue's right. "He is alive!"

"Quickly!" Blue said between clenched teeth. "Let's get him out of there!"

Once the boat had escaped the suction of the mud, it became easy to remove it completely and to pull it aside. The upper body of a man, dirty with mud, appeared through a hole dug into the ground; blue eyes blinked in the light and looked up in apparent confusion at all the men standing around the hole and staring down at him with complete astonishment.

"Scarlet!" Blue shouted with obvious relief. "Thank God, you're okay!" Leaving the sheriff and his men to take the boat away, he knelt down next to his friend and caught his hand in his; he found Scarlet's grip somewhat weak, but still firm, and he held on to it. Scarlet had a haggard expression on his face, which was visibly drawn and pale underneath the mud covering. He looked straight in Blue's direction, but from the expression in his eyes, he didn't seem to recognise him – or even see him, for that matter.

*Either he's still amnesiac, or he's in shock,* Blue reflected.

Ochre came to stand next to Blue, and he got hold of Scarlet's other arm; together, they pulled their colleague out of his precarious position. Scarlet staggered on his feet, his legs seemingly refusing to keep him upright, and it was all his two friends could do to keep him from falling down. The sheriff and his men didn't help in the matter, as they came to surround them, curious to know this stranger who had survived against incredible odds, and showing their admiration with encouraging thumps to the back and appreciative squeezing of his hand.

"Give him some space," Blue requested in vexation. "He needs some air!"

They realised he was probably right, as they quickly stepped away from the injured man.

"Hey, big guy," Ochre told him, in a comforting voice, "You look just as if you had dug your way out of hell this time."

"Take it easy, buddy," Blue said in turn, soothingly. "You're safe, now. It's all behind you."

But Scarlet wasn't listening to them; he shook his head, and struggled weakly, as if desiring to escape their helping hands. He seemed upset, and they couldn't figure out why. Unable to stand properly on his feet, he fell on his knees, pulling his colleagues down with him.

"Scarlet, what's the matter?" Blue asked in concern.

"Get her out of there!" Scarlet suddenly shouted in a strained, gasping voice.

Blue opened wide eyes, as his friend nearly collapsed between his and Ochre's arms. "Her?" he echoed with uncertainty.

He looked down into the hole, almost not daring to hope.

There at the bottom, almost entirely encased in the ground, he could just make out the outlines of a woman, her body muddy, and her eyes closed, with a Spectrum miniaturized respirator in her mouth. Blue's heart missed a beat, when he saw one of her hands move feebly, and then her eyes open. Her hair was a mess, all sticky with mud, and he couldn't see the colour, but he did recognise those blue eyes, looking confusedly up at him as she slowly removed the respirator from her lips.

Blue was staring at her in complete shock.

"Rhapsody!" he roared, startling Ochre so much that he made him jump. "Oh my God, I don't believe it!"

Ochre leaned over the hole and gasped in astonishment, upon discovering the young woman alive, when they fully expected her dead. He exchanged disbelieving glances with Blue, but there was only a short moment of hesitation from the blond officer.

Leaving Scarlet with his colleague, Blue jumped into the hole and helped Rhapsody extricate herself from the sticky muck keeping her body down. She was visibly drained of all strength and was shaking, but otherwise, she seemed fine, as far as he could tell. Blue's strong arms lifted the exhausted young woman up towards the opening, where the multiple hands of the volunteers from Les Arbrisseaux were now offered to help her. Once she found herself safely back at the surface, she sat down by the hole, exhaling loudly. Blue joined her, the strong arms of Sheriff Huxley and of another man pulling him up.

"You're alive!" Blue told her as he knelt in front of her. "That's unbelievable! I was... We were sure you couldn't have survived that fire." He cupped her face in his shaky hands to look

levelly into her weary eyes. "But thank God, here you are – very much alive. It's a miracle!"

She smiled weakly. "And I'm sure you'll want to make sure that miracle is not Mysteron-related, won't you, Captain?" she said in a small, hoarse voice.

"You don't look like a Mysteron to me, hon," he told her reassuringly.

She coughed by way of clearing her sore throat. "Don't worry. I won't hold it against you if you test me, as soon as you can."

He grinned. "Don't mind me if I will then," he said with good humour.

"I don't know what the two of you are on about," Sheriff Huxley then said suddenly, attracting both their attention, "but it sure looks like this young lady and her companion over there will need medical attention immediately. I suggest we get them back to Les Arbrisseaux as quickly as possible and have them checked by Doctor Evers."

Blue rose to his feet to face him. "I thank you very much, Sheriff, but the Spectrum medicopter should be here any minute now. We'll take our people back to Cloudbase, which is currently stationed close by. I'm sure Doctor Evers is a good doctor, but we have some of the best medical facilities on board."

"I'm sure that's true," Huxley grouched. "But I will need to hear these two witnesses' accounts of what has been going on around here."

As Blue was trying his best to reassure the sheriff and to convince him that Spectrum would do its very best to cooperate with the local law, within the boundaries of what was allowed by World Government security, Rhapsody Angel, momentarily left on her own, was heaving a deep sigh of relief, raising a trembling hand to her throbbing head. Thank God, this whole ordeal was finished now – and miraculously, she was alive and relatively well.

She looked down at the respirator in her other, dirty hand. It had been empty for the last two minutes they had stayed underground, but it had performed its job perfectly – and well beyond what was expected. If not for this, she wouldn't like to imagine what could have happened. She would need to offer her grateful thanks to Captain Grey, for having suggested this gadget be officially added to Spectrum's survival equipment.

And Grey wasn't the only person to whom she owed her thanks; there was also the man with whom she had shared this dreadful adventure.

He was there, only a meter in front of her; helped and supported by Captain Ochre, he was currently gawkily getting up

to his feet. She stumbled up as well, and noticing this, forgetful of Huxley who was still arguing with him about taking the two rescued Spectrum officers to Les Arbrisseaux, Blue immediately offered his assistance to her. She thanked him with a nod and once on her feet with his help, she took a few steps towards Scarlet.

When she stopped in front of him, she noticed his haggard expression, and his general weariness; the experience had been much more unpleasant for him than it had been for her; she could see the tatters of his shirt in the back, and his blackened hands. He had protected her from the worst, and had not come out of it unscathed.

It took a few seconds for Scarlet to notice the young woman in front of him, along with the tall figure of the blond man, wearing a blue uniform now dirty with mud, standing by her side, supporting her. He stared at him first, fixedly, trying his memory in an attempt to recall who this man could be. It wasn't as difficult as he had thought it would be, as a name came instantly to his mind.

"You're Adam," he said with confidence, nodding as he did.

Blue nodded in turn. "Your memory seems to be returning to you, Captain," he commented. "I heard it was gone."

"It comes and goes," Scarlet replied. "Right now, it's still mostly gone, but I'm sure it'll get better."

"I'm sure it will."

Scarlet then lowered his eyes to look deep into Rhapsody's blue eyes, which were not leaving him. He felt the headache, the awful headache he had come to know too well and fear so much, settling in and increasing as he stood there, unable to talk to her.

"If I'm alive, it's because of you," she said in a hoarse voice.

He nodded weakly; the headache was getting worse. He raised a shaky hand and reached for her cheek. He swallowed hard and offered a feeble smile.

"If I'm alive... it's also because of you," he answered so softly that he could barely hear himself.

Then he had the impression his head was exploding, as the pain became unbearable. His legs gave way underneath him and he collapsed forward. Before completely losing consciousness, he felt many pairs of hands catching him, preventing him from hitting the ground, and heard a female voice call his name.

Then total oblivion engulfed his mind and he knew nothing more.



## EPILOGUE

Captain Blue gave a small knock against the frame of the open door of the sickbay room assigned to Captain Scarlet, and risked a peek inside. His English colleague was in bed, with his eyes closed, his stripped upper body propped against pillows, and his right arm offered to Doctor Fawn who was taking a blood sample. With a gesture of his free hand, Fawn invited him in and Blue entered.

