
Subject: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:55:26 GMT

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Spring on Tracy Island, and love is in the air. A couple celebrates an anniversary, an engaged man says farewell to his first love, and slowly, long-forged friendships blossom into something deeper. The newest recruits are eager to spread their wings and prove themselves ready, able to take up the challenge. Yet in the world outside, trouble is brewing. International Rescue is in the spotlight, and there are those who want to know more, to uncover their secrets, to infiltrate their ranks and expose them. The warning signs are there, waiting to be noticed. Then the team - recruits and family - will need to strengthen their defenses.

Posted by Tikatu on February 23, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:55:56 GMT

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Thursday, October 11, 2068, 8:35 p.m., Christchurch, NZ.[/i]

"Hey, Cherie!" Anneliese called as they packed up their art supplies. "Jen, Manjari, Aroha, Tim and me - we're going to the ice cream shop around the corner. Want to come?"

Cherie glanced at the others who had looked up when their names had been mentioned, then at Airini. The bodyguard put her hand to her ear, pinky and thumb extended. Cherie got the message and turned to smile at Anneliese.

"I'd love to, but I have to ask permission first. Let me call my brother." She pulled out her phone, and dialed Virgil. At the same time, Airini was doing the same thing, but as a text message.

Virgil was leaving a costume shop. He had emailed his RSVP to Elise; he would have done it in person, but by the time he returned home, the exhausted rescue crew was resting, and there had been no response when he'd buzzed her door. He'd browsed around, but nothing had really smitten him. Maybe I'll see if Elise and I can go as a couple, he thought, smiling. When the phone sounded off with the ring tone he'd reserved for his sister, he was still smiling. "Hey, there, Cherie! Time to pick you up?"

"Well," Cherie said, biting her lower lip, "I've been invited to an ice cream shop around the corner with a couple of my friends," she paused, enjoying the idea of the word 'friend', "and I wanted to know if it was okay."

A chime sounded in Virgil's ear, notifying him of a text message. He brought the phone away from his ear and glanced at the screen. It read: "All chk out OK. Will follow. Airi."

"Sure, Cherie, go ahead. I'll run GPS on the address and will pick you up in an hour or so, okay?" Virgil was mindful of the fact that it was a school night, and that his parents wouldn't be happy if

Cherie was up extremely late. "I'll give Dad a call and let him know." He paused, and added, "Airini will be following, but she'll be discreet."

"Yeah, that's okay. Thanks so much, Virgil!" Cherie all but squealed. "See you later!"

"See you soon, Sis." He made sure he replied to the text message with a, "OK 2 follow" before cutting the connection and putting the phone in his pocket again. Whistling, he headed back to the car and decided to check out the music shop in the mall before picking up his sister.

The ice cream was good, and the conversation was even better. Cherie got to know Anneliese a bit more and became acquainted with a couple of the other students that she hadn't had a chance to speak to before. Aroha's tattoo fascinated her, as did Manjari's very different accent. They in turn wanted to know where she was from. "I can tell you're a Yank," Jen said, "but where in the States? I mean, to me, you all sound the same."

"I'm from the Southeast, state of South Carolina to be precise," Cherie replied.

"Does that mean you say 'y'all' all the time?" Tim asked, grinning.

"Only when it fits... y'all," she responded, returning the grin. The group laughed.

"Is Tennessee close to South Carolina?" Jen asked.

"Not far," Cherie said. "It borders North Carolina and Georgia, both of which border South Carolina. Just a couple hours drive, really, to get into the southeastern part of the state."

"Where is the Mississippi river in Tennessee?" Manjari asked.

"It's on the western border," Cherie responded. She took a bite of her sundae, then asked, "What's so interesting about Tennessee?"

"You mean you didn't hear about the earthquake there today?" Tim asked, sounding somewhat sarcastic. "I'm surprised this lot hasn't bent your ear about it before now. Earthquake equals disaster and disaster equals International Rescue, doesn't it, Liese?"

Aroha gave Tim a little push. "Of course it does, you pakeha! And International Rescue means the dreamy bloke with the yellow sash."

"But they don't wear sashes any more," Tim argued.

"Doesn't make him any less minty," Anneliese said stoutly.

Cherie's eyes went wide, and she fought hard to stifle a laugh. When she was sure she could speak without bursting into giggles, she asked, "Um, what's this all about?"

"Haven't you heard of International Rescue?" Aroha asked, eyes wide.

"Well, yes, of course," Cherie said hastily. "Everyone's heard about them. But who's this guy with

the yellow sash?"

"Oh, you shouldn't have asked that!" Tim exclaimed, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "Now Liese will tell you the whole sad yarn."

"Quit whinging and being a wet blanket," Manjari said, giving him a shove in the other direction. "Cherie's interested, aren't you?"

"Yeah, sure," Cherie said, nodding. "Go ahead, Liese. Tell me your story."

"Well," Liese began. "It was almost two years ago when it happened. My Mum and me were driving down the motorway to the mall when this mad boy-racer went past, doing the ton. He..."

"Excuse me," Cherie said, her tone apologetic. "But 'boy-racer' and 'doing the ton'?"

"He had a really loud stereo and was driving too fast -- like 200 kph," Jen supplied.

"Oh, okay. Thanks." Cherie nodded at Anneliese. "Please continue."

"Ta." Anneliese sounded a bit miffed about the interruption. "As I said, he was going really fast, and got into a prang with another car. Not that it mattered to him; he just kept going. The other car hit a lorry carrying chlorine, and started a huge prang. Twenty-three cars! My Mum and me were in one of them. The chlorine kept spreading, killing people, even the plods -- the police - who had come to help."

Cherie nodded. She was beginning to remember the incident in question. It was the first time Thunderbird Seven had gone on a rescue. "Wow! That sounds scary!" she said, her eyes purposefully wide. "What happened next?"

Anneliese's former pique was gone with her new audience's rapt attention. "Well, my Mum and me couldn't get out. The doors were smashed shut. The chlorine was like a cloud, coming closer. Gave me the colly-wobbles, it did! Then this man appeared. He was wearing a HAZMAT suit, but I could see he had brown eyes and brown hair and his face was... oh, sweet-as!" She smiled widely. "He cut us out, and got us away from the chlorine. Later, I saw him with a yellow sash on." She looked down at her hands. "My Mum and me went for counseling, and the counselor told me I should write him a letter. To thank him and all."

Jen laughed. "She did more than that! She started a fan club!"

The light went on inside Cherie's head. Anna talked about this at dinner one night! Virgil was sooo embarrassed! "So," she asked, "you started a fan club?"

"Yes!" Manjari said, her eyes shining. "We have a website, and messageboard, and we have members from all over the world! It's beaut!"

"But what about the other guys?" Cherie asked. "Aren't there more than one?"

"Yeah, and what about the girls?" Tim asked. "I hear they're flash, too!"

Anneliese sighed. "He was the one who rescued us, so he's the one I fancy."

"There are other clubs," Aroha said, "for the other pilots and rescuers. We have links to them on our site."

"But none for the girls," Tim complained. Manjari gave him another shove.

"Our site?" Cherie asked. She pointed her finger first at Anneliese, then swung it around to include the others. "You're all involved?"

"Well, not Tim here," Jen said, sticking her tongue out at the only male. "But we believe that International Rescue should have everyone's support."

"And the men -- they look so minty! That makes it even easier," Anneliese said with a dreamy sigh. She perked up and asked Cherie, "Hey, would you like to belong to the club? We have meetings once a month..."

"I just might; it sounds like fun," Cherie replied, smiling. This is rich! Wait until I tell Virgil... uh oh, what time is it? She glanced at her watch. "Uh oh. When I called him, my brother said he'd pick me up here in an hour. He'll be looking for me." She ate a last few bites of her sundae and rose from the table, gathering her things. A sudden thought hit her. I can't let them see Virgil! How am I going to warn him?

"Can't you ask him to let you stay a bit longer?" Jen asked. "My mum could drive you home."

Cherie was about to say no, when she got an idea. "I could ask," she said, fishing out her phone. With a keystroke, she dialed Virgil again.

Virgil was already sitting outside waiting, reading a book. He answered the call with, "Hey, Cherie, where are you?"

"Uh, I'm in the ice cream shop. My friends would like to know if I can stay a little longer," she replied.

Virgil frowned. "Sorry, Sis, but we're going to be squeaking it on the trip home as it is. I'm waiting outside. You'd better make your apologies and gather up your things."

"Oh, but Virgil, we were just having the best conversation!" Cherie said, adding a little whine to her voice. "I wanted to hear more about the fan club that my friend Anneliese started for one of those International Rescue men! They'd like me to join it!"

Virgil blinked. His sister's words threw up a warning signal in his head. "Uh, Sis? Would that happen to be the club Anna mentioned not long ago at dinner? And the girl who founded it is there, with you?"

"Yeah, uh huh." Cherie hoped none of her friends could overhear Virgil's end of the conversation.

"Ohh-kay," he replied, starting the car and switching on the window tinting. It was usually triggered by daylight conditions and shut down after sundown, but there was an override switch, which Virgil used. The windows darkened and showed an almost mirror surface on the outside now, which he hoped would hide him. "Just come on out. I've got it covered."

Inside, Cherie pouted. "Hrmph," she muttered. "You're not being fair!" She ended the call decisively and popped her phone in her bag. "He says I have to come now!" she groused.

"Well, maybe we'll talk more about it next time," Anneliese said, giving Cherie a sympathetic smile. "Wait!" She ducked into her own purse, and pulled out a card, stopping to write on the back. "Here's the address for the club's site. Check it out, then ring me up, just to talk if you want."

"Thanks, Liese." Cherie slung her art supply bag over her shoulder. While doing so, she looked around for Airini, who had been reading a book and drinking soda in a quiet corner while the conversation was going on. Out of the corner of one eye, she saw the older girl leave, and knew she'd be waiting outside. "I'll call sometime this week, and I promise I'll look at the site." She stopped at the front door and waved, "Bye, y'all!"

There was laughter, then a chorus of, "Tata!" "Cheers!" "Cheerio!" She stepped through the door and into the night.

Airini was standing to one side, checking through her purse, and Virgil's car was waiting on the street before her, hazard lights flashing. She ran over, and hopped into the car, giving her bodyguard a quick wave before climbing in. The door closed, she fastened her seat belt, then dissolved into laughter.

"Was it really that funny?" Virgil asked, his tone skeptical as he pulled away.

"Yeah, it was!" Cherie said gleefully. "Let me tell you all about it!"

Posted by Tikatu on February 23, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:57:14 GMT

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Thursday October 11 2068, 4.35am, New York (8.35pm Oct 11 Island Time)

Tom Hawkins' fingers flew across his keyboard as he typed up another post for his increasingly popular anti-International Rescue blog. This is great, he thought. No new material for so long and now boom! Something to shout about. This stuff with those crazies is awesome. Thank God for contacts! His eyes strained against the light from the computer monitor in his otherwise dark apartment, but he didn't care.

In the down time between the last rescue and the most recent, Tom had set about putting out feelers everywhere he could to get news on both International Rescue's activities, as well as public feeling about them. All right, so the majority of people were in favour of them -- but not the

way Tom told it. One of his contacts had sent him a link to a website made by some people calling themselves 'The Brethren'. Sweeeeeeeet, he had thought. So much potential for juicy stories -- at IR's expense!

He saved his file and sat back, lacing his fingers behind his head. He smiled as he read his 'masterpiece'.

Once more International Rescue have trundled in to save the day when a Tennessee shopping mall collapsed as a result of seismic activity yesterday morning. While no one else can say anything but 'thank you' to those brave men and women, I find myself once again pondering the question: if the government had the technology, could action have been taken sooner?

The rest of the article read in much the same way as everything else Tom had written on the subject. He simply seemed to be finding more creative ways to use the same idea each time. However, the arrival of the Brethren had given him some slightly more...interesting...material.

On a slightly stranger note, it seems that International Rescue has started coaxing people into joining what seems to be a coercive cult designed to bring innocent and inexperienced members of the public into their rescue situations. Yesterday, they used several van-loads of people dressed in what seemed like deliberately auspicious and impractical outfits to assist them in their work. This writer has to call into question the ethics of such a practice, and whether International Rescue should be allowed to put more people in danger this way...

He smiled once more, stretched out his shoulders until they popped in satisfaction, and pressed the 'send' button. After a few moments the new post was online, and he shut the computer down and went to bed, thinking about the hundreds of supportive replies he would wake up to in the morning.

Posted by ArtisticRainey on February 24, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:57:30 GMT
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Thursday, October 11, 2068, 10:15 pm, Tracy Island

Cassie sat down in front of her computer. It had occurred to her earlier that she hadn't let her family in Japan know about her career change yet. Unless one of her parents had already mentioned it to someone, they wouldn't even know that she wasn't in New York City anymore.

Instead of writing to everyone, she decided to write to one person and let them spread the news. Her grandparents and their youngest son, Hikaru, and his family lived in Kozushima Village on the island of Kozushima. Kozushima was where Cassie's mother had grown up, despite Cassie's grandfather running a successful computer and robotics business, Fujimura Technologies, based in the city of Tokyo. After establishing the business her grandfather, Fujimura Daichi, had moved his wife and kids back to the island village to make his wife, Nako, happy. He had flown between

the island and the mainland for years, until he had turned the business over to his oldest son, Satoyuki.

Though she tried to write to her grandparents on a regular basis, Cassie corresponded with her cousin, Sachio, the most. Sachio was next in line to take over Fujimura Technologies. Four years older than her, the two of them had gotten to know each other when Cassie had visited Japan. Since then, they had often exchanged emails, both keeping their respective branches of the family up to date with what was happening. She knew if she told Sachio about the changes in her life, it wouldn't be long before he had relayed that information to her grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Sachio-chan,

I hope everything is going well. How are you and Kao-chan? Anything new or exciting happening since the last time I heard from you? Is Kai-kun settling into the new school year okay? How are Grandma and Grandpa doing?

The last month has been a whirlwind for me. Remember when I told you that I was going to look for a job outside of the city? Well, not only did I start looking but I found one that interested me. I didn't expect to find one so quick, but I got an offer I couldn't resist. I took a job as a consultant with Tracy Industries. I'm based in their Wichita, Kansas office. I moved to my new location almost two weeks ago.

As you can probably guess, I've been busy settling into my new job and home. I can, of course, be reached via email, but I'll list my number and address at the end of this letter. Please share it with the rest of the family, especially Grandma, seeing as she prefers the old-fashion method of letter-writing.

I've got a two-bedroom apartment which is much bigger than what I was living in back in the city. It's nice and is in a good location. I'm in the process of painting the walls of my bedroom which is a much harder task than I thought it would be. I think I made the right decision with deciding to leave the rest of the walls white. I'm not sure I'd want to tackle painting the entire apartment.

Cassie paused, trying to decide what else she could safely say. She knew she couldn't mention Luke living nearby as that may cause suspicion. As far as they knew he lived in California. At the same time, if she didn't mention anyone that might raise some flags in itself. How could she refer to those sharing the island with her while not giving anything away?

I suppose I could refer to them as either neighbors or co-workers, Cassie thought. I'm just going to have to keep how I refer to everyone consistent. The easiest way to do that would probably keep a list, she mused. Opening her word processor program, she created a file to do just that.

Taking care not to give away anything she shouldn't, Cassie continued her email to her cousin, telling him about some of the new people in her life.

Posted by starrynebula on February 26, 2008

Friday, October 12, 2068, 9:15 am, Tracy Island

Upon Jeff's call for her to enter, Cassie entered the lounge.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she asked as she stepped through the door.

"Yes, Cassie," Jeff said, glancing up from his desk. "Have a seat," he told her, indicating the chair on the other side of the desk.

Cassie walked slowly over to the chair and sat down. She looked across the desk at her boss, waiting for him to start.

"From the reports I've been getting your training seems to be going pretty well," Jeff commented.

Cassie nodded. "Some things are coming to me easier than others," she commented.

"That's to be expected," Jeff assured her. "How are things going with the review of the Fire Protocols at the Tracy Industry branches?"

"Well, I followed your suggestion and sent out an email to the branches for them to send me the required information. A few of the branches have already sent me the required information. Those that haven't have at least responded by saying the required information will be sent within the week. It'll take me a while to go through the protocols for each branch as well as the recent fire drill results."

"Of course. Now that you're about to get started on the real work, I'd like to be kept up to date. Let's say, weekly progress reports."

"I can do that."

"Don't feel pressured to get through it quickly as I know a lot of your time is still being taken with training for IR. I also have another task related to IR for you," Jeff told her.

Across from him, Cassie set up a little straighter in her chair, interested in hearing about this new task.

"One of our rescues a little while back was a cane fire. It was actually that rescue that prompted us to start looking for a firefighter for the team. The rescue didn't go as smoothly as it could have. I'd like you to look through our records from the rescue and make some suggestions on how the rescue could have been handled better, and point out mistakes that were made. It would be good to avoid those mistakes in the future."

Cassie nodded. "I'll take a look and see what I can come up with," she told him, trying not to reveal the nervousness she was feeling inside. What if I can't come up with any suggestions? This is ultimately why they hired me after all, she thought.

Jeff handed over a data pad. "I've put all the relevant information on here for you. I'd like to meet with you Tuesday morning if that will give you enough time?"

"I'll be ready by then," she told him, making a mental note to make it one of her priorities.

"Great. Let's say 10:00 a.m. I'm going to have Brains join us too."

"Ten on Tuesday morning," Cassie said, for confirmation.

Jeff nodded.

"Was there anything else?" Cassie asked.

"No, that was it unless you have anything you'd like to talk about."

"Not right now, sir," Cassie told him.

After saying a quick good-bye, Cassie stood up and left the lounge.

Posted by starrynebula on February 26, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:58:04 GMT

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The Cliff House, sometime after noon....

Luke yawned and stretched his arms over his head. Peering over at the lump next to him, he gave it a nudge. "Hey there, Rom. Up and at 'em." The dog gave a groan and tail wagging, rolled off the bed. Luke laughed at the expression on Rommel's face and stood up, pulling on a pair of cutoffs. "C'mon, mutt, let's get us some breakfast." He glanced at the clock. "Better make that lunch." He padded to the kitchen, Rommel plodding along beside him.

He filled the dog's water bowl and food dish. Rommel sniffed at both, took a few laps of water, then went back to the living room. He lay down with a "whuff" in the sun in front of the French doors.

Watching him, Luke sighed. He picked up the water bowl and carried to the dog, placing it next to him. "C'mon, buddy, the doc says you have to drink." Rom merely rolled on his back, clearly wanting his belly rubbed. Luke chuckled and obliged.

He made his way back to the kitchen and turned on the coffee pot. He then popped a bagel in the toaster and a few minutes later, Luke was sitting on the couch, sipping coffee and closing his eyes in contentment. The only sounds were from the birds outside and Rommel snoring in the sun.

The ring of the doorbell startled them both. Rommel jumped to his feet, staggered a few steps,

then sat down. "Easy, boy," Luke told him and answered the door. "Hey, Gordon, come on in."

Dressed in a brightly colored shirt and dark shorts, Gordon stepped into the apartment. "I didn't wake you did I?" he asked, taking in Luke's half-dressed appearance.

Luke shook his head. "Nah, I slept in this morning. Didn't get much sleep last night," he said, nodding over at Rommel.

Gordon walked over to the dog and kneeling down, ruffled the animal's head. "And how are you feeling this morning, big guy? Bet you slept well." Rommel responded by giving Gordon a thorough lick and rolled over on his back. "Yeah, you know you're spoiled, aren't you?" He glanced up at Luke. "He OK?"

Luke nodded. "He's fine. I called the vet as soon as we got back and she told me he'd sleep like a log for the night and be kind of groggy today. He should be back to his normal self by tonight or tomorrow. Hey, want a cup of coffee?"

Gordon frowned at the sudden change of topic. "Sure, cream and sugar, thanks." He watched Luke walk into the kitchen before turning back to the dog. "Looks like you weren't the one who had the rough night there, pup." He waited until Luke came back into the room, and taking the coffee mug, sat down on the couch. "Mmmm....Not bad!"

"One of the few things I can cook," Luke replied, taking his own sip.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Gordon spoke up again. "Mom said the vet thought it might be that Rom sensed the quake."

Luke nodded. "Yeah, that's what was upsetting him. We've never been in that type of situation before." He glanced over at the dog. "He did great yesterday, he really did."

"Yeah he did." Gordon paused a moment. "And how are you doing this morning? Because frankly, you look like hell."

Luke sighed and placed his mug on the coffee table, then ran his hands over his face. "Truthfully, I don't know." He got to his feet and paced the room. "I don't think I've ever been so scared yesterday." He glanced over at Rommel. "I mean, it's stupid to be so upset right? He's just a dog."

Gordon shook his head. "He's more than a dog; he's your partner and your friend. People can say what they want, but look at him." They both looked down. Rommel had opened his eyes and was watching Luke's every move. "You look into that animal's eyes and tell me he doesn't have thoughts and feelings. We used trained dolphins in WASP. Sent them in before us to scope out the area. After a while you could tell each of them by their quirks and personalities." He shook his head again. "I saw you out there, Luke. You were just as worried about him as if it had been one of us. And it doesn't make you a weaker man to admit that."

Luke took a shuddering breath. "Thanks, Gordon," he said softly. "This being my first big rescue with you and all...I guess I never expected something like this to happen."

Gordon took a sip from his mug. "Well, now we know what to expect. And Mom's talking about having a direct link to the vet in case something ever happens. He's as much a part of this team as you are, Luke. We take care of our own."

Luke smiled shyly. "Yeah, you do." He straightened his shoulders. "Hey, I was just about to whip up some eggs and bacon. You hungry?"

Gordon batted his eyes innocently. "I've already had breakfast and lunch, but if you're insisting, I suppose I could try and force something down."

Luke laughed and led him into the kitchen. "Yeah, right. C'mon, eggs are one of the other things I can cook."

Posted by lillehafrue on February 26, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:58:22 GMT

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Friday, October 12, 2068, just before 2 p.m., Tracy Island

Reaching into the box, Cassie took the last few books out and placed them on a shelf on the bookcase she had bought last week. In between her training, she had managed to find time to put the bookshelves and desk together. Luke had come over to help put the two wall shelves up, as well as helping her with the curtains in the living room. As she was still in the process of painting the bedroom wall, she hadn't put up the curtains in the bedroom yet.

Picking up the empty box, she placed it near the door. The things she had shipped from the city had arrived today, which meant she had boxes sitting in various places around the apartment.

There were two boxes sitting on the kitchen counters which held the bake pans, utensils and decorating tools she had accumulated over the years. The saucers and dessert plates she had bought to go along with her teacups were in one of them, too. She had managed to find saucers and plates that had matched the red of the cups three years ago.

There were still three boxes sitting on the floor near the entrance where she had told Virgil, Gordon and John to set them when they had brought the stuff up to her apartment. One of the boxes she knew had the CD's and vid discs she had packed away. The second had her cheerleading trophies and plaques from high school, her high school diploma, and NYU degree, as well as a few stuffed animals she had saved over the years. The third box sitting there was a mystery. The return address was that of her parents, which meant her mom had probably sent her something to keep herself from worrying.

Two boxes containing the rest of the clothing she felt she would need on the island was in her bedroom. One was her winter clothing, which she planned on just simply sliding into the closet until needed. Virgil and John had also placed the vanity in its spot against the wall near the bathroom door. The box holding the mirror was leaning against it. They had offered to put it

together while they were there, but she wasn't sure where the screws and brackets had gotten packed. She and Mark had gotten the vanity packed and ready for shipping and then she had discovered the brackets and screws hadn't been packed with it. Instead of opening it and repacking it, she had packed them away in another box but she couldn't remember which one. Gordon had promised to come back later to help her attach the mirror as at least two people were required to accomplish that feat. As for her guitar, she had taken it into the second bedroom to keep it out of harm's way.

I'm going to be busy tonight if I want to get this stuff put away before Tin-Tin comes over for tea tomorrow, Cassie thought as she looked at the boxes sitting near the entrance. She glanced at her watch. Well, I'm not going to get anything else done right now as it's time to meet with Virgil.

Grabbing her laptop, which held her notes and sketches for her proposal and was already in its carrying case, Cassie left the apartment and headed toward the monorail. She met up with Nikki who was leaving the Cliff House area too. The two women shared small talk while the monorail moved along its track. Remembering the invitation she had received on Wednesday, she brought up the subject, telling Nikki she'd be there and that she'd bake some holiday theme cookies for the party.

When she reached her destination, Cassie said good-bye to Nikki, who continued on toward the Villa. Cassie arrived at the simulator before Virgil. She walked over to a table near the one wall and got her computer out. To pass the next few minutes while she waited, Cassie glanced through the notes and sketches she had created in some last minute preparations. She wanted to make sure she presented her ideas well to him.

"I was hoping you wouldn't get too involved unpacking and lose track of time," Virgil said lightly, as he came into the room a few minutes later, causing Cassie to look up.

"Are you kidding? I was glad for an excuse to put it off. I hate packing and unpacking."

"Doesn't everyone? You ready to begin?"

"Sure. I've also got that proposal for you ready," Cassie said, indicating the laptop in front of her.

"Great, let's go over that first. I'm curious to see what you've come up with," he replied as he walked over to stand beside her.

Cassie nodded, glad to get this over with before the training session so she wouldn't be preoccupied. "My idea is actually a mixture of some traditional firefighting equipment and what IR already uses," Cassie told him as she brought up her first slide of the presentation. "Current aerial firefighting techniques include the use of dropping chemical fire retardants or water from the air, like shown in this picture of a airplane filling up the Bambi Bucket, which has been in use since 1983. These buckets have the advantage of being able to refill while the aircraft is still in flight whereas with the chemicals, once the supply runs out the plane needs to return to base."

"Properly used, chemicals can be more effective against a fire than water which is why I suggest we use a gun type design, like the rear gun on the Firefly." Cassie switched to another slide. "The gun, mounted underneath Thunderbird 2, would be able to shoot the dicetyline onto a fire from the

air. Now, I'm no engineer so exactly how this would be accomplished is beyond my expertise."

"Are you suggesting using both the gun and the Bambi Bucket?" Virgil asked her.

"No. The drawback to using the dicetyline is we can't keep an endless supply of it on board Thunderbird 2. This is where the inspiration from the Bambi Bucket comes into play. If we design another feed for water, which both the Firefly and Fire Truck are capable of, and some kind of pump design so a tank can be filled with water from a nearby source of water while still in flight, we have back-up ammunition if the dicetyline runs out."

Virgil asked a few more questions, all of which Cassie answered. Some of them covered details that she hadn't thought about in her initial planning, such as where to place the dicetyline tanks on board Thunderbird 2, but which would be necessary to see the project through.

"I think it will work," Virgil said, impressed with the effort Cassie had put into the brief idea pitch. "The engineering details will need to be worked before we present it to my dad but I think this would be a great addition to our arsenal. I'll get to work on the execution part of the idea when I come back from, Paris," Virgil told her. I'll get Brains involved in it too, he added silently to himself. "Meanwhile, why don't we get started on today's training session?"

Cassie nodded as she closed the open programs on her laptop and put the computer into hibernate. That done, the two headed over to the simulator.

Posted by starrynebula on February 27, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:58:38 GMT

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Friday, October 12th, 4 p.m. on Tracy Island (10 p.m. Thursday, October 11, in Opp, Alabama)

After an exhausting time in Memphis the day before, all Callie wanted to do was rest up in her apartment. When she passed by her telephone, she noticed she had one voice message. "I'll bet it's Mom." Pressing the button to hear the message, she knew she was right.

"Geez, they called yesterday, probably while I was heading to the rescue zone. I'd better call them back." She had to think about how to cover her tracks. "Hmm, I think...I could tell them some co-workers invited me to dinner last night. I got home too tired to call. Yeah, that'll work." She picked up the receiver and called her family.

Back in Opp, most of the family was about to turn in for the evening when they heard the phone ringing. "Who could it be at this hour?" asked Richard as he answered the vidphone. "Hello?"

"Dad? It's Callie."

Richard smiled in delight. "Callie, honey. It's good to hear from you. Guess what; we felt a pretty good quake yesterday."

"You did? Was it the same one that originated from Memphis?"

Lorraine replied, "Yeah, the same one. When it got here, though, it just knocked some utensils on the floor here at the house. Also, some tools fell to the ground at the mill, but we still haven't heard any reports of injuries or damage." She looked at the kitchen clock. "Honey, it's after 10 here. How come you're just calling us now? Why didn't you call us yesterday?"

Calmly, Callie answered, "I'm sorry, Mom. I got off work yesterday, and some co-workers wanted to take me out to dinner. By the time I came in, I was too tired. I hope you're not too upset with me."

Richard shrugged. "You didn't know we were gonna have an earthquake around here. I don't see any reason for us to be upset. We just wanted to let you know we're all fine down here."

"Okay, Dad. Hey, did you hear about International Rescue's involvement?"

Joseph spoke up. "Oh, yeah! We were watching what we could see, particularly with those strange folks dressed up the way they were."

Those wacky Tyrikalicans, Callie thought to herself with an inner chuckle. They probably had more fun just being at the rescue site. I hope they don't become a serious threat to our security. "From what I've been hearing, I think they're the members of a serious fan club."

Brian added, "I don't know of any stranger people who'd be willing to go to a dangerous area just to admire those guys in International Rescue."

"I'm not so sure. Don't we have to deal with that in college football?"

"Point taken," said Brian.

Lorraine said, "Okay, guys, I think Callie needs some rest after a hard day at work. We'll let you go, sweetie. It's probably dinner time in Honolulu."

"Yeah, it is. I'll be here cooking tonight, though. I don't like to eat out all the time."

"All right, dear. We'll talk to you later."

"Bye, Mom." After Callie placed the phone back in its cradle, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Too bad I can't tell them I was in Memphis, but that's the price for protecting IR." She then went into the kitchen to start working on dinner for herself.

Posted by TracyFan4Ever on February 28, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:59:11 GMT

Friday, October 12, 2068, around 7 p.m., Tracy Island

Finishing up the dishes, Cassie set the towel down on the counter. She had just washed all her baking things that she had unpacked. She'd let them air dry and then find places for them in the cupboards.

Heading toward the living area, she moved both boxes onto her newly-bought throw rug, which sat between the couch and the entertainment system. Opening the one with the CD's in it, she pulled one out, not caring what it was and put it in the player. Soon, some familiar country music filled the air.

Settling herself on the floor, Cassie pulled the box from her mother toward her. I wonder what Mom sent me, she mused as she used the steak knife she had brought from the kitchen to open the box. Cassie smiled as she saw that all the contents had been neatly wrapped and packed. On the top was an envelope. Picking it up, she removed the single piece of blue stationery with a bonsai tree on the top.

Dear Cassie,

As I'm writing this, you're still here in New York with me but I know I'll be seeing you off soon. As much as it pains me to see you leaving, I know this is something that you need to do. Though I haven't said much, I've seen the pain and sadness that has been hovering around you these last few months. You haven't smiled as much as you used to and I miss your smile. Hopefully, this move will let you find your way through that and you'll find happiness once again, though I know that will take time. Still, I cling to the hope that the next time I see you, my smiling, carefree daughter will have returned.

I do hope that you're happy out in Kansas and that you're settling in to your new job. You said you found a place outside of the city. Are you enjoying the silence? I know I often long for the silence that I enjoyed growing up in Japan as I hear the busy city going on around me.

I thought about sending these items with you, but then decided to mail it. I thought receiving some mail from home would be a nice surprise. Hope you enjoy what I sent you.

Hope to hear from you soon!

Love,
Mom

Blinking away the few tears that had formed upon reading the letter, Cassie folded it back up and put it in the envelope. Setting it aside, she picked up one of the wrapped items. A smile immediately came to her face as she unwrapped a FDNY coffee mug. She continued pulling things out. Her mom had sent some baking ingredients along, as well as a couple tins of Cassie's favorite teas. She unwrapped several new towels and wash cloths. The last package though held the best surprise for her.

Cassie found a plastic container sitting at the bottom of the box. Opening it up, she found metal

cookie cutters. As she looked through them she realized they were in Halloween shapes. There was a pumpkin, flying bat, a witch on a broom, a witches hat, a cat with the tail sticking up in the air, coffin, tombstone, and a ghost.

These will be perfect for making cookies for the party, Cassie thought as she stood up to take the container into the kitchen. She placed it on the counter, so she could put it away with the other things.

Returning to the living room, she went back to her previous task of unpacking and putting things away. While unpacking the rest of her CD's she had found the ziplock bag with the screws and brackets for the vanity. She tossed the bag onto one of the end tables and went back to unpacking the box. She was in the midst of putting away her vid discs when she heard the door chime. It's probably Gordon, Cassie thought as she got to her feet and headed for the door.

Sure enough, as the door opened, it revealed Gordon standing there. "Handyman calling," he replied with a grin.

"Hi, Gordon. Come on in. I appreciate you helping me out," Cassie said stepping aside to let him in. "Hey, Cherie," she said, when she noticed the girl standing behind her brother.

"Hi," Cherie replied.

"Not a problem. Hope you don't mind that Cherie tagged along. She was looking for a reason to get out of the house."

"Don't mind at all. You'll have to forgive the mess. I invited Tin-Tin over for tea tomorrow and wanted to at least get the things out here put away."

"Not a problem. Did you find those brackets and screws?"

"Right here," she answered, walking over to the end table and picking up the bag.

"Then why don't we get that mirror attached so you can get back to your work," Gordon suggested.

The three of them headed for the bedroom. Cherie sat down on Cassie's bed so she wouldn't be in the way. She looked around the half painted room as Gordon and Cassie started getting the circular mirror out of the box it had been shipped in.

"I think the room is going to look pretty once its finished," Cherie remarked as she took in the reddish brown walls that had paint on them and tried to picture the room complete with the midnight blue curtains, which she had helped Cassie pick out.

"I'm liking the color myself," Cassie replied as she helped Gordon lift the mirror into place. "I'm just not sure what to do about that wall," she remarked nodding toward the wall next to the door leading from the living area of the apartment. "You got it?" Cassie asked Gordon as they got the mirror lined up.

"Yeah. Go ahead and screw in the brackets," Gordon told her.

Cassie let go of the mirror and reached for the first bracket and the power screw driver which was sitting on the dresser. "I need something on it, because without any furniture over there I've just got a big empty wall," Cassie said continuing the conversation with Cherie as she started securing the mirror to the vanity. "I was thinking some kind of artwork. Have you ever done a mural, Cherie?"

"No. I usually stick to smaller things."

"Interested in giving it a try?" Cassie asked, as she got another bracket from the dresser top.

"You mean on the wall?" Cherie asked, considering the idea. It would be a challenge but it could be fun. I could always ask Virgil for advice. "What if it doesn't turn out right?"

"Almost anything would be preferable to that blank wall," Cassie told her. "I'll pay for any supplies you need to do it."

Cherie thought it over a few more minutes. "What did you have in mind?"

"Not sure yet. I was thinking something that would remind me of home."

"Well, that would be easy then. Cherie could paint a huge fire on the wall," Gordon quipped.

"You're lucky that you are holding up that mirror or I'd hit you," Cassie told him, trying to suppress the urge to smile.

Gordon just grinned.

Cherie meanwhile had been looking at the wall again. "What about famous buildings or sites from New York City, like the Statue of Liberty and things like that? I could probably paint things like that if we found pictures I could go off of."

As she finished securing the mirror, Cassie thought over the suggestion. It didn't take her long to start liking the idea. It would be relaxing to see the familiar sites she had grown up with. "Not a bad idea. Does that mean you're interested in giving it a try? I'd pay you for it somehow. Either I could buy you something you've been wanting or we could just decide on a fair price."

Cherie looked from Cassie and back at the blank wall, still thinking the idea over. "Okay, I'll give it a try," she said slowly. "I'll try to talk to Virgil before he leaves for Paris about it so he can give me an idea on how to start," Cherie said, looking forward to the challenge that had been presented to her.

Posted by starrynebula on February 29, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Tracy Island, early evening....

Scott finished typing in the report on his computer. He read through what he had written, then hit 'save'. That wasn't a bad rescue. Not that many casualties considering the situation; no injuries on our team; everything went well, even with the extra "help". "Speaking of help," he mused out loud. I should check out those kooks. Make sure they really are as benign as they seem. He punched in "Tyrikalica" on a search engine. Instantly the page lit up with sites. He began to scan them, noting that most seemed to be news reports of the "Alien International Rescue Fan Club." Scott groaned, "Yeah, that's great for our reputation."

He dug a little deeper, finally coming across their website. "Bingo!" He began reading the site, often chuckling at some of the information it contained. The blogs were especially humorous.

"I (heart) Jhutu!"

"Undlieek-asjaphe is the true meaning of beauty!"

"Who needs Earth? We have Tyrikalica!"

He then moved onto "True rescue accounts."

"It was horrible. The plane was in the water, sinking fast. I was sure I was going to die. Suddenly one of the Jestreethzi n'Hildrathuk materialized in front of me. He spoke to me, and though I couldn't understand the language, I knew I would be safe. He took my hand and then I felt a rush of cold air. When I opened my eyes, I was on a ship. It was like magic!"

"Oh, give me a break. Magic?" Scott shook his head and read on. "Pictures, now this ought to be interesting." He keyed up the page and his smile faded. There were some barely distinguishable photos that were supposed to be the ships themselves, a few blurry images of people, then...

"I'll kill him. So help me, I will kill him this time!" Scott shoved his chair away from his desk and began pacing the room agitatedly. "But how, how to do it without getting nailed for fratricide."

He stalked the room for a few minutes, finally getting his emotions back under control. "I've got it." Scott marched out of the room and down the hallway. He paused, knocking on Gordon's door. He pasted on a smile as his brother opened the door.

"Hey, Scott. What's up?"

"Can I come in?" Gordon nodded and Scott stepped into the room. Gordon's room was neat and tidy as usual. A plaque holding his Olympic medal hung on one wall, and an enormous fish tank took up most of the other. Scott sat down in a chair. "I've been doing a little research on our Tryikalican friends. Are you aware they have their own website?"

Gordon squirmed uncomfortably. "Um, I had, ah, heard some rumors on that. John mentioned it on the way home. So, it's true?"

Scott nodded. "Yeah, and there's some interesting stuff on it, too. What I'd like you to do is keep an eye on it for me. This group seems like a bunch of harmless kooks, but you never know. Check it regularly and let me or Dad know if there's ever anything posted that could be a potential problem."

Gordon raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You want me to watch these guys?"

"Yes," Scott replied, his expression serious. "If you're not up to it, I'll ask one of the others to handle it."

"Oh no, not at all. I'd be glad to do it. You're right; it's something we should keep an eye on."

"Good. Thanks, Gords, I knew I could count on you." Scott left the room, leaving Gordon with a look of glee on his face. Outside in the hallway, he chuckled to himself. "There, that ought to throw him off. At least until I can figure out a way to get back at him." Whistling cheerfully, Scott went back to his room.

Posted by lillehafrue on February 29, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:59:40 GMT

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Saturday, October 13, 2068, 9:25 a.m., en route to Sydney, Australia, the JT-1

"So, what do you have planned for us this weekend?" Dianne asked through her headset over the rumble of the jet's engines.

"Oh, a little bit of this and a little bit of that," Jeff said with a grin. He adjusted his sunglasses, and cast a quick eye over his instruments.

"Is that all you're going to say on the matter?" she riposted, raising an eyebrow high enough that Jeff could see one edge over her own sunglasses.

"I think so," he replied. "You know I like to surprise you."

"Yes, I do, but on our anniversary, I end up feeling that I should do more for you." She glanced out the window, her face troubled.

He took her hand in his. "Love, you planned the wedding, mostly without my help. Some of the things you did surprised and delighted me. So, this year, let me do the surprising and delighting, all right? I promise that next year you can do it."

"I'd rather that we decided on our anniversary celebration together next year," she said, squeezing his hand.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it."

"It is." They settled into a comfortable silence, until Dianne piped again with, "Now, where did you say we were going?"

Jeff snorted a laugh. "I didn't, but since you're so all fired curious, we're going to Sydney. I have some special things planned there."

"Ah, okay. Sounds like fun," she replied, grinning.

"It will be, my love. It will be."

--anniversary celebration, part 1

Posted by Tikatu on March 1, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 00:59:55 GMT

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Saturday, October 13, 2068, 11:10 a.m., Tracy Island

Virgil was busy packing his clothes, trying to figure out what he wanted to take to Paris. The weather will be cool. I should probably bring some sweaters. And an empty suitcase as I'm sure to be shopping while I'm there.

Suddenly, the buzzer on his suite sounded. Who could that be? he thought, somewhat irritably as he went out to the sitting room and called, "Come in!" Once that was done, he retreated to the bedroom, calling, "I'm in here!" to whoever had entered his rooms.

"Virgil?" Cherie sounded tentative as she stood in the doorway, looking at the clutter of clothing spread out on the wide bed.

"Hi, Cherie," Virgil replied, his tone showing his preoccupation. "What do you need?"

Watching her brother busily folding and packing, the teen bit her lower lip and sighed. "I see you're busy. I'll come back later; it's not that important."

She turned to go, and Virgil straightened, then looked toward his sister, blowing out a frustrated breath. "Cherie, you might as well talk to me about it now. I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon, then you'd have to wait a week." He patted a clear corner of the bed, and bent over to fold some more clothes. "You talk while I pack."

"Okay." Cherie settled herself on the indicated spot. "I was over at Cassie's apartment yesterday, tagging along with Gordon. She asked me if I could do something for her, artwork-wise." She locked her fingers together. "I'm not sure if I can do it, but I'd like to try. I wanted to ask you for advice on the project."

"What's the job?" Virgil took the leather bomber jacket, and hung it in a garment bag, then thought better of it. I'll take this with me in the jet, and use it when Kyrano and I arrive -- if the weather's cool.

"Well, she's got one big wall that's empty, and she asked if I could paint a mural on it. I thought maybe some scenes from New York..."

Virgil stopped what he was doing. "A mural? That's some ambitious project, Cherie, especially with buildings." He moved some clothes to sit beside her. "How do you plan on pursuing this? It's not going to be your usual manga characters."

Cherie nodded. "I know. I've never done anything this big before. But I think I could do it."

"Where will you get the supplies? And what do you think Dad would say about a mural on the wall?"

The teen shrugged. "I dunno. She said she'd buy the supplies, maybe get me something I like when I was done."

Virgil shook his head. "Uh-uh. This is a big project, and you're going to handle it like a professional if I have anything to say about it. And be paid for it, too." He rubbed his chin. "Okay. I won't have time to help you much right now, but... here, let me give you an assignment."

"An assignment?" Cherie made a sour face. "Why does this have to be homework?"

"Don't look at it like that, Cherry," Virgil said, smiling. "Look at it as a lesson in how the art world works. Cassie has commissioned this piece from you, so you need to treat her like a client. That means negotiating a price, setting up a schedule, showing her proposals... this could be a good experience for you."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Cherie said, looking doubtful.

"Selling your art is a lot of work, beyond the actual painting." Virgil jumped up and fetched a data pad. "Okay, let me give you the first things you need to do."

"All right." Cherie said with a sigh.

"First, you check with Dad on the feasibility of painting a mural in the apartment. I'm not sure what agreements he has with our recruits on their living quarters, but I don't know that painting a mural on the wall, one that would have to be painted over if the occupant left, is part of that. So you check with him first, and make sure you can do it. Even if you can't, there's a way. It'll mean doing some measuring of the wall in question, so that's your next assignment. Depending on what Dad says, you might have to order a custom canvas, and we'll have to set aside some room for you to paint in, and come up with an easel..." He shook his head. "Okay. Talk to Dad, measure the wall, and start researching buildings that might look good. Whatever you do, don't lose the measurements, and keep track of how much time you're spending -- a start time and an end time for whatever you do." He saved the assignment on the data pad. "We'll talk more about this when

I get back."

Cherie took the data pad from him and glanced at it. "Why does this feel like it's going to be a huge project?"

"Because it is one," Virgil warned her. "A mural is a huge project that can take months to complete, Sis. If you still want to pursue it, then I'll help you as much as I can. But it'll still be your baby and be between you and Cassie. And it won't be something you can quit midway, either." He smiled. "When it's done, you'll know for sure if this kind of art - painting to commission - is what you really want to do. And you'll know a little bit about how to handle yourself in business, which is always good. Call it your official art class for the year."

"I'll have to fit this all around my schoolwork and everything." Cherie kept her eyes on the data pad.

"That's right; you will."

"Maybe... maybe I shouldn't do it," she said softly.

"That's up to you," Virgil told her. "But if you decide against it, do it now and tell Cassie right away."

They were quiet for a moment while Cherie thought it over. Finally she straightened. "I'm going to give it a try."

"Okay." Virgil rose to his feet. "You do those few things during the week, keeping track of how long it takes, and we'll discuss it more when I get back."

The girl nodded, and stood. Suddenly, she wrapped her arms around her brother. "Thanks, Virgil."

He returned the hug, and kissed her on the forehead. "Hey, what are big brothers for?"

They parted, and Cherie headed out of the bedroom. "Hey!" she said as she stopped briefly in the door. "I saw that fan site yesterday. It looks pretty awesome. I think I'll join the club and be your spy in the meetings." She grinned slyly. "I can report on all the things they call you, like 'minty'."

Virgil rolled his eyes, and threw a rolled up pair of clean socks at her. "You can be my spy, but I don't want to know what they call me! Minty! Do I look minty to you?" He paused for a minute and said quickly, "Don't answer that!"

She laughed and lobbed the socks back at him, then hurried from the suite before things escalated. He shook his head and laughed. "Minty... what a thing to call one!"

Posted by Tikatu on March 2, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:00:08 GMT

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Saturday, October 13, 2068, 12:00 p.m., Tracy Island (7 p.m., NYC, New York, the day before)

"Hi, Mom," Cassie said when her mother answered the telephone.

"Cassie!" Keiko replied. "It's good to hear from you! How are you?"

"I'm doing fine. I got the box you sent me and I wanted to call and thank you. It was a nice surprise to come home to," Cassie told her.

With the time difference it would still be Friday back in the States and she figured she would just let her Mom think the package had arrived that day instead of the day before.

"I thought something from home might brighten your day."

"It did. I especially loved the cookie cutters. They're a great addition to my collection."

"Maureen and I were out browsing one day and I spotted them and instantly thought of you. I couldn't resist buying them."

"Well, it's good timing too. I was invited to a Halloween party and now I can make cookies in Halloween shapes to take to it."

"I'm glad to see you're already getting to know people out there," Keiko replied. "How is the job going?"

"I'm still trying to settle into it. I've got to familiarize myself with the company's policies and procedures before I can really do anything productive. Right now, that means a lot of paperwork," Cassie said, trying to give her mother enough information to satisfy her without revealing anything she shouldn't.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine once you get used to the new routine," Keiko told her daughter. "I'm actually glad you called. Your father and I are going to fly to Kozushima for a little while."

"Is everything okay?" Cassie asked, immediately thinking something was wrong. Her parents didn't make the trip to Japan too often.

"Your grandmother has been feeling a little under the weather. Hopefully it isn't anything serious. Still, it's been awhile since I've been back home and I want to go see her. I'll be sure to keep you updated."

"Okay," Cassie said, trying not to let the worry she was feeling show in her voice.

Her mother changed the subject then, and started talking about Jordan and Byron and his family.

Posted by starrynebula on March 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:00:35 GMT

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Saturday, October 13, 2068, 1:00 p.m., Tracy Island

Brandon headed toward the swimming pool, gear in hand. Jeff had asked him if he would give Cassie SCUBA lessons and he had agreed to do so. I hope she's on time, he thought as he set the swim fins down.

Cassie arrived just as he was placing stuff on the patio. "Hello!" she said as she approached him. "I'm looking forward to this. Always thought SCUBA might be fun but I've never had a chance to try it. Actually, the first time I've ever actually swam in the ocean was with Gordon earlier this week."

"Well we won't be attempting this in the ocean just yet. You'll learn the basics here in the pool," he told her.

After a few minutes of small talk, Cassie was ready to start. "So where do we begin?" she asked Brandon. She glanced from him, to the equipment, the pool and then back at him.

Brandon grinned, happy to see she was eager to start the training. "Well, the first step is a basic swim test. I want you to begin by swimming nine laps, non-stop, using any style you're comfortable with."

"Not a problem," Cassie said. She took off the shirt and shorts she had been wearing and dove into the pool to begin the test.

He watched Cassie as she swam, her strokes barely making a splash. She's a natural. That'll come in handy during a water rescue.

Cassie finished her laps and swam to the side of the pool. "So, how'd I do?"

"You did well - so far. There are a few more things I want you to do. Then we'll learn how to use the snorkel properly."

Cassie nodded. I've learned so many new things this week I hope I don't start mixing them together.

"Diving isn't just strapping on the tanks and going in the water. There are dive tables to learn and equipment you've got to know inside and out, not to mention knowing what to do in case of a diving emergency."

Dive tables? I wonder what those are; I'll wait until the next lesson to ask. Looking up at Brandon she asked, "Okay, so what's next?"

For the next hour, Brandon put Cassie through her paces, watching as she did the things he asked of her. Finally he called her in.

In the shallow end of the pool, Brandon explained the basics of snorkeling, beginning with the mask. Cassie watched as he spit onto the face piece and rinsed it in the water.

"Not the most sanitary method," Cassie commented. "That the only way to keep it from fogging up?"

Brandon laughed, shaking his head. "Well, it's the one method that you'll be able to use no matter what the situation is. There are chemical defoggers that can be used, too."

Cassie treated the mask and put her face in the water, surprised at how clear it was. "That's amazing," she replied when she brought her head up.

After making sure Cassie was comfortable with the mask, he told her how to position the snorkel in her mouth. "Okay, pull the strap of the mask over your head with the snorkel in place. Bite on the two lugs of the mouthpiece; the guard fits between your lips and gums." After making sure everything was in place, she waited for Brandon's next instructions.

"Now, I want you to lean forward from the waist and lower your face into the water and start breathing slowly through the tube."

Cassie found it easier said than done; more than once she came up for air. This is harder than I thought.

"You're doing fine," Brandon said encouragingly. "Just take it slow and easy and you'll get the hang of it." Nodding, she put her head back down.

"You did great; you're a fast learner. We have one more thing to do then we'll call it a day. I'm going to teach you how to clear the snorkel. If water gets down into it, you'll need to get it out right away."

"It sounds easy enough. What do I need to do?"

"I want you to deliberately flood the tube. Then get rid of the water using several sharp puffs of air." Brandon demonstrated, sending a jet of water up in the air. "Okay, you give it a try."

Cassie went underwater, her snorkel filling up with water. Giving a sharp puff of breath, the water was expelled from the tube. She did it several more times before swimming back to the steps.

"Not bad for your first lesson," Brandon said as she approached, "but there's still a lot to learn."

"I'm ready for it," Cassie said enthusiastically.

"Good," Brandon replied as he gathered up the gear, "I'll be in touch to set up a time for the next lesson."

As he left, Cassie thought, I think I'm going to like diving.

Written by MagicMaster8 & starrynebula on March 4, 2008

Saturday, October 13, 2068, just before 3:00 p.m., Tracy Island

Cassie stood in front of the sink in the bathroom trying to blow dry her hair. She had rushed back to her apartment after her lesson with Brandon so she could get the chlorine out of her hair. Settling for damp hair, she turned the blow drier off and left the bathroom, leaving her hair hanging loose.

In the kitchen, she grabbed her teapot off of the stove and filled it with water. Placing it on the back burner, she went over to the cupboards. She took out two red teacups and two small saucers. She also took out two dessert plates and took everything over to the table, setting two places. Returning to the cupboards she removed several tins of tea leaves, unsure of what kind of tea her guest would enjoy. She placed the tins on the table, along with some spoons, two cloth napkins, the tea ball, the sugar bowl, some milk and the blueberry and apple scones she had baked last night for this occasion.

Cassie surveyed the table. I think that's everything, she thought as she went through her mental checklist once again. She was just finishing as the door chime rang.

As expected, it was Tin-Tin. After exchanging brief greetings, Cassie invited Tin-Tin inside.

"Sorry, but I haven't quite finished unpacking yet," Cassie said nodding toward the living area of the apartment. The box containing the trophies and keepsakes was sitting opened underneath one of the wall shelves, only a couple of trophies having found their way onto a shelf.

"That's certainly understandable," Tin-Tin replied as she glanced around the apartment. "Seems like you've done a lot of work already."

"Out here I have. The bedroom is another story though. The walls are half painted. I stored the curtains in the closet and put my guitar in the spare bedroom for safe keeping as I've still got clothes to unpack. I hate putting away clothes."

Tin-Tin let out a small laugh. "I'll ask to see the bedroom some other time then. You play guitar?"

Cassie nodded as she lead Tin-Tin toward the table. "There was this older couple that lived in the apartment next to us when I was growing up. They use to watch my brothers and me when my parents were both busy or went out together. Charlie -they both insisted on being referred to by their first names - played guitar and we always begged him to play when we were there. I think I was six when he started teaching me," Cassie told her as they settled themselves at the table.

Tin-Tin picked up the teacup in front of her.

"This is beautiful. Where did you get them?"

"My great-grandfather made them. They've been passed on through the years," Cassie told her. "What kind of tea would you like?" Cassie asked, and then listed the options. Tin-Tin made her

selection, and handed the teacup over to Cassie so the tea could be prepared.

"I think I'd be afraid to use them," Tin-Tin commented.

Cassie laughed. "I told my Mom something similar to that when I was a little girl. Her reply was that my great-grandfather would be insulted if they were to just sit around looking pretty. He made them to use and would expect them to be."

Cassie finished brewing the cup of tea and passed it back to Tin-Tin. Tin-Tin added some milk to the beverage and took the blueberry scone that was offered to her. Cassie set to brewing her own cup of tea as the conversation continued. She told Tin-Tin more about herself and Tin-Tin did likewise.

It's nice to just be able to relax and get to know one of my new neighbors, Cassie thought as she listened to Tin-Tin who was talking about some of her experiences when traveling through Europe.

Posted by starrynebula on March 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:01:08 GMT

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The Cliff House, a little before 7 pm....

Virgil stepped off the monorail and made his way over to Elise's apartment. He rang the bell and waited. He didn't have to wait long before the door opened.

"Virgil! Come on in," Elise ushered him inside.

He stepped inside. "I thought I'd stop by and..."

Luke waved from where he was sitting on the couch. "Hey, Virgil. How's things?"

"Good, thanks." Rommel walked up to him, and Virgil bent down to pat him.

"Luke and I were just talking about the rescue the other day. And the kooks! That was the best part! Virgil, you should have seen Scott. He was trying so hard to hold it all together, when you just knew he wanted to throw them all out of there," Elise said, laughing.

Luke chuckled. "It was pretty funny. I thought we had crashed a pajama party when I went into the med tent."

"Sorry I missed it." Virgil stood with his hands in his pockets, listening as Luke and Elise talked about the Brethren.

Luke finally noticed him standing there and spoke. "Well, Elise. Thanks for dinner. I'll see you

tomorrow morning. Say, around nine?" He stood and snapped his fingers and Rommel trotted to his side.

"It's a date!" She walked Luke to the French doors and waved as he walked up the steps. Then she turned back to Virgil. "Sit down. Would you like something to drink?"

Virgil shook his head and sat down on the couch. "No, thanks. What's up tomorrow?" he asked, keeping his voice casual.

She sat down next to him. "Oh, Luke is going to train some of us to work with Rommel. He and your father think it's a good idea for us all to know at least some of the basic commands."

He nodded. "It is a good idea. And we should know if something was to happen to Luke. Remember the tornado? We never know when something like that could happen again."

"I pray that it doesn't," Elise said shuddering.

He smiled at her. "Well, I'm off to Paris in the morning, and wanted to stop in and say good-bye," he said, changing the subject.

"You're so lucky," Elise told him. "I've always wanted to see Paris. To walk the Left Bank with a glass of wine, to gaze at the Mona Lisa, climb the steps at Sacré Coeur, the Eiffel Tower..." her voice trailed off.

Virgil smiled and took her hand. "I guess I'll just have to take you some day."

She turned to him, her green eyes wide. "Virgil..."

"I'll miss you, Elise," he said softly.

Elise blushed and averted her eyes. "I-I'll miss you too."

Virgil tilted her head up and leaned forward, placing a soft kiss on her lips. "Would you like me to bring you back anything?"

She shook her head, then smiled. "Have that glass of wine for me. And relax, don't think about International Rescue. Have yourself a real vacation."

"I promise." He kissed her again. "I have to go..." he told her reluctantly.

"I know." They walked to the door. "Have a good time, Virgil."

"I will. Good-bye, Elise." He pulled her close. "I'll see you soon." He started out the door but turned at her voice.

"I'll miss you too."

Posted by lillehafrue on March 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:01:19 GMT
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Saturday, October 13; 8 PM

"There, that's done," said Will as he hit 'Send'. He'd just RSVPd to the Halloween party invitation. "Now, all I need to do is to come up with a costume. I wonder what I can go as? I don't think I have anything I can cobble together, and even Mom couldn't have thought of this happening. Or could she?"

He went into the extra bedroom, where he still had boxes to unpack. He was slow in unpacking for two reasons. He still didn't believe his being on the island and part of International Rescue was real and, in any case, he wasn't sure where he wanted to put everything. Fortunately, there were only a couple of boxes left - one he'd opened and found what he wanted near the top, and one unopened as of yet.

He searched through the opened box first, then the second one, but didn't find anything he felt he could use. Sitting down on the bed, he began to ponder. Hmm. What costume can I come up with? I don't think I can ask for time off to go get one in Christchurch, or anywhere else at this point, so who can I go as. Think, Will, think!... I know! Adam, just before the fall!... Come on, Abbott, no way. There are a few people on this island who just might be offended by that. And there are children here, too. So that's definitely out. So what else or who else can I go as? He pondered for a few more minutes, then suddenly, Of course! Why didn't I think of that before? I'll have to call home for what I need, and then practice a bit. But it'll be perfect! He stood up and started to head for the phone.

"Wait a minute, Abbott. We're not in neighboring time zones. You'd better stop and figure out when'll be the best time to call home. Let's see; Arizona is eighteen hours behind, so it would be a little after 2 AM there. Guess I can't call for a while. But I'd better not put it off too long."

Posted by hobbeth on March 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:01:34 GMT
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Saturday, October 13, 2068, 6:50 p.m., Sydney (8:50 p.m., same day, Tracy Island)

They'd spent the day shopping, buying things for themselves, for each other, and occasionally for other members of the family, including wedding gifts for Kyrano and Lisa. They'd had lunch at a small, exclusive restaurant, seated in a quiet, private alcove so they didn't have to endure the stares and murmurings of those who might recognize them. Even so, it somehow got around that Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson Tracy were in town, and by the time they'd finished shopping, a few paparazzi had found their limo.

They hurried back into the car after their last shopping stop, both of them doing what they could to

evade the photographers. "Now that you've showered me with shopping time," Dianne said to Jeff as they settled back into the plush leather seat. "What next?"

"You'll see," was all that a grinning Jeff would say. He activated the intercom. "You know where to go, Estelle," he told the chauffeur "And see if you can't shake these vultures while you're at it!"

"Yes, sir!" Estelle replied crisply. What followed was a ride through some of the less scenic parts of Sydney, as well as some of the more interesting ethnic neighborhoods. Estelle kept an eye both on her driving, and the number of cabs, cars and scooters that followed them. Finally, she was satisfied that she had ditched the photographers and made her way to one of the exclusive marinas in Sydney's fine harbor.

She pulled over to the top of the ramps that edged down to the slips. "Here we are, Mr. Tracy. Are there any packages you need right now?"

"I think the one from the Chanel Boutique, Estelle," Jeff told her. He turned to Dianne. "Anything you need right away?"

"How do I know when I'm not sure what's going on?" she commented, shaking her head.

"Then just the Chanel bag, Estelle."

"Right away, Mr. Tracy."

She opened the door on the side towards the harbor, and let Jeff hand Dianne out of the car. Then she opened the trunk, but a quick glance to one side made her gasp.

"Sir, I think we've been found again."

"Then hand me the bag, and we'll make a run for it," Jeff said.

"Yes, sir!" It only took a moment for Estelle to find what he'd requested; it had been one of their last stops. "Good luck, sir, madam. Enjoy yourselves."

"We will!" Jeff took Dianne's hand and tugged. "Come on, love! Let's go!"

Together they ran down the ramps to the wide, covered slips of the marina. "They can't take pictures down here from up there," Jeff reasoned. "Hopefully the marina security will stop them before they can come down here."

"But where are we going?" Dianne asked, a touch out of breath, her hand firmly held in his.

"Ah, here we are!" Jeff stopped by a huge yacht. "This is where we're going. Dianne, may I introduce you to Benson Chan, owner and captain of La Belle Mer."

Benson Chan was a short, dapper, middle-aged man whose slightly almond eyes twinkled with mirth. "Greetings, Mr. Tracy, nice to see you again," he said to Jeff as they shook hands. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Tracy. If you would please come aboard, we'll get

underway." He made a slight bow, indicating the metal steps that had been rolled up beside the yacht.

"Yes, we'd better. There are a few news hounds sniffing along our trail," Jeff muttered. He herded Dianne up the stairs, with the captain following. "I hope you don't get seasick, love."

"I haven't yet," Dianne said as she walked out on the deck of the small ship. She turned to Jeff. "I still don't understand, Jeff. Where are we going?"

"On an overnight cruise around Sydney harbor, and along the coast a little bit." Jeff put an arm around Dianne as the captain shouted orders to cast off. Slowly they eased out from under the roofed docking area. "Let's get below so none of those photographers can get in a shot, all right?"

"Aye-aye, commander," Dianne murmured, taking his hand. "Now, where is our cabin?"

to be continued...

Posted by Tikatu on March 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:01:50 GMT

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Saturday, October 13, 2068, 11:15 p.m., Sydney harbor (Sunday, October 14, 1:15 a.m., Tracy Island)

Dancing in the dark, till the tune ends.
We're dancing in the dark, and it soon ends.
We're waltzing in the wonder of why we're here.
Time hurries by, we're here and gone.
Looking for the light of a new love,
To brighten up the night, I have you, love,
And we can face the music, together...
Dancing in the dark.

What, though love is old,
What, though song is old,
Through them we can be young.
Hear this heart of mine,
Make yours part of mine
Dear one, tell me that we're one.

It wasn't terribly dark on the yacht. The railings had been strung with tiny white lights, and the pale pine flooring reflected the hidden lights around the edges. Jeff and Dianne waltzed to the music, cheek to cheek. There was a warm breeze that stirred her hair, and had made it impossible to have candlelight. But dinner had been first class, and the view of the harbor at sunset as they'd made their easy way along had been breathtaking.

Now the song ended, and they parted enough to join lips in a passionate kiss. He smoothed his hands over the satin and velvet of her red gown, and she traced a finger along his jawline, ending with a small flourish at his chin.

"I have something for you," he said, his voice husky. He'd shed his tuxedo jacket earlier, and Dianne liked him better this way, white pleated shirtfront and spotless white tie making him seem more approachable, less stuffy.

"And I have something for you," she murmured. The breeze that had stirred her hair had disarranged it in an almost artful fashion, and Jeff liked the way it softly framed her face. He brushed a stray lock back and away.

By mutual consent, they returned to the little linen draped table. A bottle of champagne, already opened, sat in ice, waiting for another toast. And on the table sat two small boxes, both wrapped in shiny paper, with satin or velvet bows. Jeff picked up his, Dianne lifted hers, and almost in unison, they held out the gifts and said, "This is for you."

Laughter followed, then again, as each took the proffered package, they said, "You go first."

More laughter, then Jeff spread a hand towards her. "Ladies first."

Dianne acquiesced. "All right." She sat down, untying the bow slowly, glancing playfully up at Jeff to watch his reaction at the deliberate pace. He seated himself, leaning forearms on the table, fingertips touching the box she'd given him.

At last she opened the box, and extracted the jeweler's box within. "This looks familiar," she said, smiling. Opening the velvet case, she smiled a little wider. "My rings. You did find them."

"Yes. I had Julian make sure they were all right, and he cleaned them, too." Jeff peered over as she began to slide on the plain band. "Wait. I also had him inscribe something... finally figured out what I wanted to say."

"Oh!" Dianne stopped, and held the band up to the small lamp that graced the table, turning it so she could read the fine script lettering. "'From this day, my light, my love, my life'." Tears filled her eyes as she gazed at her husband. "Oh, Jeff. That's beautiful."

Reaching out, he took the ring from her fingertips, then took her left hand and slid the band onto the proper finger. "With this ring...", he murmured as he slipped it on. Then he picked up the diamond ring, and did the same to it, kissing her hand when he was through.

"Thank you, love," she said, as she took a linen napkin to dab at her eyes. Once she'd finished sniffing, she smiled at him, and nodded toward the box before him. "Your turn now."

Jeff made shorter work of the wrappings than Dianne had, and smiled when he extracted the familiar jeweler's box. He opened it, then met Dianne's gaze as he pulled the wedding band from within.

"After your accident, they had to cut the ring from your finger. I promised you a new one then. It seemed fitting to give it to you now," she explained. "Please, read the inscription."

Jeff squinted at it in the light, then gave Dianne an apologetic glance. "I'm sorry. I don't have my reading glasses..."

She laughed, and took the ring from him. "'Yours alone, today, tomorrow, always'." As he had, she took the band and slipped it on his finger. "With this ring..." Then she turned his hand over, placed a kiss in the palm, and rolled his fingers over it.

They sat quietly for a moment, listening to the sound of the engine as it eased the boat through the water. Then Jeff rose and offered his hand to Dianne. "Another dance?"

She took his hand and stood. "I don't think so. I have... another idea." She gave him a sly smile and he pulled her to him tightly, kissing her deeply.

"I think I know what your idea is," he said when they paused. "And I like the way you think." They kissed again, then Dianne took him by the hand. He grabbed his tuxedo jacket and slung it over one shoulder as she led him to their cabin... and a different kind of dance.

to be continued...

(The song is "Dancing in the Dark", by Schwartz and Deitz, lyrics copied from "Showstoppers" as sung by Barry Manilow)

Posted by Tikatu on March 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:02:09 GMT

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]Warning! Jeff and Dianne steamy spice![/I]

Sunday, October 14, 2068, 6:30 a.m., Sydney, Australia (8:30 a.m., same day, Tracy Island)

"Oh, keep doing that," Jeff sighed. He was lying face down on the bed in their cabin. Dianne knelt to one side, hands covered with cream, massaging and kneading Jeff's back and shoulders. The strong scent of Chanel Pour Homme filled the air; Jeff closed his eyes, and took in a deep breath, letting it out in a long half-sigh, half-moan. "You are good at this, woman."

"I've had a good teacher," Dianne said as she shifted her position to straddle his waist. "And plenty of practice." She smiled as she worked; the massage was her contribution to the anniversary celebration. Though it was something they indulged in from time to time, she tried to make it special on their anniversary. This year, the new scent was her idea; it wasn't something he'd have thought of, and it made him smell indescribably masculine and commanding.

Jeff smiled; he was beginning to feel the same warmth in his loins that he'd felt the first time

Dianne had given him a massage, the same stirrings and desire. But this time they were welcome, without fear or embarrassment. He knew this time he would be in control, making what was to come far more pleasurable than that first time... and even more eagerly received than that first encounter had been.

She moved her hands along his ribs, fingers encountering the scars from his accident. She knew where every one of them was, and tried not to pay special attention to them, for his sake. But they reminded her of how close she came to losing him, and as a result, she stopped her massage, leaning over his torso to plant a soft kiss on his cheek.

"That was unexpected," he murmured. "What was it for?"

"For being here," she replied.

xxxx

9:30 a.m., Sydney (11:30 a.m., Tracy Island)

La Belle Mer pulled slowly into its slip, bumping gently against the bolsters along the edges of the dock. Captain Chan shut down the engine, and a crewman climbed down a rope ladder to secure the yacht, then push the steps back up against the side.

"Well, Mr. Tracy, Mrs. Tracy, I hope you've enjoyed your little overnighter," Captain Chang said as he came down to say his farewells. His crew was already busy taking Jeff and Dianne's luggage off, piling it onto a wheeled float and strapping it down.

"We've had a wonderful and satisfying time," Dianne said with a smile, sliding her arm around Jeff's waist. "It's an anniversary I'll always remember."

"It was a great trip, Benson." Jeff offered his hand, which Benson took. "Send along the pictures when they're ready."

"I will," the captain promised. "I hope you'll come back to celebrate again with us."

"We will!" Dianne exclaimed. The captain motioned toward the steps, and Jeff led Dianne down to the docks, hand in hand all the way. They waved goodbye, then followed their luggage back toward the shore.

A familiar limousine waited for them at the end of the ramp, and Estelle paused in loading their luggage to open the door, and give Jeff a sharp salute as he slipped inside. Dianne settled back against the leather seat with a deep satisfied sigh.

"So, did you enjoy yourself, love?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"Everything was wonderful, Jeff. Absolutely wonderful."

"Then happy anniversary, dear one." Jeff leaned over to kiss her.

Dianne took his face in both hands to properly return the kiss. When they parted, she murmured, "May we have many, many more, my love."

--finis

Posted by Tikatu on March 5, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:02:46 GMT

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Dressed in her gi, Cassie headed down to the gym. The place was empty when she arrived. Going off to one side she put a mat down on the floor and began stretching out. It had been awhile since she had even practiced karate, the last time being some sparring with Mark before leaving.

After doing some stretching exercises, she moved on to practicing Kata. Feeling a little rusty, she started out with the simple ones that her uncle had first taught her. It wasn't long before her body remembered the feel of the motions. She moved on to the longer, more complicated sequences. She was so absorbed in the activity that she didn't realize she wasn't alone anymore until she happened to notice Dom standing by the door.

"Hello," she called out, as she stopped in the middle of the kata she was trying to remember.

Dom stopped in his tracks as he saw Cassie working out. The memory of their first encounter surged forward and he colored a little. "Good mornin'. Didn't know anyone was here. I'll leave you to your workout." In his mind, he was already fetching Joshua from Callie's apartment, and doing his own yoga workout in his living room.

"You don't have to leave," Cassie said quickly, though inside that's what she would rather he did. After their first encounter, she hadn't really had the desire to have another conversation with him. The fact that he had seemed to be avoiding her too, had made steering clear of him easier.

Still, we can't avoid each other forever, especially when we may very well have to work together on a rescue at some point, she thought to herself. She found herself forcing a smile as she said the next words. "The gym's big enough for the both of us."

He glanced from her to the gym, as if noticing for the first time how spacious it really was. There was indeed room enough for the two of them, and the thought of some time away from a fractious two-year old who would become easily bored as his father went through his yoga routine, appealed to him more and more.

Smiling nervously, he asked, "If you don't really mind?"

"No, it's fine," Cassie replied. "Just don't laugh at me if I mess up. I'm out of practice. In fact, I think I may have to email my brother for a reminder on this kata that I've been trying to remember."

"Ah, okay. Thank you." Dom entered the room, and pulled down another mat, positioning it near the windows that overlooked the patio. He sank down gracefully into the lotus position, closed his eyes, and began to breathe. Each deep, cleansing breath seemed to relax him more, and the tension in his shoulders and face seemed to drop away.

Cassie watched him for a few minutes, amazed at the change she saw. She had often heard that yoga was good for relaxation, but had never attempted it herself. Though she found karate and her other workouts relieved stress, she had never found them particularly relaxing.

Not wanting to disturb his concentration, Cassie started the kata sequence that had been interrupted over from the beginning. She worked through the moves, hoping that the familiar stances and arm movements would trigger her memory as to the ending of the pattern. When she got to that point though, she once again came up with a blank as to where she was supposed to go next.

Dom moved from the lotus to another, stretching position, trying to tune out Cassie's presence. He was only partially successful, and he knew that the only way he'd be totally so was to turn away and ignore her altogether, an act he felt was extremely rude. So, he turned to one side and tried to keep his eyes focused forward. Still, he noticed her sudden stop, and the puzzlement in her very stance.

Sensing eyes on her, Cassie glanced in Dom's direction. He had turned to one side but was looking in her direction, with a questioning look on his face. "I don't think I'm going to be able to remember the rest of the sequence," Cassie said, guessing as to what that look meant. "Maybe I should have kept up with the lessons with my brother instead of just keeping up with my karate through him and my uncle when I actually see him."

Dom held his pose for a moment longer, then shifted a bit. He flashed her an uncertain smile and commented, "Perhaps so." Then he arranged himself into another yoga pose, this one more intricate and making use of his flexibility.

"If you don't mind me asking, how long have you been doing yoga?" Cassie asked, trying to decide if she wanted to practice something else or just retreat to her apartment.

"Seems like forever," he replied, a touch of tension in his voice from holding the position he was in. He waited a few more seconds, then released, and sat on the mat to converse before continuing. "It's been very helpful in controlling stress." He nodded in her direction. "How long have you studied karate?"

"My uncle started teaching my brother and me during the summer we spent time in Japan with my mom's family. That was right before I started eighth grade. Both Mark and I started classes at a school in New York when we got back. I dropped out after about two years, but I still enjoy doing it for fun."

"So it's just a hobby?"

"For me, yeah. My brother has competed and is teaching some kids at the local youth club."

Cassie shrugged. "I never saw the point in trying to get different color belts. Neither my grandfather or my uncle officially have a black belt but they could hold their own against anyone who does."

"They must enjoy the philosophy behind karate, then." Dom sat up and stretched, then moved into another yoga pose, holding it for a bit longer than normal. The stress of the past few weeks was still affecting him, and he needed the extra time to shower his head.

