

Saturday, June 2, 2068, 3 p.m., local time, Pir Panjal range, India

The Hood sat back in his pilot's seat, sipping a cup of green tea that he had brewed in the tiny galley of his hoverjet. The stainless steel case was stored securely in the helijet's hold, and though he was impatient to get back to his Malaysian stronghold and examine his prize, he waited.

~Patience will be my weapon this time, he mused. ~If I leave now, I may attract the attention of International Rescue, and Thunderbird One can easily outfly this craft. If I wait until they are gone, I should be able to leave undetected. He smiled smugly. ~The camouflage on my helijet was excellent. Thunderbird One flew over me twice and did not detect my presence.

Taking a sip of tea, he lifted his binoculars to his eyes again. "Yesssss," he murmured. "Thunderbird One is airborne... but something must be wrong with the pilot. I have never seen it lift off with such a lack of grace. And... yes, Thunderbird Two has lifted off. And again, the pilot's skill is lacking." He put down his cup. "Perhaps... could it be possible? Could all of the eternally cursed Tracy family have been missing from this operation? Could this have been staffed solely by their new recruits?"

He began to power up his helijet. "I could perhaps ask it of my half-brother when I return to my temple." Then he shook his bald head. "No, the last attempt nearly laid me low. I will not risk it again except in greatest need. However... perhaps I can find a way to learn more about these new recruits. I will give the matter some thought."

With that, he lifted off the face of the mountain and made his way in the opposite direction of the Thunderbirds, heading for Malaysia, and an enjoying evening with his new toy.

xxxxxxxxxx

"Thunderbirds Two and Five from Thunderbird One," Elise called into her microphone. "Calling stand down at 1500 hours local time. Base, we're on our way back."

"Thunderbird One from Thunderbird Two," came Dom's Irish accent. "F-A-B. Stand down acknowledged."

"Thunderbird One from Thunderbird Five," said John at nearly the exact same time, "F-A-B."

"Thunderbird One from Base." Brains's tenor added to the blend of male voices. "F-A-B. What is your ETA?"

Elise laughed, a short chuckle that removed some of the tension she felt flying the lead Thunderbird. "One at a time, you guys, one at a time! Base, our ETA is 2 hours. I'm pacing Thunderbird Two home."

"F-A-B, Thunderbird One," Brains replied. "You've all done well."

"Uh, Base from Thunderbird Two," Dom called out. "What is the status of the... uh, other team?"

Both of the Thunderbird pilots and the space monitor could hear the heavy sigh. "Still incapacitated. I'll give you more of a report when you return to base."

"F-A-B, Base. Thunderbird Two, out."

"Does that mean we'll still be on sick room duty when we get back?" Nikki asked, frowning.

"I don't know," Dom said distractedly as he prepared to lift Thunderbird Two back into the air.

"Tell you what, Dom," Nikki began. "I'll get a nap in crew's quarters on the way home and take over the sick room for a while. It'll give both you and Brains a break."

"You're a true angel, Nikki," Dom replied with a grin. "Thank you."

"I could watch Joshua for you," Kat suggested.

"Thank you for the offer, Kat, but I think I'd like to spend some time with my son myself," Dom replied kindly. "He doesn't always like it when his Da goes to work."

Callie stretched. "I'll be glad to get back and have something decent to eat." She turned to Brandon and nudged him. "How about you?"

Brandon shook his head. "I'll pass on the food, I think. I've still got those chemical leftovers on my mind."

The group laughed, and Nikki got up to find the crew's quarters, intending to nap while the others came down off the euphoria of their first, unaccompanied rescue.

xxxxxxxxx

"Base from Thunderbird Five," John called as soon as Brains was done talking with the on-site rescue team.

"Base here, go ahead."

"Einstein, I intercepted a message from the Indian Defense authorities. It seems that Kat's mysterious attacker has made off with the prototype of a new anti-aircraft scanner, one that will even detect our ships."

Brains groaned. "Oh, wonderful. Any way for us to get the schematics so we can develop a countermeasure?"

John shook his head. "I don't know. I doubt they'd give the schematics up at this point. Maybe the Commander can come up with something once he's back on his feet."

"I hope so. Anything else I need to know?"

The space monitor shook his head. "Not that I can think of."

"Then I'd better get on with my medical duties."

"F-A-B, Thunderbird Five, out."

From: Tikatu Sent: 12/29/2005

---