"How is he, Edward?" he asked, gazing in concern at his friend.

He noticed the doctor's unhappy expression. "How do you think he is?" Fawn replied in a sour tone. "The usual, of course."

"I'm fine," the voice of Captain Scarlet then slurred in answer. His blue eyes opened and he raised his head slightly from the pillows, turning towards Blue who had stopped by his bed. "I'm just waiting until Dracula finishes sucking my blood and removes this needle from my arm."

"I'm hardly taking *all* your blood," Fawn protested. "And you'll be happy to know, I'm finished now." Fawn pulled the syringe out of Scarlet's arm, checked the contents with a satisfied nod, and then applied a small bit of cotton wool to the puncture, before bending the captain's arm. "Hold this a few seconds, until the bleeding stops," he instructed his patient. "I don't want you to stain another set of sheets."

Scarlet gave but a single look at his bent arm, and then started counting, slowly: "Three... Two... One..." He unbent his arm and removed the pad to casually present it to Fawn. "Here, as good as new, Doc. If you need another sample, you can always use this."

Fawn glared at him. "You have to be the *worst* patient I ever had the displeasure to care for," he said in a low, disgruntled voice, as a grinning Scarlet threw the soiled cotton wool into the trashcan near his bed. "If that's all the thanks I get for the hard work I'm doing around here, I should probably go back to Australia. I'm sure there's a lot of kangaroos in the outback who will appreciate my services much better than you do."

"Awww... Don't take it that way, Doc," Scarlet said by way of apologising. "We love you here, you know that."

Amused by their banter, which he knew was more playful than anything else, Captain Blue chuckled. "I see everything is back to normal then. If Scarlet is teasing you, Edward, it must mean he's better than he was when he arrived here yesterday."

"*Much* better, yes," Scarlet confirmed with a vigorous nod. "When I woke up this morning, I felt like my usual self. I

remembered everything: my name... who I was... Spectrum... my place in it and you guys... Everything... Ah, with the notable exception of what happened to me one year ago, when the Mysterons had me under their control. *That* remains elusive."

"I expect those were the memories of... another," Blue commented quietly. "No more headaches?"

"No... All gone now, thank God."

"I fully expected to find you with a shaved head. Or at least a bald spot. Doctor Fawn told me he had to surgically remove that thing you had in your head that he suspected was causing your amnesia."

Scarlet grinned. "Well, you wouldn't've had the opportunity. You know Doc doesn't do things by halves. He could have shaved my head, but he didn't. Instead, he made some kind of laser incision, and lifted part of the scalp to get it out of the way for the operation. Then he put it back and stitched it nicely in place."

Blue tilted his head to one side. "Did he really do that or are you leading me on?"

Fawn sighed. "He makes it sound worse than it really was," he said, shaking his head dejectedly. "It was just a very small portion that was lifted and stitched back. It's not uncommon these days, Captain Blue."

"Still, it's fascinating stuff," Scarlet continued.

Blue grimaced. "I'm glad you think so. Because me, I don't find it very fascinating. I wouldn't be looking forward to someone scalping me – or fiddling inside my brain either, for that matter."

"Don't let him fool you, Captain Blue," Fawn then piped up. "*He* wasn't looking forward to it either. He was sedated the whole time. Not an easy thing to do, considering his fast-acting metabolism. We probably gave him enough drugs to put down a whole herd of mammoths."

"I admit you did a very nice job of patching me up, Doc," Scarlet said. "And with the minimum of discomfort for me. I'm completely healed, the stitches are already gone..."

"I can't take credit for *that*," Fawn retorted.

"Maybe not, but you can for the rest. If I'm back to what is considered normal for me, it's thanks to you."

Fawn shrugged and smiled. "Well, it is nice to see you sometimes appreciate my work, Captain Scarlet... and I'm glad to be of service whenever I can. However, if you've regained your memory and you're free of those headaches you were suffering from, it's all down to your miraculous powers of recuperation. I provided only a little of my expertise by removing what was causing you so much trouble." He reached for a small object which stood upright on the table next to the bed, and

handed it to Captain Blue. "Here. This was the cause of the whole problem."

Blue turned the object between his fingers, and nodded pensively. "So it was indeed a bullet you had in your head," he told Scarlet.

"Ah, but not *just* an ordinary bullet," Fawn retorted, before Scarlet could utter an answer.

Blue frowned. "What do you mean, Edward?"

"Do you remember a few months ago – that component Scarlet retrieved from the hovercraft in Koala Base?"

"The one that caused it to malfunction, and we all thought it was an inside job by a traitor?" Blue said, frowning as he recalled the incident. "Well indeed, the hovercraft was sabotaged, but Colonel White told us our experts in R and D discovered that the component Scarlet brought back had been tampered with at a subatomic level."

Fawn nodded at Blue's summary. "Which is another way of saying that it was... Mysteronised." He indicated the bullet with which Blue was distractedly playing. "Which I believed *this* thing was."

"Are you suggesting that this slug –"

Blue stopped turning the bullet between his fingers and looked down at it with incredulity. Scarlet sighed and crossed his arms on his chest. "Edward thinks this bullet was indeed Mysteronised, and that it was the reason why my retrometabolism couldn't deal with it as it would a 'normal' bullet."

"Which means what, dissolve it?" Blue asked with a frown. He often wondered how Scarlet's body dealt with projectiles, his friend and Doctor Fawn seemingly always neglecting to explain to him that aspect of Scarlet's retrometabolism. This time, he thought he would finally learn about it, but as Scarlet was opening his mouth to reply to his enquiry, Doctor Fawn interrupted him, adding to his patient's earlier statement:

"I'm not saying that it was specifically Mysteronised with the intent of causing harm to Scarlet. You were shot at by a Mysteron agent, Captain," Fawn said, addressing Scarlet directly. "And it's possible that his equipment has been recreated along with him, when he was killed to undertake this new assignment for the Mysterons."

"Mmm – it's true that Mysterons agents are not often recreated naked," Scarlet commented, stroking his chin. "From what we know, they are fully clothed – and sometimes fully armed. However, if these agents are sometimes indestructible, what they wear or carry with them usually isn't. I know my uniform wasn't... Or that'd be less of a bother for me."

"You're right, Scarlet: they *usually* are not. But this time might be one of those occurrences where it actually was."

Scarlet grimaced. "Much to my misfortune, I regret to say," he muttered.

Fawn took the bullet from Blue's hand. "This projectile lodged itself in Scarlet's skull," he explained to the American captain. "Obviously, its presence impaired his memory – more so than the injury it had caused."

"Yeah, because my retrometabolism had already healed that injury," Scarlet stated.

"... But Scarlet's retrometabolism couldn't cope with the bullet, due to its own Mysteronisation. They conflicted with each other – cancelled each other out, if you will, in a cycle that kept repeating itself. Which caused the headaches Scarlet kept having during this whole period of time."

"Those headaches occurred mostly when I was making an effort to remember," Scarlet added. "Or when I did remember something – or get close to remembering something."

Fawn nodded. "It's possibly your retrometabolism was working hard to restore your lost memory," he commented, as Scarlet took the projectile from his hands to examine it with curiosity. "But the presence of this bullet wouldn't permit it to do so. To restore your memory would have meant getting rid of the bullet. But as the bullet was retrometabolic too –" He looked down at the projectile that Scarlet was thoughtfully turning between his fingers. "I'll have to hand it over to R and D later," he said. "I'm sure that upon examination, they'll discover it underwent the same kind of 'subatomic manipulation' that the hovercraft component did in Koala Base."

"So what you're saying, Edward," Blue then said, "is that as soon as you surgically removed that slug, that took care of the problem?"