While Dom did his yoga pose, Cassie started working on some blocking techniques. She tried to think of something else to say. She felt that the awkwardness she felt around him was starting to decrease and she didn't want to let the opportunity pass.

Taking a chance, she decided to broach the subject that had caused tension between the two of them in the first place. "So where's your son? Joshua, isn't it?" she asked, trying to recall the name from the luau a week earlier when she had seen the little boy from a distance.

Dom was quiet for a moment, then relaxed his pose, breathing deeply. When he was through, he said, "Joshua, yes. Callie's watching him for me today. I needed a little time to shower my head, and a bored wee one doesn't quite help, if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean," Cassie said, a bit wistfully. To keep from thinking about Nathan too much though Cassie quickly asked another question that had been on her mind for awhile. "How did the custody hearing turn out?"

"Ah, that." Dom resumed the lotus position for the time being. "The meeting itself didn't go as well as I'd hoped, but later, my ex dropped her petition. So it was all a waste of time in the long run. Oh, and thank you for asking," he hastily amended.

"I'm glad it turned out well for both you and Joshua in the end," Cassie replied, mildly surprised at how easy the words were to say.

"Thank you again." He grinned, the first real smile she'd seen on his face since he'd walked in. "We're very happy about the decision... though Josh never got the opportunity to know what was going on around him. A good thing, too, to my thinking."

Cassie carefully considered the next question she wanted to ask. She knew it was personal but she had to admit she was curious. Now seemed a good time to ask it.

She paused with her practice and took a deep breath. Looking over at him she said, "You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but did Joshua's mother ever want custody of him before this?"

Dom took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, "No. Never. She handed him over to me when he was born and walked away." He shook his head wistfully. "I used to love her. But now I love him more, and I'll fight tooth and nail anyone who tries to take him away."

He glanced up and frowned a bit. "What about you? You told me your wee one died. How did it happen?"

"A car accident back in June," Cassie said, quietly. It was still hard to talk about it but Dr. Lindon had kept telling her that talking about it would help, so she forged on. "My husband, Alex, had picked him up from daycare. Another driver ran a red light and ran into my husband's car. Nathan was pronounced dead at the scene. I'm just thankful my company hadn't been called to that accident. I don't think I could have dealt with seeing it."

Cassie felt tears on her cheeks. She reached up and wiped them away but continued on. "The accident wasn't my husband's fault but he blamed himself. I was grieving too much to be of any support and losing our son was too much for our already strained marriage so we went our separate ways."

Dom had started tutting a little in sympathy when she'd started her narrative, then he drew in a sharp breath when she mentioned the possibility of being called to the scene in the course of her duties. He nodded a bit when she described the dissolution of her marriage, but was left without much to say at the end. It was like watching her reopen a wound that had started healing. The only thing that came to him was, "You must have loved him very much."

"I do," Cassie said, a bittersweet smile coming to her face as she thought of her little boy. An awkward silence followed the statement. "I guess we'll never understand why some things happen," she commented, just to break the silence.

"No, we may never understand." The conversation was getting uncomfortable, so Dom decided that taking Josh for a walk on the beach would be a good idea. He got up in one fluid motion, and clapped his hands a little. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll take my wee man out for a dander on the beach. He likes to see what there is to find in the tidal pools."

Cassie nodded. She couldn't deny that being able to talk about what had happened helped at times, but it was still hard. She was grateful that Dom was trying to gracefully end the awkward scene that was unfolding.

"Enjoy yourselves," Cassie said, forcing a smile and trying to sound upbeat.

"We will." He paused at the door. "Have a good day."

He left the gym, feeling relieved, and a bit melancholy. He was physically relaxed, but the emotional side of him was still tensed up. He decided that a hot shower was in order, and then he'd fetch Josh, and go for that walk.

Cassie watched Dom disappear out of the gym. She thought about going back to her karate workout, but decided she wouldn't be able to concentrate. Instead, she decided she would head back to her apartment. First, I'll send a quick email to Mark, asking him the rest of that sequence, and then do some baking.

Written by Tikatu and starrynebulaon March 6, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:03:02 GMT

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Sunday, October 14, after 2:30 p.m., Tracy Island time, en route to Paris, France.

"So, what are your plans for the week?" Virgil asked of his co-pilot.

Kyrano smiled. "I have very little actually planned, Mr. Virgil. I will visit some old friends and tell them of my engagement. There are several places in the city I wish to see again. And..." Here his voice got soft and sad. "I will visit Tin-Tin's mother... at the cemetery."

"Ah, I see," Virgil replied, nodding in understanding. There was a quiet moment, then, hesitantly, he commented, "You don't talk about her much - Tin-Tin's mother, that is. In fact, I don't even think I know her name. Tin-Tin's never told me, either." He raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Not that I've ever thought to ask..."

"It... it is difficult to speak of her," Kyrano replied. "Like your father, I was devastated when my wife died, leaving me with a small girl to care for. The year or so after she was killed seemed like an eternity; I do not remember much of it because of my grief. Moving to the United States at your father's request was like starting anew." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then assayed a small smile. "Her name was Samani, and she looked very much like Tin-Tin does now. Her eyes were brown, though, and her skin darker."

"She must have been beautiful," Virgil murmured.

"She was, as beautiful as her namesake. Her father named her for an Indonesian butterfly, the vanessa samani." Kyrano paused, and sighed. "I will see him again, in Paris. He has been an invalid for many years; Samani's sister's family cares for him."

Virgil shot a surprised glance at Kyrano. "Tin-Tin has an aunt? And cousins? She's never said..."

"I know. We have drifted apart somewhat, my wife's family and I. Much like your family has with your mother's kin." Kyrano looked out the window at his side; there were clouds beneath them that thickened as they flew west, but through the infrequent parts he could see shoreline, and land. "I have kept up a correspondence with my father-in-law, telling him about Tin-Tin's accomplishments, but the letters have diminished to a handful per year now. Still, I feel it is proper that I tell him about my engagement to Lisa."

Virgil nodded. "I wonder if Dad did something similar when he remarried." He glanced over the instruments, and nudged the plane to a slightly new heading. "Tell me: how did Samani die?"

The Malaysian sighed. "She was a scholar, my Samani. Her field of study was Renaissance history, and she had become a frequent lecturer at universities throughout Europe. When we met, she was beginning to work on her doctoral dissertation. She was visiting the Renaissance room in one of the Paris libraries when the building was hit by lightning. It caught fire, and..." He paused and sighed again. "She died."

They were silent for a time again, then Virgil said quietly, "Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for asking," Kyrano replied simply. "It has been a long time since I have thought on these matters. I hold Samani dear in my heart and in my memory, but it is easier to live if one does not dwell on the past."

"Like my father did."

"Yes." Again, there was a moment of quiet, then Kyrano straightened in his seat a little. "And what are your plans for this visit, Mr. Virgil?"

Virgil smiled. "Well, I plan on shopping a lot. I need new clothes, and there are gifts to buy for certain... ahem... upcoming events. I brought along my paints, so I can spend time capturing anything that suits my fancy while I'm there. There are the art galleries and museums, and the gift I was given included tickets to three different performances; one to the opera, one to the Trans-Siberian Orchestra's performance, and one to a musical. I also purchased tickets to a concert by Chartreuse Petunias; they're one of my favorite alternative rock groups." His smile widened to a grin. "I'll be keeping pretty busy."

"It sounds as if you will," Kyrano said.

"The only thing that would make it perfect is if I could have taken someone along to share it with."

"Like Miss Elise?"

Kyrano got another surprised look for his comment. "How did you know?" Virgil asked.

Kyrano smiled, an expression both serene and slightly teasing. "As your father's retainer, I see much that others do not see... including which of his sons has romance on his mind, and with whom."

Virgil chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind," he said, his tone dry. "Yeah, I wish I could have brought Elise, but when I was given the gift, I had no idea things were moving in that direction. Neither did Dad or Mom. I'll bring her to Paris some time, if it works out between us."

"And I am sure she will enjoy it," Kyrano said. "As will Lisa, when I bring her to the City of Lights."

Posted by Tikatu on March 6, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:06:15 GMT

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*****Sunday, October 14, Tracy Island; Callie's apartment; around 3 p.m. (8 p.m. the previous evening in Tuscaloosa, Alabama)*****

Relaxing in her apartment, Callie watched TV as her college football team played a school from Wisconsin for their homecoming game. When she saw an ad for an upcoming Halloween sale,

she gasped. "Oh, no! I forgot about that RSVP for the Halloween party. I still haven't even picked a costume yet." Upon calming herself, she stood up and looked around for the invitation.

After a few minutes, she found it near her computer. She sat down in the chair and started looking up information on costumes. "I don't have a lot of time to do this, either." She had looked up all kinds of different costumes, including a replica of a 1960s astronaut uniform. "Wow! It looks like the one I read about in college, when the space program really took off." Thinking carefully, though, she shook her head. "No, as much as I'd like this, it'd be way too hot to wear here. I couldn't ask them to turn up the air conditioning just for me. I need an outfit that's a little more comfortable."

She continued checking sites for the next 30 minutes, but she kept shaking her head. "None of these would work for me. I just don't like how they look, too revealing." Swiveling the chair to face the TV again, she thought deeply. "Wait a minute. I haven't done anything for myself since my breakup with Roger. He got his life together and was able to move on. That's what's holding me back now. I've got to do something to get myself moving on...and perhaps more open." She started looking through the costumes online again. "Maybe I can get one that's revealing enough without scaring the kids." She kept searching until she noticed a costume that got her attention. "Wow. I've never seen a costume like this before. And it's just right. I can show some leg and maybe a little bust, but not to the point of making Tyler and Alex cringe." She completed the online order and smiled. "I think I'm going to turn a few heads come Halloween."

Grabbing the invitation, she looked at the details. "To RSVP, I have to bring some food and notify Elise and/or Nikki as to what I'm going to bring." She paced around wondering what she could cook up. "Hmm...I could do that recipe for chicken bat wings. Yeah, that'll work." She turned on her wrist comm and said, "Hey, Elise, can you read me?"

Elise responded to the call. "Hi, Callie. What can I do for you?"

"I've got my dish picked out for the Halloween party. How does chicken bat wings sound?"

"I hope they're not the same as Luke's hot wings," Elise said with some concern.

"No, they won't be. I'm going to make a chicken batter and create the bat-shaped wings. That okay with you?"

"Absolutely! I'll be glad to put you down as officially bringing chicken bat wings. Oh, have you picked out a costume yet?"

Callie smiled with her answer. "Oh, yeah, I've got one picked out...one that may surprise some people."

Elise said, "All right, then. You're all set for the party."

"Great! Thanks. I'll see you later." After disconnecting, Callie's smile got wider. "It's time I moved on, and there's nothing like a Halloween party to take that big step."

Posted by TracyFan4Ever on March 6, 2008

Monday, October 15th, Tracy Island beach, a little after 9:00 am...

"Good boy. Here, have a drink." Luke poured some water into his hand and Rommel eagerly licked it up. Suddenly the dog looked up and gave a low "Woof". Luke turned to see Gordon walking towards them.

"Hey!" Gordon waved. "Hope I'm not late."

Luke shook his head. "Not at all. Scott and Elise should be here soon."

They chatted for a few minutes, until the others arrived. "Sorry we're late," Scott said. "We were..." he glanced at Elise. "Discussing a few things."

Elise folded her arms across her chest. "Discussing? Funny, I thought we were arguing."

Luke glanced at Gordon who stifled a laugh. "OK then, why don't we get started." He snapped his fingers and Rommel trotted over to him. "Rom will always obey me first; however, there are a few commands he will respond to with others." As he spoke, Luke pulled an orange vest out of his backpack. He motioned to Rommel and fastened the vest on the dog, who instantly stood at attention, not even flinching when a sea gull flew overhead.

Scott whistled, impressed. "Wow. It's like he's a different dog."

Luke nodded. "He knows that when the vest is on, it's working time, not play time. There's not much that can distract him." He stood and held his hand up flat, then brought it down. Rommel sat. "That's the first thing I want to teach you. He may balk at first, since it's not me, but he'll catch on soon enough. So will you," Luke added with a wink.

He stepped back and watched as Scott worked with Rommel. At first the dog wouldn't respond, but Scott refused to back down, and finally was obeyed. "Good dog," Scott told him. Luke handed Scott a dog biscuit. Scott held it out and the dog gobbled it down.

Gordon was next. Rommel obeyed a little quicker for him and got a treat sooner. When Elise held up her hand, the dog sat instantly.

Scott frowned at the dog. "What are you, a ladies man?"

Luke chuckled. "No, he's used to her. She's been working with me for a couple of days now." Luke snapped his fingers and once again, the dog moved to his side. "Now, here's the command for search." He held his hand up flat again, then quickly pointed. Rommel ran off, sniffing at the ground as he went. Luke watched for a moment, then called him back. "I don't usually do that one unless one of the boys are helping me. Rom gets frustrated if he can't find what he's supposed to be looking for."

Gordon raised an eyebrow. "Tyler and Alex?" Luke nodded. "I didn't realize they were down here

so much."

Luke nodded. "They're two of my best helpers," he said with a grin. "They make great victims."

Scott laughed, "I'm sure they do!"

They continued to work until Luke called a halt. "I know it's only been an hour or so, but he gets balky if I push him too much." He took the vest off and Rommel gave himself a good shake. "Good dog." He picked up a stick and threw it. "GO!" The dog bolted after the stick. Luke watched him, smiling, then turned to the others. "Any questions?"

Elise shook her head. "No, I'm all set. I need to get back to the house anyway. I left laundry in." She looked at Scott. "We'll finish our discussion later." She turned on her heel and marched back towards the Cliff House.

Gordon winced. "Man, what did you do now?"

Scott sighed and ran a hand over his head. "I merely mentioned that she should take Mobile Control the next time we have a rescue. She lit into me, asking if I was going actually let her do it this time."

Gordon grinned. "Well, she does have a point there, bro. You did sort of take over last time she manned controls."

"I know, but dammit..." His voice trailed off and he sighed. "I shouldn't have. It was just instinct."

Luke shrugged. "It's hard to let go once you've been in charge. That's just one of the things my old boss and I didn't see eye to eye with."

Scott nodded. "Yeah, well, I'd better let her cool off before I try and talk to her again." He glanced up at the sky. "Though with this heat, I don't think I'll be cooling off anytime soon. Thanks for the lesson, Luke. Same time tomorrow?"

"Yes. It's better if I work him at a consistent time. Good luck with Elise," Luke told him. After Scott had left, he turned to Gordon. "He's toast."

Gordon laughed. "Oh yeah he is!" Rommel trotted back and dropped the stick at his feet. Gordon obliged by throwing it and the dog chased after it. "I'm going to take a quick dip, want to join me?"

Luke nodded and a few minutes later, both men and dog were romping in the waves. Gordon had brought the stick and he and Rommel were playing tug of war. Luke laid back in the water and sighed contentedly. Wouldn't be able to do this in Colorado. A loud splash caught his attention and he looked up as Rommel galloped through the waves, catching Gordon in the chest and knocking him down. "Rommel! No!"

Gordon came up, spluttering and laughing. "No worries, I asked for it." He shook the water out of his ears. He moved to sit in the breaker line, throwing the stick out deep for the dog to fetch. Luke joined him. "It's nice having a dog around here. Haven't been around one since we moved from

the farm."

"Quite a culture shock moving from there to here." Luke looked at the wide expanse of the sea. "I know it was for me. Still is!" They both laughed.

A sudden movement caught Luke's eye and he turned. John was jogging along the beach. He gave a brief wave as he passed them, then continued on.

Gordon watched Luke, a grin blossoming on his face. "Like blonds there, do you, Luke?"

Luke started, his face going bright red. "I don't know what you mean," he said getting to his feet and walking out of the water.

Gordon chuckled and followed. "C'mon, I saw you looking at him. Admit it!"

Luke groaned and sat down in the sand, resting his head on his knees. "I take the Fifth." Gordon laughed and sat down next to him. Luke looked up. "OK, you're right, I'm gay. How'd you know? Besides me leering after your brother that is."

"It was the Beach Babe incident a couple of weeks ago. You mentioned PFLAG. I had a bud in WASP whose sister is gay. He went to functions whenever we were landside," Gordon told him. "And watching you watch John... That was another big clue."

Luke groaned again. "Am I that obvious?"

"No, I'm only teasing you."

"Well, that's something." Luke grew quiet a moment. "It's not a problem, is it? Me being gay?"

"Not with me," Gordon replied. "And probably not with the rest of my family either, so relax."

"Thanks, Gordon."

"No worries." He got to his feet. "Though there is one thing... You really like John? Is it because he's blond?"

Luke looked startled a moment, then spying the twinkle in Gordon's eye, grinned. "You know, I'm not really sure. I usually go for redheads."

Gordon burst out laughing and with a wave, started back towards the house.

Posted by lillehafrue on March 8, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:06:53 GMT

Monday, October 15, 2068, 5:15 p.m., Tracy Island

Scott found himself in the Villa's workout room, hands taped, doing a seemingly endless tattoo on the leather speed bag. He didn't hear the door swish open or anyone enter, lost as he was in his thoughts.

What's wrong with me? I had no problem training plenty of wet-behind-the-ears pilots in the Air Force. Men and women alike. No problems. A lot of them went on to be top guns, as I was. But now... I don't know.

He sighed, and gave the speed bag one last, savage punch. It swung up and away; as it came back, he grabbed it to stop it from continuing its swing. He swept a hand across his nose, and turned... only to find he had an audience: his stepmother.

"That's some punch you have there, Scott," she said, smiling slightly. She was dressed in workout clothes, and as she spoke, she stretched, beginning the sequence of exercises he recognized as being part of her physical therapy.

"Yeah. Just trying to get some frustration out." He ran both hands through his hair. "Where's Gordon? Or Nikki? Aren't they supposed to be helping you with this?"

"I'm at a point where I can do this myself. I go back to the physio on Friday to see if the muscles are healing the way they should be," she explained. Her voice strained a bit as she stretched. "So what are you frustrated about?"

Scott sighed again, and dropped to a bench, rubbing the back of his neck. He lifted troubled eyes to Dianne. "I dunno. I seem to be having trouble connecting with some of our new recruits."

"Oh? How so?" Dianne concentrated on her leg lift, giving Scott a bit of emotional distance.

"I can't seem to train them to fly." He let out a pent-up breath. "First Kat, now Cassie. I suggested today that Cassie have someone else teach her to fly, like Kat ended up doing." He shook his head slowly. "She suggested, none too politely either, that maybe the problem was me." He leaned forward, his expression caught between hope and dread. "Is it me, Mom? Is it?"

Dianne sighed, and sat up, directing her entire attention to her stepson. "Y'know, Scott, I couldn't tell you for sure. I haven't seen you teach flying before. It might be that you're intimidating to these women."

"I didn't have any trouble teaching women in the Air Force," Scott began.

"But you're not in the Air Force now," Dianne reminded him. "You need to remember that, Scott. You can't treat our new civilian recruits the same way you treated those you've taught in the past."

"Mom, I didn't think I was!" Scott exclaimed. "I thought I was being patient and giving clear instructions. Brandon was fine... Luke's doing okay." He paused, then his eyes widened. "And Nikki! Nikki did just fine! No problems there! Passed her test on the first try. And Kat said she'd

had difficulties learning to fly before she met me."

"True. Still, perhaps Nikki didn't feel intimidated by you," Dianne replied. "And perhaps Kat did to an extent, and Cassie does. I seem to remember that Christopher had something against you... though I'm hard pressed to know where it came from."

"Yeah. I don't know where that came from, Mom -- at least, before the rescue of the Prime Minister. After that, well..." Scott took in a deep breath and let it out. "In fact, I had a little run-in with Elise about Mobile Control today." He shifted uncomfortably. "I realize I... I don't like not being in the driver's seat there."

"If anyone understands that, Elise does," Dianne said with a chuckle. "Maybe we need to keep you home sometime and let you take the desk while Elise runs Mobile Control."

Scott made a face and gave Dianne a baleful look. "You know I hate the desk."

"Yes, and Jeff hates not being behind it as much as you dislike giving up Mobile Control. Do you both some good to step away from your usual role." Dianne grinned playfully at him for a moment, then sobered. "Seriously, Scott, you need to step back and evaluate how you're teaching. Ask Virgil what he thinks; he's seen you working with the recruits enough."

"He's already mentioned it to me," he replied sourly. "Suggested I try talking to her in a more relaxed setting."

"Might work, Scott." Dianne went back to stretching. "You should invite her for a walk on the beach or something."

He sighed heavily again. "I guess so. I'll give it some thought."

"Do more than think about it, Scott." Dianne sighed, and winced. "Give me hand here, would you? Press against my foot so I have something to work with?"

"Sure, Mom." Scott moved in to help his stepmother, pushing the idea about talking with Cassie to the back of his mind.

Posted by Tikatu on March 8, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:07:29 GMT

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The Cliff House, later that evening...

The timer on the oven went off, and Cassie got up from her chair and walked over to the oven. Slipping on the oven mitts, she took the last batch of cookies out of the oven and sat it on top of the stove. Taking off the mitts she sat them on the counter.

Baking hadn't cleared her mind like she had hoped it would. The end to another rough flying lesson with Scott was still running through her head. Maybe talking to Luke would help, she thought with a sigh.

She put some of the chocolate chip cookies on a plate and then made the short trip over to Luke's apartment.

Luke was sitting at his desk, working on paperwork when he heard the knock at the balcony door. He looked up as Rommel walked over. "Cassie? Come on in."

Cassie walked into her friend's apartment. "Hi, Luke. Is this a bad time?" she asked.

He shook his head and put his pen down. "Doing stuff for my 'official' job. It'll wait." He eyed the plate in her hand. "Are those cookies?" She nodded. "Chocolate chip cookies?" She nodded again. "Well, what are you standing there in the doorway for, sit down!" He grinned as he led her towards the couch. "Want something to drink? I've got milk, beer, water..."

"Milk will be fine," she replied as she took a seat on the couch. She placed the plate of cookies on the coffee table as Luke headed for the kitchen. "I wanted to talk to you about something," she told him as he opened the refrigerator.

Luke brought back two tall glasses of milk. His was chocolate. "What?" he asked at her upturned eyebrow. "Chocolate milk goes best with cookies; didn't your mother ever tell you that?" She shook her head and smiled, then it faded. "So, what's up?"

"I had another rough flying lesson with Scott today," she told him, figuring that she might as well get right to the point. "Granted none of them have exactly gone smoothly. It seems like every time I get in the simulator my mind goes blank. Everything I've learned about the plane controls and the terminology just disappears. I've lost track of how many times I've actually crashed in the simulations."

Luke took a bite of cookie. "We've all done that, Cass. Hell, I'm surprised we still have a flying simulator after I get out of it. I'm much better at jumping out of planes than piloting them."

Cassie took a swallow of the milk before continuing. "Well, Scott must think I'm hopeless because he suggested that maybe I should take lessons from someone else at the end of the lesson today," she told him, thinking about the lesson she had that afternoon. "Of course, I probably should have never said what I did when he suggested that. I sort of told him that maybe the problem was his teaching methods and not me."

"Ouch. Scott's having a bad day." Luke shook his head. "He and Elise had a bit of a disagreement this morning, too. Probably what put him in a mood."

"Well, he definitely didn't look too happy when I said that," Cassie told him. "He told me we'd discuss it further later and then left. The last thing I need is Scott being angry with me. We didn't exactly get off on the right foot and I just can't shake the feeling that I need to prove myself to him. The way I've been taking to the flying lessons is definitely not helping that."

"Cassie, you're being too hard on yourself. We all have trouble with something." He took another cookie. "What makes you think you two got off wrong? I've never seen him acting funny towards you."

"There was an incident on the plane when Elise and Scott picked me up for my initial interview. I got the feeling that Scott was starting the interview right then and there. Like he was looking for some reason for me not to get the job." Cassie paused, taking a drink of her milk before continuing. "He apologized later, but I guess I still haven't shaken the feeling that I need to prove to him that I belong here. I was hoping that if I could do okay with the flying lessons then maybe that would show that I can cut it here. Seems the more time I put into doing well with them, the worse I get."

Luke frowned. "That doesn't sound like Scott. He was fine training with Rom and me this morning." He looked up at her. "Are you sure you're not reading into something that's not there?"

Cassie placed the glass of milk down on the coffee table and then leaned back against the couch. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure anymore. Maybe I am over reacting. After all, growing up Dad was always telling me that I shouldn't be a firefighter. That it was too hard and too dangerous. All I ever wanted though was to follow his in his shoes. To be just like him. Even Alex told me the same the same thing. I've never once had second thoughts about my career choice despite that though. Maybe I'm a little defensive when it comes to my career because of that though."

He nodded. "That could be. Look, give the guy a chance. I know he can be stubborn; we all are at times, but he's good at what he does. And so are you." He took her hand. "Stop doubting yourself, Cass; that's half your problem." He got up and took her glass to the kitchen. "You know," he called. "This is a good thing. Here you don't have the pressure of family breathing down your neck. You'll stand or fall on your own two feet."

"That's a nice thought, Morel," Cassie replied in a flat tone. "I just hope I do more standing than falling."

Luke chuckled. "Uh-oh, I know I'm in trouble when you call me by my last name." When she didn't respond, he sighed and crouched down next to her. "Cassie, look at me." She turned, her eyes troubled. "I'm not trying to be mean. You're your own worst critic. You always have been. You can do this. No, it's not going to be easy; nothing that matters is."

Cassie nodded, knowing her friend was right. "I still don't know what I'm going to say to Scott. I sure can't avoid him forever and it's definitely my turn to apologize. Maybe he's right. Maybe it would be better for someone else to give me the lessons though that kind of feels like I'm admitting defeat."

"Then don't. Suck it up and stick with Scott." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "I know I would."

Cassie laughed at Luke's last comment. "Somehow I don't think he would exactly appreciate your advances, Luke."

He flopped down on the couch, sighing dramatically. "I suppose not...woe is me." He turned to her, grinning. "There, feeling better?"

"Yes," Cassie admitted. "Too bad you're not straight. You always seem to know how to make a girl feel better."

Luke laughed. "The ladies wouldn't have a chance if I were straight. It's better this way." He took her hand. "Think you'll be able to sleep now?"

Cassie nodded. "I think so. Scott said he wanted to talk about this afternoon at some point anyway. I'll wait for him to bring the subject up and then apologize. Don't be surprised if I come knocking on your door again after that conversation though."

"No problem. I'll probably still be doing paperwork." He got up and led her to the door. Rommel gave her a "whoof" and a quick lick on the hand before lying back down on the floor. "Good night, Cass."

"Good night, Luke. And thanks for being there for me."

"Sleep well." He watched her walk across the balcony to her apartment. With one last wave, she stepped inside. He sighed and went back to his desk to finish his work.

Post by lillehafrue and starrynebula on March 9, 2007

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:07:47 GMT

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Monday, October 15, 2068, 9 a.m. Paris, France (8 p.m. Same day, Tracy Island)

Kyrano left the restaurant full and satisfied. He was staying in the Hilton de la Défense, where he'd worked as head chef before being hired by Jeff Tracy. He hadn't worked the breakfast shift, so he felt there'd be no one there he would know. His intentions were to eat luncheon there sometime during the week, and see who might still be there. Dinner, as well, for he had known several of the staff from that shift. Even so, he held out slim hopes of meeting someone who would remember him. Kitchen staff tended to have high turnover, and he knew this well.

He had arranged for a car to pick him up at 9:15, which gave him a few moments to gather up some items he wished to take with him. His first stop would be at his late wife's family's home, to see his father-in-law.

The driver tipped his hat as he opened the door for Kyrano. Pausing before climbing in, Kyrano asked, "Parlez-vous français ou anglais?"

The driver looked surprised. "Je parle français et anglais, mais je préfère le français."

"Trés bien. Je te parlerai en français." Kyrano smiled and entered the car. The driver shut the door, and took his place up front. Kyrano gave him the address and off they went.

En route, Kyrano took in the sights of the city. The leaves were bright with color where they hadn't already fallen to the ground, and the people were wearing sweaters and long coats against the cool breezes. The outdoor cafés weren't as populated -- but then, it wasn't lunch time yet. The sky was a brilliant blue, though, and the leaves contrasted with it in a way that Kyrano wished he could capture and bring back to Lisa.

The driver brought him to an apartment building, one of the older ones, covered in brick and ivy that twined around the rails of the cast iron balcony rails. Kyrano alighted, pulling a tote bag with him. He instructed the driver to return in two hours, or when called, whichever came first. The driver smiled and nodded.

The front door of the building opened, and a dark-haired, middle-aged lady looked out. It seems I am expected, Kyrano thought as he approached.

"Bonjour, Tuan," the lady said with a regal nod. She was younger than he was, with café-au-lait skin that was just beginning to line with wrinkles. She was short, and slightly plump, a contrast to his Samani, who was taller and willowy when they met.

"Bonjour, Tamea," Kyrano said, bowing. "It is good to see you again."

Tamea smiled slightly. "It has been a long time." She closed the door and indicated the interior with a hand. "Come in. He is awake."

Kyrano nodded, and followed his sister-in-law to one of the rear apartments. The sitting room overlooked a walled garden, one where a few flowers still braved the chilly nights. An elderly man, well into his ninth decade, sat in a comfortable chair before the wide sliding glass doors. He glanced up as Kyrano came in, and his wrinkled face creased in a smile.

"Tuan. It is good to see you again," he said, his voice sharpened by age.

Kyrano bowed low. "And to see you, Elias."

"Come, sit." Elias indicated another comfortable chair near him. He spoke to Tamea. "Tea, please, for me and my guest."

"Yes, Father," Tamea said before bustling off to the kitchen.

Kyrano took the proffered chair, sitting with the bundle he'd brought in his lap. "How are you, Elias?"

Elias smiled again. "I am well, though my memory is not what it used to be." He glanced out over the garden. "I wish you could have come earlier in the year; my garden flourished and the butterflies were so beautiful. I saw one or two species I had not seen before."

"Did you get pictures?" Kyrano asked.

Elias waved a hand. "I am too old for such things now, and Tamea scares them away. But I did

mark them in my book." He pulled a worn leather journal from the table beside him. "Here, you see..."

He opened the book, and found the page he was looking for. Kyrano noticed that the journal was nearly full, only a few pages were left to fill.

"Just the other day I saw a vanessa atalanta, what is commonly known as a Red Admiral," Elias said. "I hope to see more of them before winter really sets in here. They are often the last butterflies to be seen in the autumn." He held up his book, where a rough sketch in colored pencil showed the markings of the butterfly.

"You still sketch them very well, Elias. It reminds me; I have brought something for you." He pulled a wrapped package from his bag and handed it to the old man.

"A gift!" Elias's eyes lit up as he opened the package. He lifted free the gift. "Oh, this is magnificent! Where did you get it?"

Kyrano smiled. The picture was a small framed sketch of a butterfly with iridescent blue wings edged by a band of black and fringed with white. Small orange spots appeared at the lowest edge of the smaller wing set, and tiny white and black tufts stuck out from the fringe like little tails. The background was orange and green, and it was signed "C. Tracy". "My employer's daughter is a budding artist, and sketched this on a visit to Kansas. Her brother helped her identify it."

"A cupido comyntas. It is beautiful! Tamea, come and see! Come and see the gift Tuan has brought!"

Tamea came from the kitchen. "What is it, Father?" she asked. "The tea is almost ready... oh!"

Elias beamed as he handed the picture for her to see. "This is lovely. Tuan, did you bring this?" she asked.

"Yes, I did," Kyrano said with a soft smile. I believe Tamea is becoming hard of hearing...

"It is a very nice gift," she said, handing the picture back to her father. With a quick motion, she slipped a low table between the two chairs. "I will bring the tea in a moment."

Elias put the picture aside. "Now, what of my granddaughter? Have you brought a picture of her?"

"Yes, I have, Elias." Kyrano pulled an envelope from the tote. "This was taken in my garden, by a young man who is courting my daughter. You can see by the way he posed her how fond he is of her."

"Ah, yes. She is so beautiful, and reminds me so much of her mother," Elias said as he pulled the picture from the envelope. He glanced over at Kyrano. "Is this the same young man you spoke of before? The race car driver?"

"No, Elias. This is a young man she works with. Very different from the other. It is too soon to tell if they will have a future, but..." Kyrano shrugged slightly. "Time will tell all."

"Ah, I see." Elias nodded, and put Tin-Tin's picture aside.

Tamea came out with the tray of green tea and set it down. Once she had, Elias showed her the picture of Tin-Tin. "Does she not remind you of your sister?"

"Yes, Father. She does." The tone in Tamea's voice was slightly disapproving as she handed the picture back. Kyrano knew that Tamea had always been jealous of her sister, but was surprised that it lasted so long after Samani's death.

Kyrano took it upon himself to pour the tea, and after both he and Elias had taken a few sips, he cleared his throat. "Elias, Tamea, I have something important to tell you." He pulled his album, the new one that Lisa and Tin-Tin had given him, and opened it. "This is another picture taken by that same young man and given to me for my birthday. The lady who Tin-Tin is sitting with is named Lisa Parkhurst. I have known her for two years now, and... she is my fiancée."

There was a silence as Elias and Tamea looked over the picture. Finally, Tamea spoke. "She seems like a motherly woman." She glanced at Kyrano. "Does she have children?"

He was surprised at the question. "Yes, she does. She has been divorced for many years, and has three grown children, and several grandchildren." He didn't think it wise to mention that one of her children was his employer's new wife... or the interesting relationships that would develop from the marriage.

"What do they have to say about your marrying her?" Tamea persisted. "It is clear how Tin-Tin feels from the picture."

"They are in favor of it." Which was perfectly true, even with Douglas's half-hearted endorsement.

His attention turned to Elias as the old man heaved a sigh. "I... I hope you will be happy with her."

"I will, Elias. I already am. But I will never forget Samani. I cannot, for her face and figure are before me always in Tin-Tin."

"When will you be married?" Tamea asked. "Will you be bringing your... Lisa... to Paris?"

"Yes, I will. And we will visit, so you may meet her."

The old man took a deep breath, and let it out, then smiled at Kyrano. "I think... I think we must celebrate, Tuan. Tamea, where is the cognac?"

Kyrano let out a soft, relieved sigh. These people were his family in a way, even if they were not close, and he was pleased to know that they were happy for him.

Posted by Tikatu on March 9, 2008

Monday, October 15, 2068, 10:20 p.m., Tracy Island

"Jeff, which one?" Dianne sounded weary and frustrated.

Jeff sighed and came back to the laptop Dianne had perched on the ottoman. They had sent their RSVP for themselves and the children along to Elise, and they agreed that they'd decide later on what to bring -- especially since few of the family would be able to get into the Villa kitchen to actually bake or cook for the party. John said he would handle costumes for himself and Tyler, which left Alex and Cherie to choose their own... and for Jeff and Dianne to wrangle over who they would go to the party as.

"Which ones did you like again?" he asked as he sat down next to her on the sofa. "I've seen so many costumes that my head is swimming."

"We narrowed it down to these two," Dianne said, pulling up windows with both sets of costumes in them. They had decided to go as a couple, which had both limited and expanded their choices at once.

He looked at each costume, flicking back and forth between them, then finally left one window on top. "This one. It shouldn't be as much of a pain to put on. And it has pants, not tights."

"So, you don't want to go as a superhero?" Dianne asked, chuckling a little. "Or see me go as one?"

Jeff sat back, hands behind his head. "I'll admit, love, that you would look spectacular in that suit... what little of it there is. But me? I'm not given to wearing my underwear outside my clothing, thank you very much."

She eyed him speculatively. "Well, with this other one, you'll have to dye your hair...."

He took his hands down. "What do you mean? Why can't I go as a more... mature version of the character?"

"Because, you won't look right unless you do," Dianne insisted. "Then there's the facial hair..."

Jeff groaned. "Oh God, not more of that." He waved a hand toward the screen. "At least it's not a full beard. I can draw that thing on, instead of wearing the mustache."

"You will weah the mustache, suh," Dianne drawled. "Ah'll hafta weah a wig, aftuh all."

He grumbled for a moment, then subsided. "Okay, okay! I'll do it." He waved at the screen. "Go ahead, order it. Have them ship it out to us on the mail plane."

Dianne leaned over to kiss him. "Thanks, love." She ran a hand through his hair, and said, "You know, you're going to be particularly handsome with your hair dyed."

"Just don't get used to it," he replied, cupping her face with his hand. "I worked hard to get all these gray hairs... or my sons worked hard to give them to me... and they are a badge of honor."

Dianne smiled slyly, and chuckled. "Keep telling yourself that, Jeff." She leaned in for another kiss. "Just keep telling yourself that."

Posted by Tikatu on March 9, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:08:36 GMT

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Tuesday, October 16, 2068, 10:20 a.m., Tracy Island

Jeff listened intently as Cassie went over the report she had prepared on her analysis of the cane fire. As he glanced over at Brains, he could see that the scientist was just as engrossed in the report.

"I'd recommend more caution anytime a vehicle, like a chopper, is being approached when there is fire around. There is always a chance of an explosion, like what happened with the helicopter in this case. Anyone trained to fight fires is well aware of this, and the first thing any survivors of a crash like this one would do is put as much distance between themselves and the downed aircraft," Cassie said confidently.

Her nervousness about presenting the information had disappeared as soon as she had started her report. She was in her element right now. Cassie glanced down at her notes before continuing.

"Alan also left the Firefly when he spotted the survivor and followed the guy on foot. Now, if the Firefly had been in a terrain on which it couldn't continue that would be one thing, but from the information I was given, it doesn't indicate that. He should have taken the Firefly as far as possible. By leaving the Firefly and continuing on foot, he ran the risk of being cut off from the vehicle."

Jeff nodded. "A very good point. I don't think that even occurred to anyone else," he commented.

He had been impressed so far with Cassie's report as well as with her ability to answer the questions that he and Brains had asked throughout it. She had answered them all without losing track of where she had been in the report she was given.

"The last concern I have is more general rather than specific to anything that happened in this instance. For the most part, IR followed the instructions given to them by the local personnel on scene which is fine. I realize that coordinating with the local rescue personnel is important. However, my concern is this - if the local personnel weren't there to rely on would IR know how to proceed without their guidance?"

"A very good question, and to answer it for you, several members of the team have expressed that they are unsure about how to go about fighting a fire," Jeff commented. "Hence, the reason we brought you on board."

Cassie nodded, having expected a reply along those lines.

"Perhaps it is time that Cassie conducts a training session or two of her own, Mr. Tracy," Brains commented. "She could present some of the ideas she presented here today to the rest of the team, as well as going over some general guidelines on how to proceed."

Jeff nodded. "A very good suggestion, Brains. How do you feel about it, Cassie? You've only been here a couple of weeks. Do you feel ready to be the trainer instead of the trainee?"

"Yes, Mr. Tracy," she replied without hesitation. "Wildfires and fires within a building are two different things. Given that the cane fire was a wildfire, I think it would be best to concentrate on fighting wildfires right now and then handle building fires at a later time."

"Sounds reasonable. IR has had more experience dealing with building fires than wildfires. No point in overwhelming the troops by tackling everything at once," Jeff said, adding to the notes he had been taking on a data padd. "How would you like to go about the training session?"

"Well," Cassie began, making some preliminary plans in her head. "It might be best to split it up so as to not overwhelm everybody. Perhaps present the analysis of the cane fire rescue in one session and then do some training on how to fight a wildfire in general."

Cassie paused for a moment, deciding whether to suggest her next idea or not. She finally decided to go for it.

"I have another suggestion to make. Learning about how to fight a fire in theory is quite different then actually doing so. Granted IR has fought fires before, but that was without the training. In the fire academy, we go through what are known as live fire training drills. It's basically a test situation where we are presented with a controlled fire and we use our training to put it out. Afterward, we receive feedback on our performance. When I went through the academy in the city, the live fire drills that were done were building fires. The New York City Fire Department does them in what are known as Simulated Structural Fire Buildings in which they use computers to control the situation. When I was training I found those drills quite helpful because it allows you to put what you were taught to use in a controlled situation. I participated in a live fire drill when I did the wildfire training course out in California. They're a bit more complicated to set up; in the one I participated in, the foresters out there were doing a controlled burn which we used for our advantage. If we could find a safe way to conduct a live fire drill of our own I think it would be beneficial to the training process."

Jeff thought about her suggestion. "What do you think, Brains. Think we could pull off live fire training here on the island?" he asked, looking over at the scientist.

Brains remained silent for a moment. "If we did it on the far side of the island, there wouldn't be any danger to any of the facilities. Cassie has a point; putting theory into practice in a controlled situation could be beneficial. I'm sure Cassie and I could find a way to conduct a controlled fire."

"Very well," Jeff glanced down at a calendar. "Think a week would give you enough time to pull it off? We could schedule the training sessions on Friday and Monday afternoons," he said, looking up at Cassie. "We can rearrange your training schedule a little if need be if you need extra time to prepare, though with Virgil in Paris; you do have the time you normally spend with him open."

"I can be ready to conduct the training session by Friday," Cassie told him. She looked from Jeff to Brains. "Think we can get a live fire scenario set up in the next week?"

"It might mean putting in some time over the weekend but we should be able to pull it off," the scientist replied with a nod.

"Very well," Jeff said. "I'll send out an email to everyone informing them of the upcoming training. Is there anything else either of you would like to discuss at this point?"

Jeff looked to Cassie and then to Brains. Both of them replied no. "Then this meeting is concluded. Keep me informed on how the plans for this training are coming along."

"Yes, sir," Cassie replied.

"Of course, Mr. Tracy," Brains answered.

Cassie and Brains stood up and headed out of the office.

"We should probably start working out the details as soon as possible," Brains said to Cassie as they exited the lounge.

Posted by starrynebula on March 10, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:08:53 GMT

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Tuesday, October 16, 2068, 1:20 p.m., Tracy Island

Tin-Tin leant back against the rock behind her, closed her eyes and listened to the waves roll onto the shore. Whereas some people in the world thought that an alcoholic beverage was relaxing, Tin-Tin begged to differ.

It wasn't long until she opened her eyes when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. She looked in the direction of the steps and smiled.

"Hi, Nikki."

"Hey, Tin-Tin." Nikki sat down next to Tin-Tin and smiled.

"I hope you don't mind that we came out here to talk. It's just that if we were in the villa, the

apartments or by the pool I would guarantee that we would be interrupted."

"It's all right I understand that. So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I just wanted to catch up," Tin-Tin replied. "With rescues, other tasks and so many people living on the island it's not often that we get to sit and just chat."

"That's true." Nikki tightened her hair band around her ponytail. "So have you thought about what you're going to wear for the Halloween party?"

"Yes, I've thought about it." Tin-Tin paused and looked as if she wasn't going to carry on.

"And?" Nikki asked impatiently.

"And...you'll have to wait and see."

"Spoil sport."

Tin-Tin laughed. "I'm looking forward to it, though. I especially look forward to seeing what everyone will come as. I'll have my camera ready."

"As long as pictures aren't posted online on some website, then I'm all right with that."

"Oh, I would never do that." Tin-Tin looked thoughtful for a couple of seconds. "But I wouldn't put it past Gordon."

"Thanks for the warning. I think we'll all have to watch our backs and keep our eyes on him during the party. Wouldn't want any tricks happening."

"Same here. But then it wouldn't be Halloween without the tricks. Just count ourselves lucky that he and Alan are not together this Halloween," Tin-Tin traced her finger in the sand to her side. "Speaking of Alan... you two seem close."

"He's a good friend and he's easy to talk to." Nikki smiled and looked out to the ocean. "And when I'm feeling down, it doesn't take long for him to lift my spirits."

"I see," Tin-Tin sighed. "I know that it's none of my business, but I want to ask: do you care about him? As in more than a friend."

"Tin-Tin..."

Tin-Tin stopped playing with the sand and looked at her friend. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's all right. It's just that the question took me by surprise and...well...don't take this the wrong way, but you're his ex, so it's a bit..."

"Awkward."

"I guess that's the right word."

"Nikki, he may be my ex-boyfriend, but he's also my friend. I want to see him move on like I have done and be happy. If you do have feelings for him, then I'm completely fine with that."

"Thanks Tin-Tin," Nikki answered. She was relieved that Tin-Tin told her how she felt.

Tin-Tin submersed her hands in the sand. She wanted to warn Nikki about the reason why she and Alan broke up, but felt it wasn't her place. 'If it wasn't for his job, then I wonder where we would be,' she thought.

Posted by Nikki on March 10, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:09:24 GMT

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Tuesday, October 16, 4 p.m.

Cassie ran along the beach, kicking up some sand with each stride. Still, running along the beach was more enjoyable than running the busy city streets. I do miss having the other people around though, she thought. The crowds might be difficult to maneuver but I miss the distraction. Out here, it's just me, the crashing waves, and the occasional bird.

She glanced down at her stopwatch. She had almost reached the thirty minutes she had planned on running. Keeping an eye on the watch, she kept jogging until the numbers switched to thirty minutes. She slowed to a stop, hitting the button to pause the timer on her watch while she was at it.

The main portion of her workout completed, she kept walking, taking a drink of water from the water bottle she carried as she did so. After a few minutes she stopped and put the water bottle down on the ground. She began doing some stretches beginning the cool down portion of the workout.

When she completed the normal stretches, she retrieved her water bottle. She took another drink from it and twisted the top back on. Resetting the stop watch, she began a slow, cool down jog. As she jogged, she glanced out across the ocean. In the distance she spotted two people out in the ocean. From her current distance she couldn't make out who it was.

Before long she was close enough to tell the two people were surfing. Which two occupants of the island were out there she still wasn't sure of. Cassie continued to watch as she jogged closer. Wipeout, she thought as she saw the one person fall off the board and disappear briefly under the surface. The second person rode the wave all the way in. Finally close enough to make out who it was, she watched as Gordon picked up his surfboard and turned to look for his companion, who was just breaking the surface.

"Up for one more wave, Scott?" Gordon called out, as Scott reached his board.

"Not today," Scott called back to him. "I think I've had enough salt water."

"Fine," Gordon said, planning on waiting for his brother. He glanced to his left and spotted Cassie slowing down to a walk. "Good afternoon, Cassie."

"Hi, Gordon. Enjoying yourself?" Cassie asked, taking a drink from her water bottle.

"I am. Not so sure about Scott though," Gordon said with a nod toward the ocean. "He's spent as much time off his board as on it this afternoon. What about you?"

"Just out enjoying a run. I wanted to get outside for a little while. Seems I've spent most of the day indoors," Cassie replied, as Scott approached the two of them. "Hi, Scott," she said hesitantly. She hadn't talked to him since the end of the flight lesson the day before.

"Hello," he replied neutrally.

Gordon looked from Cassie to his brother and back again at Cassie. He could tell something was going on between the two of them, though he had no clue what.

Cassie took a deep breath. She had been waiting for Scott to bring up the subject of their last conversation as he had told her they'd would discuss it later. He had yet to broach the topic and Cassie decided to take the initiative. It would probably be best if we had this whole situation straightened out before the next lesson tomorrow.

"Scott, do you have time to talk right now?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," he replied with a nod. "I'll catch up with you later, Gordon."

"Okay," Gordon said. "Want me to take your board?"

"Sure," Scott said, handing his surfboard over to his brother. As Gordon headed up to the villa, he turned his attention back to Cassie.

Nervously, Cassie started walking slowly down the beach. Scott followed, falling into step beside her. He waited patiently for her to start the conversation as she had been the one to say she wanted to talk.

"Look, about yesterday, I'm sorry about the accusation I made. Your suggestion caught me off guard and I just instinctively went on the defensive. Not that I'm using that as an excuse, I just thought you deserved an explanation."

"Apology accepted," Scott told her, realizing how hard it was for her to make the apology. That's one thing I can definitely relate to her on, he thought. "That still leaves us with the decision of what to do about your lessons. I'm not sure going on with the way things are right now is such a good idea. I know you know the material," he said quickly, not giving her a chance to interrupt him. "I could ask you a random question right now and you'd probably have no problem giving me an answer. Your problem is putting what you know to use in the simulator."

Scot thought about his earlier conversation with his brother. Was Virgil right? Was he making her nervous?

"If I'm going to continue giving you lessons, I think we need to figure out what the problem is, no matter what it is. Even if it really is me, in which case I'd like to know what it is so I can try to change. I've already had to turn one student over to someone else. Explaining to my father that I wanted to do so again isn't exactly high on my list of things I want to do. I'd prefer that we work whatever the problem is out between us. "

Cassie took a drink of water, taking a few moments to think about what she wanted to say before she actually opened her mouth. Her conversation with Luke the evening before was still fresh in her mind.

"It's not anything specific," Cassie began, as she screwed the lid of the water bottle back on. She took a deep breath. The only way this was going to get worked out was if she was completely honest with him. "Since the start, I've had the feeling that you really didn't want me here. Like choosing me for this position was more your father's and Virgil's decision than yours."

Scott looked down at the ground. She certainly read that right, he thought. "I thought we cleared up the issues from our first encounter."

"We did. I meant what I said then, too. Still, since I moved here permanently you haven't exactly come off as friendly. Other than work related things, I think this is the first time we've actually talked. Yes, I haven't exactly made any attempts myself. Guess I felt too intimidated to approach you," she said with a shrug. "Maybe I was reading something into it that wasn't there," she continued. "After all, the years of hearing my father and ex-husband telling me I shouldn't be a firefighter has made me a little defensive when it comes to my career but I felt like I needed to prove to you that I belonged here. I saw the flight lessons as a chance to do that, but once I got into the simulator, my mind went blank and it seemed the harder I tried the worse it got. When you suggested someone else giving me lessons, I felt as if you thought teaching me to fly was hopeless." She made a face which matched the rueful tone in her voice. "Which I've got to admit, I'm starting to think might be accurate."

"I don't think the prospect of you learning to fly is hopeless," Scott told her. As she was being open about the situation, he felt he should be, too. "As for the other part, no, you weren't my choice out of the candidates we had to select from. You were actually Virgil's first choice, and don't go telling him I told you this, but I think he chose the right person."

He looked over at Cassie to find her looking at him with a surprised expression on her face.

"Look. I'm not exactly good at given praise. There wasn't room for that in the Air Force but, as my stepmother reminded me last night, I'm not in the Air Force anymore. I've been impressed with your performance here so far. You came in and threw yourself right into the training. Virgil said you were making suggestions during your first training session with him. As for the flying, we didn't hire you to be a pilot. If it takes you a little longer to catch on, then fine. People learn things at different paces. Flying could be something that you're going to take to a little slower than what you're used to."

"You've got a point there," Cassie said with a thoughtful nod, appreciating the praise she had gotten from him. "So, are you still willing to give me flying lessons?"

"If that's what you want. It'll save me from explaining things to my father."

"That's what I want. Your father obviously thinks you're best suited to train me in this area."

"Okay, then," Scott told her. "Meanwhile, why don't the two of us spend some time getting to know each other a little better," he suggested, deciding to follow through on the rest of the advice Virgil had given him. "Have any plans right now?"

"No."

"Do you like playing pool?"

Cassie laughed, thinking of some of her previous attempts at playing that game. "I enjoy it though I'm not exactly any good at it"

"Then how about we go up to the house? I'll change into regular clothes and we can talk over a friendly game of pool." He gave her a grin. "I promise I'll go easy on you."

"You're on. I'll be interested to see how you define 'going easy on one'," Cassie said, smiling. With that, The two of them turned around and headed back in the direction of the path leading up to the villa.

--clearing the air, by starrynebula on March 11, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:09:39 GMT

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Tuesday October 16th, Paris, France, 3:15 pm (2:15 am, Wednesday, Tracy Island)

Virgil strolled along the pathway running along the banks of the Seine. He paused to lean against the railing, watching the sun reflecting in the water. Wishing he had brought his sketch pad with him, he stared for a few minutes longer before continuing on his way.

He wandered along, pausing occasionally to watch an artist draw or to browse through a shop, looking for nothing in particular. At one point, he found an out of the way artisan's shop where he picked up a beautiful cloisonné barrette for his mother. On impulse, he bought another for Elise. Pocketing his purchases, he once again made his way outside. The early afternoon sun was warm, but the October air had a touch of a chill in it and he pulled the zipper up on his jacket.

Deciding that now would be a good time to stop and have a cup of coffee before heading back to dinner at the hotel, he made his way to a small café. As he ordered, he remembered Elise's request and instead of coffee, ordered himself a glass of Merlot instead. When the waiter had left,

Virgil held the glass up. "Happy Birthday. Salute." Leaning back in his chair, he enjoyed his wine.

Posted by lillehafrue on March 27, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:09:54 GMT

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Wednesday, October 17, 2068, 9:15 a.m., Tracy Island

"You've got quite a load here, Professor Hackenbacker," Shaun, the pilot of the Tracy Industries cargo helijet said as his crew started offloading a variety of crates. "Got another two transports on the way, too. Mind if I ask what's in those crates?"

Brains, who was looking over the data pad with the manifest displayed, glanced up and blinked. "I don't mind."

"Mind?" Shaun repeated, pushing back his cap and scratching his head.

"If you ask." Brains moved to the next plastic crate, using a scanner to read the bar code on it, and checking the item against the manifest.

"Oh." The pilot still looked confused, but ventured, "So... what's in the crates?"

The engineer looked up again and said mildly, "Parts." He gestured to a logo on one of the boxes. "Aircraft parts."

"Oh, okay." The pilot now nodded sagely. "Need some replacements."

"Something like that." He turned at the sound of the small hangar door opening. Will ducked beneath it and came towards Brains as the latter waved him over.

"Shaun, this is Will Abbott. He's our new mechanic, and will be able to sign for any shipments of this sort. I'll be adding his name to the permission files at headquarters." Brains turned to Will. "Will, this is Shaun Redford. He's the lead pilot for our cargo delivery fleet."

Will offered his hand. "Nice to meet you, Shaun."

"Nice to meet you, too, Mr. Abbott." Shaun shook the offered hand.

"Just call me Will. Mr. Abbott is my father." Looking around at the crates, Will said, "I'll get a float and start movin' these inside."

"Right." Brains scanned another bar code, as Will headed back the way he'd come. "And give a call up to the Villa to see who can help out. We've got two more helijets on the way!" Brains called.

"Will do!" Will called back, glancing over his shoulder and waving an arm to show he'd heard.

XXXX

Will had taken over the inventory duties, and Brains was directing the third float load of crates through the hangar door. Brandon and Gordon were pushing it along while Scott and John loaded up the fourth run.

"So, what's in the crates?" Brandon asked as they maneuvered the float into an empty aircraft berth.

Brains indicated two crates. "Unload these two here, and bring the third up to the repair bay." As Brandon and Gordon maneuvered the crates to the floor, Brains continued. "In answer to your question, Brandon, these are the parts to Thunderbird Seven's new engine and cockpit. We'll be working on building a new one over the next few weeks."

"That's great news, Brains!" Gordon said, his face alight. "It was tough to haul the medical cabin around at that last rescue."

"Will it be a hovercraft again?" Brandon asked. "Seems to me that would be more maneuverable..."

"That's the plan," Brains said, following the two men and the float up to the repair bay. "Hovercraft with an caterpillar trolley like the Mole's for work in high wind conditions. Dr. Tracy was adamant that we have the one, and Mr. Tracy just as stubborn about the other. The variable use was a compromise between the two."

"Well," Gordon said before shifting the remaining crate to the spot Brains indicated. "If you need me to help in rebuilding, just holler."

"I will, Gordon. You'd better haul that out, and Brandon, if you can pick up the other float on the way back, I'll be down to help load up. Will should have finished the inventory on that second load. I'll have him hand over the inventory duties to Tin-Tin for the third helijet. With three floats moving, we'll make quick work of what's out there. We'll need the runway clear for Elise, who is bringing Mrs. Hanson."

"Boy, it's feast or famine around here," Brandon commented as he and Gordon headed back down the ramp. "Either it's really quiet, or really busy. I prefer busy, myself."

"Well, it's about to get a lot busier down in the lab area as we gear up to rebuild Seven's control cab." Gordon smiled slightly. "Things will feel like they're back to normal once Seven's running properly again."

Posted by Tikatu on March 27, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:10:08 GMT

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Wednesday, October 17, just after lunch

"Anna."

Anna looked up from her book. "Scott. Sit down. Is something up?" Scott. Strong military type. He wouldn't ask for help unless he was desperate, and I haven't heard about anything major.

Scott sat down across from her. How do I start? I'm not used to asking for help. He cleared his throat. "Have you seen the Brethren web site?"

"Yes."

Scott shifted nervously. "Including the photo section?"

"Yes. I must say, the picture shows off your very-well built body. When did Gordon take it?"

"A few weeks ago, after he played a practical joke on me. The joke I can deal with. But posting the picture -- no way." Scott took a deep breath. "I know you normally stay out of this sort of thing. But I also know you're planning something yourself. I'm out of my league here, and I need help."

Anna looked at him, considering. "Yes, I do have something planned. In fact, I have started it. I'm waiting for something to arrive. But I could use some help with part of it."

Scott grinned. "Fill me in, Commander."

Posted by susanmartha on March 27, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:10:37 GMT

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Wednesday October 17, 2 p.m. Tracy Island (10 a.m. Japan same day, 9 p.m. Kansas previous day)

Cassie was curled up on her couch going over her flight manual again before her flying lesson with Scott. Scott had informed her that they would be meeting in the hangar at the beginning of the lesson before heading to the simulator. He wanted her to go through a pre-flight and post-flight inspection. He hadn't referred to it as a test, but it certainly felt like one to Cassie, and as she had done before any test in the past she wanted to review the material beforehand.

She was getting ready to go through the post-flight check material when her phone rang. Reaching over, she picked the phone up off of the end table. Her mother's cell phone number was flashing on the screen.

She's probably calling to tell me her and Dad made it safely to Japan, Cassie thought. She had finally received a reply from Sachio yesterday as he had been away on a business trip. Her uncle was looking to expand Fujimura Technologies outside of Japan and Sachio had been looking at some possible sites.

"Hello, Mom," Cassie said, answering the call.

"Hello, Cassie," Keiko replied, in a weary tone. "I know it's starting to get late there, but I just wanted to let you know that your father and I arrived in Kozushima safely."

"Good to hear. How was the flight?"

"Uneventful. We had good weather all the way over. Wish I could have slept like your father but I just couldn't get comfortable on the plane."

"How is Grandma?"

Cassie heard her Mom sigh before she spoke. "She's definitely lost some weight and she looks tired. Hopefully we can convince her to go to the hospital in Tokyo."

Her mother paused. Cassie could hear some muffled voices on her mom's end.

"Your grandmother wants to talk to you," Keiko told her daughter. "I'm putting her on now."

Moments later, Cassie heard her grandmother greeting her in Japanese. She even sounds tired, she thought as she returned the greeting, speaking in Japanese herself. Her grandmother started asking her how she liked Wichita and her new job. Cassie tried to answer the questions convincingly then changed the topic of the conversation to how everyone was doing in Japan.

Posted by starrynebula on March 29, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:11:07 GMT

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The monorail eased to a stop, and Cherie picked up the ladder. Now, which entrance was it? Oh yeah, the one on the left. She entered the door on the left, and took the elevator to the third floor. Ringing the buzzer for apartment D3, she waited for Cassie to open the door.

Inside the apartment, Cassie was sitting at her desk making her plans for the upcoming fire training sessions. Hearing the buzzer, Cassie looked up at the clock on the wall.

That would be Cherie, she thought, dropping her pencil onto the papers spread out over her desk and standing up. Leaving everything where it was, she walked over to the door to let her guest in.

"Hello, Cherie. Come on in," she greeted the girl, when the door opened.

"Hi there, Ms. Kishi," Cherie said, smiling widely. "I'm here to measure the wall in your room." As Cassie led her to the bedroom in question, the teenager added, "I talked to my brother, Virgil, about the mural. He's decided it'll be a good learning opportunity for me. Teach me how to handle a client and take commissions." She rolled her eyes and chattered on. "In any case, he gave me some homework for the week he's away, and one of the assignments is to measure the wall."

She opened her stepladder, and put it beside her, facing the wall with her hands on her hips. "Hm. I guess I'd better do the top first." Moving the stepladder close to the wall, she asked, "Could you hold this steady for me, please, Ms. Kishi?"

"Sure, Cherie," Cassie replied, moving forward to hold the stepladder steady. Cassie grabbed a hold of the stepladder. Cherie climbed the stepladder, measure in hand. "Can you do me a favor though? Can you not call me by my last name? It's way too formal for me. It's okay to call me by my first name or if you're more comfortable with it, put the Ms. in front of my first name instead of the last name."

"Oh, okay, Ms. Cassie," Cherie said as she climbed the stepladder, reaching as high as she could to position the measure. "It's just that my dad's really big on showing respect to our elders, and Virgil did say I should treat you like a client." She activated the laser and the thin red light shot out, only to be stopped by the opposite wall. The measure beeped at her; she clicked off the laser and read the measurement off, adding it to the data pad. "Since I have your permission, I don't have to be so formal."

She reached up again, stretching her arm until the measure was butted against the ceiling, and this time, pointed the laser towards the floor. Once the device had beeped, and she added the figures to the data pad, she climbed down.

"There! I have what I need!" Cherie said, beaming. "Now, I'll take the stepladder and get out of your hair."

Cassie smiled at the girl's comment. "Oh, you're not in my hair. Not only do I like having the company but I did ask you to do this project. I have some chocolate chip cookies if you would like to stay for a snack."

"Cookies? That sounds great!" Cherie put her measure back in her bag, and toted the stepladder to the elevator door as Cassie led her to the kitchen area. "I love chocolate chip! Maybe we can talk a little about the buildings you'd like to see on the wall, too." She sat down at the table and put her data pad on the surface. "Once I have an idea, I can start looking for pictures to work with."

"Sounds like a plan," Cassie replied as she headed into the kitchen. "Just have a seat at the table while I get things ready. Would you like some milk to go with the cookies? Or I also have water and apple juice?" Cassie asked as she took out a plate to put the cookies on, and placed it on the counter.

"Milk is great, thanks." Cherie sat down, her data pad between her hands, opening another file. "I started looking at various buildings in New York, but I realized that I didn't know where you lived and what you would have seen from your window. I also didn't know if what you wanted on the wall were just some of the better known buildings, or an actual scene taken from street level

somewhere. The more I thought about it, the more options came to mind." She looked up, watching Cassie put the cookies on the plate. "Have you given it much thought?"

"I've thought of it a little bit," Cassie replied, as she finished preparing the plate of cookies. She sat it down on table near Cherie and then returned to the kitchen to get the drinks. "I like the suggestion you made of the Statue of Liberty. I think that is one site that everyone identifies with NYC."

Cherie nodded. "Finding pictures of the Statue of Liberty won't be hard," she commented. "The hard part will be picking out the best view."

"I was also thinking about one of the bridges, preferably the Queensboro Bridge. I grew up in the Upper East Side of Manhattan so I was closest to that one," Cassie commented, as she carried two glasses of milk to the table. She sat one down in front of Cherie and then sat down in a chair next to her. "Another possibility would be Belvedere Castle in Central Park. My Dad always took me there as a little girl and I fell in love with the place."

Cassie paused, trying to decide if she really wanted to even make her last suggestion. It still sounded a little silly, even to her. Still, she couldn't deny that when she thought of her home city she thought of the place. "This might seem a little silly, but I was also thinking about my old fire station, Station 66."

Cherie grinned. "I had the same idea, actually. If I can find a picture of it to work from, that is." She added the name to the data pad. "Any of the really tall buildings?" She picked up a cookie and bit into it. "Mmm. These are good!"

Cassie swallowed the piece of cookie she had eaten herself before replying. "Thanks! I'm glad you like them. As for the tall buildings," Cassie paused for a few moments before continuing, "I can't really think of any in particular that really stand out for me. If you wanted to include one, I guess you could surprise me with one you think would look good with the other buildings."

Nodding, Cherie added the note to her data pad. "Too bad the Empire State Building's gone. That would have been cool!" She glanced up. "It feels strange knowing that my family was involved in all that. Scott and Gordon told me the story."

"Yeah, that was an unfortunate turn of events," Cassie commented, thinking of the day. She had been at the fire station at the time. Everyone at the station had been gathered in front of the TV watching the event. Once the building had collapsed though, Ladder 124 had been called to the scene like the rest of the stations on Manhattan. Everyone had put in overtime that day and the days following as they dealt with the clean-up. "New York City without the Empire State Building in the skyline still looks strange at times."

"Hm." Cherie looked thoughtful as she chewed on her cookie. She took a swig of milk to wash it down. "I never think about the clean up." Raising the glass to her lips again, she sipped, then added, "I still could put it in the mural if you want. It's not like this is going to be accurate, like a photograph."

Cassie thought about the suggestion. Though the building was no longer there, it was very much

a part of the city as she had known it growing up. The whole point of this mural was to give her something to remind her of home. The Empire State Building would do that just as much as the other buildings and structures she had already named.

Cassie nodded as she spoke. "Go ahead. I like the idea of having the building in the mural."

"Okay!" Cherie added the note to her data pad, then drained her glass. "Well, I'd better get going. Grandma will have dinner on soon, and I'm supposed to help set the table." She rose from her seat, and extended a hand. "Thanks for the cookies, Ms. Cassie."

"You're welcome, Cherie," Cassie replied, getting to her feet herself and shaking Cherie's extended hand. "I really appreciate you taking on this project for me and I hope you have fun with it."

"I think I will," the teen replied as Cassie walked her to the door. Cherie picked up her stepladder and other materials, then stepped into the elevator. "Talk to you again soon!"

The door slid shut and Cherie smiled. Looks like I'm going to enjoy this challenge!

--project begun by starrynebula and Tikatu on March 29, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:11:55 GMT

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Wednesday, October 17, 2068, 3:15 p.m., Paris, France (2:15 a.m., Thursday, October 18 on Tracy Island)

Virgil found himself in the Louvre, as he knew he would. The art of the masters called to him as always, and he found himself revisiting those pieces he was most familiar with. He stood before Canova's marble sculpture, "Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss", admiring the way the sculptor had created the fold of the fabric covering Psyche's private parts. I should do some sculpting. It's not something I've dabbled in much.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said an English-accented voice to his left.

He turned his head to see a lovely blond woman, dressed in a designer frock that reminded him of something Lady Penelope would wear. She was examining the sculpture, but when she realized he was looking his way, she gave him a friendly smile.

"I love the Louvre," she added. "I come here every time I visit the city." She gestured to the statue. "One of my favorite pieces."

"It's one of mine, too," Virgil said, returning her smile with a polite one of his own. "I particularly admire the way Canova evoked the fabric folds and the details in the hair."

"Yes, and the clever way he managed to show just enough, but not too much, as far as nudity is

concerned." The lady chuckled. "Must have had the prudes of the day in mind."

"Not necessarily," Virgil replied. "His male nudes are just that: nude, with none of their genitalia covered. And several of his female nudes have bare breasts, though this one," he gestured toward the sculpture, "has the breasts covered."

He turned back to the sculpture, and the lady made another attempt at conversation. "Are you aware he did a sculpture of George Washington?" When Virgil turned his attention back to her, she gestured toward him. "I thought that, as an American, you might be interested..."

Virgil looked thoughtful. "Yes, it is interesting. I believe I've heard about the piece you're talking about, though I've never seen it."

"I understand it's displayed in the state house of North Carolina, though I might be mistaken," the lady told him. She waved a deprecating hand. "I can never keep the individual states straight. I'm sure it's the same for you with the various counties of England."

"Actually, no. I have friends in England, and am very familiar with it," Virgil said.

"Oh? Anyone I would know?"

The question took Virgil by surprise. "I... I'm not sure, especially since I don't even know your name, never mind which circles you might travel in."

The lady beamed. "Well, perhaps I should introduce myself. I am Dez Richmond." She held out a well-manicured hand.

Politeness -- and his grandmother's lessons in etiquette -- bade him reciprocate. He took her hand. "And I'm Virgil Tracy. Nice to make your acquaintance."

"And I am pleased to make yours." She smiled widely as they shook hands, for she already knew who he was. Dez Richmond -- otherwise known as Desdemona Hightower -- had seen Virgil in the lobby of the hotel where they both were staying. She'd recognized him as one of Jeff Tracy's sons, and called on one of her underlings to take a few pictures and confirm his identity. His sons are hardly ever in public anymore, and when they are, they keep as low a profile as possible. This could be an excellent opportunity to cultivate a relationship to replace the one Giles bollixed up so spectacularly.

"Perhaps we could have tea together, or share a bottle of wine?" She looked down, a slightly embarrassed look on her face. "You see, we are staying at the same hotel, and I saw you in the lobby... and you're a very handsome man." She smiled at him again, this time with a bit of sly undertone to the expression.

Virgil raised a bushy eyebrow. "So you followed me into the Louvre, hoping to meet me?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide, sounding shocked. "Nothing like that, I assure you. I was visiting the museum myself, noticed you, and thought I should seize the moment, as it were."

He chuckled. "I have to admit, it's flattering to have a beautiful woman pursuing me because she thinks I'm handsome." Though I doubt that's the only reason she's interested. He paused, then said, "I don't see that it would hurt to have a glass of wine with you. Where and when?"

Dez glanced at her watch. "There's so much more to see here in the museum... perhaps we could meet in the hotel's bar? Would nine o'clock be convenient?"

"Yes, I think that would be fine."

She tried hard to keep the triumph from her smile and voice. "Then I will leave you to Canova... for now. Au revoir, monsieur."

"A bientôt, mademoiselle."

With a wave, Dez sauntered off. Virgil watched her go, cognizant of her swinging hips and noting that she stopped at another sculpture, a bronze depicting Mercury lifting Psyche into the air. He blew out a breath, took another long look at the marble work before him, then moved onto the next piece.

Posted by Tikatu on March 29, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:12:17 GMT

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Wednesday, October 17, 2068, 9:15 p.m., Paris, France (8 a.m., Thursday, October 18, Tracy Island)

"So, what do you do?" Dez leaned forward, a finger making a slow circuit of her wineglass's edge. She smiled, a sultry look, her eyes half-lidded as she gazed across the table at her companion.

Virgil took in a breath, and let it out in a short huff. Dez was wearing a different designer number, one that showed off her natural endowments to best advantage. He was finding it hard to focus on conversation with her sitting there, long shapely legs visible if he moved his head one way, cleavage on display, some alluring scent wafting across to tickle his nose. She was bothering him in a way that only one other person had come close to recently, and it had been so long...

"What do I do?" He shifted in his seat a little. "I'm a designer."

"Oh? And what do you design?" She took a sip of wine, her full red lips leaving a slight lipstick mark on the glass.

A peculiar thought suddenly occurred to him: Lady Penelope never left such stains on her china cups - or anything else for that matter. I'll have to ask her how she does that. He turned his thoughts to answering her question and came up with the standard deflection that he and his father had decided upon. "Oh, small things, engine parts, gadgets... nothing big or impressive." He took a sip of wine and asked, "And you? What do you do?"

"Oh, nothing special. Just living on my well-invested inheritance." She gave him a speculative look. "You know, I had a friend look into your background, Virgil." With a smug tone to her voice, she added, "A girl can't be too careful these days." She leaned back and took a sip of wine. "He seemed to think you were into the posh life, living off your Daddy's money. Look at you," she waved a hand in his direction, "dressing so dapper. No one would ever think you're a mere designer."

He turned his wineglass around, watching the base for a bit as she spoke, then drained what little was left in the glass. Pouring himself another half portion, he thought about his answer. Finally he said, sounding lazy, "As appealing as living off my father's wealth is, I do like to use my very expensive degree from time to time. It exercises my mind, and keeps me from becoming a total recluse."

"Ah, I understand now." Dez drained her own glass, and Virgil lifted the bottle as if to ask, "More?" She nodded, and nudged her stemware in his direction. He filled it to the top with wine, set the bottle back down, and set the glass before her again. She inclined her head in a silent "thank you" and sipped the wine again. "What brings you to Paris?"

"A gift from my father, actually, for my birthday. I get to be a tourist for a change, instead of coming here on business." The truth wasn't going to hurt, he figured, and was much easier to say than a lie. "And you?"

"I needed some new frocks, and came to see what some of my favorite designers had to offer." It was the truth on her part as well.

"Hm." He brightened. "A friend of mine from England buys from François Lemaire. Do you like his designs?"

Desdemona made a face. "Oh, dear God. No. François... I cannot describe what I think of his frocks." She shuddered. "I would not be caught dead in what he produces."

Now Virgil felt a little affronted -- he'd always thought that Lady Penelope had excellent taste. "Well, my friend seems to like his collections, and the ensembles she's purchased from him look very good on her."

"Then she must have..." Dez bit down on the word, "execrable" and changed it to, "... very different tastes than I do." She cocked her head to one side. "Who is your friend? Perhaps I know her..."

Before Virgil could say anything, a waiter hurrying by their table was bumped by someone trying to pass him on the other side. The waiter's tray tipped, and though his quick grab kept most of his cargo intact, one bottle of beer fell smack onto their table, smashing, upsetting their both wine bottle and glasses.

Dez shrieked, as the red liquid splattered her dress, and the beer followed, pouring into her lap before she could jump up. Virgil didn't escape unscathed either. He sprang away quickly, but was also doused with wine and beer before he could move. The mortified waiter began apologizing,

and both the manager and a second waiter came to try and help them clean up.

Virgil watched Dez's face flush red, and was taken aback when she started to scream at the hapless waiter.

"You idiot! Why didn't you watch where you were going?! Look at my frock; it's ruined! No, don't try to mop me up! The hotel's management will hear about this!" She went on and on, her ranting punctuated from time to time with expletives in both English and French.

The manager added his apologies to the waiter's, trying to calm Dez down, telling them both that the bottle of wine they'd shared was no charge. Finally, Virgil stepped in.

"Dez, it was an accident, okay? Screaming isn't going to change what's happened. Why don't you go up to your room to clean up and change?" He reached out to take her elbow and guide her from the bar.

Desdemona gave him an angry look, whipping her elbow from his grasp. "I can manage by myself, thank you very much!" With a huffed out, "Hmph!" she stalked out, the gazes of the bar's other denizens watching her leave.

Virgil glanced at the table, and something on the floor beside Dez's chair caught his eye. He leaned over to pick it up. "Dez! Wait! You forgot....!" The door to the bar closed before he could finish his sentence.

"I'll get it to her," he told the manager, who had offered him a dry cloth to wipe the beer and wine from the bag's surface. Once it was dry, he accepted the manager's fervent apologies and left the bar. Behind him, a man with dark curly hair smiled and opened his phone.

"Agent 29 to Pink Lady..."

"I guess I'd better find out what room she's in," Virgil muttered as he crossed the lobby, heading for the elevators. He sighed, and fumbled with the catch on her handbag. There wasn't much inside; a key card, a lipstick, compact, small brush, and a credit card. This last caught his eye. He was familiar with the card type; it was black and meant for people with vast fortunes. He had one himself in his wallet. But the name, emblazoned there in gold, next to her holographic photo was not the name she had given him that afternoon.

"Desdemona Hightower."

He stopped in his tracks. Damn! Now it all fits together. I'm sure she knew exactly who I was when she "ran across" me at the Louvre. But what did she want of me? Some way to get into Tracy Industries? Put me in a position for blackmail? He looked at the card for a moment. I can't give her any opportunity to sink her claws into me. I'll have to avoid her for the rest of the week.

His mind made up, he removed the key card and snapped the handbag shut. He approached the front desk and spoke to the concierge. "Please see that the lady in this room gets this handbag."

"Of course, monsieur." The man behind the desk looked him up and down. "Were you perhaps

part of the accident in the bar?"

"Yes, I was. I gather the lady has already spoken to you?"

The concierge's pleasant smile faded. "She has. Tell me what room you are in, monsieur, and I will arrange for your clothing to be cleaned -- at our expense."

Virgil smiled, and gave the man the information he'd asked for. Then, satisfied that he'd done the right thing, he headed for the elevators. Once ensconced in an empty car, he leaned against the wall. The smell of wine and beer became more noticeable in the close confines and he made a face. "Need a shower when I get to my suite."

Once in his suite, he stripped, and took care of showering first, calling to the front desk to have the suit and shirt picked up. Then he padded into his bedroom, and sat down heavily on the bed. He ran a hand through his still damp hair, and thought of his near miss with Desdemona. She's beautiful, but... The image of another blonde, smiling, dressed in red, came to mind and he checked his watch. Nine a.m. there. A good time to call.

He decided to use his satellite phone, and speed-dialed a number he'd added to his contacts before he left. It seemed to take forever to connect, but finally a familiar voice sounded in his ear.

"Hello, Virgil? It's good to hear from you! How's Paris?"

He smiled wearily. "Hi there, Elise. It's good to hear your voice, too. Paris is wonderful, but God, I miss you."

Posted by Tikatu on March 30, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:13:03 GMT

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Thursday, October 18, 11:30am, Tracy Island -- Mail call

Cherie stepped through the sick room door. "Hey, Dom! There's mail for you."

Dom looked up from cleaning the exam table. "For me? Thanks Cherie." He took the letter and looked at the return address. It's from someone named Dave Kandagaye in Kansas. I don't think I know anyone with that name. He sat down in the exam room chair and opened the letter.

Thursday, October 11, 2068

Hi Dom.

I'm not sure how well you remember me; we only met a couple of times during training and on a few Lifelight missions. I'm the Captain of Kansas Region II EMS team, not too far from your old

stomping grounds. I heard you took a job in the private sector and wanted to see how it was going for you. I'm looking for a few more people and wondered if you wanted to return to the public sector.

You missed the big excitement. International Rescue was called in during the tornadoes two months ago. One of the twisters hit their mobile hospital and injured their CMO. I was on the team that responded to the site and helped get her out. I hope she's doing ok; she lost a lot of blood. Both the nurses were hurt too. I understand they went home the next day. I hope they're all ok now.

As you can imagine, the press was all over the place for a while. I don't know how many reporters I had to dodge. I hid for almost a week. Things have settled down now, but I expect we'll get more requests for interviews on the anniversary next year.

Do you remember Lisa Simmons? She went through a divorce 2 years ago. She gave custody of the kids to her husband. Well he got transferred to New York and took the kids.

She was telling me about a strange interview she had a week after the tornadoes. Two men, claiming to be World Government agents, took her to dinner. They thought International Rescue might contact her and offer her a job based on her work at the accident site. Apparently they've been researching the type of people IR might want -- young, single, with no dependents. That leaves you and me out of the running!!

Anyway, the WG agents (she did check their ID) said they didn't want her to spy on IR. Just tell them who contacted her, how and when. They implied they could arrange for her to get custody of her kids if she did! She told me she wasn't sure how she felt -- angry or afraid. I told her I'd probably feel both at once and wind up taking a swing at the two guys. That finally made her laugh. But she said she hopes IR doesn't contact her -- she doesn't want to have to choose.

As exciting as it would be to work for International Rescue, I'd never be able to do it. Not with three kids and a wife! Who would babysit?

Anyway, I hope you are doing well and enjoy your new job. It doesn't sound too exciting but if it lets you have more time with Joshua, I think it's great. My kids are in grade school now and I miss them running around the house. But it's amazing how much better I sleep and how much work I can get done. Anita did a happy dance the day our youngest started preschool.

Let me know sometime you're in the area and we can get together for a beer.

Dave Kandagaye

Dom blinked and reread the letter. I vaguely remember Dave. I don't think we were ever actually introduced. I didn't notice him at the crash site, but I wasn't noticing much of anything. But apparently he recognized me.

Dianne looked in from the next room. "Dom? I could use some help with the supplies."

Dom looked up at her, distractedly. "I'm sorry, Dr. Tracy. But I think I need to talk to your husband,

right now." He stood up suddenly and strode quickly out the door.

Dianne looked after him. What was that all about? I hope his ex-wife isn't causing problems again.

Posted by Susanmartha on March 31, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:13:47 GMT

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"Mr. Tracy?"

Jeff looked up from his desk. "Hello Dom. What's up?"

"I think you better read this. It just came today." Dom handed over the letter and the envelope it came in and sat down.

Jeff raised an eyebrow and read the letter. When he finished, he looked at Dom. "Do you know this Dave," he glanced down at the letter again, "Kandagaye?"

"Slightly. He taught a class I was in once, but the class had over a hundred people, so we never actually met. I've seen him around, talked with him, but we've never been introduced. I didn't notice him at the crash site, but I was pretty distracted. I was so focused on Doc's injuries that I didn't even notice someone walking next to me until he yelled at me to get checked for whiplash." Dom suddenly went pale. "Oh, lord. That was Dave, walking next to me! I didn't recognize him at the time."

Jeff's lips tightened. "Would he make a good agent?"

Dom shrugged. "I haven't the faintest. I suspect so."

Jeff tapped the envelope against his chin. "Ok. Write him back saying, sorry, but you like your new job." Suddenly grinning, he added, "Unless, of course, you actually do want to quit."

Dom smiled, slightly. "No, I like my work. But if the custody fight had gone wrong..."

Jeff nodded. "Joshua has got to come first. Ok, Write a reply saying you like your job, but thanks anyway; you'll keep it in mind. Mention the tornadoes and that the Tracy's old farm house had been destroyed. Say you'd like to meet International Rescue someday, but by the time Josh is out of school you'd be too old. I think you can figure out what else to say. Wait for a couple days before sending it. In fact, I'll arrange for it to be mailed from Kansas City." Jeff leaned back in his chair. "Can I keep this?"

"Sure. But I'll be needing the envelope to get the return address and the correct spelling of the name."

Dom stood up and Jeff handed him the envelope. As he turned to leave, he heard Mr. Tracy

muttering, "What time is it in England?"

Posted by Susanmartha on March 31, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:14:37 GMT

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Jenny Finch heaved the box out of the back seat of her car, jerked the door shut with her foot, and pressed the immobiliser. Then she turned and lumbered up the garden path to her mother's front door.

"G'day love. The shed door's open. Do you mind taking Hiss there now?" Jenny's mother asked, eyeing the box uneasily.

"Sure." Jenny turned and marched toward a little garden shed, almost hidden by creepers and other foliage. She set the box down inside, and opened it. A beautiful carpet python, green with white spots, slid out and wound itself around Jenny.

"Now, now, Hiss," Jenny murmured, catching hold of the snake, "I know you've had a long drive, but I really do want a drink, so get down." Jenny then noticed the basket of peaches in the corner. Swiftly she moved over and grabbed one. "Hey, Hissy, have a peach?"

"How's tricks?" Mum said, as she and Jenny piled Jenny's suitcases in the spare bedroom.

"Not great, that's for sure, especially since the landlord kicked me out of the flat. Apparently one of the residents complained about Hiss. What a lovely rose!" Jenny motioned towards the window, where a gorgeous deep red rose was peering in.

"Yes, isn't it lovely. Wendy gave it to me some months ago, on my wedding anniversary."

Jenny glanced quickly at her mother and noticed a tear, which Mum hastily wiped away.

"It's been 14 years, and I still cry when I think of your father." Mum smiled shakily.

"How are Wendy and Murphy?" Jenny asked, to change the subject.

"Murphy's been promoted to factory manager, and Wendy cleans the school. No grandchildren in the offing yet." Mum said, rather wistfully, with a hopeful glance at Jenny.

"Sorry, Mum, no sign of Mr Perfect." Jenny couldn't help smiling.

"If I'd waited for Mr Perfect, you and your sister wouldn't be here!" Mum retorted, a twinkle in her eye.

Jenny just laughed.

"Murphy said to me the other day that if you couldn't keep Hiss, he'd like to take her. Apparently they've got a real problem with mice. So, what do you plan to do now?"

"Get a job. The government aid job didn't suit me. I'd like to go back to cooking. Maybe cooking for a rich family. I'm sick of working in a commercial capacity, it's too stressful. I'd love to join International Rescue, but I don't know how to get in with them, so I'll have to be content with something else. I might do some volunteer work in the State Emergency Service or the fire brigade again. I'll have to do a lot of courses, though. I do need to update my first aid skills."

"Yes, well, you never know when you might have to do a little first aid. Anyway---" Just then the phone rang, and Mum left to answer it.

"Well, love," Mum said when she came back, "Wendy and Murphy are coming next week. Murphy's on leave or something."

Posted by scuppy3 on April 6, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:14:53 GMT

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Tracy Island, Thursday October 18th, mid-afternoon...

Luke paused in the repair bay doorway and let out a low whistle. "That's a lot of equipment," he said to himself. Spying movement, he wandered over towards the far side of the room.

Will looked up as he approached. "Hey, Luke. What's up?"

"Not much." He glanced around again. "All this must be the new parts and equipment for Thunderbird Seven? Sorry I wasn't around to help you guys unload it. I was working with Rom."

"No problem." Will looked down at his data pad. "Well, it looks like we've got everything. Now to sort it into sections."

"Want a hand? Rom's sleeping up in the AC and it's too hot out there to go jogging."

"Sure! I'd be happy for the company," Will replied. "And the second set of arms."

Luke grinned. "Great. I need a quick word with Brains, then I'm your man. Have you seen him?"

Will nodded. "He's back in his lab."

"Thanks. Be right back." Luke made his way through the hanger and paused at the lab's door. He pressed the door buzzer.

"Come in."

Luke stepped inside and spied Brains sitting at his desk in front of the computer. "Hi, Brains. Are you busy?"

The scientist shook his head. "Not really. Just double checking our inventory. Can I help you with something?"

"Well, I was talking to Scott this morning and he says you're the man to see. It's about Dom's birthday present." Luke quickly outlined his idea. "And I thought this would be easier than lugging everyone over to the mainland," he finished.

Brains nodded thoughtfully. "When did you want to get this done?"

"That's the problem. It depends on when I can get Josh away from Dom."

Brains nodded again, then smiled. "Well, I don't see it being too much of an issue. It shouldn't take long, a half hour maybe. Let me know when you're able to get him."

Luke grinned. "Thanks, Brains! I really appreciate this."

"Glad to help." He shook Luke's outstretched hand

"I'll leave you to your work then. I told Will I'd help him get things organized out there." Luke waved and went back out to the bay.

"Find him?" Will called out.

Luke nodded. "Yep, all set. Now, tell me what you need me to do."

Posted by lillehafrue on April 6, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:15:07 GMT

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Thursday, October 18, 3:15 p.m., Paris, France (2:15 a.m., next day, Tracy Island)

"This should be the last stop," Kyrano said, in French, to his driver. They had driven all over Paris, it seemed, purchasing the things he wanted to bring back to his daughter and his fiancée. Most of the places they'd stopped at were smaller shops, including this last one, a parfumerie. It was one of the older shops, but had been renovated since his last visit. "Everything changes, but Paris remains the same," he murmured.

He had been here before, many years ago, shopping for his beloved Samani. He'd purchased an expensive perfume that day, a creation from the house of Dior. Now he wanted the perfect scent for Lisa. With a deep breath, he entered the shop.

"Est-ce que je vous aider, monsieur?" asked the fashionably dressed young woman who

approached him.

"Oui," Kyrano replied. "Je recherche un parfume."

"Allez-vous ici, s'il vous plait," she said with a smile, gesturing toward the long glass counter.

They continued speaking in French. Kyrano's confidence in the language had been growing all week, and now he felt comfortable holding long conversations in it, as he had when he had lived in the city.

"May I ask for whom you are purchasing this perfume?" the saleswoman asked.

"I am buying it for my fiancée," he told her. A slight blush unaccountably covered his features; he was still getting used to speaking of Lisa as such in public. He was also cognizant of how it sounded for a man of his years to be marrying.

"Your fiancée?" the woman asked, an eyebrow raised -- whether in incredulity or delight, Kyrano couldn't tell. "She must be a very lucky woman."

"No, it is I who am the lucky one," he murmured in response. He glanced up at the bottles of scent behind the saleswoman. One of them caught his eye, and he smiled. It was called *Dolce Vita*, and was the scent that his Samani had preferred. It had cost him a pretty penny, and he'd only been able to buy the one small vial; money was tighter back then. Now, he could buy Lisa something a little more costly; he had been careful with the generous wages Jeff paid him, and though he was still far from wealthy, he wasn't living hand to mouth either.

"Perhaps this for the lady?" The saleswoman took down a tester bottle entitled *Midnight Poison*. She had a vision that this older man was marrying someone very much his junior, probably for his money. The fragrance was one that would suit a young woman, despite the title.

Kyrano shook his head. "No, that will not do." He scanned the bottles and his eye fell on one in particular. "Ah. Please let me smell the one named, *J'Adore*."

The lady nodded, and did as he asked. She sprayed a little on his hand, and began to describe the fragrance. Kyrano was pleased with how it smelled on him, even though he knew that it wouldn't smell the same on Lisa. The name was what pleased him more than the fragrance, and he decided right then and there he would purchase it.

"Do you have this in a fragrance ensemble? With bath accessories?"

The saleswoman smiled. "We do. I will show you."

She began to show him the various lotions, bath gels, soaps, sprays and other body scents that they had to offer in the fragrance he'd chosen. After a few moments of back and forth over the contents of the ensemble, Kyrano chose the elements he wanted and paid for them, while the saleswoman packaged them, and wrapped the fancy box.

"Merci, mademoiselle," he said at last, bowing.

"I was happy to be of assistance," she replied. "Please come again."

He signaled for the driver to come and take the box. It was added to the other packages in the car's trunk. Then the driver held open the door for him.

Neither of them noticed a dark-haired woman who had entered the shop after him, and left the shop as he did. She sauntered up the sidewalk, looking into store windows, but really using them as mirrors to keep the car in sight. Nor did they notice a gray-haired man who sat at a nearby café, watching the shop. As the car pulled away, he got up and hailed a taxi cab, telling the driver to follow Kyrano's car. The woman, on the other hand, grabbed a small, sleek scooter, and followed the car herself.

Posted by Tikatu on April 6, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:15:22 GMT

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10 AM; Tracy Industries Washington D.C building

"Jambo, wanaume. Karibu."

Lena was in the lobby, greeting six men who had just arrived. Jeff had emailed her a few days earlier telling her of the visit. They were from Nairobi, and were coming to tour the D.C. offices. The plan was for them to establish a Tracy Industries branch in Kenya, and they wanted to learn all they could, so it could go smoothly. Although they all spoke English very well, Jeff wanted her there in case of any possible misunderstandings. She had told him she'd be delighted to help, and was indeed looking forward to speaking her native tongue, even if it was only a little.

The president of the D.C. branch, David Fischer, was standing next to her. The visitors beamed to hear their language spoken, and she introduced herself and her companion to them in it. Then they switched to English. Their leader, Thomas Onyango, introduced himself and the others. Their eagerness to begin the tour was evident, so they started immediately.

The Kenyans had many questions, all of them pertinent, and David was happy to answer them. Occasionally Lena did need to translate, but everyone did seem to understand each other for the most part. As they went from department to department, a thought occurred to Lena that gave her great amusement.

I know dat Don Wilson is here today. I'm sure we'll encounter him at some point. And for de first time, I'm hoping we will. I want to see his face when he hears dese men speaking English.

They broke for lunch at 12:30, and were back on the tour an hour later. They reached Lena's department half an hour after that and weren't there two minutes when, sure enough, Don Wilson showed up. Keeping a straight face, she introduced him to the Kenyans, and they immediately began asking him questions. He answered them easily, but his face got red, and he glanced

suspiciously at her several times.

David knew of Lena's problem with Don, and he, too, looked at her. So he noticed what Don didn't; her face was impassive, but there was an unholy gleam of amusement in her eyes. Five minutes later, all questions were answered, and Wilson excused himself. He headed back to his office, and Lena could have sworn he moved faster than she'd ever seen him before.

She excused herself to use the ladies' room, promising to rejoin them in a few minutes. Thirty seconds later, she was in a stall, and laughing until tears flowed down her cheeks.

Posted by hobbeth on April 6, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:15:35 GMT

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Friday, October 19, 2068, 10:30 a.m., Wellington, New Zealand (same day and time, Tracy Island)

"Okay, lift." Ed Haenga felt along Dianne's calf. "Does this hurt?" he asked, probing gently, moving his fingers around the tiny electronic leads that were attached to her skin.

"No," Dianne replied mildly. Her voice sounded natural, not strained as she held her leg in position. "There's no pain at all."

"And you seem to have full range of motion, too," Ed commented, adding a note to his data pad. "You can lower now."

Gordon and Nikki looked on, both a bit nervous. They knew that though it was Dianne's progress that was being measured, that same progress -- or lack of it -- was a reflection on their jobs as her coaches.

Ed removed the leads from Dianne's leg. "Okay, now for the abdominal muscles. Lay back and let me attach these."

Dianne gave a slight sigh, and did as she was told, lifting her t-shirt up slightly. Gordon looked away; Nikki couldn't decide if it was because this was his step-mother's stomach he was looking at, or because of the scars that marred it. Nikki herself felt a clinical detachment about the marks; she saw them as a nurse would and not as a friend or relative.

Once the leads were attached, Ed stood back. "All right now, Dr. Tracy. I want you to grab your toes and hold them. Keep your legs straight."

Dianne took in a deep breath and did as Ed told her to. It seemed she held on to them for a long time, but it was only a minute or so before Ed said, "Okay, release."

She took in another deep breath and let it out slowly. The abdominal muscles had given her as much trouble as the leg; as a result, she'd worked harder on those specific exercises over the past

week.

"Now, let's try this one. Lie back, arms down at your sides, and lift both legs simultaneously. Keep them together and... hold." Ed watched with a critical eye, nodding slightly as Dianne held the position for the time he required. "Okay. Lower your legs... keep them together... nice and slow... that's good."

He checked the readings that he was getting, and added another note to his pad. "Looking good so far, Dr. Tracy. A few more tests and I think I'll be able to release you."

Dianne grinned at Gordon and Nikki. Gordon gave her a thumbs up, and Nikki's wide smile spoke without words. "Let's get to it, then," Dianne said.

Posted by Tikatu on April 8, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:15:48 GMT

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Friday, October 19, 2068, 11:35 a.m., Tracy Island

I need some coffee, Jeff thought as he reached over to press the button that would connect him with the kitchen. He waited a minute for a response, then remembered that Kyrano wasn't available to bring him the coffee he wanted. He frowned a little, then huffed a small, self-deprecating laugh and rose to fetch the drink for himself. "This work can wait for a few minutes. I've gotten lazy in my old age," he murmured, shaking his head.

As he started down the stairs, he noticed the door to the classroom was open. Lisa was sitting with Alex at his computer station. Both had headphones on, and Alex was saying something in Spanish.

"That's good, Alex, but remember to roll your Rs," she instructed. The Spanish lesson continued as Jeff moved out of earshot.

Kyrano's in Paris, Dianne's in Wellington, Lisa's doing the schooling, so that means... Mother must be in the kitchen on her own. And it's nearly lunchtime. No wonder I got no response.

He entered the kitchen from the dining room, and headed for the coffee pot. He filled a cup, then glanced over at the stove. His eyes widened, and his coffee was forgotten as he watched his mother trying to manhandle a very large stock pot over to the sink.

"Ma, let me get that!" he said, striding to her and grabbing oven mitts before taking the weighty pot off her hands.

"Land's sakes, Jeff! Thank you!" she said, running the back of her hand over her forehead and pushing a stray lock of hair into place. "Just dump it into the colander for me."

"Right." Jeff followed her instructions and carefully dumped the pot full of pasta into the metal colander. Hot water splashed up on all sides at first, and he quickly angled his body back to avoid it. Steam rose; he turned his face away while still trying to keep an eye on the pasta as it poured into the strainer. Finally, the pot was emptied, and Jeff returned it to the stove.

"That was heavier than I thought it was," Emily admitted as she rinsed the pasta with hot water to keep it separated. "Usually Lisa handles that for me, but she's busy right now." She added a buttery mix of herbs to the pasta and tossed it expertly while it was still in the strainer. Looking around, she sighed. "The sauce is nearly ready, but there's still so much to do."

"What can I help with, Ma?" Jeff asked, glancing around the kitchen himself.

"The children will set the table, but the plates need to be counted and set out for them," she said. "I think the Italian bread is almost ready to be pulled from the oven; I still need to mix up some garlic butter..." She gave him a weary smile. "Why don't you get the plates out, dear? It would be a big help."

"All right, Ma." He stopped to kiss her head. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

As he counted out the plates for lunch and set them on the sideboard, Jeff began to think. There are so many times when we have a situation like this, or when the crew comes home in the middle of the night and needs a snack. He glanced toward the kitchen. Face it, Tracy, she's not getting any younger, and neither are Kyrano or Lisa. They do so much around here; maybe it's time to bring in someone else. Someone younger and stronger, who can deal with the early mornings and late nights.

Placing a stack of saucers on the sideboard, he paused and nodded. Of course, I'll need to discuss this with Kyrano, Lisa and Mother before looking for that help. The hard part will be convincing them -- especially Ma - that they actually need the help.

Posted by Tikatu on April 8, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:16:04 GMT

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Friday, October 19, shortly after 2 p.m.

"Does anyone have any questions or comments?" Cassie asked as she finished presenting the report she had given to Jeff and Brains earlier in the week.

"You haven't really mentioned the Fire Tender and the fire break created in front of the rum plant," Scott commented.

Cassie nodded as she made note of the comment. She needed to create a written form of the session as Alan and Virgil were not in attendance. Though she could use the report for the base, anything extra brought up during this session needed to be added.

"Preventing the fire from reaching the rum plant, which I'm sure everyone was aware of, was an important part to containing the fire. The rum would have acted as a fuel, which is one of the sides of what is known as the fire triangle. The fire triangle is a simple model used to understand the ingredients needed to create most fires. Along with fuel, the other sides include heat and oxygen. When trying to put out a blaze the idea is that by taking away any of these sides you break the triangle and therefore are able to control and ultimately extinguish the fire. I'll go into more detail about the fire triangle, as well as two other models based on it, the fire tetrahedron and the fire square on Monday. Are there any other questions?"

Cassie scanned the training room, her gaze meeting each of her teammates. Other than a few of them shaking their head, no one said anything.

"Then we're done for today. On Monday, I'm going to cover information on wild fires in general and teach you all how firefighters would go about fighting them. You'll get a chance to put what you learn on Monday into practice on Tuesday in the live fire training scenario we're going to stage."

"Where's this training fire going to take place?" Gordon asked.

"On one of the smaller islands in the area," Cassie replied. She and Brains had talked about sites and had decided it would be safer to not do it Tracy Island. "I can't give you more detailed information than that at this time because Brains and I are going out to pick the exact site tomorrow. Anything else?" she asked again, pausing briefly. "Okay, then we're through here. Thanks for coming everyone."

As the others got up from their seats, Cassie started to shut down her lap top.

"I thought you said you were nervous about this training session," Luke commented as he joined her at the table.

"I was," Cassie told him as their teammates started walking by them on the way out of the room.

"Well, I don't think anyone noticed," Luke commented.

Xxxx

As she walked out of the room, Callie caught part of Luke and Cassie's conversation. She sure didn't seem nervous to me, she thought.

John was walking beside her. Glancing over at him, Callie decided to strike up a conversation with him.

"Wow, there's more to fighting wildfires than I thought. I hadn't heard about the 'fire triangle' until Cassie mentioned it," she commented. "I'm curious to find out exactly what the fire tetrahedron and fire square are too."

John nodded. "I've heard of the fire triangle before but not the other two," he commented.

"I know," said Brandon, speaking up from behind the two of them. "Living in Southern California, I should probably know more about wildfires than I do, but some people get too complacent, thinking it won't happen to them."

"Wildfires can happen anywhere at any time," Callie commented. "I remember a bad one when I was a teenager. It took place about 30 miles north of Opp, and most of the people there didn't think anything of it ... until they had to evacuate with almost nothing but the clothes they wore."

"Bet that got their attention," Brandon said seriously.

With a nod, she said, "Oh, did it ever. It served as a wake-up call to everyone in the area, including my family. We knew what we had to do to prevent our home from ever burning down in a wildfire."

"Things like that do have a way of opening your eyes to things," John commented.

The three of them had reached the point where they needed to head in different directions. Callie and Brandon said good-by to John. While John continued to the Villa, Callie and Brandon headed for their respective apartments, still talking.

Friday Training By: TracyFan4Eever and starrynebula

Posted by starrynebula on April 11, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:16:18 GMT

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Tracy Island, Friday, 19th October, 2068, 6:30p.m.

Tin-Tin sighed contently as she walked through the garden her father loved so much. She could understand why he spent so much time in them. The bright flowers and plants were beautifully captivating and the scents they gave off worked in harmony to relax those who walked by.

Almost hypnotic, Tin-Tin thought. Stooping, she looked at one of her father's Hibiscus. "Don't worry, Father will be back soon. But until then, I promise I will take care of you as he does."

"Erm, Tin-Tin," a voice behind Tin-Tin called out making her jump slightly.

Standing up, she turned only to smile. "Brains, you startled me. Did you hear a lot of what I said? I must've sounded a bit silly."

"I'm sorry Tin-Tin, I didn't mean to scare you," Brains rubbed his hand on the back of his neck briefly. "I arrived at the point where you were telling the plants that you will take care of them. You didn't sound silly at all. I just...well I didn't know you were into talking to plants."

"My father always tells me that talking to them helps them grow."

Brains thought for a second. "I agree there is some truth to that theory. Seeing as how plants need carbon dioxide to grow and by talking to them, you are breathing out CO2."

"I'll be sure to tell my father that you agree with his methods." Tin-Tin once again began tending to the plants. She frowned slightly, noticing how dry the soil had become.

"Seeing as you're busy, I'll leave you to it," Brains said.

"Oh no, Brains. Please stay. I'd appreciate your company. You could help if you'd like."

"Sure." Brains joined Tin-Tin. As he began, he noticed the same thing Tin-Tin had about the soil. "I must say that it's looking a bit dry, Tin-Tin."

"I saw that too. It must be the same all over the Island. Let's hope we get some rain soon." Tin-Tin sighed. "I don't want my father to come home to dying flowers and plants."

Posted by nikki on April 11, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:16:30 GMT

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Friday, October 19 evening, Western Australia

Jenny leaned forward and perused the job advertisements carefully.

"The Jackson family wants a cook/housekeeper. Mum, wasn't there an embezzlement scandal a few months ago involving the Jacksons? The tycoon who owns all those restaurants out East?"

"Yea, and I think there was some other crime imputed to them, but I don't remember what it was; I hadn't been paying much attention." Mum replied from the sofa where she was knitting.

"No, neither did I. Well, I don't think I'd like to work for them. Hey, the Boltons want a housemaid. Goodness gracious, look at the hours they're asking!"

"Oh, dear, I wouldn't work for the Boltons. Mr Bolton is a greedy old miser, so I've heard. They'll work you as hard as they can, and pay you pittance."

"That's just gossip, but I won't apply anyway. Ooh, the Trouts want a housekeeper. I've seen Brett Trout in films. He's really handsome."

"Yes, love, and do you know how he treats his girlfriends? Like dirt. Tells them he loves them, dumps them as soon as he's had some fun with them. Or worse. Remember Verity Morgan?"

"The actress from that film, um, Midnight Dreams. She played the heroine."

"Yes. Well, I don't know the particulars, but apparently he treated her so badly that she tried to shoot him."

"What!?"

"Yes. So, if I were you, I'd steer right away from that family."

"Hmm. Well, I can't see any more jobs that might suit me."

"Oh, well, leave it off. I'm sure a job will come up sometime."

"You're very optimistic, Mum. Like a cuppa?"

Posted by scuppy on April 17, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:17:03 GMT

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Friday, October 19, 2068, 10 a.m., Paris, France (9 p.m., same day, Tracy Island)

Kyrano breathed deeply of the morning air. Though the day was sunny, he knew it would be chilly early on, and so waited until the temperatures rose to a more moderate level before heading outside. He would have waited longer and set out after lunch, but for this, he was impatient.

The cemetery was wreathed in the colors of autumn, and fallen leaves skittered across the pathways, driven by a slight breeze. He'd left the driver at the entrance with instructions to return in an hour, preferring to walk to his destination, letting the quiet of the place work its way on his heart and mind, preparing him for his visit with his late wife, Samani.

Oh, he knew she wasn't really there, not in spirit. But here, at least, he had a focus, a place he could visit and envision how she once was, feel again the joy and love she had brought to his life. It was a pale shadow of what they'd once known, and was eclipsed by what he now shared with Lisa. He smiled as he strolled toward where Samani was buried, remembering how she had so single-mindedly pursued him, how her gentle wooing had finally awakened a devotion in him that had made him wonder why he had not seen it sooner, for it seemed as if it had been there always. No one before Samani had done that, and there had been no one since... until Lisa breezed into his life.

He was at the spot before he realized it. The smooth granite block stood before him, engraved with her name and the single word in Arabic letters: "tercinta" - its meaning in Malay - "beloved". He bowed deeply, hands pressed together. Then he began to speak in French, the language they both shared and loved.

"My wife, my beloved -- I am here once again. It has been several years since I last visited the city and came to pay my respects to you. I have seen your father and sister; they are well, though

your father is growing older and shall soon join you beyond the pale." He smiled, and stepped forward to place a hand on the block. "Our daughter is flourishing, and has become as beautiful and intelligent as her mother. She is not yet married, and so has not made me an ancestor, but she has the love of a good man. Gentle, kind, patient - they have worked together and I think will be a good match when all is settled between them."

He shook his head gently. "I wish you could see her, could have been here to guide her as a mother. The years of raising her were full of joy, but also very difficult. Fortunately, there has been a wise woman in her life, one who has become as a grandmother to her. Her influence made things easier on me in many ways."

"As for myself, I am well. Age is also taking its toll on me, and I am not as resilient as I once was. But I am content with my work, and my garden, and my place." He paused, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "But... there is something I must tell you." He took another deep breath, a shaky one this time, and swallowed heavily before proceeding. "For many years I have missed your presence in my life, tercinta, and I shall still miss that which we shared. But you are beyond the pale, while I am still here. And -- beyond all hope -- I have found someone new to love and cherish. I am soon to be wed again." He looked down and smiled. "She is as vibrant and full of life as a spring day, and though she is both mother and grandmother, she makes me feel young again." Glancing skyward, he murmured, "I do not know how much the dead can see or hear of those things in life, but if you can see and hear me, wish me well, my Samani."

For some reason he didn't understand, he waited expectantly. The air had grown still around him, and all was silent. The breeze had died; the leaves lay scattered, stiff and still on the ground around him.

But if Kyrano was looking for a sign from his late wife, he did not get it. Instead, a soft, mocking voice called from behind him, speaking in Malay.

"It has been a long time, brother."

Kyrano stiffened at the sound, but did not turn. He took a moment to compose himself and calm his now-racing heart. Hoping his voice did not waver, he asked, "Why are you here, evil one?"

There was a low chuckle. "Why to pay my respects to my late sister-in-law. It is a pity we were not introduced while she lived. I am sure I would have found her a fascinating woman." The voice was coming closer, and Kyrano could hear the slight crunching of dead leaves as his hated half-brother paced toward him, his footfalls slow and measured. "I also wanted to see you, Kyrano. We have much to discuss."

Kyrano thought of the alarm pendant around his neck, but realized that it wouldn't work so far from the island. He strengthened his mental defenses, but that provoked another mocking chuckle from Gaat.

"Come now, Tuan. I have no need to probe, not here, not now. Not when we are thus, so close. Not when I can make you tell me all that I want to know and Tracy cannot help you." A large, strong hand fell on his shoulder. He stiffened again, and the fingers dug in, holding him fast. "Will you not face me, brother? Will you not let me look at you in the flesh?"

Kyrano closed his eyes tightly, waiting for Gaat to swing him around so they were face to face. I will not give in!

Suddenly, there was a shout, and a thud. Gaat cursed, and his grip eased a little. Then he screamed and let go entirely.

"My eyes!"

Startled, Kyrano nearly turned, but there was a pull on his arm and a young voice said in accented English, "Run!"

He obeyed, opening his eyes to find himself pulled by a dark-haired woman. She urged him onward. "The spray will not stop him for long. We must flee, ja?"

"Y-Yes," Kyrano stuttered.

She moved her grasp to his wrist, and tried to pick up the pace, moving from monument to monument, making quick darts from place to place. Finally, they reached a sleek motor scooter. She mounted the machine and looked at him expectantly. "Behind me, Herr Kyrano. Schnell, bitte."

Kyrano hesitated a moment, and the dark-haired girl said, in a quiet, urgent voice, "The Pink Lady sent me."

He needed no more urging. Awkwardly, he put a leg over the back of the machine, and held on to her for dear life as she took off with a scattering of gravel. Her long hair whipped in his face, and he turned his head briefly, looking back. Gaat had just cleared the maze of monuments. He was wearing a mask, and looked like a distinguished gentleman with slicked-back gray hair and bushy eyebrows to match. He stood there, shaking his fist with one hand and wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his leather coat. Kyrano gave an internal sigh as he realized he was out of danger.

The young woman took a circuitous route back to the heart of the city, and finally stopped at a small café. "I believe he cannot follow us, Herr Kyrano," his rescuer said. "We will rest here for a moment, ja? Then I shall take you back to your hotel."

Kyrano nodded, and sat heavily down in a chair. When a waiter appeared, data pad in hand, he asked for a cognac, something he would usually never request so early in the day. The young woman asked for black coffee, then sat back to study him for a moment.

"Have you been following me?" Kyrano asked, once fortified with a sip or two of wine.

The young woman nodded. "Ja, Herr Kyrano." Holding out a hand, she said, "I am Gisela Schmidt, from Germany. I have been keeping a discreet watch on you during your visit." They shook hands briefly, then Gisela settled back into her chair. "The Pink Lady herself would have done so, but she had other obligations."

Kyrano took another drink of his cognac. By now, his racing heart had eased, but he still watched

the crowds around him with a uncomfortable wariness. "How did you know...?"

"He wore different faces, but he has been following you since Tuesday. How he came to know you were here, I cannot tell. But I reported his interest and description each time, and her Ladyship became alarmed. She told me to purchase some pepper spray, and if he was to confront you at any time, to spray it in his eyes. When he did so at the cemetery, I threw a stone at him to gain his attention, and followed my instructions." She cocked her head to one side. "I do not understand why she placed such importance on his eyes."

Kyrano shook his head slowly. "It is... difficult to explain. But I thank you for your intervention. I had no desire to come face-to-face with him." He took another sip, and choosing his words carefully, asked, "There is someone else here in Paris for whom her Ladyship would be concerned. Is someone watching him as well?"

Gisela nodded. "Ja. The gentleman responsible for most of France is keeping the young man under his eye." She said no more, and gave no indication whether or not she knew who that young man was. Some of the agents knew that Jeff Tracy was the head of IR; others only knew that they worked for that organization. In any case, Gisela was being particularly discreet, and Kyrano was glad of it.

"Perhaps you should call your driver," she suggested. "He is supposed to meet you at the cemetery, ja?"

Kyrano drew in a sharp breath. "Yes. I will phone him and..." He looked at his rescuer.

"I will return you to your hotel, Herr Kyrano," Gisela repeated firmly. She finished her coffee and put the cup down, then set about pulling her hair back to braid it.

Nodding, Kyrano pulled out his phone. I should ask for another driver during the remainder of my stay in Paris. If this one happened to meet Belah at the cemetery... The thought chilled him. He dialed the number he had been given, and set about thinking of a way to explain himself when the driver answered.

Posted by Tikatu on April 20, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:17:18 GMT

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2 PM: Paris, the Left Bank

"Pull over here, please."

The chauffeur complied, and Virgil got out. He looked around, then nodded in satisfaction. With assistance, he pulled out a chair, an easel and stand, a small table and his paints and brushes from the trunk. It didn't take him long to find the right place to set up, and in a short amount of time everything was ready.

"Thank you, Jean. Please return in two hours to take me back to my hotel."

"Very good, monsieur."

Virgil watched the limo pull away, then went back to his setup and sat down. He pulled out a sketch he'd done a couple of days ago and attached it to an upper corner. Then he looked at the scene in front of him, comparing it to the sketch. The Seine was visible, with the Eiffel Tower in the distance. There was a low wall and a walkway along the river, and people were sitting on the wall, walking along it in groups of twos and threes. Perfect, he thought. Even the light is right, Now to get to work.

Swiftly he sketched out the scene before him, pausing from time to time to compare it with his previous sketch. Finally he had the outline of what he wanted, and began to pull out his paints, and mixing them to get the right shades.

It took him a few minutes to select the brush he wanted to use, then, finally, the actual painting began. He worked quickly, getting the background in first, with just a little of the tower, then concentrating on the foreground, and the people who were sitting on the wall.

Suddenly he stopped. He looked at one of the people on his canvas, surprised. The person sitting on the wall was a brunette, yet he'd painted her hair as blonde. I can't seem to get her out of my mind. I must miss her more than I thought.

He looked back and forth between the painting and the woman sitting on the wall with her little girl. I think I like her better as a blonde. I'm going to leave it as is.

He continued to work until the chauffeur returned. It wasn't completed, but the finishing touches could be done at the hotel, or even later, when he returned to Tracy Island. Either way, he was satisfied with what he'd accomplished.

Posted by hobbeth on April 21, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:17:29 GMT

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5 p.m., Paris

Gaat tossed off the rest of his drink, still cursing his misfortune. It was pure coincidence, seeing my brother here in Paris. Such an opportunity is rarely granted by the gods, and I am no fool. I followed him, watched his comings and goings, and only this day did it occur to me he would visit the cemetery. I thought my gods were smiling on me when I found him there, alone, with no way to protect himself.

He scowled and poured himself another measure. "Bah! I should have known Tracy would have him watched and protected, and not only by the driver. That cursed woman! She ruined

everything!"

Glancing out the window of his hotel room, his eyes searched for the place where he knew Kyrano rested. "He has been deep in meditation since our confrontation, and I have spent the hours peeling off my ruined mask and clearing my eyes of that vile spray." He took a large gulp of liquor. "I will not catch him again, nor will Tracy's son fall into my hands. I have business to attend to across the Channel and will not have the time."

Finishing his drink, he sat down in the overstuffed chair his hotel provided. "I wonder what he was saying. The only word I understood was 'tercinta' - he must have been speaking to his wife. It is a pity he spoke in French. I might have gleaned some interesting information."

He glanced out the window again. "A pity. He will be doubly on his guard, and so will Tracy. No matter -- I can be patient."

Posted by Tikatu on April 21, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:17:42 GMT

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Saturday October 20th, around 8:30 am.....

Luke stepped off the monorail and made his way to the lift leading to the next level of the Villa, Rommel trotting at his side. Walking around to the glass doors, he spotted the family at the table and knocked.

Jeff looked up and waved. Luke stepped inside. "Good morning!"

"Morning, Luke. All ready for your day?" Jeff asked.

Luke nodded. "Yes, sir. Got plenty of snacks and water," he said as he shrugged the pack on his back.

Grandma walked in and handed him a package. "Here are a couple of sandwiches and some leftover cake."

"Cool!" Alex jumped up from the table. "I'm ready! Let's go!"

"Did you feed Patches yet?" Dianne asked. "And change the litter box?"

Alex groaned. "I'll take care of him as soon as I get home. He'll be fine!"

"Alex," Dianne said warningly.

Luke cut in. "Say, Mr. Tracy, that reminds me. There are probably going to be times when I can't take Rommel out on rescues with me. I was wondering if you could help me hire someone to help

me out. They'd have to be responsible and trustworthy. I'd need them to feed and walk him while I was gone."

Jeff smiled. "I'm sure I could look into the personnel files and find someone."

"Great, thanks."

Alex sighed. "I'll be right back, Luke." He hurried out of the room and they could hear him calling for the kitten, Tyler tagging at his heels.

"That was clever," Dianne told him.

Luke shrugged. "Hey, I was an eleven year old boy once, too. I hated having to feed our stock before I left for school everyday. Funny how once my brother and I grew up and moved out, Mom and Dad got rid of most of the animals."

"They lost their slave labor." Jeff grinned up at him. "I raised five boys; I know how to play the game."

They all laughed. "What kind of animals did you have, Luke?" Cherie asked.

"Chickens, ducks, a few goats and horses. Always had barn cats and a dog or two. We still have a couple of horses and the chickens," he replied.

"Cool."

Alex came flying back into the room. "All set."

Dianne smiled. "Good. Have fun and be careful," she told him. "Both of you!"

"Yes, ma'am. Ready?" Luke asked Alex. The boy nodded and hefted a pack of his own. "We're off then. We'll be back before dinner."

(Exploring, Part 1)

Posted by lillehafrue on April 23, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:17:58 GMT

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Saturday, October 20th, 2068, 10 a.m. Tracy Island

"So have you ever been on a boat before?" Brains asked Cassie as he handed her a life jacket.

After discussing the issue several times since Tuesday morning, the two of them had decided it

would be best not to hold the live fire training exercise on the main island. Instead, it would take place on one of the smaller islands in the area. Brains had taken Cassie on a fly-over of the islands on Thursday as she was unfamiliar with the area. They had used that trip to narrow down the choices. Today, they were taking a boat out to get a closer look of the terrain on two of the islands.

"Other than a ferry, no," Cassie told him, taking the life jacket from him. She put it on and looked at the motorboat they were standing in front of. "Somehow, I don't think this is going to be anything like that experience though."

"Well, you're definitely right there," Brains replied before going over some basic boating safety with Cassie.

When he was done, Brains climbed on board the motorboat. He then turned and extended his hand to Cassie to assist her on board. Cassie took the hand offered to her and stepped from the dock to the boat, feeling slightly apprehensive and excited at the same time.

As Brains untied the boat from the dock, Cassie took a seat in one of the seats. When he was done his task, Brains took his place behind the wheel of the boat. "Are you ready?" he asked, looking over at his passenger.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Cassie replied.

Brains nodded as he started the boat. He stated to maneuver the motorboat out of the boat pen and into open water.

"Atoll number 2 is closer. I know that was our second choice, but I figured we'd check that one out from the boat first and then go on to Neverland. If you want to take a closer look at either of them let me know and we'll go ashore."

"Okay," Cassie replied, with a nod as she looked around her taking in the scenery. With the sun glaring off the water she was glad she had remembered her sunglasses and FDNY cap, which she had secured to her hair with clips to help keep it from blowing off in the wind.

Other than a few fluffy white clouds here and there, the sky was clear. "You know Brains, I'm a bit concerned with how dry everything is," she commented, looking over at the scientist. "If it doesn't rain before then it wouldn't be wise to do the live fire exercise as it will just increase the chance of it getting out of control."

"The thought has crossed my mind as well," he admitted to her, having come to the same thought himself when he was in Kyrano's garden the evening before. "It's unusual to go this long without rain here and I'm sure the trend won't last too much longer. There's no point in worrying about something we can't control. If things are too dry when we go to set up on Tuesday then we scrub the exercise."

Cassie nodded, knowing he was right. However she didn't get a chance to reply as Brains pushed the throttle forward, speeding up the boat. After her initial surprise, she sat back in the seat to enjoy the boat ride.

XXXX

"We're approaching Neverland," Brains called out, shouting to be heard over the sound of the boat and the wind.

They had already checked out atoll number 2. Cassie had found the island less suitable from sea level than when she had seen it from the air. She was hoping that this island, which had been her first choice anyway, wouldn't turn out to be the same way.

She lifted the binoculars they had brought with him to her eyes, even as Brains slowed the boat down as they approached the shallower waters around the island.

Not for the first time, Cassie wondered about the island's name. Deciding there was only one way to satisfy her curiosity she decided to ask the question that had been on her mind since first hearing it.

"How did the island get the name Neverland? That's the name of the island the Lost Boys from the Peter Pan story lived on isn't?" She asked thinking about the story her dad's father had told her when she was little. It had been quite some time since she had heard the story.

Brains nodded as he started to answer.

"The island officially just has a number designation, but as we tend to use the island for some extracurricular activities, Gordon decided that was boring and wanted to give the island a name. He liked the Lost Boys' concept of never growing up, so he picked the name Neverland." Taking one hand off the wheel, he pointed to the shore. "This is the side of the island where we usually have our paintball wars," he informed her as they approached the east side of the island. "The forests on the island and the heavy brush make it a good location for the game. As you can see, the island has quite a bit of rocky shoreline. However, there are locations on both the east and west shores that Thunderbird two can land on as well as being able to get close enough with a boat. The southern shore doesn't have much of a coastline, while the north end of the island is all cliffs."

"Well, let's check out the western side of the island," she suggested, dropping the binoculars. "The others might not appreciate it if we burn their paintball playground."

"You've got a good point there," he replied with a grin as he maneuvered the boat to the south end of the island.

Cassie saw what Brains meant about the southern shoreline. There was only a thin strip of beach before the brush and trees started taking over. Large areas of the shoreline were also very rocky. As they came around to the west side of the island, she lifted the binoculars again to scan the terrain.

This looks like it would be a good place for the live fire exercise, she thought. "I'd like to go ashore and look around," she called over to Brains without lowering the binoculars.

"Sure," he replied, turning the wheel to head the boat toward the island.

Posted by starrynebula on April 25, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:18:17 GMT

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Luke and Alex made their way through the jungle, Alex often pausing to show the older man a bird, insect, or other bit of island wildlife. Rommel trotted alongside them, nose quivering at all the new scents.

They continued down the path, Luke content to stay quiet and listen to Alex's chattering. The sound reminded him of his nephew, who was also around Alex's age. Smiling to himself, he let Alex lead him towards what looked like a small pool. As they got closer and the foliage parted, Luke realized it was actually a good sized lake, complete with waterfall at one end.

"See! I told you it was big!" Alex piped up.

Luke chuckled. "Guess I owe you my cookies then. Why don't we have lunch now, then see if we can catch any fish." They sat down on a group of rocks and Luke doled out the lunch Grandma had made. "These are great!" he said as he bit into his.

Alex grinned. "Grandma Tracy makes the best sandwiches. And you should taste her chocolate cake!"

Luke paused mid-bite. "Did you say chocolate cake?" The boy nodded. "I'm a sucker for a good piece of cake." Rommel whined, and Luke tossed him a bite of ham.

The two finished their lunch, then Luke unpacked his fishing rod. He reassembled it and then glanced at the water for a few moments. He selected a fly from his case, and cast out over the water. He had a few hits, but nothing took the bait. Frowning, he reeled in and chose another fly. Still no luck. "That's really weird," he mused. "I should have at least had a few good bites."

Alex nodded. "I'm not surprised. Most of the freshwater fish here are in the catfish family. Or the types you find in aquariums. There are a few species of perch in Australia though."

Luke looked impressed. "Wait a sec, what about all the trout fishing in New Zealand?"

"I think the fish were brought in sometime around the beginning of the century."

"Stocking." Luke nodded thoughtfully. "You know, this would make a good trout pond. There's enough aeration with the waterfall, and see this?" He knelt down and parted the weeds at the edge of the pond. There were some grayish tubes in the water, attached to the plant stems. "Do you know what these are?"

The boy thought a moment. "Mosquito larvae?"

"Right! So that means there's plenty of food for the fry and the larger fish."

"But there aren't any larger fish."

"But if we stocked this ourselves, there would be. It would take a couple of years to get the population up enough for them to support themselves, but it could happen. And, it would take care of the mosquito population too."

Alex leapt to his feet. "Great! Let's do it then!"

Luke chuckled. "Hold on there, sport, it's not that easy. First of all, we need to do a little homework."

"Homework? Yuck!"

"Yes, but we have to. OK, say we just throw some brown trout in here. Suddenly, what local fish there are there, start disappearing. And, what if there aren't any other fish like that anywhere? Or, what if the mosquito larvae that the trout eat are actually supporting something else?"

Alex sobered. "I never thought of that."

Luke nodded gravely. "A lot of people don't. That's why I'm here. Well, one of the reasons anyway. While I was primarily hired to be part of International Rescue, my 'official' job is to survey the impact Tracy Industries has on the environment. Whether that's building a new facility, or checking on an existing one. All it takes is a shift in one part of an eco-system to destroy it." Then he smiled. "Tell you what, why don't you help me? We can do some studies together and if we think it'll work, we'll approach your dad and get some real fish in here."

Alex brightened. "Sure! We can take water samples, record what wildlife uses the pond, keep a record of water levels, all kinds of stuff!"

"That's the way." Luke glanced out over the water again then grinned down at the boy. "Right now, last one in is a rotten egg!"

With a yelp from both, and a bark from the dog, they leaped into the water.

Posted by lillehafrue on May 3, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:18:33 GMT

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Saturday, October 20, Tracy Island; 1 PM (5 PM Friday in San Diego)

Brandon had just gotten on the computer when he heard the sound of someone IMing him. He

clicked over to it and saw:

ShMcC1: Hi, Brandon. Are you there?

He answered with:

BigMac1: Hey, Shannon! What's up?

ShMcC1: I saw you come online and had to tell you what I found. It's too funny!

BigMac1: What?

ShMcC1: You remember that trunk of Grandpa Dave's that Mom's been keeping in the attic?

BigMac1: Yeah. She said I looked so much like him, I might be able to use some of the things in it someday.

ShMcC1: Right. Well, I opened it to make sure everything was still in good condition, and you won't believe what I found.

BigMac1: What?

ShMcC1: Grandpa Dave was an exotic dancer when he was young.

BigMac1: What??

ShMcC1: It's true, Brandon. There are pictures of him in his costume.

BigMac1: What?

ShMcC1: His costume is even in the trunk, too. And it's in great condition!

BigMac1: WHAT???

ShMc1: LOL! C'mon, Brandon. You aren't that much of a prude.

BigMac1: I know, Sis. But imagining our grandfather as an exotic dancer is a bit of a stretch, don't you think?

ShMc1: (after a pause) Yeah, I guess. But isn't it a hoot?

BigMac1: It is, but it's weird, too. Is there anything to show where he danced?

ShMcC1: A couple of pics have a name on them: Chippendales. I'd heard of them, though they haven't been around for some time.

(a long pause)

ShMc1: Brandon? Are you still there?

BigMac1: I'm here, Shannon. I was just thinking.

ShMcC1: You? Thinking? About what?

BigMac1: Can you send me the costume and a couple of the pics?

ShMcC1: What?

BigMac1: I think I can use them. Would you send them as soon as possible, please?

ShMcC1: What??

BigMac1: We're having a Halloween party here, and I think that would make a great costume.

ShMcC1: WHAT???

BigMac1: Oh, c'mon, Shannon. Don't you think I could pull it off?

ShMcC1: Very funny, bro.

BigMac1: Actually, I'm serious. I was thinking about going as a Big Mac, but I like this idea better. And it's not like I'll actually do any exotic dancing - or any dancing. You know I've got two left feet.

(another pause)

ShMcC1: Y'know, it could work. Only your torso would be bare, and looking at the pics, your build is very much like Grandpa Dave's when he was that age.

BigMac1: Just as long as it doesn't become like his when he was 88.

ShMcC1: LOLLOLOLOL! Okay, bro. I'll box the costume and two of the pics up, and send it out Monday. I'll be too busy to get it out tomorrow.

BigMac1: Thanks, Sis. I owe you one. Btw, how are Mom and Dad doing?

ShMcC1: Dad's coming along nicely, but I'm having trouble with Mom trying to do more than she should. She thinks she should be able to do everything now that she did before the accident.

BigMac1: You tell her I said to back off for a while longer. It hasn't been that long, and the older you are, the longer it takes to heal completely.

ShMcC1: She just walked in and saw what you wrote. She said to tell you that she feels fine; she just tires more quickly.

BigMac1: Mom, feeling fine and being fine are two different things. You've told us that more times than I can count. Besides, getting tired more quickly probably means that you still have a way to

go.

ShMcC1: Mom says, "I should have known one of you would turn my words back on me one day. Okay, I'll try to go easier on myself, but it's hard to break the habits of a lifetime."

ShMcC1: It's time to get dinner started, so I'm off. Catch you again soon, okay?

BigMac1: Okay, Shannon. Take care.

He closed the IM window and, grinning to himself, turned to his email.

Posted by hobbeth on May 3, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:19:07 GMT

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Later that evening...

Luke stepped out onto the balcony, still rubbing his hair with a towel. Rommel padded after him, then plopped down at his feet. Luke chuckled and ran his hand through his hair. I need to get this cut. I've never had it this long before and it's driving me nuts! Wonder if I could get Mrs. Parkhurst to give me a trim.

He tossed the towel back into his apartment and leaned on the railing. The sun was setting, and a cool breeze came across the sea. He closed his eyes and sighed. Today had been a great day. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun with a kid. I know, it was last time I was over at Roger's. Spent the whole time wrestling with Jason.

Sighing again, he went back inside and pulled up his laptop. Waiting for it to load, he glanced around the room. I'm all done unpacking. I should invite Elise and Nikki by to see how it came out. His eyes caught a photo on one of the shelves and he smiled. It showed his parents, brother, sister-in-law, and his nieces and nephews. He'd taken it before he left, and carved the frame out of a piece of barn board from the ranch. His computer finally loaded and for the next couple of hours, he immersed himself in work.

It was nearly midnight when he got a 'beep' signaling he had mail. He quickly opened his email and grinned.

Hey there, loser!

Where are you? You don't answer your phone; you don't write...have we broken up? Just kidding, I know you're probably busy. In case you've forgotten the date, hunting season starts in a little over two weeks. And dummy me, I promised Sarah last year that she could come to camp with us this time. So, check with your new boss and see if you can get any time off. We've got a date in the woods! And I'm not getting stuck there with Dad and my daughter alone!

Miss you, little brother.

Roger

Luke chuckled to himself, then sobered. "I wonder if I could get some time off," he mused out loud. He yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "Well, that's enough work for now." He turned off the computer. "Rommel! Time for bed!" The dog came trotting in as Luke shut the balcony doors. They walked into the bedroom and he paused to glare down at the dog. "Don't even think about getting up on that bed tonight. After your romp in the pond today, you need a bath." Rommel merely sat and gave his master a pathetic look. Luke rolled his eyes and turned off the light. A few moments later, he felt Rom jump onto the bed. "You know, just for that, you're helping with the laundry tomorrow." He rolled over and was soon fast asleep.

Posted by lillehafrue on May 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:19:20 GMT

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Saturday, October 20, 9 a.m., Paris, France (8 p.m., same day, Tracy Island)

"So, Kyrano," Virgil asked as the jet climbed into the morning sky. "How was your vacation?"

Kyrano sighed despite himself. "It was... interesting." With those words, he set his gaze out the window.

Virgil glanced at the older man, but said nothing until they'd reached cruising height. "Okay, what exactly did you mean by... interesting?"

"I... I encountered someone I did not expect," Kyrano said softly. "And barely escaped his clutches."

"Escaped? Clutches?" Virgil frowned behind his sunglasses. "Sounds like what happened to me... sort of."

Kyrano turned his head sharply to Virgil. "How so?"

"I ran into someone... or perhaps she ran into me... I don't know which." Virgil glanced over the controls. "One of the Hightowers. Her name is Desdemona... though that's not quite the name she gave me."

Kyrano nodded slowly. "I see. How did you escape her?"

This question took Virgil aback a little. "An accident, actually. Someone spilled a couple of drinks on her; she went ballistic." He shuddered. "It was coincidence that I found out who she really was."

"An accident? Hmm." Kyrano sat quietly, digesting this news.

Virgil was quiet for a moment, not wanting to break Kyrano's train of thought. Then, the older man looked up at him. "It may not have been an accident."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because my deliverance was not." Kyrano sighed once again, and folded his hands in his lap. "I was visiting my late wife at the cemetery where she is buried when I was confronted by my half-brother."

"The Hood!?" Virgil said with a gasp. "He was in Paris? How did he know you were there?"

"I do not know, but it was clear he had been following me." Kyrano thought back to that moment, and to his rescuer. "Lady Penelope had provided a discreet bodyguard, one of the agents. She intervened when my brother approached me and rescued me from him."

Virgil gave Kyrano a sharp look. "Do you think...?"

Kyrano nodded, sure of what Virgil was trying to ask. "I do. The agent assigned to follow me told me that France's agent was shadowing you. That is why I think the incident you mentioned was no accident."

"I see." Virgil murmured. He sat quietly for a moment then nodded and chuckled. "Just like Lady Penelope, keeping us safe even when we don't know we need it." He turned back to the controls again. "Looks like we have something to discuss with Dad when we get home."

"If her Ladyship has not already informed him of the incidents," Kyrano said.

"Hm. Yes."

They flew onward for a little bit before Virgil asked, "Besides meeting up with your brother, how was your visit?"

This time, Kyrano smiled. "It was satisfying in many ways, and melancholy in others. As Paris herself can be when one returns after a long absence." He turned to Virgil again. "And your visit?"

"Inspiring and eye-opening," Virgil replied. He smiled, too, a dreamy sort of smile. "I had time to paint, to visit the Louvre, and to realize how much I missed someone special."

"In that last sentiment we are agreed," Kyrano replied. He straightened in his seat. "How long will it be until we arrive at the island?"

"Nine hours, I'm afraid." Virgil was apologetic. "That includes an hour for refueling in Bombay." He shook his head. "It'll be five in the morning tomorrow when we get there."

"Then we will be ready to rest, and recover from the jet lag." Kyrano said, nodding sagely. "Our return cannot come too soon."

"Amen to that," Virgil echoed.

Posted by Tikatu on May 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:19:34 GMT

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Thursday, October 18; 1:30 PM

Brains and Will watched as the weary team of rescuers exited Thunderbird 2 and headed to the elevator that would take them to the Villa and some much needed nourishment. Elise paused and looked at the pair for a moment, and Brains told her, "Get on up there. There's food waiting. You can debrief and eat, then get some rest. You all look exhausted."

"Yeah, well, there were three fatalities before we even got there, one from the local rescue team. And two others are so badly injured, we don't know if they'll make it or not."

A group of spelunkers had been trapped by a cave-in in a remote area of the Rockies along the British Columbia-Alberta border, a few hundred miles north of Montana. The local rescue team that went in to locate them and get them out had also been trapped by a second cave-in. It had taken that team and their equipment over twelve hours to get there, and time was running out for both groups. So International Rescue had been called. It had taken them another six hours to get all the trapped people out, and two more before the worst of the injured were stabilized enough to be taken to a hospital.

"As badly as we wish we could save everyone, sometimes it's just not possible," said Dianne.

Will looked at her somberly. "I hope that knowing that you did save others helps, even if it's just in a small way. Plus if the worst of the injured don't survive, at least you've given their families a chance to say good-bye. That's gotta count for somethin'."

Dianne smiled wanly at him. "It does; but sometimes it's just not enough."

Brains gave her a gentle shove toward the elevator. "No more philosophical discussions. They can wait until you're rested and fed. Will and I will take care of things down here."

She stepped into the car and as the doors closed, Scott was heard to say, "Be careful with my baby, now. She's been through a lot."

Brains snorted a laugh and turned to Will. "He says that to me every time. Well, let's get started."

"Right." Will headed over to where a small tank with a vacuum stood by as Brains moved to the pod. Thunderbird Two was still raised above it, and would be gone over after the pod and the vehicles within were taken care of. The tank was brought into the pod to be used to collect all dirt and rocks scattered throughout and on the vehicles, so it could be checked for any bacteria or

other things, large or small, that might be hazardous to plant or animal life on the island. Once it was all in the tank, a sample was removed to go to the lab where Brains - or now more recently, Callie - would perform all the necessary tests to determine if it was safe to use.

They started with some of the smaller equipment, thoroughly and methodically cleaning each, then moving it out of the pod. Finally they tackled the Mole. Brains had Will clean it from top to bottom, inside and out, including the engine. Once the equipment was cleaned, Will vacuumed the inside of the pod. Finally the dirt and rocks were in the tank, which was then moved out and to one side.

"Since the Mole is the most important piece of equipment that was used," Brains said, "start with it while I work on some of the other equipment. I think you can handle it; you did after the previous rescue."

"Thanks, Brains. This baby's been getting a lot of use. I'll holler if I need help."

For another hour, they worked without speaking. Then Will, after starting the Mole and listening to its engine for a few minutes, said, "Brains, would you come over here a minute?"

Brains stopped what he was doing and walked over to stand next to the redhead. "What's the problem?"

"Take a listen to the engine. I'm hearin' something that doesn't sound right. Do you?"

There was a long pause while Brains complied. He was about to tell Will that it sounded fine, when he heard it. It was faint, but there - a slight vibration in pitch. "You heard that? It took me a while."

"Yeah, well, it took me some time, too. Besides, when the well being of an aircraft carrier is your ultimate responsibility, you learn fast to rely on all senses and to keep them sharp, so you can catch a problem early and fix it fast. But I'm glad you did hear it; now I've got to find out what's causin' it."

"Want some help?"

"Sure!"

It wasn't easy to check the engine from every angle to locate the source of the anomaly, and it took nearly forty five minutes before they found it. A shaft had become warped, just slightly, but enough for the engine to start making the faint sound change the men heard.

"You got a replacement for it in stock?" Will asked.

"Let me check. Come watch. You'll need to be able to do this yourself. After all, I won't always be able to be here to work with you."

"I know; heck, I wasn't sure if you'd be able to come today. You've got a lot of responsibilities. Ah! A computer. I take it you can find out what you've got and where is it from here."

"Right. Here's the desktop icon to take you to the inventory site. You know, we've been lucky so far, in that we haven't needed to replace anything in the time since you started. But it was bound to happen. So today, you get to learn a little more: how to find out if we have a replacement part, and how to get it." He showed Will how to access the site and locate the part. Each Thunderbird, auxiliary vehicle, and piece of equipment had its on section, with all the parts listed, and quantity in stock. "Now, which shaft was it that we need?"

"Hang on." Will went to the cabinet where the manuals were kept and took out the one on the Mole. He flipped through the pages as he returned, then set it down on the counter beside the computer. "It's this one, right?" he asked, pointing to the illustration.

"Right the first time. And," Brains checked the inventory, "we're in luck. We have one in stock." He noted the location and said, "Come on. I'll show you where we keep our parts."

Posted by hobbeth on May 4, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:19:49 GMT

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Saturday, October 21, 11 PM; Silver Spring (3 PM Sunday on Tracy Island)

Lena got home from the family gathering at Matthew's house, to celebrate her parents' return from their round-the-world cruise. It had been fun, looking at the pictures and some videos, hearing about what they did, both on board and off. But she was thinking about one adventure that her mother had related.

"While we were heading to Santiago, we were diverted to an area where a jet had gone down. Dere were survivors, and ships were needed dere to take dem aboard. We were close enough, so de captain changed course. But we encountered one woman who was unhappy about it, and made it known to one of de pursers, in de middle of de hall."

"Your motter called Miss Hightower on her attitude, asking her how she'd feel if she was one of de passengers and couldn't be rescued because of someone's selfish attitude," Daniel said.

"Hightower? Desdemona Hightower?"

"Dat's right, Lena. Do you know her?"

"I had de misfortune of meeting her once. Dat was more dan enough, Motter."

A little more was said, then the talk turned to other things. But Lena knew that she'd better inform Jeff. And Lady Penelope, I tink. As soon as she put her things away, she went into her home office. It didn't take long for her to get the computer up and ready. She brought up an email window, added both Jeff's and Penny's addresses, and began to type.

I just learned something this evening that I felt you both should know about as soon as possible. My parents just returned from a world cruise, and were aboard one of the ships that took on survivors of that jet crash you went to last month. On their way to tell the purser that they would share their cabin with any survivors, they encountered Desdemona Hightower, which means she may have seen some of the equipment used to effect the rescue.

If so, she might get the idea (if she hasn't already) to try to find a way to go after International Rescue and their equipment. Even though your security, regarding your communications and computer transmissions, is state-of-the-art, I will continue to see if I can come up with ways to enhance it.

But I thought you both should be informed, and let anyone else know whom you feel needs to be.

Please let me know if there is anything else I can do to help.

Lena

She thought a minute, then smiled and added:

By the way, my mother seems to have the same opinion of that woman that I do, and didn't hesitate to tell my dad after their encounter with her. According to him, she told him that Miss Hightower was a bitch. She's right.

She made sure all security checks were operational, then sent the message. She sat back and said to herself, "Dat's all I can do, for now. I'd better get some sleep."

Posted by hobbeth on May 5, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:20:15 GMT

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*****Sunday, October 21, Tracy Island, 4 p.m.*****

Enjoying the sunshine, Nikki sat poolside as she watched John and Gordon swimming laps. "Maybe I'll take a swim later on."

After 10 more minutes of swimming, John and Gordon swam to the side where she sat.

"Whew," Gordon said, "today's a great day for being at the pool. It's really warm."

John nodded. "Not enough to start a serious fire around here. Speaking of which, I'm looking forward to the next training class tomorrow."

"So am I," Nikki said. "I've seen wildfires on television before, but I have a feeling Cassie's going to cover a lot more than what's been shown."

"You're probably right," Gordon said. "I'll probably need to take a pencil and paper."

Raising an eyebrow, Nikki said, "Be serious, Gordon. Wildfires are no joke."

"Who said I was joking? I really want to take down as much information as possible. Sure, the rum plant fire was a start, but I need to learn more to be ready. Note taking's my best method."

Nikki blushed in embarrassment. "Sorry. I just thought you were kidding around in a serious situation."

John shook his head. "Nikki, there are times even I can't tell whether he's being funny or serious. This time, though, I know he means it. Believe me, I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of people bring in pens and pads just to get all the information."

"I don't expect us to learn every bit about wildfires or how the firefighters handle 'em," said Gordon, "but I'd rather think in the long-term, with all of us having the capabilities of fighting fires, not just some of us. I think doing this will make us more well-rounded."

With a smile, Nikki said, "You're right. If we can do more than just our individual specialties, the one or two experts won't feel so burdened."

"It's like the old expression, 'Jack of all trades, master of none.' Before too long, we'll all be knowledgeable in many different fields."

John agreed. "Then we wouldn't have to send as many people out on rescues. Or, if we have more than one going on at the same time, we'll have experts at each zone."

"Perhaps," said Nikki, "we may consider more cross-training in other aspects, such as make an astronaut out of Gordon."

"Part of astronaut training does involve working in water," John noted. "If we could ever get time, we could have more than just Alan, Callie, and me. All you'd need are the basics."

Gordon shook his head. "Hey, we can do all that when we get time. There's too much coming in the next couple of months to even consider the option yet."

"Okay, okay, you're right. We'll bring it up after Dad's birthday. I'll put it in my PDA to make sure we don't forget about it."

"Sounds good," Nikki said. "I feel like a swim. Would you mind if I joined you?"

"Come on in," said Gordon, "the water's just fine."

So, she joined the two brothers for a fun swim in the pool just before dinner time.

Posted by TracyFan4Ever on May 5, 2008

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:20:32 GMT
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Sunday, October 21, 7 p.m. Tracy Island (3 a.m. NY same day, 2 a.m. Kansas)

Cassie stood on the balcony and looked out at the horizon. Storm clouds were approaching.

Well that should help take care of the dry conditions that Brains and I were worried about, she thought.

Turning, she headed back through the open door and into the living room of her apartment. She flopped down on the couch and pulled her laptop into her lap. The firefighter needed a break from work so she planned on catching up on her personal email. Logging into her account, she scanned the new messages in the inbox. There were three messages; one from Mark, one from Dr. Lindon and another from Jackie. As she hadn't heard from any of her old co-workers in awhile, she opened Jackie's email first.

She was halfway through it when she noticed one of her contacts come online. Glancing at her IM, she saw that it was Jordan.

She glanced up at the clock. Having gotten use to the time difference between the island and the city, it didn't take her long to figure out what time it was there. What is he doing up at three in the morning? she thought. There is one way to find out.

Kitten2039: Hey Jordan! You're up late

DocJEK: Hey Cass. Could say the same about you. I just got off work. What's your excuse?

Cassie thought quickly of how to answer that question. She decided to keep it simple.

Kitten2039: Couldn't sleep.

DocJEK: Same here. Though after sixteen hours at the hospital I hadn't counted on sleep being a problem.

Kitten2039: Rough night?

DocJEK: You could say that. Two doctors and a nurse called out sick so I stayed. Guess I'm still keyed up from being busy. It sure isn't a quiet night in the city. Not to mention, one of the last patients I saw sort of unnerved me.

Kitten2039: Want to talk? You know I'm always here to listen.

DocJEK: Well, I can't go into details but one of my last patients was a victim of a hate crime. Beat up because he was gay. All I could think was - what if this was Mark? I haven't exactly been the most supportive of big brothers these last couple of years.

Kitten2039: I've got a question for you then. Is it the idea that some might beat Mark up because

he's gay, that's bothering you or that you're uncomfortable with the fact that your kid brother is gay?

Cassie watched the screen, waiting for a reply. When one wasn't forthcoming she typed in another message.

Kitten2039: Hey, I was just trying to help you figure things out. You're not mad, are you?

DocJEK: No, I'm not mad. Just thinking.

There was another pause, before Jordan's next message appeared on screen.

DocJEK: I guess it's more of the second. There isn't much I can do to about what other people do and I know Mark can look out for himself. Guess I always thought of myself as tolerant and open minded. I haven't exactly been showing that when it comes to my own brother though. Hell Cass, I can't even remember the last time I talked to him. Last Christmas probably.

Kitten2039: So, then give him a call. Ask him to go out for drinks or something.

DocJEK: You think he'd even want to hear from me?

Kitten2039: I know he'd love to hear from you. The last thing Mark wanted to do was cause a rift between him and the rest of the family but he also can't deny who he is. Just call him.

DocJEK: Maybe I will.

Kitten2039: Good.

DocJEK: So how have you been?

Cassie chatted with Jordan for a while more until Jordan signed off to head to bed. Cassie went back to reading her email hoping that Jordan really would call Mark. She'd like to see all her brothers on better terms with one another and maybe this was a start.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:20:40 GMT

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Sunday, October 21, 9 a.m., London (9 p.m., same day, Tracy Island)

Lady Penelope raised the porcelain teacup to her lips almost absently. Her eyes were focused on the data pad before her, rereading the reports sent to her by the IR agents in Germany and France and the email she'd received from Lena. She drew in a breath, then let it out again in a soft sigh. She carefully replaced the cup in its saucer.

"Parker."

Parker, who stood nearby, stepped forward. "More tea, Milady?"

"Just a touch, Parker," Penelope said. "Then leave the pot with me. I must speak with Jeff."

"Very good, Milady."

xxxx

The pink pearls on Penelope's portrait flashed, and Jeff looked up from his desk. He frowned, and toggled a switch, then watched Penelope's portrait come to life. She was perfectly coiffed, but her neckline was trimmed with fluffy marabou feathers, indicating she was still in her dressing gown. He managed to put on a smile, and warmly said, "Hello, Penny. Good to see you again."

"And to see you, Jeff." Penelope smiled a little. "Am I correct in assuming you received Lena's missive?"

"I did," Jeff replied, nodding. "And I've managed to have a talk with Virgil as well. He told me what happened with Ms. Hightower, and indicated that Kyrano had also encountered someone unpleasant. My impression was that he was leaving it to Kyrano to tell the whole story. Unfortunately, I haven't had a chance to speak with Kyrano about it yet; he's having trouble with jet lag."

"Ah, I see." Penny glanced down at her data pad. "Though Virgil's encounter with Desdemona Hightower -- in her guise as 'Dez Richmond' - concerns me, it does not worry me as much as Kyrano's meeting."

The way Penelope kept her face very blank and very still made Jeff ask sharply, "Who did he meet, Penny?"

Penelope let out a soft breath and straightened. "He met his half-brother, Belah Gaat."

Jeff sank back into his chair a bit, a stunned look on his face. "Damn." Shaking his head, he reiterated, "Just... damn." After a moment, he composed himself, and asked, "What happened? Why was he there? How did he know that Kyrano was there?"

"According to the reports I have had," Penelope began, her voice both professionally crisp and soothing at once, "I do not believe that Gaat knew of Kyrano's visit. It seemed to the agent who followed Kyrano that Gaat was in Paris of his own accord, but once he saw Kyrano, he began to shadow him -- in disguise, as is his custom." Her eyes dropped briefly to the data pad and back up to meet Jeff's gaze. "They met in the cemetery where Kyrano's late wife is buried. The agent - Gisela - swooped in and pulled Kyrano from the scene, taking him to safety."

"So Gaat didn't get a chance to use his... mind control... whatever it is... on Kyrano?" Jeff sounded worried.

"Gisela indicated that he was unable to affect Kyrano -- who resolutely kept his back to Gaat, by the by."

Jeff sighed, relieved. "Thank God. I hate to think what Gaat would have done..." He paused for a moment, thinking, then asked, "Any news on Gaat's current whereabouts?"

Penelope shook her head, sounding regretful. "None, I fear. Gisela sprayed him with pepper spray, and very likely ruined the mask he wore. There is no way of knowing what disguise he might use after that point." She paused. "However, I doubt he would go about as himself, seeing as he is very high on Interpol's 'Most Wanted' list."

"I see." He straightened in his chair again. "Please convey my thanks to Gisela for her timely intervention."

"I shall." Penny smiled briefly, then sobered. "As to Virgil..."

"Yes, Virgil." Jeff nodded slowly. "He told me he didn't think she'd known he was going to be there beforehand, but he wasn't sure."

"The impression that Jean-Claude had was that she was in Paris legitimately, and like Gaat, saw an opportunity." She glanced down at her pad again. "He brought in the agent from Brussels once he'd discovered her identity, and that worthy reports she visited several clothing designers after her encounter with Virgil. It confirmed what Jean-Claude could hear of their conversation in the bar. Although," here a very slight smirk touched her lips, "she seemed quite put out that Virgil seemed to be avoiding her after the... ahem... 'accident' in the bar."

Jeff chuckled. "Yes, he told me about that, and her reaction to it. He mentioned that it might not have been an accident."

"It was not." Penelope replied, smiling. "Jean-Claude works quickly. He is an excellent agent, as is Gisela, and the gentleman from Brussels."

"I know. We're blessed with some of the best people as agents." Jeff picked up a stylus and tapped it against his chin. "About what Lena related -- that had to have been the airliner rescue involving the giant pandas. Do you know if there could be any correlation between the two incidents?"

Penelope thought for a moment, a tiny frown causing a slight wrinkle between her eyebrows. "... I do not believe so. I am more of the opinion that Desdemona saw an opportunity to infiltrate Tracy Industries in a way that her brother, Giles, failed to do. At this point in time, I do not see how she could deduce that the Tracy family is involved with International Rescue." She shook her head slightly. "However, that does not exclude her from making such a deduction later... if we are not vigilant."

"I agree. Fortunately we have agents like Lena and yourself working on keeping us vigilant."

"Quite so."

There was a moment of silence between them, then Penny brightened. "Well, Jeff, I shall download copies of these reports to you, and let you go about your evening. Please inform me of anything pertinent that Kyrano or Virgil might tell you about their encounters."

"I will, Penny." Jeff stopped then remembered something. "Oh, Penny! I almost forgot. Have you heard anything about that man who wrote Dominic? The paramedic from Kansas..."

"Ah, yes! Mr. Kandagaye." Penny pulled up another file on her data pad. "I am waiting for a final report from our Kansas agent, but things are looking very promising." She glanced up at Jeff. "If you decide to recruit him as an agent, would you like me to handle the matter?"

"Let me think about that, Penny." Jeff replied. "I want to be very sure before offering him the position. For all we know, the World Gov could have approached him as well -- and he accepted."

"Very true." There was another pause, then she added, "Oh dear! I must hurry off now. Bon soir, Jeff. Please my regards to Dianne and the rest of the family."

"I will. Have a good day, Penny."

"I shall. International Rescue London, signing off."

Penelope's portrait winked back into static form and Jeff sat back and sighed, a deep one made of relief. "I'm glad we included the agents in Lena's security upgrades. It's good to know we have secure communications across the board. And good that the Hood wasn't able to get hold of Kyrano. That's something more for me to speak with him about when I discuss the kitchen situation."

He glanced at the clock. Wonder what my wife is up to. Perhaps an early bedtime... though I say nothing about sleeping... With that thought, he shut down his computer and prepared for more pleasurable activities.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:23:42 GMT

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Monday, October 22, 2068, 10:15 a.m., Tracy Island

Jeff looked up from his computer screen as Scott walked into the lounge.

"You wanted to see me, Dad?" Scott asked as he approached.

"Yes, I did." Jeff beckoned to him, and Scott came behind the desk. "I've been looking over the flight mileage for the past few months, and I'm concerned. For example," Jeff highlighted an area, "Virgil's close to his limit for this month just with the flying he's done as a civilian. You know I don't like the combined hours to go over if it's at all possible."

"What about Elise?" Scott asked, peering at his father's data.

"She's okay with her hours; most of them are from the last rescue. But..." Jeff highlighted another set of numbers. "You're not." He glanced up at his firstborn. "If we have a rescue in the next week

or so, John is going to have to handle One, or Elise will have to take One and someone else fly Two. Depends on how close to November first the rescue comes."

Scott sighed heavily and shook his head. He leaned up against the communications bank behind him, folding his arms "So, what do we do? Train up someone else on One? On Two? I mean, Gordon's checked out on both..."

Jeff swung his chair around to face Scott. "For the time being, we'll have to play it by ear. It's only for a week or so. But in the long run... I think it's time we looked for a replacement for Heather."

"I'm surprised we haven't done so already," Scott said, raising an eyebrow.

It was Jeff's turn to sigh. "I know. But we haven't had much luck holding onto a Thunderbird One pilot, and I was rather hoping that we'd be able to use Elise as a swing pilot of sorts, filling in on either Thunderbird when needed. However, I can see that's not necessarily what's best." He opened up a file in the third screen. "Here's the help wanted ad. I'm phrasing it differently this time; it doesn't look good for us to be looking for a 'personal pilot' this time." He snorted a laugh. "Makes it look like we're difficult to work for."

"Corporate pilot?" Scott glanced at his father. "Well, that should look a little better. Not so much like it's for the family." He settled back and frowned slightly. "Isn't that what Christopher was doing before we tapped him?"

"Yes, Christopher and Elise both were corporate pilots for Tracy Industries," Jeff admitted. "Of course, Elise is now considered a 'personal pilot', which allows us to pay her from the personal accounts. And I'll still be looking for someone with military flight experience; I wouldn't trust One to anyone without that crucial bit of training." He glanced over at Scott. "Does this meet with your approval?"

"Yeah, it does, and thanks for running it past me, Dad." He smiled a little, a weary expression on his face. "I just hope we have better luck with whoever we get this time."

Jeff nodded slowly. "So do I, son; so do I."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:24:02 GMT

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Monday Oct. 22, 2068, Tracy Island, Just before lunch

Cassie had been going over the plans she and Brains had drawn up for carrying out the live fire training exercise again, making sure that they had covered everything. Brains had already arranged for Virgil to fly them out to Neverland in the morning to set up. However, she realized that other than themselves they didn't have anyone helping them set up the incendiary devices to start the fire. Though they could have managed on their own, the process would go quicker if they had more help.

The first person Cassie had thought about asking was Tin-Tin. She had called her on the communicator and asked if she would be willing to help out. Tin-Tin had agreed to help out.

Who else could I get involved? Cassie mused, staring blankly at the plans still lying in front of her. It didn't take her long to think of Will. I think I'll go ask him in person though, she thought, as she got to her feet. I really haven't had much of a chance to talk to him since he moved here.

She headed over to Will's apartment first. Not getting an answer there she headed down to the repair bay to look for him.

As she first entered the repair bay, Cassie didn't notice anyone. "Anyone here?" she called out.

"Over here."

Heading in the direction the reply had come from, Cassie made her way around some equipment. She spotted Will working on another piece of equipment. Hearing her approaching footsteps, Will stopped his work and looked over at her.

"Hi, Cassie. Can I do something for you?"

"I wanted to ask you something if you have a couple of minutes."

"Sure. I could use a bit of a break. What did you want to ask me?"

"Well, I'm sure you've heard about the live fire training exercise we're planning tomorrow. I was reviewing our plans and it occurred to me that we could use some help setting up the incendiary devices in the morning. Tin-Tin already agreed to lend a hand but your help would be appreciated if you're up for it."

"Sure, I can give you a hand," Will replied. "I've always been involved in the repairing side of things. It'll be fun to be on the destruction side, for a change," he commented with a grin.

"Great," Cassie said, smiling at his last comment. "The task should go much quicker with the four of us. We're planning on leaving for the island at nine o'clock in the morning. We're going to meet in the lounge."

"I'll be there."

Cassie glanced at her watch and noticed it was almost lunch time. Thinking of her earlier realization that she and Will hadn't talked too much, she decided to make a suggestion. "If you don't have any plans for lunch already, why don't you come have lunch with me. It'll give us a chance to get to know one another better."

"Sounds good to me," Will replied, as he hadn't even considered what he was going to do for lunch. "Just let me get things cleaned up here and I'll be ready."

"Okay, then how about I head back to my place and start getting things ready. Do you like chicken salad?"

"That's fine."

Cassie nodded. "I'll see you in a little bit then. I'm apartment D-3," she added as she started to leave, just in case he didn't know which apartment was hers.

She just caught Will's acknowledgment as she left the repair bay. She headed to her apartment and started preparing a quick lunch for the two of them. She got out a couple of plates, glasses, forks and a serving spoon and placed them on the counter. Then she got the chicken salad she had mixed the day before and a container of pasta salad out of the fridge. Soon Cassie had a small stack of sandwiches sitting on the counter.

Cassie tried to remember where she had put her serving platter when she had put things away. She hadn't had an opportunity to use it yet, but she wanted it to put the sandwiches on. She was eying the cabinets when she heard a knock on the door leading from the living room to the balcony. Suspending her search she left the kitchen area and headed for the balcony door. Sure enough she saw Will standing on the balcony.

Reaching the door, she unlocked it and slid it open. "Come in, Will," she said stepping aside so he could enter. "I've almost got things ready," she told him, as she headed back to the kitchen.

Closing the door behind him, the mechanic followed. As he walked by the shelves, he noticed the cheerleading trophies sitting on them. "So how long did you do cheerleading?" he asked his hostess to start a conversation. Reaching the kitchen, he watched with a bemused smile as she started opening cabinets.

"I started when I was in sixth grade and cheered through high school. I stopped when I went to college as I didn't have time between school and working as a paramedic," Cassie replied. She opened the next cabinet and spotted the platter on the top shelf. Now why did I go and put it up there? she asked herself silently, knowing she'd never reach it without something to stand on.

Cassie turned to her guest, who was about a foot taller than she was. "Will, do you mind giving me a hand getting the platter from the top shelf?"

"No problem. Let me give you a boost."

Before Cassie could ask what he meant by a boost, Will was standing beside her. Picking her up by the waist, he lifted her up. She grabbed the platter from the shelf and he placed her back on the ground.

"Well, that certainly was a different method than I expected," Cassie commented, looking up at him.

"It's a habit of mine," he responded with a shrug as his hostess started placing the sandwiches on the platter. "I started doing it with my sister and even my mother a few times, and it just stuck."

"Always wanted a sister myself. Is she younger or older than you?" she asked, carrying the platter to the table.

Seeing the plates and utensils sitting on the counter, Will picked them up and headed to the table as he answered her question.

"Jenny is six years younger. I've got a younger brother, too."

Cassie nodded and then asked Will what he wanted to drink. After getting the drinks and bringing the pasta salad over, she sat down in a chair next to him. When they both had served themselves, Will spoke up.

"You said you always wanted a sister, so does that mean you're an only child?"

"No. I've actually got four brothers. In a way you could say I'm stuck in the middle. The triplets are three years older and Mark is three years younger."

"No wonder you always wanted a sister. With four brothers you must've felt a little outnumbered growing up."

"Sometimes," Cassie admitted with a slight shrug. "In some ways, being the only girl had its advantages though. I've always been daddy's little girl and all four of my brothers are very protective of me." Will nodded, thinking of his own siblings and how protective he was of them. "Are you close to your brother and sister?"

"Yeah, we're close even despite the age difference. My whole family is quite close. What about you?"

"When I was growing up, we were, but the dynamics have changed since I graduated high school. My younger brother, Mark, is gay and since he told us, my parents don't talk to him. Even our brothers are uncomfortable with the situation which makes for some awkward family moments. Not to mention Dad has never been happy about me following in his footsteps. He always felt it was too dangerous for me, but part of that probably just comes with being a father."

"My Dad was always happy about me showing an interest in his work. He owns a chain of auto and boat body and repair shops. I started working for him when I was fourteen. When I decided to leave the military, I went back to work for him. I was actually managing one of the shops in San Francisco before I came here. I would've kept working for him except I missed the hands on work, and this job will give me plenty of opportunity to experience that aspect."

"I can relate to that," Cassie said, thinking of her own job search.

The two of them continued to talk while they finished their lunch. After thanking Cassie for the meal, Will headed back to the repair bay. After cleaning up, Cassie sat down on the couch to look over her notes before the two o'clock training session.

written by starrynebula with help from hobbeth

Monday, October 22, 2068, 1:30 p.m., Tracy Island.

Jeff looked at his mother, his retainer, and his mother-in-law, feeling vaguely nervous as they sat around the table in the study. He hadn't wanted to discuss the subject he was going to bring up while sitting behind his desk; he knew his mother well enough that she'd accuse him of hiding behind it. Here, around the table, they were all equals -- or so it seemed. Well, it's now or never, he thought. He took a deep breath, harumphed once, and began.

"I -- ahem -- I asked to meet with you to discuss something that's been bothering me for the past few days. It's something that directly affects you all, and I wouldn't bring it up if I didn't think it was imperative to address it..."

Emily cut in. "Jeff, just spit it out. We're not stockholders; we're not anyone you have to try and convince of something. So get on with it."

He sighed. "You're wrong there, Ma. You are worse than a stockholder; you're my mother. And I most certainly hope to convince you of something -- but, since you want me to spit it out, all right."

Jeff glanced at each of them in turn. "On Friday, I walked into the kitchen, looking for a cup of coffee, and I found my mother trying to wrestle a large pot over to the sink -- by herself." Lisa started to speak, and Jeff held up a hand. "I don't blame anyone for the situation, Lisa. It was part of a concatenation of circumstances that doesn't happen often, and may never happen again." He glanced at them each again. "However, it made me realize something, and it's what I want to discuss now."

Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly. "Let's face it; we're none of us getting any younger. And the business that this family is in hasn't spared anyone. You three might not go on rescues, you might not sit and direct things from the desk, but you're always up with us when we go out -- preparing coffee, watching children, making a meal or snack for when the crew comes back, filling in for Dianne and I when it comes to the schooling. We... I appreciate all that. But I also know that it takes its toll on you, as it does on me." He spread his hands. "I have the luxury of going to bed when the crew returns early in the morning. But you three, you often have duties that keep you up when you should be sleeping."

"What are you trying to say, Jeff?" Emily asked sharply, folding her arms. "That we're not good enough anymore? Are you going to replace us?"

"No, I'm not," Jeff shot back. "What I'd like to do is bring in someone more. Someone younger, more resilient, someone who can spend the hours up and about when we're on call and leave you to your regular duties. Someone who can lend a hand when everyone else is busy doing what needs to be done." He smiled slightly. "Someone who could have manhandled that pot for you, Ma."

Kyrano sighed, and all eyes turned his way. He nodded. "I... I have long been considering what would happen should one of us become incapacitated or permanently disabled. The illness you all

contracted in June showed me how difficult it is to run this household with only two -- though we had Mrs. Matumbo's assistance, it was still difficult." He gently took Lisa's hand. "We are soon to be wed, and will travel on a honeymoon. Who then will take our places during that time?" Glancing first at Emily, then at Jeff. "I was not sure how to approach you about the subject. I thank you for bringing it up, for I feel it is a true need."

Emily frowned and shook her head sharply. "Kyrano, I'm sure we'll manage while you and Lisa are on your honeymoon. Dianne knows how to cook; the boys will pitch in... I'll steal Parker from Lady Penelope if I have to!"

"Emily," Lisa said with a sigh. "I appreciate what you're saying, but Kyrano and Jeff are right. I've spent my life working to support my family, and though I don't mind pitching in to help around here, I'm of an age to retire. Not to mention wanting the time to actually act like a newlywed again. The fact is that we can use the help. This operation," she waved her free hand to indicate the island, "has grown so much from when I first was brought in on the secret. There's so much more to do, and so many more people to do it for. Frankly, I'd like to ignore the alarm when it goes off... at least some of the time." She turned toward Jeff and smiled. "Jeff's not putting us out to pasture, Em. But he is giving us an opportunity to slow down and catch our breath a bit." She nodded. "Jeff, you've got my blessing, too."

There was a long pause, and Jeff gave his mother a searching look. "Ma?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you've got this new person all picked out for us?"

Jeff shook his head. "No, I don't. In fact, I want your input on what kind of qualifications I should be looking for. You know better than I do what we'd need most and where we'd need it. Do we need a cook? A housekeeper? Would you feel better with a married couple? What kind of person do you want to have helping you?" He tapped the data pad he'd set on the table earlier. "Let's brainstorm a bit and figure that out... as long as you're okay with the idea, Ma."

"Hmph!" Emily sniffed. "I don't know if I agree with this, but if Kyrano and Lisa think we need someone, then I'll defer to their wishes." She leaned forward, and tapped a finger on the table top. "Just make sure that whoever we hire knows who's the boss in the kitchen!"

Kyrano exchanged glances with Lisa, and the couple glanced over at Jeff, who shook his head a little, then picked up the data pad. "Okay. Let's begin, shall we?"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:24:20 GMT

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Monday, 22nd October, 2068, 6:30pm, Tracy Island

Nikki rapped her fingers against the surface of the table as she sat in front of her computer, staring at the white portion in the middle of the screen. Slowly, she began to type.

Hey Alan

I hope everything's all right with you up there.

Nikki looked at what she wrote and shook her head. "I hope everything's all right with you up there'? If it wasn't, we would've heard about it by now." She deleted the e-mail and started again.

Hey Alan,

Having fun up there? Of course you are.

Everything's good down here by the way. Been keeping busy with organising the Halloween party with Elise.

I wish you were able to join us all for the party. It'd be more fun with you there. I'll take lots of pictures so you won't miss how everyone looks on the night. Plus, I'm sure someone might film it, so you won't miss a thing.

Speaking of missing, I miss you when you're not down here. I especially miss our chats. A lot of the time I feel like I could tell you anything. So how about we catch up over dinner sometime after you get back. I'll cook since I know I can out-cook you anytime (don't try to deny it).

I'll see you soon.

Nikki

Nikki read over and spell checked the e-mail before hovering the curser over the send button. Maybe I should write something more. Tell Alan how I really feel, she thought.

Sighing, she pressed the send button, knowing that it would be better to tell him to his face.

Nikki felt butterflies in her stomach as she thought about telling Alan. She wasn't usually a shy person. If she was attracted to someone, she would tell them without hesitation. But yet she shied away from telling the truth this time. Nikki put it down to the fact that she worked and lived in close proximity to Alan.

Getting up from around the table, Nikki decided to make herself cup of tea in the hopes that it would make the butterflies disappear.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:24:31 GMT

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Monday, October 22, 2068, 7:40 p.m., Tracy Island

Jeff sat behind his desk, still feeling comfortably full after the evening's dinner. He pulled up the Tracy Industries' internal network page, and clicked on "Human Resources". The tab marked, "Careers" sported a yellow star, as it did most days. There always seemed to be hiring going on

within the company, usually for the many manufacturing plants worldwide.

The side menu had a list of types of jobs available, and some of them sported yellow stars, indicating that new jobs had been listed. One of these was transportation, and Jeff clicked on that. A drop down list gave him further choices, and he clicked on "flight". New jobs were always listed at the top, and there it was, the ad he hoped would bring in a new pilot, one who could replace Heather.

"Help Wanted: Commercial pilot for corporate fleet. Able to fly Lear and Tracy Aero fixed-wing jets and helijets, long and short distances, with passengers. Must be willing to relocate. Ability to speak more than one language an asset but not a requirement. Apply Human Resources office, Tracy Industries, New York, NY, USA."

He nodded to himself, pleased with what he saw. Looking at the left-hand menu again, he moved his cursor up a bit to "Support Staff". The page changed, and he selected the drop-down menu choice of "Food Service".

"Help Wanted: Sous chef. Able to assist head chef in small kitchen facility. Experience needed in preparing entrées, salads, appetizers, breads and desserts for small groups. Thorough knowledge of kitchen maintenance, food storage and safety is considered critical, and ability to lift heavy objects essential. Must be willing to relocate. Fluency in English a must; ability to speak another language an asset. Apply Human Resources Office, Los Angeles, CA, USA."

"That one was hard to design," Jeff muttered as he read it again. "We didn't want to make it look as if we were looking for a personal chef, but because it's a small kitchen... it was difficult to pare down all the qualifications that Ma insisted on." He shook his head. "Whoever comes along will sure get a thorough grilling!"

He sighed, remembering the discussion, and the talk he had later with Kyrano about Paris. Lisa sat in on that, and was horrified to hear how close her fiancé had come to capture by his half-brother.

"Now I wish I'd gone with you, Tuan!" she exclaimed, her tone concerned. "With the two of us... he couldn't have taken us both on at one time, I'm sure!"

Kyrano took her hand and patted her arm. "I am glad you were not there, dear one. I have no desire for him to know that you are in my life and will become my wife. If he had ensnared you in his power, what then would I have done?"

"Still, Kyrano, you were very lucky," Jeff said, his brows knit in a frown.

"No. Unlucky, perhaps, for him to have been in Paris when I was, and for him to have seen and followed me," Kyrano replied with a sigh. "But you do not trust to luck, do you, Mr. Tracy? I am grateful you had someone watching and following. Thank you for your foresightedness."

"With the attempted incursions we've had over the past few months, it seemed the wisest course to take." Jeff scratched the back of his head. "I guess it hit me that personal protection and safety should be a family affair... and you certainly are family."

And will become even closer family once he and Lisa finally tie the knot, Jeff thought as he logged out of the internal network . I wonder how close they are to setting a date. Weddings take time to plan -- as well I know!

He stood and stretched, glancing up as Tyler peeked around the grillwork between the lounge and the study.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Ty?"

"Wanna play some pinball with me?"

Jeff put on a thoughtful face as he crossed the room. "Hm. I guess so. But I usually lose when I play against you."

It was Tyler's turn to put on a thoughtful look. "Wellll, maybe we can play air hockey, instead. You're better at that than pinball."

Chuckling, Jeff tousled Tyler's stiff hair. "How about we play one game of air hockey, and one of pinball? I think there should be time before you have to go to bed. What do you say?"

"Cool!" Tyler replied, grinning. He grabbed Jeff's hand, pulling him toward the study door. "C'mon! Last one to the game room goes second!"

"I'm coming!" Jeff exclaimed, breaking into a trot. "You're going to lose tonight, son!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:24:42 GMT

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*****Monday, October 22, 8:00 p.m. Tracy Island*****

Hearing the washer turn off, Cassie propped her guitar on the seat. The load in the washer was her last one, and instead of making trips back and forth to her apartment, she had decided to stay downstairs until it was finished. After making her way back to the laundry room and transferring clothes from the washer to the dryer, she turned on the dryer and walked back to the chairs.

Cassie picked up her guitar again. She thought briefly about what she wanted to play, and then started the opening chords of "Moving On," a song by her favorite country group, Mississippi Mud.

The firefighter was singing the chorus for the second time when she suddenly had the feeling that she wasn't alone. She stopped playing and glanced toward the door. Sure enough, she saw that Callie had entered.

"Hi, Callie," Cassie said, resting her right arm along the top of her guitar. "Wasn't disturbing you, was I?"

Callie smiled. "Are you kidding? I haven't heard that song since my grandparents celebrated their 75th anniversary a few years ago. I always did like that one."

"Oh, cool. It's always been one of my favorite songs, even if it does mean I had to take some teasing from my friends for liking country music. For some reason, a lot of people in New York City would rather listen to other music genres."

"Guess some things never change. 'Course being from the southeastern part of the country I don't have to worry about that. Ever write your own songs?" Callie asked, sitting down on the couch next to Cassie.

"A couple," Cassie said with a shrug. "Not that too many people have ever heard them, just some family and friends. I haven't attempted to write anything in a few years due to the lack of time and inspiration."

The bioengineer nodded. "When I was working aboard the ISS, I got so absorbed with what I did I almost forgot what good music sounded like."

"Didn't you have the personal players?"

"Of course, but I never used it because I'd tune everything out while working. I'm just happy to hear some old-fashioned acoustics."

Cassie smiled before changing the subject. "So, how are you feeling about the training fire tomorrow?"

With a shrug, Callie answered, "I'll admit, I'm just a little nervous. Sure, I did help out with that fire in Australia, but I was inside the Fire Tender. I wasn't outside where the flames would've been so close to my face. My closest encounter with a serious fire before that was my father applying too much lighting fuel on his barbecue grill. We put it out with a fire extinguisher. Fortunately, the grill was deemed unusable afterward."

Cassie chuckled. "It's too bad every fire can't go out that way. Course that would mean I'd have to find a new job."

"I agree. If every huge fire could be put out with an extinguisher, life would be so much easier." After a nervous sigh, Callie added, "I've been doing so much training on different things for the past couple of months, I feel I could get confused on instructions. Being outdoors to work on a large fire is also a new challenge, so I hope I don't freak out."

"That's the reason we're having the training sessions and the fire. It'll get everybody on more equal footing, everyone learning how to be ready for an out-of-control fire. Hey, it won't be learned overnight, but in due time you'll at least understand the basics. Like I said in the training session, learning about how to handle a fire and actually fighting a fire are two different things. When I was training, I thought that live fire training was the most useful thing we did. Even though most fire

departments do their training with simulated structural fire buildings, when you're actually fighting the fire you forget that an instructor can end the whole thing with a push of a button. Of course, tomorrow will be a more traditional concept of live fire training. We won't have the luxury of using computers to control things."

"Hopefully, I can remember what you've taught us these last couple of days," Callie commented.

"You'll do fine," Cassie assured her. "I'm just hoping I can remember all the code names tomorrow. I've been trying to make sure I have them memorized this weekend. Yours is Ursa, right?"

Callie nodded. "The code names did take some getting used to," she admitted, thinking about the first time she had to use them herself. They came easily to her now. "I could quiz you on them if you want, under one condition."

"What's that?"

"Could you play a tune for me, please?"

"Any requests?" Cassie asked. Playing for an audience, no matter how small, always is more fun, she thought.

Pep talk for the big show the next day by starrynebula and TracyFan4Ever[/size]

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:24:51 GMT

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Tuesday, October 23, shortly after 9 a.m., Tracy Island

Onboard Thunderbird 2, Cassie passed data pads around to Brains, Will and Tin-Tin. Each pad contained the same data, which was the location of the incendiary devices that the group was going to be setting.

"I've downloaded the coordinates for all the points where the devices should be set. As you can see the pattern Brains and I settled on is a square. There will be a incendiary device at each corner of the square with one device set in the middle," Cassie told them as everyone looked at the information the data padds contained. "Brains and I will take the ones to the south. We plan on setting the southwest device together and then splitting up to set the southeast one and the device located in the middle. That leaves the two devices on the north perimeter of the square for the two of you to set," she said, looking first at Tin-Tin and then Will.

"Should we each take one or set them together?" Will asked.

"It's up to the two of you," Cassie replied. "The northwest device is the closest to our landing position though, so if you each take a point, whoever has that one is going to get done before any of the rest of us."

"Which will give me company while I wait," Virgil interjected from the pilot's seat.

"Worried about getting lonely?" Tin-Tin asked, smiling at his remark.

"Nah, I got some reading material with me. I've still got to catch up on the information from Cassie's training session she did on Friday."

"Good," Tin-Tin, replied before looking over at Will. "I'd prefer if we stick together to set the devices."

"That's fine," he replied. "Having company on a trek through the jungle will be nice."

"We'll keep in touch via the communicator," Brains reminded them all. "When a device is set, radio it in so we all know what progress is being made. Virgil will be monitoring the radio communications from Thunderbird 2 too."

"We'll be landing in a few minutes," Virgil called back to his passengers.

The talk came to an end as Thunderbird 2 landed on Neverland. Once on the ground, the group started to get gear together so they could begin their task.

Xxxx

Will watched as Tin-Tin set the incendiary device that would form the northeast corner of the square. As it was the farther of their two points, they had chosen to head there first and get the second point on their way back to Thunderbird 2.

The stand-by light on the device started to flash.

"One down," Tin-Tin said, as she stood up.

Will nodded and activated his communicator. "Mechanic to Jade. The northeast device is set and ready."

"Copy that Mechanic. Einstein is setting the southwest device now and then we'll split to set the other two."

"Okay. Sweet and I are heading for the second point now. Mechanic out."

Tin-Tin and Will headed to where they had stopped their hoverbikes.

"Do you want to set the next one?" Tin-Tin asked as she climbed onto the hoverbike. She looked over at her companion as he climbed onto the second bike.

"Sure. There is no reason why you should have all the fun," Will said lightly.

"Fun? This isn't exactly my idea of fun," Tin-Tin commented, as Will started his hoverbike.

"We should get going or they'll be wondering where we got to," Will suggested, not commenting on Tin-Tin last statement.

With a nod, Tin-Tin started her second bike and the two of them headed to the second point.

xxxx

An hour-and-a-half later, Cassie, Will, and Tin-Tin were already back at Thunderbird Two. Tin-Tin was onboard the green craft with Virgil. Will and Cassie had found a large rock to sit on and were chatting. Brains had yet to get back from setting his second device but was expected soon.

When Brains finally returned, he smiled. "Well, we've gotten all the charges set to go. If they go off as planned we'll get to see the results of your training classes, Cassie."

"I sure hope so," she said. "Fires tend to be unpredictable, but at least we can all be on the same page."

"You're right there," remarked the scientist. "Well, let me just grab my gear from Thunderbird 2 and the rest of you can head back to Tracy Island," he said as Will and Cassie fell in step with him.

Brains was going to remain on Neverland to keep an eye on things. Should any of the devices go off prematurely, they needed someone here to alert them and relay the information back to Tracy Island.

"We all set then?" Virgil asked, looking back from the pilot's seat as his three teammates came into the cockpit.

"Yes. We should be good to go for this afternoon," Cassie responded, taking a seat.

Brains grabbed his gear and exited the craft as the others got settled and strapped in. When Brains was a safe distance away and his passengers were settled, Virgil started Thunderbird 2. Moments later, the green craft was in the air and heading back toward Tracy Island.

Setting things up by starrynebula and TracyFan4Ever

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:25:03 GMT

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Shortly before 2 p.m.

The lounge in the villa was crowded as most of the IR team members had found their way to there. Several different conversations were taking place as they waited for the last few people to arrive. Brandon came through the door, glancing briefly at the clock. Not far behind him, Virgil and Elise entered the room.

Now that everyone had gathered, Jeff decided to get things started.

"May I have everyone's attention please," Jeff said. At the sound of his voice, the conversations throughout the room came to an end. "Cassie took a group out this morning to set the charges for our training session this afternoon. The plan is to set them off while Thunderbird 1 is in route. The idea of this training session is to put into practice what Cassie covered in her training sessions. Therefore, Cassie will be at mobile control observing everything but will only step in if necessary. Brains is still on Neverland, so he can keep an eye on things until the rest of you get there. He will also be observing as long as things don't get out of hand. Will has expressed an interest on seeing some of the vehicles in action first hand so he will also be on site but not actively participating in the session."

Jeff paused and looked around the room, his gaze falling on Elise. "Elise, I want you to take Mobile Control this time out," Jeff told the blonde pilot. "It will give you some experience at leading the rescues. You'll leave for Neverland first so that you will be first on scene just as if this was a real rescue. Cassie, I want you to go with her so that you're on-scene from the very beginning."

Both women nodded in consent.

"Scott, you'll join the others. It'll give you a chance to work with the auxiliary equipment."

"Yes, sir," Scott replied evenly. He didn't like the idea of relinquishing control of the mission but he also realized that it would be a good experience for not only Elise but himself as well.

"Thunderbird 2 will launch as Thunderbird 1 reaches Neverland. Elise will hand out the assignments once she's taken in the situation. As you won't be far from base, Dianne is going to remain here. If someone is injured notify Dom, Nikki, or Cassie. The decision if immediate transport back here is necessary will be made after the situation is assessed."

There were a chorus of acknowledgments and nodding of heads throughout the room. "Any questions before we begin?"

Jeff paused, giving the others a chance to speak up.

"Sir, can I say something?" Cassie asked.

"Go ahead."

"Though this is supposed to be a training session keep in mind this is a live fire exercise. Brains and I have done our best to control the situation as much as possible but fires can be highly unpredictable. Stay alert."

"Is there anything else?" Jeff asked when he was sure Cassie was done. A few people in the room shook their heads but everyone remained quiet. "Then let's get this exercise underway," Jeff said with a nod to Elise.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:25:12 GMT

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Jenny's fingernails tapped on the top of the computer desk and she muttered under her breath as she scanned the help wanted advertisements. "Hm... that looks... no, I don't like the hours. Wait, maybe... well, they're asking for a lot of experience for such a puny job..." She shook her head and sighed. "At this rate, I'll never find the kind of job I want."

Jenny's mother, Sandra, sat nearby, knitting and listening to her daughter's complaints. "Jenny luv?"

"Yes, Mum?" Jenny half-turned in her seat.

"I think perhaps you should look for something less... ideal."

Frowning, Jenny turned to fully face her mother. "What do you mean, Mum?"

Putting her knitting down in her lap, Sandra smiled at her daughter. "Jenny luv, you've always said you wanted to work for International Rescue. That's a lovely thought but, as you've said, you don't know how to get in touch with them. And now you want to work for a rich family. That's all well and good, but I think you have to ask yourself, why? Why do you want to work for International Rescue? Is it because of their popularity? What would you have to offer them as far as skills are concerned?"

"Well, I can cook, and clean, and I've done work with the missing persons bureau..."

"Yes, I know. But don't you think they have people to do these things already? Or that perhaps they do them for themselves?" Sandra sighed. "And why do you want to work for a rich family? Is it for the pay? You know that, if you are hired by a rich family, you'll be their servant... with all the attitude which that entails." She smiled sadly. "That's why I warned you about those other positions you were considering; I don't want you to work for someone who won't treat you like a person or pay you what you're worth."

Jenny nodded slowly, a thoughtful look on her face. "I see. I never thought about my own motives in working for a rich family. I supposed it would be well-paying and glamorous, not like some of the drudge work I've done - like when I worked at the hotel. I didn't think of how I might be treated." She sighed again. "And International Rescue... I guess they'd have people more experienced than I am; though I admit, it would be thrilling to work alongside them rescuing people."

"That's why I think you should look for something more... down to earth. Not necessarily working in a take-away shop, but perhaps, a school cafeteria? Or the hospital?" Sandra's voice sounded hopeful. "Even a good corporation might have an opening where you'd fit."

"Hm." Jenny turned back to the computer screen. "What you said reminded me of an advertisement I saw earlier." She minimized two windows, then scrolled up a little. "Here it is: 'Help Wanted: Sous chef. Able to assist head chef in small kitchen facility. Experience needed in preparing entrées, salads, appetizers, breads and desserts for small groups. Thorough

knowledge of kitchen maintenance, food storage and safety is considered critical, and ability to lift heavy objects essential. Must be willing to relocate. Fluency in English a must; ability to speak another language an asset. Apply Tracy Industries, Human Resources Office, Los Angeles, CA, USA.' Hm. I can do all that, but I don't know that I'd want to move to the United States."

"Oh!" Sandra sat up straight as her daughter read the ad. "But Tracy Industries is world-wide! Do you remember Amanda Cook's sister, Betty?"

"Of course, Mum." Amanda had been Jenny's good friend until her death from acute appendicitis. "I remember Betty."

"Well, she applied to Tracy Industries for a job in their manufacturing plant outside of Sydney. She had to send her CV to New York, but she was interviewed in Sydney first, then sent on for a second interview at the plant itself." Sandra set aside her knitting, and came to peer at the window over Jenny's shoulder. "It may be that you send your CV to Los Angeles, but they would interview you locally. If they liked what they saw, then they would send you on to where the actual position was to interview there." She met Jenny's gaze. "I do remember Mrs. Cook saying that they reimbursed Betty for her travel expenses."

Jenny considered for a moment, then nodded. "All right. I'll send my CV on to them and see what happens. And... I'll look for something a little more down to earth, too." She turned and kissed her mother on the cheek. "Thanks, Mum."

Sandra smiled and patted Jenny on the shoulder, then went back to the couch and picked up her knitting again. Jenny pulled up her curriculum vitae and began to compose an email to go with it.

"Dear Sir or Madam. I am inquiring about the position of sous chef..."

Looking for jobs by Tikatu

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:25:50 GMT

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Monday, October 22; 10 PM; Silver Spring (2 PM Oct 23 on Tracy Island)

Lena closed her carry-on bag with a smile of satisfaction. I'm sure I didn't forget a thing, she thought. I even remembered the camera Matthew gave me.

Matthew and Amelia had driven over and taken her out to dinner, "So you won't have to cook or clean up before you leave for Maine," according to her daughter-in-law. It amused the older woman, but, any time I can get a free meal, why not? And - truth be told - she enjoyed their company, which, despite living with them while recuperating from the plane crash, she felt she didn't get enough of.

They'd gone to Lena's favorite seafood restaurant, located only a few miles from her house. The food was excellent as usual, and the server, recognizing that the three adults were people he

could joke with, was very entertaining. He made their meal more enjoyable then ever before, according to Lena. And when Matthew brought out a camera, the server offered to take a picture of the three of them.

Once that was done, and the server went off to take care of his other tables (and the people sitting at them), Matthew handed the camera to his mother. "I'd like you to take some pictures of the autumn foliage up there, if you have the chance. You know how Amelia's great-grandmother enjoys autumn colors, and we want to give her more photos to enjoy."

"Of course, son. I'd be glad to." Lena turned to Amelia. "How is Dora doing, honey?"

"She's slowly fading, but never complains. I don't think she's in pain; at least I don't see any signs that she is when I see her. And she still laughs and tells stories. We've all taken to recording her stories. I think they'd make a wonderful book some day."

"What a good idea! I'd like to be de first to order a copy when it's published. I've heard a few of her tales, and dey're marvelous."

Matthew laughed. "Get in line, Mother. Amelia had called Joy, and told her about this idea. Joy mentioned it to Naomi."

"So now half of Maryland at least knows about it, right?" She laughed. "I don't tink Naomi could keep a secret if her life depended on it. I tink she's going to be a gossip columnist or a journalist someday. She'll definitely not work for de World Government; dey couldn't trust her to keep tings to herself."

Soon afterwards, they took Lena back to her house, stopping only long enough to print out the picture their server had taken. Then they headed home, and Lena finished her packing and took her shower, changing into her nightclothes afterward.

She put her carry-on by the front door, amused at the fact that Jeff had insisted on having a driver pick her up, and a private jet to take her to Portland. After de crash, he insisted on doing dis, aldough I managed to talk him out of it when I went on my next trip. I'll compromise, and let him do dis once in a while. After all, it never hurts to be spoiled sometimes.

She smiled, went into her bedroom and was asleep ten minutes after getting into bed.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:25:59 GMT

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After 2 p.m., Neverland

Cassie could see the smoke on the horizon from the training fire as she and Elise approached in Thunderbird 1. Looks like the devices worked as planned, Cassie thought as she kept her eye on the scene in front of her.

Despite knowing the fire had been set deliberately, Cassie could feel her heart beat faster just like any other time she had been called upon to do her job. It was going to feel strange not being an active part of fighting this fire but her role was as an instructor this time.

I finally know how all the instructors at the fire academy felt.

"Base from Thunderbird 1," Elise said beside Cassie.

"Base here. Go ahead Thunderbird 1," came Jeff's reply.

"I've got the island in sight and can see smoke from here. I will be doing a fly over within two minutes."

"FAB, Thunderbird 1. Thunderbird 2 will be launching momentarily."

"FAB."

It wasn't long before Thunderbird 1 was flying over the island, both occupants taken in the situation.

Meanwhile, Elise was trying to decide where to set up Mobile Command, and the best course of action to take in fighting the fire.

Cassie said to be aware of the terrain and to look for natural fire breaks, Elise thought, as she remembered what had been taught the day before. That rock face would serve as a barrier the fire. That side of the fire zone should be of lowest priority. That leaves three other sides to concentrate on. The wind direction will determine where we should concentrate our efforts. As for setting up Mobile Command, the only place to land is going to be the beach.

"Thunderbird Two from Thunderbird One."

"Thunderbird Two. I copy you, Frankie," came Virgil's reply over the radio. "What's the situation?"

"The fire is located on the west side of the island. The east perimeter of the fire is about thirty kilometers from a rock face. The western perimeter is about 20 kilometers inland. We can land both Thunderbirds on the beach on the western side of the island. I'm sending you the coordinates. I'm going to land and set up Mobile Control and get weather information from Alan. I'll have further instructions for you when you get here."

"FAB, Frankie. See you in the danger zone."

"Einstein from Thunderbird One," Elise radioed to Brains as she banked Thunderbird 1 to head back to the landing site she had picked out. She needed to relay to the scientist the coordinates of where she planned on setting up.

"Einstein here, go ahead Thunderbird One."

"I've picked out a location to direct operations from. Sending you the coordinates now."

"FAB," Brains replied. "I'll meet you there. Einstein out."

Setting the blue craft down softly on the beach, she shut down the engines. The two women went about getting the equipment they needed, and disembarking from the craft. It wasn't long before Mobile Command was set up.

"Thunderbird 5 from Mobile Control."

"Thunderbird 5, here. Go ahead, Frankie," came Alan's reply from the space station.

"Indy, I need wind speed and direction for the area," Elise told him, as she glanced off to her left to see Brains approaching their position on a hoverbike.

"F.A.B.," Alan replied. There was a brief pause as Alan retrieved the requested information. "I'm sending it to you now."

Elise watched the computer screen as the information was downloaded to Mobile Control. With the information gathered from her fly over and the weather information, Elise started to make plans on how to tackle the fire.[/size]

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:26:07 GMT

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When everyone left the lounge, Dianne turned to Jeff. "Why are you keeping me behind? I'm as much a part of the team as the others and should be with them."

"Don't worry; neither you nor I will remain here. I have an idea for us to observe this training exercise in person and unnoticed." He called Thunderbird Five. "Alan, I'll be away from the desk. If you need to contact me, do so via the hands-free."

"F-A-B, Dad."

"So, what's your plan?" Dianne asked as she followed Jeff from the lounge.

"Give Lisa a heads up that we're going out and I'll show you," Jeff said, heading downstairs. "I'll meet you at the boat pen." He paused to glance at her. "Make sure you bring a jacket! There'll be a breeze on the water!"

"F-A-B!" Dianne said with a smile and a sharp salute.

Ten minutes later, she arrived at the boat pen with jackets for both of them over her arm. She spotted him in the speedboat, and its motor was running. "Come aboard, Doc. We're on our way to Neverland. I know a couple of places where we can observe without being seen."

With a grin, he held out his hand to assist her in boarding. Instead, she put his jacket into it, and

nimbly got in unassisted. "I like the way you think, my dear. By the way, do you have a hands free, and where'd you find one?"

"I do. I found one - two, actually - in the lab." He moved toward the bridge, and set the boat in motion, piloting it through the cavernous tunnel and out into the open sea. With one hand on the wheel, he used the other to put the hands free unit into place. "Here's one for you," he said, offering her a similar case.

"Thank you, kind sir," she quipped as she deftly inserted the set into her ear. Putting a hand to her head, she made a rueful face. "I'm going to wish I'd put on a kerchief or something."

The speedboat took them across the waves quickly, and it wasn't long until they saw a plume of smoke on the horizon.

Jeff slowed the boat as they neared the island, and when he saw the Thunderbirds, he veered to the left. "There's a cove close by where we can beach the boat and a hill where we can see what's going on. I've also brought binoculars for both of us, so we should be able to catch all the action."

"Brains let me know where they set the charges after Cassie left the island, and I did some calculating on my own. It's an easy climb so we'll be able to reach our vantage point quickly. And it's well out of the way of the fire."

He took the binoculars out of a chest and handed her one. "Are you ready to watch the show?"

"Yes, I'm ready." She took the binoculars, stringing the strap around her neck. "I'm not exactly dressed for climbing, but I'll do. Let's go."

They beached the boat in the cove, and Jeff took Dianne's hand as they headed for the overgrown path that would take them to the hill top. "Next time we're out here, I'll have the boys clear this," he said as he pushed fronds and leaves out of his way.

"I can smell the smoke already," Dianne said as she clambered up behind him. "Are you sure we won't be in any danger?"

"I'm sure. I know this islet almost as well as I know Tracy Island. We'll be fine."

Dianne gave her husband a slightly skeptical look, but didn't say anything more. And sooner than she thought possible, they were at the top. He pointed in the direction of the smoke. "See? It's a good three or four miles away. If it comes this way, it'll also be heading for the Thunderbirds," he said, pointing ahead and to the right at the vessels. "We'll have time to get off this hill, since neither Scott nor Virgil would let anything happen to their babies."

He turned and saw a large flat stone. "We can sit here and watch. in relative comfort. These binoculars are powerful. They can spot a ladybug on a rose petal half a mile away." He grinned at her as she rolled her eyes.

"I'd be happier if you called Alan," she replied as she lifted her field glasses to her eyes.

"F-A-B," Jeff said dryly. "Commander calling Thunderbird Five. Do you read?"

Alan glanced at his monitor, noting the location where his father and Dianne were, and the distance to the Danger Zone.

"Reading you strength five, Commander. Have a good view from there?"

"Yes, we do." Jeff put the glasses to his eyes. "Let us know of any weather changes or shifts in the fire. I'm sure we're far enough away, but fires are unpredictable."

"F-A-B."

"And don't let the others know that we're here."

There was a chuckle. "F-A-B."

"Good man. Commander out."

Dianne dropped her glasses a bit. "Do you think they'll see us up here?"

"No, I don't. We're not where we can easily be spotted, and they should all be too engrossed in the training to notice us." Jeff dropped his glasses and gave Dianne a significant look. "And if they're not so engrossed, they'll hear about it later."

Dianne and Jeff head to Neverland, by Tikatu and hobbeth

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:26:22 GMT

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"So what's the plan, Frankie?" Scott asked as he walked toward Mobile Control. Behind him, the others were unloading equipment from Thunderbird 2.

Elise didn't look up as she answered Scott's question.

"We've got a southeasterly wind, blowing at 5mph. The fire is moving in that direction. As the eastern border is a rock face, we've got a natural firebreak on that side. I'm sending Alpine, Big Mac, and Sweet to the southern perimeter in the Fire Truck to start tackling the fire on that side. Quasar and Ursa can take the Fire Tender and start a fire break on the western side, working in the southern direction," she said, as she finished putting the assignments into the computer. She hit the button to send the information to the visors. "You, Angel and Cousteau should take the Firefly and start a fire break on the north perimeter. We want to be prepared if the wind should shift direction."

Scott nodded. Before he could say anything, another voice spoke up.

"What about me?" Virgil asked as he came up behind Scott.

"I want you to stand by in case we need to use the dicetyline missiles in Thunderbird 2," Elise said, remembering what Cassie had told them yesterday about the importance of air support while fighting a wild fire. "I'm going to keep Tynan here at the command post, too, just in case of any injuries."

"Sounds good. I'll go join up with Angel and Cousteau," Scott replied, as he turned and headed back toward Thunderbird 2.

At Mobile Command, Elise turned and looked back at the others, surveying what was going on. The Firefly and Fire Truck had already been unloaded. John was currently driving the Fire Tender out of the pod. Taking a deep breath, Elise continued to watch as the others carried out her orders.

xxxx

Off to the side, Will stood next to Brains watching the same scene. He had spent the last few weeks learning and working on some of the equipment. This was the first opportunity he had to see it put to use out in the field.

I'm glad Mr. Tracy allowed me to come out here. Seeing how things work first hand will give me a better feel for the vehicles, Will thought as he watched Luke, Brandon, and Tin-Tin get settled in the Fire Truck, with Brandon behind the wheel.

"Let's go observe the training exercise over near Mobile Command," Brains suggested with a nod in that direction.

Will glanced over at the scientist and nodded. The two men headed toward where Elise and Cassie were. It wasn't long before they were joined by Virgil and Dom, who had brought two hover bikes over with them.

--passing out assignments by starrynebula

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:26:31 GMT

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Scott, Gordon, and Nikki started walking toward the Firefly as they noticed the Fire Truck and Fire Tender pulling away from Thunderbird 2, both vehicles heading for their assigned areas.

As the three climbed into the cab, Nikki was nimble enough to beat them to the entrance. Turning to face them, she grinned and said, "You'll have to move faster than that, boys."

The brothers chuckled as they followed her into the seating area, both preparing themselves for their part of the mission.

"Everyone ready to get started?" Scott asked, even as he climbed behind the wheel of the Firefly.

"Yeah, though are you sure you remember how to drive this thing?" Gordon asked his brother, a grin lighting up his face as he got into the cockpit himself. He then motioned for Nikki to take the seat next to Scott.

Scott answered, "It's been quite a while since I have driven this thing, but I think it'll become second nature soon enough."

Gordon's grin didn't leave his face as he sat behind his brother.

As the Firefly began its trek, Scott said, "Angel, watch things ahead of us. Cousteau, check levels and--"

Gordon shook his head and laughed. "Will you take it easy, Scott? It's not like we don't know."

With a blush, Scott said, "Well, um...yeah. Okay." He couldn't say anything else to counter his brother's words.

Nikki chuckled. "Old habits can be hard to break." Shooting a glance at Gordon, she hoped he wouldn't give his older brother a hard time for the entire day. "Besides, with Gordon in the back, he can check the water and dicetyline levels in the pump and nozzle."

"Okay, okay," Gordon said in mock surrender. "I'm just glad I don't have to go outside to do that by hand." He looked at the controls to make sure the water pump and foam nozzle were functioning properly. "Looks like everything's working fine. Let's get to work."

"F-A-B," said Scott as he drove the Firefly closer to the huge flames.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:26:39 GMT

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John and Callie were working on the fire break along the western perimeter. Reaching the beach would have made a natural fire break, but a changing direction toward the western shore would have threatened the command point. With the wind blowing in a southeasterly direction, the fire slowly moved toward them as trees and brush burned.

"Even from this distance it looks formidable," Callie said softly.

"It sure does," John commented as he drove the Fire Tender slowly to the south.

Callie looked over at John, a little startled. "Sorry, I didn't realize I was thinking out loud," she told him.

"No problem. It was too quiet in here anyway." John glanced out the window on his left at the fire in the distance. "Just think what the others are seeing. They're on the advancing side it."

"Think we'll get this fire break built in time?"

Before he could even answer, John noticed a piece of burning debris flying through the air toward them. Pressing his foot down hard on the brake, he brought the Fire Tender to a sudden stop. The debris slammed into the windshield; John threw his hands up and Callie gasped in surprise.

A few moments later he put his hands back down and noticed a burning log laying across the front of the vehicle. Glancing at her, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just a little shook up."

"We have to get out and deal with this log," he told her, even as he turned to get one of the fire extinguishers stored in the cab with them.

Callie grabbed a second extinguisher and the two of them got out of the Fire Tender.

"Guess we just got to see the result of a fire whirl first hand," she commented as they sprayed the log with dicetyline.

It didn't take long to get the burning log out and off of the vehicle.

"Let's get back to building this fire break," John told her, turning to get back into the cab. "You can call Frankie and...damn," he hissed as his left foot found a hole.

"You all right?" she asked, starting to head around the front of the vehicle.

"Yeah," he answered in annoyance. "I didn't know that hole was there."

"You need any help?"

"No, I just twisted my ankle a bit. It's not sprained."

"Good," she said, having reached the driver's side of the vehicle. "Last thing we need is someone getting hurt in this practice fire." After storing both fire extinguishers in the cab, she added, "Let's give Frankie an update on our situation and see what she wants us to do."

"F-A-B," he said as he got into the passenger seat. Whew, I'm just glad I didn't sprain my ankle. I wouldn't hear the end of it from Gordon!

Now behind the wheel, Callie radioed Elise. "Frankie from Fire Tender..."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:26:48 GMT

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"Frankie here," Elise responded to Callie's call. "What's your status, Ursa?"

"We're heading back your way. Quasar and I had to get out and deal with some flaming debris, and Quasar hit a hole of some kind, twisting his ankle. He says it's not sprained, but he should probably have it looked at anyway."

"FAB. Tynan will be standing by here," Elise told her, glad it didn't sound like a serious injury. Still that meant that the group in the Fire Truck wasn't going to get the back up as had been planned.

Luke had radioed in just minutes before, saying they had reached position and were starting to engage the fire, which was still advancing quickly in a south-easterly direction. The goal of the Fire Truck group was to stop the fire's movement by spreading dicetyline and water on the area ahead of and onto the fire itself.

Elise called the group in the Fire Truck to update them on the situation. Next she called Scott, Gordon, and Nikki in the Firefly. After receiving the report from Gordon, Elise signed off and reassessed the situation.

Work on the northern firebreak was going well. They were making steady progress inland. Once the Firefly completed that, there would be less chance of the fire spreading to the north. The plan was to extend the firebreak further inland than the fire's current position in case it should switch directions. With that fire break and the rock face off to the east, there would be some degree of containment.

Callie and John had almost completed the western firebreak. With them heading back to the command post though, the south-western front was a weak link. Should the wind shift in a westerly direction, the fire could move past the firebreak and circumvent their efforts.

What would be the best course of action? Elise asked herself. Should I pull Luke's group off their current assignment to finish that fire break? That would mean that the fire would be advancing unopposed. If nothing changes, there should still be time to send the Fire Tender back out to finish the fire break, though I might need to send Dom or maybe Brains out with Callie.

xxxx

While Elise contemplated her next move, Cassie looked away from the information displayed on Mobile Control to look toward the fire. So far Elise was doing well. Cassie was waiting to see how she would handle the unexpected change. The firefighter in her wanted to make suggestions, but she quashed the urge to speak up. After all, Elise was supposed to be leading the operation. Unless her teammate asked her opinion or things got out of hand, Cassie intended to remain silent.

Alan's voice came over the radio.

"Mobile Control from Thunderbird 5."

"Go ahead, Indy," Elise replied.

"I have a weather report for you, Frankie. There is a storm system heading your direction which has changed the wind direction," Alan replied. "New wind direction is north-east. Wind speed will

pick up to as the system closes in on Neverland."

"FAB. Keep me updated on the system's progress."

"You got it, Frankie. Thunderbird 5 out."

Cassie nodded slowly. In the distance, smoke from the fire rose above the tree line, but was no longer rising in the same manner. Where it had been angling toward the south there was now a northerly angle to it. Figures Thunderbird Five would catch it first. Wonder how strong the wind will get. She bit her lower lip to keep from saying what was on her mind. She decided to wait and see how Elise would react to the new information.

--progress reports by starrynebula

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:26:56 GMT

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Dianne lowered her field glasses and turned to Jeff. "So, what do you think?"

"Interesting, so far." Jeff kept his eyes on the action. "I can see the logic behind containing the fire before really tackling it.... wait, why is the Fire Tender heading out of the Danger Zone?"

Lifting her binoculars, Dianne surveyed the scene. "I don't know. Perhaps Alan does?"

"Good idea." Jeff lowered his glasses and tapped his earpiece. "Thunderbird Five from Commander."

"Thunderbird Five here, Dad." Alan's voice sounded in Jeff's ear. "I was just about to contact you."

One silvered eyebrow went up as Jeff replied, "Oh, you were, were you? What about?"

"That storm has picked up speed; it'll hit Neverland sooner than expected. I figured you and Mom should probably high-tail it out of there before it hits."

"Hmm," Jeff grumbled. "You're right; we should." He paused, then asked, "Alan, we noticed that the Fire Tender has headed back to Mobile Control. Do you know why?"

"Ah, yes," Alan replied. "The report I have is that John twisted his ankle a bit. He says it's not serious, but Callie figures he should get it checked out."

"I see. Good call on her part." Jeff lifted the binoculars to his eyes again. "The smoke has shifted direction a bit. Due to the storm, I figure."

"Storm?" Dianne asked, giving Jeff a sharp look. "What storm?"

"Yes, the wind direction is changing. You two had better head out," Alan counseled.

"F-A-B. We're out of here. Commander out." Jeff tapped the earpiece and put the binoculars in its case.

"Again I ask: what storm?" Dianne scowled as Jeff stood, offering her a hand up.

"There's one heading this way and we need to be clear before it hits." He hauled her to her feet and started for the path back to the beach.

"Didn't you check the weather before we left?" Dianne demanded, working to put her field glasses away while walking.

"Yes, I did, but this one is moving faster than the weather people predicted." Jeff shook his head. "Good thing Thunderbird Five's got the better sensors." He glanced back and offered her his hand. "C'mon. The way down can be treacherous, especially if we get caught in the rain."

"Now you tell me," Dianne grouched. But she took his hand anyway.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:27:43 GMT

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"Ugh," John said as Virgil and Dom helped him to sit down on a large rock.

He tossed his left boot aside and winced as Dominic elevated his ankle to take a closer look at it. The nurse's movements were gentle and firm as he looked over the injury, before nodding to himself.

"Most likely a sprain of the anterior talofibular ligament," Dom said. "Nothing too serious. The swelling isn't too pronounced and I don't think it'll get much worse. I'll give you an analgesic and an anti-inflammatory hypo and bind it. You'll probably be fine in a few days as long as you stay off it -- I imagine Doc will agree."

"That's not so bad," John said.

Dominic opened his medical bag and first loaded one ampule, and then another. He then reached for a roll of bandages and opened the packaging.

"Virgil, will you support the foot? Try and keep it up above the level of his heart."

"FAB," Virgil said with a quirky smile.

John chuckled, but winced sharply as his brother pressed on the wrong part of his ankle.

"Watch it," John said. "Or I'll be hobbling after you seeking revenge."

Virgil laughed and shook his head.

"I can just imagine."

"Up, up," Dominic said as Virgil lowered his brother's ankle.

Dominic wrapped the bandage as tightly as was appropriate in order to keep the swelling in check and tied it off neatly. He went back into his medical bag and took out two large blue blocks. He manipulated the plastic covers until the material inside snapped in two, and very soon they became ice-cold as the chemicals inside began to react with one another.

"We'll keep these on the ankle as well."

Dominic tossed one of the blocks from one hand to the other before applying it to John's sprain.

"Another of Brains' handy inventions," he said. "The kind of thing you want around when the AC breaks down."

"Right," John said, and winced as the second cold pack was applied.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:28:02 GMT

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Brandon carefully maneuvered the Fire Truck through the jungle. Tin-Tin sat next to him, acting as navigator, and Luke sat behind them, manning the water cannon.

"This is easier than I thought it would be," Brandon remarked.

"That's because we're safe and sound in here," Luke commented back. "This is a lot easier than the fires I've fought. Chasing after them on foot, in full gear, in the middle of summer, is NOT my idea of a good time!"

Both Brandon and Tin-Tin chuckled. "Where did you do that?" Tin-Tin asked.

"California, a couple of years ago. There were a series of bad storms with a lot of lightning. That set off numerous fires, some of which got pretty out of control," he told her.

Brandon nodded. "I remember that. Parts of the state were even evacuated due to them and the smoke."

"Conditions weren't fun that's for sure. Add those crazy Santa Ana winds and you have a real nightmare." Luke peered into the canon's viewer again. "I see smoke, but no flames."

Tin-Tin surveyed the area. "Move a few degrees west."

"FAB." Brandon adjusted his course and they continued on. "So, tell us more."

Luke nodded, remembering. "One fire, north of LA got pretty out of control. They asked for volunteers so my crew and I went out. We didn't get into the really serious stuff, just stayed with the crew trying to prevent it from spreading. You know, making fire breaks, lighting back fires, that sort of stuff. That's where Cassie and I met." He paused. "I can see the flames now. Let's tackle this thing."

Brandon edged closer to the blaze. Tin-Tin fired off nitro-glycerin shells as Luke used the water cannon. Together, they managed to extinguish the blaze. "Mobile Control from Big Mac."

"Mobile Control, here. How are you coming along?" Elise asked.

"Not bad," Brandon replied. "We've put out a few of the smaller fires and are working our way closer to the main blaze."

"FAB. Try and step on it. Indy has informed me that there's a weather system moving this way. I want this thing done and all of us back under cover when it hits."

Brandon glanced back at Luke who nodded. "FAB, we'll call you when we're done." He turned to Tin-Tin. "You heard her. Let's go."

They moved forward again, heading towards the smoke a short distance away. "It's a good thing we're in this type of climate. With all the rain we get, we'll have this done in no time," Brandon said.

Tin-Tin nodded. "Don't forget our equipment. The Firefly can fire from both directions, preventing it from getting trapped. And even if it does for some reason, the hull is fire-proof. That's what helped Alan during the cane fire in Australia. If the Firefly hadn't been built to our specifications..." She shuddered. After a moment, she smiled. "But wait until you see the modifications we have for the new Thunderbird Seven. Brains has been working hard on the design," she said, a touch of pride in her voice.

"If anyone can do it, Brains can," Brandon remarked. "We're coming up on the fire." He let out a low whistle. "Man, that's one big wall of fire."

Luke glanced up. "Wow. Wonder what Cassie used for accelerants?" He shrugged. "Oh well, like you said, there's really no way for it to jump the fire breaks. Too wet. One of the perks of training in a rain forest!"

They all chuckled and prepared to battle the inferno.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:28:09 GMT

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Elise glanced up to see that the wind had, indeed, changed direction. "Thunderbird Five from Mobile Control."

"Thunderbird Five here." Alan's voice sounded out over the speakers.

"Indy, I need an update on the weather report. Will we get rain, and if so, how much?"

Alan checked his weather satellites. "You've got a bit of time yet, maybe twenty minutes or so, but yes, you'll be getting some heavy rains."

"F-A-B," Elise replied. She looked up at the gathering, darkening clouds. "Mobile Control out."

She rose and turned toward Thunderbird One. "Gotta get that tent up over Mobile Control."

"Whoa!" Will said, stepping forward. "I can do that. You stay put. I need to do somethin' other than stand around and watch. Just tell me where I can find it."

"Let me show you," Brains said, and the two men trotted off toward Thunderbird One.

While they were working on that, Elise turned to Callie. "Can you and Brains head back out in the Fire Tender and work on the fire break? I'm worried about the changing wind direction."

"Sure. We may get that heavy rainfall, but not before the winds blow back eastward. I'll tell Brains when he gets back here."

When Brains returned to Mobile Control, Callie explained the situation. "We'd better get going."

"Right. The quicker we're back there, the faster we can put out the fire."

As Callie and Brains hurried off to the Fire Tender, Will came up with the Penelon tent. "Are you sure this will cover everythin'?" he asked, looking skeptically at the small package he held.

Elise grinned. "It will; believe me, it will."

"Okay. If you say so." Will opened the package and set about assembling the tent over Mobile Control.

Elise glanced at Cassie, who was watching with interest. "How are we doing so far?"

Cassie nodded and smiled a little. "So far, so good."

(preparing for the weather by TracyFan4Ever and Tikatu)

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:28:30 GMT

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Alan was carefully tracking the progress of the training session on Neverland. He focused on one monitor, giving him readouts of the fire's core temperature, thinking how he wished he was down there, when an alarm sounded from one of the other computer screens. He snapped his head

towards it, and suddenly reached for the comm.

"Mobile Control from Thunderbird Five. The fire has passed the break."

XXXX

Cassie poured over the data coming in from Thunderbird Five, her brows drawing together as she came to a realization. She too reached for the comm.

"Einstein and Ursa from Mobile Control," she said.

"Einstein here," Brains' voice answered.

"Guys, the fire has jumped the break close to your location."

There was a split second's silence before Callie spoke.

"How close?"

"It's within fifty meters at this stage, but isn't moving towards you."

"FAB, Mobile Control. We'll --"

Suddenly, Alan's voice interjected.

"Mobile Control, Ursa and Einstein from Thunderbird Five. Wind direction has changed, repeat, wind direction has changed. The fire is headed directly for the Fire Tender."

Cassie closed her eyes briefly and clenched her fists.

"How fast, Thunderbird Five? It's moving at around ten kph, but that's not the worst news. It's rapidly cutting off your escape route, Fire Tender."

Cassie heard Callie swear under her breath, and thought quickly.

"I'm sending up Thunderbird Two immediately to clear a path with dicetyline. Einstein, Ursa, stay in the Fire Tender and be ready to roll."

"FAB, Mobile Control," Brains, Callie and Alan said simultaneously.

"Mobile Control out."

Cassie immediately opened a new comm channel to let Virgil know the plan.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:28:37 GMT

Thunderbird Two rose quickly and gracefully into the sky above Neverland, and Virgil carefully arced the huge aircraft around to head towards the area where the fire had spread. It was moving quickly towards the Fire Tender. His fingers tensed over the controls.

Thick smoke was billowing into the air, and he found himself relying totally on Thunderbird Two's sensors for guidance. He quickly keyed in the start-up sequence for the dicetyline missile launcher, and opened a comm channel.

"Fire Tender and Mobile Control from Thunderbird Two, am about to launch dicetyline missiles. Stand by."

"FAB, standing by," Callie replied.

Virgil checked the location data for the final time, before hitting the fire button. The missiles sliced through the black sky and hit their targets with pinpoint accuracy. Virgil fired another barrage, and quickly an escape route had been carved from the burning foliage.

"Alright, Fire Tender. Get out of there, fast!" He said.

"FAB!" Brains said.

On the sensor screen, Virgil watched as the little dot representing the Fire Tender rapidly accelerated out of the area. The twinge of fear lifted from his chest, he swung Thunderbird Two back around, and headed towards Mobile Control once more.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:29:01 GMT

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Back at Mobile Control, Will stepped into the tent. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's startin' to rain pretty heavily out there."

Elise sighed with relief. "That'll be a big help."

Cassie nodded. "It will be, but don't count on it to extinguish the fire." She glanced across the readings at Mobile Control, then at her watch. "It might be time to wrap this up."

"I agree," Elise said. She turned back to Mobile Control. "All units from Mobile Control. Let's put this fire out, now. That means you head back to the Danger Zone, Fire Tender. You too, Thunderbird Two."

"Since Thunderbird Two is airborne, it would be wise to have it attack the fire from behind," Cassie added.

"Okay," Elise agreed. "Van Gogh, use the dicetyline on the back end of the fire. Fire Tender,

attack it head on with both the water and dicetyline."

xxxx

"F-A-B," said Callie. She turned to her companion. "Well, Brains, you heard the lady. The quicker we get this out, the faster we can all go home."

He looked at her. "Say, what's your hurry?"

"I feel like just getting this done. Don't worry, I'm not trying to rush anything."

Brains said nothing, just shook his head a little as Callie drove them back toward the fire.

xxxx

In the Firefly, Scott nodded toward Gordon. "Time to fire off some more shells. Then you can start using the pump."

Gordon checked his gauges. "Ready when you are, old timer."

Scott rolled his eyes and Nikki chuckled as Scott maneuvered the Firefly into position.

xxxx

"Ready for more, Luke?" Tin-Tin called back.

"I've been ready all day." Luke adjusted the dicetyline mix. "After this I'll need a nice, cold Guinness to wash the smoke from my throat."

"We can change positions, if you want," Brandon offered.

"Nah. I'm good. This dicetyline stuff is pretty amazing. We should knock this baby down in no time."

xxxx

Virgil turned Thunderbird Two around, and prepared another set of missiles. I can see what Cassie means by needing another method for firefighting from the air. The missiles are good, but the dicetyline gun will be more effective, I think.

He flew over the first line of fire, the heavy rain drenching his windshield. Between that and the smoke, he could barely see out, and was relying on his instruments to show him where the worst of the fire was, as well as where the positions of the three firefighting vehicles.

"Firing first barrage now!" he called.

xxxx

"Firing shells now!" Scott's voice overlapped Virgil's at Mobile Control. John, sitting on a small folding chair, ankle propped up on another, listened intently to the ongoing fight. He was feeling a bit crowded; the tent walls shuddered in the increasing wind. Dom sat on the ground near him, and Will, who had been interested in the readouts at first, moved around to the other side of the Mobile Control unit to make room. Cassie stood where she'd been almost the entire time, at Elise's right shoulder.

"Feelin' a tad cramped in here," Dom whispered to John. "The wind and rain... they remind me of London."

"Yeah, but we were out in it then." John glanced at his watch. "Hope we can get this done before sundown."

xxxx

"How's it look, Luke?" Tin-Tin asked, craning her neck to see their surroundings. "It's gotten so dark; visibility's way down."

"Let me know if I have to change position," Brandon added.

"Looking good out there, actually." Luke checked the heat signatures around them. "The active fire is out. There's just the smoldering stuff that's left, and that's dwindling fast."

"Should we call in and let them know we're done?" Brandon asked.

"Give it a few more minutes."

xxxx

"I don't think I'm going to have to do much, here, Scott." Gordon checked the heat signatures. "There's only a couple of hot spots left."

"Then douse them, and let's get out of this rain," Nikki said. "It's getting hard to see out there."

"Mobile Control from Firefly," Scott said, touching his earpiece. "We've got things nearly under control here. Someone else need help?"

xxxx

"How's the dicetyline holding out, Brains?" Callie asked as she kept her eyes firmly fixed on the terrain before her.

"We're getting low," Brains said, a touch of concern to his voice. "I'm not sure if..."

His comment was cut off by a loud boom ahead of them. The area before them was suddenly covered in greenish-white foam -- as was the windshield of the Fire Tender.

"What what that!?" Callie shouted, bringing the Fire Tender to a shuddering halt.

"I think it was Thunderbird Two," Brains said dryly. "I guess we don't have to worry about the dicetyline levels anymore."

xxxx

"Mobile Control from Firefly. Fire in our sector is out."

"Mobile Control from Fire Truck. Reporting our sector is clear."

"Mobile Control from Fire Tender. Fire is contained in our area."

"F-A-B, all units." Elise let out a deep breath.

Will clapped. "Woo hoo!"

Elise put up a finger. "Hold that thought. Thunderbird Five from Mobile Control. How does it look, Indy?"

"Looks good from here, Frankie." Alan consulted his scanners. "Heat levels register from 0 to 0.2 at most, and the warmer spots are quickly cooling. Looks like the fire's out."

"And the weather?"

Alan glanced at the weather radar. "You've got another twenty minutes before the rain tapers off, I'm afraid."

"F-A-B. We can work with that. Mobile Control out." Elise switched channels. "All units from Mobile Control. Return to mobile base. I repeat, return to mobile base. Stand down at 1737 hours."

There was a chorus of "F-A-B." Elise turned to Cassie, who smiled widely.

"Looks like we've had a successful session," Cassie said, putting a hand on Elise's shoulder.

"That means you were a good teacher," Elise replied.

xxxx

"Base from Thunderbird Five." The eyes on Alan's portrait blinked. Jeff reached over to open communications.

"Base here, Alan. Go ahead."

"Stand down was called at 1737 hours. The island is clear of fire."

"F-A-B, Thunderbird Five."

Dianne came in with a tray of coffee cups and an insulated carafe. She glanced at Alan, then back

at Jeff. "News?"

"Stand down has been called. The fire's out," Jeff explained.

She poured a cup of coffee, and handed it to Jeff. "Well then, I'd better let the kitchen crew know. I'm sure we'll have a lot of hungry people to feed at debrief."

--knocking it down by TracyFan4ever and Tikatu

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:29:11 GMT

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Tuesday, October 22, 2068, 8:15 p.m., Tracy Island

Dinner was over and Jeff met with Scott, Elise, Virgil, and Cassie in the lounge for an evaluation of the training session. The debriefing had been strictly limited to the events of the training session, and now Jeff wanted to dissect it a little bit more.

"As you know," Jeff began, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Dianne and I were able to see part of the training session, but the weather forced us to leave."

"I still can't believe we didn't you see up there," Scott said, shaking his head as he pulled his cup toward him.

"We made sure we couldn't be seen, son. What we saw looked very good, though." Jeff took a sip, and put his cup down in the saucer. He glanced at Elise. "So, how did things go for you?"

"I felt much more confident in what I was doing, that's for sure. Both using Mobile Control and dealing with the fire was easier this time." She glanced at Cassie. "I was much more comfortable this time -- if only because I didn't have Scott standing over me, watching my every move!"

Scott put both hands over his heart and threw his head back. "I'm wounded!" he cried in an overly-dramatic voice.

"I see someone's been taking acting lessons from Gordon again!" Virgil said dryly.

Elise wagged a finger at Scott. "You know exactly what I mean, