

Sunday, March 22, 2068, 1:45 p.m., local time, Los Angeles, CA

Jeff sighed as he got out of his sports car and surveyed the sprawling hacienda that Dr. Andrew Carmichael called home. He knew he was expected; Maggie Carmichael had insisted he come for Easter dinner, and to get onto the premises through the ornate grille they called a gate, he had to announce himself. ~I just hope I haven't damaged this friendship by holding onto the secret of IR for so long, he thought. ~I trust Andy to keep quiet about what Dianne told him, but will he want to become an agent? I should have brought her along, but Tyler wasn't feeling well after coming back from Bongo-Bongo and she wanted to stay home with him. Poor kid; I guess lamb didn't agree with him.

The door opened before he could knock and a smiling Maggie Carmichael greeted him with, "Jeff! How good to see you! I'm so glad you could come!" She embraced him, then looked beyond him for anyone else he might have brought. "Where's Dianne?"

"At home, Maggie. Tyler's not feeling well."

"Ah, of course. Doctor Mom strikes again!" she exclaimed. "Come in, come in! Drew's in his study. Drew! Jeff is here!"

Andrew Carmichael came out of his study. Jeff could tell by the stiffness of his greeting that he wasn't best pleased to see his old friend and nephew-in-law. "Where's Dianne?" he asked, as he shook Jeff's hand, trying to seem normal. Jeff explained again where Dianne was and why, and Andrew nodded. "I'm sure she can take care of it."

Jeff was greeted by Regina, Andrew's youngest daughter, and her husband, Philip. The obviously pregnant woman was trying hard to keep their other three children in check as they raced around. The youngest looked up at the newcomer with wide blue eyes, then put up his hands with grasping fingers, signaling that he wanted the stranger to pick him up. Jeff glanced over at Regina for permission; she chuckled and nodded, and Jeff crouched down to lift the child into his arms.

"So this is what it feels like to be a grandfather," he said jokingly, as the tot squeezed his nose with wet fingers. "I'll have to get my sons working on making me one soon."

"How's the foot?" Andrew asked off-handedly, as they walked towards the dining room.

"Good, very good. I'm just doing a little bit of therapy each day to keep things limber," Jeff replied. He blew raspberries at the toddler, who squealed with delight.

Andrew ushered Jeff and his passenger into the dining room, where Regina took the tot from Jeff and sat him in a high chair. The Carmichael's older daughter, Grace, was putting the finishing touches on the table, and greeted him with a smile. "Uncle Jeff! It's been a long time!" She came around to kiss him on the cheek. "I think you remember my husband, Austin." The two men shook hands and muttered some pleasantries, then everyone sat down at the table to enjoy their Easter

feast.

An hour and a half later, Jeff was more than sated, and anxious to deal with the real reason for his visit. Regina was busy putting her children down for naps, and Grace's children, who were older, repaired to the game room to play. The two sons-in-law did the same, but to watch sports on the television. The maid was cleaning up the dinner table, and Andrew steered Jeff to his study so that they could talk.

"I think Maggie should also hear what I have to say," Jeff said quietly.

"Oh? You trust her? I'm surprised," Andrew replied, a touch of bitterness in his voice.

"I'll deal with that as we talk. But I have a... proposal to make, and I think she should hear it, too."

"All right." Andrew left, and came back a few minutes later with Maggie. She smiled at both men, and when she got a tiny smile from Jeff and no smile at all from her husband, she frowned.

"All right, what's going on with you two? I've never seen you quite so... cold to Jeff before, Drew. And Jeff, you've been acting like you've got some important business and that dinner was something to endure, not enjoy."

Jeff sighed. "Was I that obvious?"

"To me, yes. To anyone else, probably not." She sat down in one of the smooth leather chairs and crossed her legs. "Now, what is it?"

Jeff sat down next to her, and Andrew sat down behind his desk, folding his hands and putting them on the surface. "Should I start?" he asked, "Or do you want to tell the whole tale?"

"Go ahead and tell your part, Andy," Jeff said. "I've heard it from Dianne, but I'd like your point-of-view, too."

"All right." Andrew proceeded to tell Maggie all about his encounter with the CMO of International Rescue while he was working with Doctors Without Borders in Samoa. When he got to the part where Dianne had turned around, Maggie gasped, and for the rest of the story, her wide eyes were on Jeff.

As Andrew finished, she asked, "Is this true, Jeff? Is your family really... International Rescue?"

Jeff nodded. "Yes, Maggie. We are." He gazed at Andrew. "You have every right to be angry with me for not trusting you enough with the secret. You've been a good friend, and a person I have trusted over the years. But... it has been difficult to open up about this, even to my closest friends. There have been... there are people out there who would stop at nothing to get even the slightest hint of who we are and where we're based, who would kill to get their hands on our technology, or even to... to destroy us as a family and as an organization for revenge's sake. That's why I've been very, very selective about who I tell, and when."

He blew out a breath. "Dianne forced my hand in your case, Andy, Maggie. It's her opinion that we

need you on our side, on our team, in case... in case she herself is injured or we have need of medical facilities beyond what is in our infirmary at the island. I was angry at first that she had revealed us to you, Andy, but now that I know her reasons, I have to agree with her. Above and beyond that, you are family, and have proven yourself to be trustworthy for a long time. That's why I'm asking both of you now to join our organization as what we call agents." He held up his hands. "I don't know what else to say. You both look like you have questions, so go ahead and ask."

There was a moment of silence, then Andrew asked, "Did you marry Dianne to keep this secret of yours 'in the family'?"

Maggie exclaimed in shock, "Andrew!" while Jeff shook his head emphatically.

"No, Andy. I married her because I love her. Plain and simple."

"When you asked me for doctors, were you looking to recruit new members of... your group?"

Jeff shook his head again. "No, I wasn't. I was looking for exactly what I asked for, someone to take the medical end of things from Brains. Someone who could be discreet and who we wouldn't have to lie to if one or the other of the boys needed surgery. Someone we could take into our confidence on medical issues, both for the family, and for the boys as they worked on the field. I'll admit, I had toyed with the idea of adding a medical component, of having someone with more than just EMT or first aid training out there, but Dianne was the one who insisted I follow up on the idea. At first, she worked in our cargo carrier, which has a small sickbay. But then... then I built Thunderbird Seven for her so she would have better facilities to work in and with."

He swallowed and sighed. "If you must know, it was Dianne going out as International Rescue that saved my own life and that of my pilot when my helijet crashed in New Hampshire. If she had not been available, or she didn't have those facilities, I most likely would have died." He met Andrew's stormy gaze and said, "Let me ask you a question. If you had known then what you know now, would you have recommended Dianne to me?"

Andrew glared at him for a moment, then his expression changed and he sat back, his shoulders slumping. "Probably not." He sighed. "I guess I can understand something of why you kept this from us. But why are you here now? And why tell Maggie, too?"

"And what did you mean by the term 'agents'?" Maggie asked.

Jeff sat up straighter. "We have, throughout the world, a network of people who assist us in many different ways. Most of them gather intelligence for us. Some of them help with delivering communications and arranging for security when we're in their area. A very few actually undertake covert missions for us, doing things that we can't do for fear of exposure. We call them agents. I would like to extend to both of you the opportunity to help us out in this way. Your duties would be flexible, but mainly would be medical in nature. And I'm including you, Maggie, in this invitation because I believe that spouses have a right to know what's going on and the opportunity to participate if they want to."

There was a silence between the three again, then Maggie asked, "What would we need to be of help to you? Because I, for one, want in!"

Jeff chuckled, but Andrew didn't. His wife glanced over at him and said, "You're not going to let a little thing like hurt pride get in the way here, are you, Drew? Jeff has apologized for not telling us before, and truthfully, I'm glad he didn't. Now he and Dianne need us, and I want to help. But you're the one they really need, not an old gossip like me." She turned back to Jeff. "Does Lisa know about this?"

Jeff sighed again, but he smiled and nodded. "Yes, she does. Dianne was the one who didn't want to tell her; she knows her mother very well. Turns out that Lisa had figured it out for herself and kept it a secret, trying to prove to Dianne that she could keep a secret. We were quite surprised when we discovered that she knew." He paused, then said, "But Dianne's brothers don't know. There might come a time when they would have to know, but as Dianne said to me the other day, that time isn't now." He sat back and plunked one ankle on the knee of the opposite leg. "Lisa's been a big help, especially when she's come out to the Island to bolster our support team. Of course, the fact that she and Kyrano are an item doesn't hurt either."

"Of course not," Maggie said with a twinkle in her eye. "And it does explain why she's out at the island so often." Her face took on a more serious expression. "Perhaps that's a way I could help, too. And, if you ever needed a place for the kids to stay..."

"That's a great idea, Maggie, and a wonderful offer. Flying out to Greenville is quite a distance. Having a second place for the kids would be wonderful." He paused again, then added, "Well, a third place if you count the kids' other grandparents. We do try to let the kids visit every so often. But they don't know either, and won't." He turned to his friend. "What about it, Andy? Can we count on you? Can Dianne count on you?"

Andrew let out a long, quiet breath, then nodded. "Yes. You and Dianne can count on me. I can understand why you kept this from me."

"It really wasn't anything personal, Andy," Jeff assured him. "I have a lot of other friends that I've known for years that have no idea about the... ahem... 'family business'." He sat forward, and Maggie sat forward, too, her eyes eager and shining. "Now, let me tell you what happens next...." he began.

From Tikatu July 26, 2005