"Indeed," Scarlet said, causing Blue to turn to him. "When I woke up this morning, after the operation and a good retrometabolic sleep – which I was told, was longer than any of those I've had in the last year – all of my lost memories came flooding back. Gave me something of a headache to begin with, as my brain was processing all that information. But it didn't take very long and now..." he shrugged, putting the bullet back onto the table by the bed, "it's like nothing at all had happened."

"As usual," Blue commented with a grin. "I don't suppose it'll be long before you'll be signed back to active duty?"

"Three days," Scarlet answered, swinging his legs off the side of the bed. "Edward reckons I deserve a break after all that excitement in Devil's Bayou."

"You do indeed," Fawn confirmed. "I know that Colonel White is expecting you to make your report as soon as you can. But after that, I expect you to take some much needed rest." He waved dismissively. "Take a vacation. Leave Cloudbase and go home, or wherever you'd like to find yourself at the moment." He seemed to give it some thought and addressed a mischievous smile to Scarlet. "Try to avoid swamps, marshes, bayous or any wilderness of the kind."

Scarlet made a face. "That goes without saying, Doc."

"Now I know you can't wait to be out of sickbay, so I'm giving you your leave right away." Fawn gave Scarlet a friendly thump on the shoulder. "Now get out of here, you bum. I want you gone from this room when I come by later on."

Scarlet chuckled. "There's little chance you'll see me in here, Doc." Fawn turned around and was about to walk out of the room, when Scarlet called him back: "And Edward...?"

Fawn turned on his heels. Scarlet addressed him a genuine, friendly smile.

"Thanks again. For everything."

"Anytime, mate," Fawn answered, smiling back. "Do take care of yourself for more than a week, will you?" And with that, he went on his way.

Left alone with Blue, Scarlet turned to his friend, still standing in the same place as when he had arrived, and gestured towards the sole chair in the room, which was set nearby, against a wall.

Would you pass me my uniform, Adam? And my boots, please."

Blue turned to the chair and noticed the shirt and tunic which lay on the backrest. He took both and handed them over to his friend, while pulling the chair nearer to the bed; he sat down, moving the red boots at his feet within Scarlet's reach.

"You remember everything then?" Blue asked, as Scarlet pulled the dark shirt over his head.

"Oh yes," his friend confirmed, as his head emerged through the collar. "Everything... Even that twenty you owe me from our last poker game, and that *you* seem to have forgotten about." He glanced at Blue who rolled his eyes. "How strange that a man so loaded with money would forget such small details, I can't explain that..."

"Yeah, me neither," Blue said, chuckling. "Would you settle for dinner in the cafeteria later, then?"

"Okay, but I'm warning you: I worked up quite an appetite during that stay in the bayou, dodging bullets and arrows, and escaping fires. I'm absolutely famished. It'll cost you more than twenty."

"I can live with that." Blue watched as Scarlet slipped his tunic on. "And what happened in the bayou – you still remember that?"

"Why yes, of course... Every last detail." It was Scarlet's turn to roll his eyes and to heave a deep sigh. "Can't believe I've been so inept... There were situations I would have been able to straighten out easily if only I'd had my memory in the first place! Just thinking about it – it's almost embarrassing."

Blue shook his head. "It's not like it was your fault – not entirely, that is. I think we can say your instincts served you right when it became necessary... and you certainly turned up trumps in the end. The same could be said for Rhapsody."

"*Epecially* for her," Scarlet retorted. "Without her support during that whole ordeal in the bayou, I might not even be here right now, talking to you. She was a rock and held the fort admirably, particularly in those times where I was totally useless."

"I wouldn't say you were useless," Blue said softly. "You did save her life... Several times, according to her."

"You talked to her?" Scarlet inquired. "Fawn told me earlier she was all right, when I asked about her, but I haven't seen her yet."

"She is... quite all right, actually. She has a room down the corridor and has been resting since her arrival. She received some minor burns from the fire, but I think you took the worst of it, protecting her. She had quite a ghastly slash across one of her arms... I think that's the worst she suffered."

"I remember," Scarlet said, recalling the bandage he had seen on the young woman's left arm. "She told me she did that to herself when she ejected from her Angel craft. She told me it was nothing, and it didn't seem to bother her. She treated it with medicine she found in Joe Benson's cabin. You tell me it was serious?"

"It looked ugly – and was probably painful. The medicine was probably helpful. Doctor Fawn assured that it won't have any lasting effect."

"Well, she didn't let that injury affect her in the bayou, that's for sure. I don't suppose she told you she saved my life too? Also, several times."

"I remember her mentioning a 'hanging party'," Blue commented with a grim expression. "And was quite angry just thinking about it. You really had it tough down there, buddy."

Scarlet sighed. "It was... a difficult assignment, I must admit."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to assist you."

"That couldn't be helped." Scarlet smiled fondly. "It's true your help would have been appreciated, but Dianne made a

more than capable replacement. She certainly made up for your absence."

"Certainly?" Blue repeated, raising a brow. "Don't you mean 'almost'?"

Scarlet burst out laughing. "Don't be jealous, Big Blue! Having her as a partner during a field assignment wasn't the same as working with you. It was... different. For one thing, she's prettier."

Blue sniggered. "I'm not sure she would consider that qualification as relevant, considering the circumstances."

"I can tell you she doesn't," Scarlet confirmed. "And she's certainly one tough lady."

"That she is," Blue admitted with a slow nod. "I saw that first hand down there." As Scarlet gazed at him inquiringly, he continued: "You were out for the last part of your assignment, so you didn't get to know what happened after we found you."

"What *did* happen, exactly?"

"The medicopter took a few minutes more coming than expected, and Sheriff Huxley was pestering us to take you and Rhapsody down to Les Arbrisseaux, to be treated by Doctor Evers..."

"Oh God, you didn't –"

"No, don't worry. The medicopter *did* finally arrive, and that put an end to that part of the problem. However, in the meantime, that gave Rhapsody the opportunity to... shall we say... exact vengeful retribution on the leader of those young scum who wanted to kill the both of you?"

Scarlet had reached for one boot and was about to put it on, but Blue's words made him stop and he returned his attention to him. "What did she do?" he asked with curiosity.

"Well, that Holland boy was brooding in his corner, kept under watchful surveillance by Sheriff Huxley's volunteers. The way he was glaring at you and Rhapsody – if he had had daggers instead of eyes, you both would have been killed on the spot."

"Now why am I not surprised?" Scarlet growled.

"Rhapsody noticed that and went to him. I went with her. Holland was handcuffed, I wasn't afraid that he might do something to her. On the contrary, I was concerned that *she* might do something to *him*. Her eyes were flashing with cold, barely contained anger. You know how she can be when she gets particularly cross?"

Scarlet rolled his eyes as he put his boot on and zipped it up. "Do !! I've seen her in action already. And I've been on the receiving end of her wrath, once or twice. She's not considered our fiercest Angel pilot for nothing, that's a well-earned

reputation. But I don't suppose she would have got physical with Holland? I'm sure you worried too much, Adam."

"Well, at the time, Paul, I couldn't be less sure of what she was planning. She really didn't look in any kind of forgiving mood. You would have been concerned too, if you had seen her. She stood in front of Holland, and asked him if he was happy with what he had accomplished – that so many people had to die and suffer because of his greed."

"And...?" Scarlet asked reaching for his second boot.

"That bastard told Rhapsody, in no uncertain terms, and with conceit such that you can't even conceive in a man in his situation, that he would have been much happier if the both of you had died in that fire." Blue paused a second, watching as Scarlet's blue eyes glimmered with anger at these words. "He did use some words that weren't very nice nor polite to describe you both."

"I can imagine what those words were," Scarlet muttered between his teeth, zipping his boot up. "The scumbag."

"I already felt like punching him in the mouth in the beginning," Blue said dryly. "Imagine after he had said that. But Rhapsody beat me to it."

"What did she do?" Scarlet asked with a raised brow. "She didn't slap him – you said she didn't get physical with him and anyway, you would have put that in your report and I would have seen it. Or maybe you would have 'forgotten' that part..."

"So you read my report, huh?"

"Of course. Colonel White had Lieutenant Green supply it to me – after I argued that it would probably be helpful to fill in *my* own report – that he is waiting for impatiently, I reckon."

"Liar," Blue said with a thin smile. "The truth is, you were impatient to learn how the assignment had ended. Admit it."

"I'll admit whatever you want, but please, go on, Adam. Tell me what happened next."

Blue laughed. "You'll be disappointed if you think that Rhapsody resorted to physical violence. She didn't slap Holland – although he would have richly deserved it. No, she has more class than that. With a pokerfaced expression, she presented the boy with a handful of *something* she had brought with her – and that I didn't notice she had in her hand before that moment."

"A handful of 'something'?" Scarlet echoed, his brow furrowed.

"At first I thought it was burned bark – or leaves, blackened beyond recognition. It took me a moment to realise it was paper material... green, tied in a wad..."

"Money," Scarlet suddenly realised. "Riley's loot."



Blue nodded quietly. "What was left of it, anyway. Rhapsody told Holland: 'You wanted Riley's treasure so much you were willing to kill everyone and destroy everything in your path. Here's what left of that treasure. The whole lot of it burned with the shed, when your chums set it on fire in their attempt to kill us. For all your efforts, that's all you'll have. It's yours. Enjoy it'."

"Oh my..." Scarlet opened his eyes wide. "And I missed that? Bloody hell – I bet that didn't go down very well with Holland!"

"No," Blue said in confirmation. "From what I know, he was absolutely obsessed with that treasure."

"Enough to resort to multiple murders to have it, yes. What happened next?"

"Rhapsody threw the money at Holland's feet, and then turned her back on him and walked away, her head held high, without looking back, to return to your side." Blue shook his head in disgust. "I never saw anyone go so many colours in quick succession. I swear, he was so red I thought he was going to burst. Then he became very pale – and finally, green, as if he was going to get sick on us. He started shivering and fell down on his knees, whimpering like a child, repeating over and over again that he'd come so close to finally getting what he wanted and to have a life of his own – and then sobbing that he never had any luck in his life."

"Oh my heart bleeds... so not," Scarlet retorted with bitterness. "I hope that little creep will receive his just punishment. I don't know if Louisiana applies the death penalty anymore, but considering all the deaths he's been responsible for..."

"Maybe that would be too light a sentence," Blue commented.

"Then the rest of his life in prison, for all I care. He's a dangerous psychopath, a manipulative murderer who got away with too much not to be properly punished in the end. When I think of all he and his gang did, I can barely contain my anger." Scarlet gave a deep sigh. "I read in your report that Sheriff Masters is alive. I'm glad, he's a good man. He was very lucky. When I saw him fall into that river with a bullet in his chest, I felt sure he was done for."

"He's certainly a tough guy," Blue commented. "He was very weak when we got to talk to him, but he was able to tell us enough to realise that you were in trouble – not only from the Mysterons that we knew were present somewhere in Devil's Bayou, but from that gang of young hoodlums who had killed that man – Joe Benson."

"Joe was also a good man," Scarlet murmured. "He helped me, not knowing who I was – I know he had stashed all that stolen money at his place, and that he probably killed that Riley guy years ago, but..."

"Rhapsody told me you had found that part," Blue continued. "And that you suspected he had killed that bank robber out of vengeance, for that young teller who died in the robbery in New Orleans – and who had the same name as Joe." As Scarlet looked at him, waiting for more information that he was obviously about to provide, Blue continued: "The girl was Joe's niece – Anita. She was his only living relative at the time and he loved her like his own daughter."

"I *knew* he was close to her," Scarlet said with an understanding nod.

"What you might not know, however, is that Riley was a close friend to Joe at the time of the girl's death."

Scarlet opened his eyes wide in disbelief. "Joe *knew* that man?"

"And knew him pretty well. They were from the same town – a town that was destroyed many years ago by a series of floods, tornadoes and other tropical storms, and which once stood not that far from Les Arbrisseaux. I've got the information from Doc Evers himself. He knew about the history between Joe and this man."

"The doctor told you all that?"

"He did. Joe Benson was a colleague of his. He was the doctor of that town, before it vanished."

"A doctor," Scarlet said in realisation. "That explains a lot... The way he treated my injuries. The medicines Rhapsody found in his cabinet. He must have kept contact with people who could provide them to him. Very useful when you live in a hostile environment like Devil's Bayou, I reckon."

"Joe lost all of his relatives in the last flood that destroyed the town, except for Anita. As for Riley, he lost his home and all he possessed – and probably part of his good sense too. He knew Anita from Joe. Evers thinks – because he can't say for sure – that it's possible that Anita unwittingly gave information about her work at the bank in New Orleans. Riley thought of using that information to attack the bank. It might be that Anita, who wasn't supposed to work that day, recognised him, and that his intention was to get rid of an unwanted witness... or that she might even have been an accomplice. Joe might have been one too in some way, knowing of Riley's projects. But even if Joe was an accomplice, it's certain he would never have done any harm to Anita. It could also be possible that Riley, while on the run from the police, was simply looking for a place to hide, and

he thought his friend Joe might help him. Maybe in exchange for some money."

"But when Riley came to him, Joe already knew of Anita's death," Scarlet continued thoughtfully.

"That's what Evers thinks. He suspected for a long time that the person who killed Riley and hanged him in Devil's Bayou might be Joe, but he had no evidence to confirm that. There were no traces, no prints, nothing to indicate who might have killed Riley. As for Joe... He never left the area – although he could have, taking the money along to make himself a new life."

"He wouldn't touch it," Scarlet asserted. "For him, it was blood money. It caused the death of his beloved niece. And by not using any of it, nobody suspected he had it all this time, and that he was Riley's killer. Everybody would have thought that killer had gone with all the money. Except for Jasper and his gang," he added in an undertone. "Somehow, they discovered the truth."

Blue nodded. "Joe was already some kind of a recluse at the time, having lost his practice and all of his relatives. Now with Anita's death, it was like his last remaining link to civilisation had been cut. There weren't that many people who knew of his past – to everyone, he was just an old crazy guy who didn't like to mix with anyone."

"Did Sheriff Masters ever know of Joe's secret?"

"Sheriff Masters might have had some suspicion, but all this happened before his time. He wouldn't have bothered Joe with it, more than likely. As for Evers, from what I was able to gather from him, out of deference for his former colleague, and not wanting to cause him any trouble with groundless accusations should he be mistaken, he didn't mention his suspicions to anyone. Joe was mostly a quiet man who didn't have any hassle with anyone. With all he endured in the past, he deserved to be left alone. Riley's death could have been described as 'Bayou Justice'. I can't say I agree, but I can certainly understand." Blue sighed. "That's it, you have the story. I didn't ask further questions on the matter. I didn't think it was for me to investigate deeper than that or report the situation to higher authorities."

Scarlet nodded his appreciation. "Better to leave people to rest in peace," he said in a low voice.

"Amen to that."

"That answers that mystery – at least in part. But what about the microchip?"

Blue raised a brow. "That thing you and Rhapsody went into Devil's Bayou to retrieve?"

"Yeah. What happened to it? Was it found?"

Blue shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Much to the colonel's chagrin. Or rather – the World President's. Do you have any idea what was on that chip?"

Scarlet shrugged. "How would I know that? I doubt the colonel knows either and I'm not sure World President Younger even does. What I know is – whatever it contains is probably *big* – and *dangerous* – enough for the Mysterons to want to get their intangible hands on it."

"I agree. Their threat this time was very cryptic – so much so that we had trouble understanding it. It mentioned something about pitting allied countries against each other and causing the disunification of the World Government. At first, it looked like the Mysterons were preparing an attack within Futura City; they made us believe it, anyway."

"And during that time, they had Montgomery trying to get the microchip," Scarlet said thoughtfully. He nodded. "The good news is the Mysterons didn't get the microchip either. If they had found it, we would know: Montgomery and his men would have left Devil's Bayou with it and would not have wasted their time trying to get it from Dianne and me. They thought we had it – or at least that we knew where it was."

"So Rhapsody told me," Blue approved. "According to her, you were the last person to actually see it and to have it in your possession."

"Maybe," Scarlet said, frowning deeply to remember. "My memory might be working fine right now, but the circumstances in which the chip was lost remain rather fuzzy. I retrieved it all right. It was inside the case the colonel had given me the combination of. It was in a small metal box, small enough to be held in the palm of my hand. The last time I saw it, I had thrown it into a waste basket in Joe's cabin. Dianne and I thought it was still there, so that's why we went to his cabin in the first place. But it wasn't. We then suspected that maybe it was taken with all the rest of my stuff by Sheriff Masters as evidence. That would be standard police procedure, I guess."

Blue huffed. "Well, you were right about that one. Sheriff Masters had a list of the items taken from Joe's place at the same time you were taken in. On that list figures an object that fits the description you just gave me."

"And...?"

"And that's all. When Masters and his deputy drove you to the place where you were supposed to be taken into custody by Spectrum – actually, a trap laid by a Mysteronised agent planted in our New Orleans office, which would have led you into Montgomery's hands – that object, along with all the rest, was brought along."

"We fell into a trap all right," Scarlet muttered.

"Sheriff Masters' car was set on fire... everything that was inside was burned with it. So if the chip was in there – and Masters confirmed that the box containing it was – then it was destroyed."

"That probably happened after Dianne rescued me from Jasper and his gang and she took me up river," Scarlet commented.

"Yes. She said the car was untouched when she left. Jess Crowley – the guy his friends called 'Scarecrow' – told us that Jasper had asked one John Monroe to burn the car, to destroy all trace of what had happened. There was a body in that car when it was found, and when the forensics were done – well, it turned out it was Monroe." Blue sat back against the backrest of his chair. "And there was a 'John Monroe' found at Joe's place too. According to Crowley, he was following Montgomery's orders to the letter."

"He was a Mysteron agent."

Blue nodded. "He was killed later by Jasper Holland." He scratched the side of his nose, thinking. "I don't know how this happened exactly, but I would say that Montgomery surprised Monroe at the sheriff's car and killed him to 'recruit' him. I would say the Mysterons were *very close* to getting their hands on the microchip, but they never suspected it was in that car."

"Thank God for small miracles," Scarlet said in a sour voice. "It looks like many people died over that microchip – and over Riley's money too."

"All the Mysteron agents were killed," Blue confirmed. "And there's only two members left of Jasper Holland's gang. Holland himself and Crowley. The latter is quite happy to testify against his former leader, if it can get him a reduced sentence."

"I remember that boy," Scarlet said, a glare of anger shining in his eyes. "Scarecrow... In my book, he was nearly as bad as Jasper Holland. He tried to hurt Dianne, with that other friend of his – the one that got sucked into quicksand. Jamie, I think his name was. That one was a real blackguard." Scarlet then noticed Blue's expression, as the latter tilted his head to one side to stare at him intently. He frowned, wondering what was on his friend's mind. "What? Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing, as far as I'm concerned," Blue said thoughtfully. "I've just realised... you keep talking about Rhapsody as 'Dianne'."

"It's her name, right?" Scarlet retorted a little sharply.

Blue noticed how the English officer suddenly seemed on his guard. He shrugged dismissively.

"Of course, it is – it's just that it seemed odd to me that not *once* since we started talking, have you referred to her by her codename... Is there something I should know?"

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

Blue looked at his friend for a moment, chewing on his bottom lip, realising that there was indeed something he wasn't telling him. However, Scarlet's expression remained neutral. That made the blond captain curious.

"Come on, Paul, it's me. You know you can tell me everything. Did something happen in that swamp, between the two of you?"

"And what do you mean exactly by 'something'?" Scarlet replied, still guardedly.

Blue sighed. "It's just a feeling that I have, really. You know, when I talked to her earlier, she said she was very concerned for you and hoped you would regain your memory soon. She told me that she had been worried the whole time you were separated during this assignment, and that she was just as worried when you finally got together, and discovered you had amnesia. She felt powerless to be of any help to you."

"Did she?" Scarlet asked with a thoughtful smile.

Blue narrowed his eyes at him. "*Something* did happen down there," he said in a knowing voice.

Scarlet glared at him with an annoyed expression. "Adam, we were fighting for our lives. Whatever you're thinking, we didn't have time for anything else but –"

"Hello?" The soft voice coming from the opened door interrupted Scarlet and he almost choked when he realised who just popped her head through the opening to peep inside with smiling blue eyes and a cheerful smile.

"Hi, Di – Rhapsody," he welcomed her as she entered. He felt himself reddening to the roots at the mere thought that she might have heard any of the conversation he'd been having with Blue about her. She didn't seem to notice – but Blue did, it was obvious just by his mischievous smile and his general attitude. Scarlet could have throttled him on the spot.

"Hi, Captain," Rhapsody replied quietly. "Doctor Fawn told me you can receive visitors today." She waved at him. "And I see you're already up and dressed, all ready to leave?"

"Fawn dismissed him from sickbay," Blue said, before Scarlet could answer. "Now that he's fully healed and that he has regained his memory. He probably thinks this room would be put to better use by someone who really needs it." He smiled at the young woman. "How are you today, Rhapsody?"

"Much better, thank you, Captain Blue. I've received my release from sickbay as well, although I'm not fully back on

duty." Rhapsody turned to address Scarlet. "Your memory is back, then? That must be a relief for you, Captain Scarlet."

Scarlet answered first with a slow nod. Blue glanced at his friend, finding him uncharacteristically lost for words. Apparently having said what she wanted to, Rhapsody waited for her compatriot to speak next. There was a prolonged silence between them.

Blue smiled inwardly, realising he had been right all along: something had happened in the bayou between these two; something that seemed to have had some deep impact on both of them, but that obviously neither was willing as yet to voice – not in front of a third party, anyway. Blue could only imagine what it might be, although he had a pretty good idea. The way Rhapsody had been protective and defensive of Scarlet from the moment they had been rescued the day before was already a good indication; and then, just now, there was Scarlet's behaviour and denial. It couldn't be clearer.

And it was about time too.

Blue cleared his throat, breaking the silence and causing his two colleagues to turn to him as he left his chair. "You will excuse me, both – but I'm due back on duty in five minutes, so I will have to leave right away. Besides," he added, "I think you'd prefer to be alone and have a little chat." He noticed Rhapsody's confusion and Scarlet's warning stare. "You've been through a lot these last few days," he added quickly. "So maybe you have a lot to talk about... You have a report to present to the Old Man, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, we do," Rhapsody confirmed quickly. "I was told that I will need to present myself with you, Captain Scarlet, so we can be debriefed together."

"Then I'd better be on my way and leave you to it."

Scarlet addressed a grateful smirk at his friend. "Thanks, Adam. I'll see you later."

"Yeah – and I expect you will give me all the details then."

Blue waved at both of them. "Take care, Dianne."

"See you soon, Captain."

Rhapsody followed Blue with her eyes as he left the room quietly. Once he was gone, she turned to Scarlet; he was seated on the side of the bed, watching her silently. She gave a brief nod in the direction of the door, frowning in curiosity. "What did he mean by you'll give him all the details later?"

Scarlet shrugged dismissively. "My nosy best friend wants to hear from the horse's mouth every little detail of my – our – misadventures in the bayou."

"All the details?" she asked. "And you'll tell him?"

Scarlet grinned. "Only what he needs to know."

She considered that answer and approached closer. "So... you've really got your memory back? All of it?"

"Yep."

"No more headaches?" she persisted.

"None whatsoever."

"And... you're completely healed?"

"Yes. I'm back to my old self." He stood in front of her and looked down at her with a renewed smile. "The indestructible and loveable Captain Scarlet."

"Uh-huh." Rhapsody's brow went sky high. "And you've certainly regained your confidence and high opinion of yourself." His eyes lowered and she discovered the bullet, that Scarlet had put back onto the table a few minutes earlier. She took it and presented it to Scarlet. "Is this what I think it is? The thing that was the origin of all your troubles?"

"Oh, the bullet," Scarlet said, taking the small object between his fingers. "Fawn must have forgotten it. I know he wanted to give it to R and D, for them to find out if it was possibly retrometabolic, as he suspects."

"So that's the answer, then," Rhapsody said in understanding. "A Mysteronised bullet?"

"Most likely, yes. Fawn thinks it must have conflicted with my own retrometabolism, which was trying to get rid of it – but obviously couldn't. He removed it surgically and all the problems were gone. I'll have to remember to give it back to him."

"Maybe he meant you to keep it as a souvenir?" Rhapsody suggested with a teasing smile.

He chuckled. "I'm not really the type of man who gets attached to this kind of stuff, Dianne." He looked down at her hand, which previously held the projectile; he had noticed that it was covered with bandages, from the wrist to the fingers, as was the other, that she kept by her side. He pointed to it, scowling. "What did you do to yourself?"

"Oh, that?" Rhapsody raised her hand and wiggled her fingers. "First degree burns, to both hands. I wonder how it could have happened..." she added in a falsely musing tone.

"I wonder too," he replied in the same fashion. "Perhaps it was when you held on so tight to me, while we lay together in that dark, narrow, damp and awfully uncomfortable hole. I'm sorry this happened to you. I daresay it'll keep you off duty for a while?"

"Two weeks. But it's not only my hands. My left arm is a little sore, as well, so until I'm healed, I must rest. That's not too bad, all things considered. And you don't have to apologise, Paul. You did your best to protect me from the worst... especially by offering yourself as a shield between me and that



fire. I'm sure your back looked far worse than my hands are at the moment. I could tell by your blackened shirt. You must have been in terrible pain."

"I did what I had to do, Dianne," Scarlet said, shrugging.

"You saved my life," she insisted. "At the risk of yours. I know, I know: you're indestructible, and you never stay injured, or 'dead' for that matter, for long. But I also know you feel every wound and every pain. I know how difficult it was for you in that hole."

"It was," he confirmed, lowering his eyes. "You're right, I might be indestructible, but when I feel pain or injuries, it's the same as any other man. 'Dying', if you can call that, doesn't come easy, even in the best of circumstances. And down there in that hole, with the heat of the fire against my back, and the smoke filling my lungs, I really felt as bad as you can imagine... until you put that respirator in my mouth." He gave her a half-reproachful, half-grateful look. "Despite the fact I told you to keep it for yourself."

"You were suffocating," Rhapsody retorted, in a tone that meant she wasn't offering any apologies for her actions. "I couldn't let you suffer needlessly like that, certainly not while you were risking everything to save me. You were too weak anyway to protest or stop me."

"We were lucky there were a little more oxygen in that capsule than you first thought – or you might not be having this conversation with me right now."

"Captain –"

Scarlet stopped her with a gesture and smiled thinly. "You took advantage of the situation. I thank you for that – and for not listening to me."

Rhapsody smiled back. "You're welcome. And you have to admit, that was one situation worth taking advantage of."

He let the words sink in, and then added, very softly: "Unlike that other situation in the bayou when you chose *not* to take advantage?"

Rhapsody looked down, as if trying to avoid his eyes. "I was kind of hoping you wouldn't remember that episode," she said.

"Hey, regaining my whole memory doesn't mean I ought to forget what happened while I was amnesiac," Scarlet retorted. "It's not exactly like last year, when the Mysterons took me over." He narrowed his eyes at the young woman. "And frankly, do you *really* expect I would forget something like that?"

"I know. I'm sorry, I suppose I was a little embarrassed by it all."

"Whatever for?" Scarlet inquired. "Dianne, what happened between us –"

"What *almost* happened between us."

"No. What *happened*." Scarlet sighed, annoyed that she wouldn't look him in the eyes. "Dianne, look at me, please." He reached for her and gently raised her chin. She docilely complied and their eyes met. Scarlet could see the confusion in her face, which reflected his own mixed feelings. "Something *did* happen down there," he insisted.

"A result of the strain born from the hard situation we found ourselves in," she replied, trying to sound rational about it. "In those circumstances, I think it would be normal that two people – a man and a woman – would feel naturally attracted to one another and would try to find comfort in –"

"No. You know as well as I do that this psychological mumbo-jumbo doesn't apply in our case."

"Maybe at the time I was trying to find a way for you to regain your memory?" she suggested.

"By sleeping with me?" Scarlet shook his head dismissively. "Come on, how in the world would that have helped if we weren't a couple before? I know you. I know you would not have permitted things to go as far as they did between us, if you didn't have some kind of feeling for me – and didn't think that those feelings were reciprocated."

"And what kind of feelings are you referring to?" Rhapsody replied, narrowing her eyes at him.

Scarlet swallowed hard. "I think I'm falling for you, Dianne Simms. Falling *hard*. And I think the same is happening to you."

She looked him squarely in the eyes. "Are you being serious about this?"

"What, don't you believe me? What do you want, proof?"

Scarlet took a step forward to come closer to her. Rhapsody froze at his approach, and as a result, didn't react when he put his arms around her and pulled her against him. His lips were on hers, silencing her just as she was about to protest, in a hard, passionate kiss. At first, she felt like pushing him back for his presumption – but a second later, her resolve melted at the intensity of his embrace. Her arms enfolded him in turn and her lips returned his kiss with the same fervour.

When they finally resurfaced to breathe again, they looked at each other, with a similar glimmer in their respective eyes. "So?" Scarlet asked in a voice barely above a whisper, keeping her close to him.

Rhapsody reached to caress his cheek, in a tender gesture. "I think I'm also falling for you too, Paul Metcalfe," she finally answered with a sigh. "And I think – it's been going on for quite a while."

At these words, he addressed her a grateful smile. "I had a feeling it was that way," he said with an understanding nod. "And I think the same goes for me. Otherwise," he added in a good-natured tone, "I wouldn't have asked you all those silly questions in the bayou about us." He was happy to see her chuckle at the memory. "I hope I didn't embarrass you too much with those?"

"It was awkward, I have to admit, but truly embarrassing? No, I wouldn't describe it that way. I would say it was... enlightening."

Scarlet grinned at her and was about to reply when they both heard footsteps coming from the corridor. They broke their embrace and took a step back from each other; looking towards the open door, they saw one of the sickbay nurses walking down the corridor. She barely addressed them a look as she continued on her way, probably too busy with her duties to concern herself with their presence.

When she disappeared, Rhapsody and Scarlet looked at each other again, a little gawkily as if they were unsure of their next move.

Scarlet pushed his fists into the pockets of his trousers, his expression now one of thoughtfulness. "So... what do we do from here?"

Rhapsody nodded at his question. The same thought had crossed her mind. "I think we should take it one step at a time. See how this develops... where it will take us."

Scarlet smirked. "I know where I'd like it to take us, love... But the question at the moment would be – *how* to get us there?"

"Carefully, I would say," Rhapsody replied with a fond smile.

He raised a brow. "I agree. We have Spectrum's regulations to bear in mind; the colonel's feelings about it... We should be discreet."

"Like Adam and Karen?" Rhapsody suggested.

Scarlet chuckled. "I'd *hardly* describe Adam and Karen as 'discreet'. I bet everybody onboard knows about them. Maybe even including the Old Man."

"Then we'll have to do *much* better than them."

Scarlet nodded slowly, his eyes riveted on those of the young woman standing in front of him. "It seems there is a lot we need to discuss, then. Things to organise..." He tilted his head to one side. "How about we talk these things through away from Cloudbase?"

"What do you mean?" Rhapsody asked with a slight frown.

"I seem to recall I promised you some time off in New Orleans after our last assignment."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh. *That*. Actually, you had arranged a date between me and a man who ended up turning into a Mysteron..."

"I'm sorry Mahoney can't be on hand –it really wasn't his fault. The poor guy. However, you're still entitled to that date. And I don't think I'm mistaken in thinking you would actually have preferred, from the beginning, that this date was with me instead?" Scarlet smirked mischievously. "I did recognise disappointment in your voice two days ago, when I organised that date – and told you it would be with Mahoney."

"It wasn't as much disappointment as it was exasperation, actually."

"You've just told me you're not due for active duty for a couple of weeks. As for me, I'll be off for a few days, after I meet the colonel for debriefing, and present my report..."

"Something I have to do with you," Rhapsody then reminded him.

"Doctor Fawn recommended me to go off base for a short furlough. I'm sure Colonel White would agree you need the same. Considering all we've been through lately, I don't think he will say no to us having some time off on the surface."

"In New Orleans?" she repeated thoughtfully.

"Or elsewhere, if you'd rather not find yourself too close to where we had our misadventure."

"No." She smiled, looking up at him with eyes bright with anticipation. "New Orleans is fine by me. I seem to recall you mentioning that the New French Quarter would be nice to visit. I'm looking forward to it."

"Then it's settled." Scarlet went to the nearby table to take his cap from it and putting it on his head, returned to the young woman to present his arm to her. "Would you care to accompany me to the Control Room, Rhapsody Angel? I think Colonel White is waiting for our report – and then we'll talk to him about that furlough."

"By all means, Captain Scarlet – that's another invitation I eagerly accept." She took his arm and together they walked towards the exit. "Especially as I don't want to miss seeing the colonel's reaction when you reveal to him that you told Sheriff Masters your name was 'Scarlet O'Hara'."

Scarlet opened falsely horrified eyes. "Does he know? No, don't tell me he does!"

"Paul, if he doesn't already know, he will have to be told. If you don't tell him, I will."

"No, you won't. It can be another secret of ours, can't it?"

"No way. I wouldn't dream of keeping this one to myself. Come on, be a man and face the consequences of your actions."

"You big bully. Come on, Dianne. Do you know what this could do to my self-esteem if you reveal this to Colonel White? I'll be mortified for life!"

And to that, Rhapsody could only answer, with a wicked smile: "Frankly, my dear Scarlet, I don't give a damn."

\* \* \*

"I should have known I would find you here, Leonard."

Leonard Masters raised his head at the sound of the voice coming from his right; he turned to look in that direction. Doctor Bill Evers was standing only a few feet away from him, seemingly waiting patiently by the car the sheriff had borrowed from Sam Caldwell, when he had met the man a couple of hours before in front of the clinic. Masters acknowledged the doctor's presence with the briefest of nods, and returned to his contemplation of the river. He was seated directly on the ground, on a patch of grass right next to the burned remnants of his car, at the end of the beaten trail leading to the river, not far from Devil's Bridge.

"You didn't have to come for me, Bill," the sheriff said in a low voice. "I can find my way back home perfectly well when it's time."

"Yes, you can – but will you have the strength to come back?" Slowly, Evers approached closer and stood over his friend. "Leonard, it's only been two weeks since we fished you from this very river, literally more dead than alive. You should still be in bed and convalescing. You're far from being healed, and all this wandering around certainly won't help get you back in shape. The bayou is a good place to catch death. A man can come down with a fever, or disease that can send him to an early grave – especially if this man is in a weakened state. Like *you* are. Now come on, be reasonable and follow me back to the clinic right now."

Masters lowered his eyes, and didn't deign to answer at first. It was true he didn't feel on top of things; all things considered, he knew he was lucky to be alive and counted his blessings for that. However, he was going crazy, locked up in that room at Bill Evers' small hospital, with the nurses all over him, treating him almost like a old man, swallowing painkillers like so many candies and accepting the sympathies of visitors coming over to offer their support. Everyone seemed to consider him a hero, to have survived what he did and to have, in some way, contributed to the arrest of vicious criminals.

But Leonard Masters didn't consider he had done that much; and he certainly didn't feel like a hero. And there were too

many questions which for him remained unanswered, many days after the end of those events in Devil's Bayou.

"How did he do it, Bill?" he asked his friend.

"Who?" Evers replied with a slight frown.

"That Spectrum officer – the amnesiac man I found at Joe's place and locked up in my jail." Masters sighed. "How did he do it, seemingly reviving from death itself and healing from his wounds, without a trace left of them afterwards?"

"You know I don't know that anymore than you do, Leonard. And I'm unlikely to find any answer to it, now that Spectrum has confiscated all files I might have had on that guy."

"I've been thinking about what Holland told me," Masters continued. "You know, doing nothing in that room... that makes a man think about all kinds of things, even crazy things..."

"What have you been thinking about?"

"About Spectrum and their fight against these Mysterons... Do you believe in aliens, Bill?"

His friend scowled. "Those coming into the country illegally across the border, or the interstellar kind?" He grunted and waved dismissively. "I read Worldnet too, Leonard. I know about those idiotic rumours you can find in there. The Mysterons coming from another planet... Zombie-like terrorists roaming the surface of the globe... Is that what Jasper Holland told you about? You're not going to believe any of that, are you?"

"It does sound stupid, when you put it that way," Masters admitted.

"Me, I prefer to think of more rational explanations." Evers paused a second or two and added: "It's true I can't think of any right now, but I'm sure there is one."

"You're probably right, Bill. But for the rest, can you believe it? Terrorists... and Spectrum fighting here in Devil's Bayou? That certainly tops anything that might have happened here – including that hanging of Riley, that's for sure. *That* mystery finally got its answer, but it's now been replaced by another mystery. 'Cause I don't know for sure what this whole deal with these terrorists was all about – and I don't expect we'll ever find that out."

"Yeah," Evers grunted. "World Government security and all that... I wonder why it's even necessary. Frankly, I don't really care about that. I care more about the lives that were lost out there in the bayou."

"Joe and Mac..." murmured Masters. "And these boys, who thought they would get rich easy... I know they were bad, but I can't help myself thinking it was such a waste, Bill. Maybe... I should have seen coming."

"How could you? Even if you had known for sure that Joe was behind Riley's death all those years ago... That he had kept all that money all that time..."

"You and I suspected Joe had something to do with Riley's death, Bill. You, nearly from the beginning and me, when I came into office some years ago, and checked the story out – mainly out of curiosity. But with no proof, neither of us could act upon it. And I don't think we ever wanted to find any proof." Masters took a small stone from the ground and tossed it into the river, absently. "Riley was a scumbag and deserved his death many times over. And Joe –"

"Despite it all, Joe was a good man who had had enough setbacks in his life," Evers said. "He didn't need for anyone adding to it."

"Until Jasper Holland killed him," growled Masters.

"Holland will pay for his crimes. You were very lucky not to have become one of his multiple victims, Leonard."

"I may not be dead, Bill, but I'm still one of Holland's victims. I got shot – and won't probably be fit enough to hold the post of sheriff of this parish anymore because of that."

"Don't talk nonsense," Evers scolded. "It's true you have a long way to go, but you're alive, and that's more than can be said for others. And look at you: you're up and about, despite all my efforts to keep you still! Does that look like a man who won't be able to resume his duties to you? You might feel like you're unfit right now, but that's because you're not giving yourself proper time to heal completely. You just need to be patient."

"Maybe." Masters looked to his left, straight at the twisted and burned remains of his car and his mind wandered back, thinking about the recent events that had marked the area. Not two weeks ago, he was driving this car with Alan MacGibbons seated by his side, and there were very few crimes happening in the area. He never imagined for one second that already then, Jasper Holland, helped by his gang of friends, was hassling old Joe Benson into selling his property – just because he thought somewhere around it was hidden the loot of a hold-up that had been performed a decade and a half ago. Joe's stubbornness led to his end at Holland's hand – whose greed caused even more suffering and deaths in the aftermath.

And then came that Spectrum officer on assignment in Devil's Bayou, literally dropping from the sky. Defenceless, amnesiac, without a clue of who he was or what he was doing there. For Jasper and his gang, he seemed to be the perfect victim of a frame up for Joe's murder, but that was to be their ultimate mistake. Because this man, who wasn't as defenceless as he seemed after all, already had people gunning for him –

dangerous people who would take out whoever was standing between them and their prey.

Jasper and his gang stood in the way and became unwittingly entangled in a war between Spectrum and vicious terrorists... and they paid the ultimate price.

And unfortunately, so did Alan MacGibbons.

A 'plop' coming from the river attracted Masters' attention and he turned his eyes back to it; he saw a dark form slithering just below the surface. He noticed the movement of the waves, and narrowed his eyes, looking attentively; he was able to distinguish the scaly back of an alligator, along with its snout; one dark eye seemed to stare straight at him, before the beast dived under the surface. Masters had taken note of the sheer size of it just as it disappeared from his view.

"You were right, Bill," he said in a soft voice. "Indeed, I was lucky to escape death. I could have died many times over when I fell into that river... I could have bled to death, I could have drowned, hypothermia could have finished me off – or alligators might have made a nice meal out of me. But here I am, still talking to you." He smiled, almost sadly. "Maybe some of that Spectrum officer's healing abilities rubbed off on me. Who knows?"

"Some of his luck, more likely." Evers approached his friend and took hold of his arm. He had noticed his weakening voice, and the lines around his eyes. This stay in the bayou, sitting on the damp ground, wasn't doing him any good. "Come on, now. My car is a few yards down the road. I'll drive you back to the hospital, and ask Willa to prepare you a nice, warm chicken soup. That'll do some good to your bones."

Masters let his friend pull him up; he staggered once he found himself on his feet, but Evers held him firmly, squeezing his arm warmly.

"Thank you, Bill," he said as he followed his friend down the path. "That soup will certainly be welcome – but what about Caldwell's car?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll ask Caldwell to find someone to bring him here, to pick it up."

"So many things happened here – we'll have to get this wreck cleaned up at the next opportunity. Can't leave a mess on the banks of this river – it could disturb the local fauna."

Evers smiled with satisfaction. His friend was in 'sheriff' mode now and that was a good sign. "You're right, Sheriff. We'll arrange that."

Masters nodded. Then a thought came to his mind. Something he had heard while lying in that hospital bed, doing nothing but listening to what people were saying around him, bits



and pieces of what happened in Devil's Bayou and that he didn't have the opportunity to witness himself.

"Is it true there was a girl lost in the bayou, that we didn't know about?"

"That's what's people say, yeah."

"Was she pretty?"

"I don't know, Leonard – I didn't get the chance to see her... but Huxley told me she was."

"Dang it. And I missed that..."

Both men walked down the path leading to Evers' car, without a second glance behind them.

They didn't get to see the large alligator heaving itself on the banks of the river, near the place where Masters had been sitting, and resting there for a while, taking in the sun which glistered against its scaly back. With curiosity, it turned one of its dark little eyes towards the wrecked and burned car, seemingly wondering what this odd object could be, and of what interest it might be to it. The animal seemed to decide it wasn't even to be considered, and it turned around, preparing itself to return to the dark waters of the river behind it.

Its snout disturbed the muddy ground against which it was resting, and dislodged a small square object, blackened by fire and smoke, and covered with dirt. The alligator leaned towards it, again its curiosity piqued. It wasn't something it had ever encountered before: it felt like a small stone, was as cold as a stone and just as hard, but it didn't have rounded edges, like a stone.

The large reptile took the object into its mouth and tasted it; it didn't have any taste at all and obviously wasn't something eatable.

To the alligator, the small box containing the microchip that had taken many decades to be discovered and which had so many people going after it and finding death, was just a strangely shaped pebble. And the animal treated it just like it would any stone it would likely take into its mouth.

It swallowed it whole, before returning to the dark and muddy waters of the river.

**THE END**

**Author's Notes:**

When I started this story in 2007, I knew exactly where it was going, and how I should go there. Unfortunately, due to real life getting in the way, and of the sudden lack of inspiration for some details of the story, I was unable to finish it within the amount of time I gave myself in order to write it.

As time went by, people who had started reading it were growing concerned that I might never finish it, despite my assurance that I eventually would. But still, despite returning to it often over the years, and bring it up to eight chapters three years after starting it, I still couldn't find the needed impetus to complete it.

The truth, I came to realise over time, was that I had written myself into a corner... especially with those last lines in chapter 8, written in 2010, and I couldn't find a way out of it in a believable fashion. Surely, there was *something* in the story that might help me get out of that corner. And perhaps, there were some key plot points that I could use for that. If it meant rewriting the ending of that last chapter, then it was probably what I needed to do as well.

So at the start of 2013, with the encouragement of friends, who wanted to see this story finished, finally deciding to complete 'Murky Waters' and put it to rest once and for all, I re-examined the story from the beginning. It had been so long since I wrote it, it was as if I was reading the story with new eyes. I found my needed plot points, as well as a few plot holes within the earlier chapters, and still with my original ending in mind, I decided to fill those holes and rewrite some minor details, so that the story will be, at least I hoped, a better reading.

It must have been that I wasn't truly satisfied with the earlier version, because as soon as I made those most needed modifications, the old ideas came flooding in, along with new ones, and I took the opportunity to write them into the already existing story... Not so much as to change most of it, but to give more details to what was going on. The ending of Chapter 8 changed as well, and the dynamic of the story changed as well. Only then, was I able to continue writing this story.

It is now completed, dusted and done, with the epilogue *finally* posted.

All my thanks go to all those who encouraged me to complete this story which had taken six-years to complete: Hazel Köhler, Marion Woods, Christine Featonby, Clya Brown, Caroline Smith, Lezli Farrington, Mary J. Rudy, and all those who contacted me through the years, requesting to see the end of the story, be it by emails or on the forum – your support has been much appreciated, believe me. That meant that people wanted to read this story.

I also want to thank my beta-reader, Hazel Köhler, for her long-suffering patience over the years, waiting for the next chapter to be ready, and for her always wonderful job.

I also want to extend my thanks to the late Gerry Anderson, who shared the by-line for 'Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons' with his former wife Sylvia, and many others who contributed to the creation of this wonderful series. Gerry passed away in December 2012, but as far as I am concerned, he had achieved a form of immortality, by leaving behind a wonderful heritage that continues to live on into the imagination of countless fans.

The rights of 'Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons' are not mine. I acknowledge that they belong to others. I just borrowed the characters and the concept to play with.

Chris Bishop  
December 2013

**POSTING HISTORY:**

- **CHAPTER 1** - Originally posted June 24, 2007 - reposted March 3, 2013
- **CHAPTER 2** - Posted July 22, 2007 - reposted March 3, 2013
- **CHAPTER 3** - Originally posted April 26, 2008 - reposted March 12, 2013
- **CHAPTER 4** - Originally posted June 18, 2008 - reposted March 17, 2013
- **CHAPTER 5** - Originally posted August 2, 2009 - reposted March 28, 2013
- **CHAPTER 6** - Originally posted September 5, 2009 - reposted April 21, 2013
- **CHAPTER 7** - Originally posted June 11, 2010 - reposted April 29, 2013
- **CHAPTER 8** - Originally posted November 9, 2010 - reposted June 3rd, 2013
- **CHAPTER 9** - Posted August 26, 2013
- **CHAPTER 10** - Posted September 26, 2013
- **CHAPTER 11** - Posted November 18, 2013
- **EPILOGUE** - Posted December 31, 2013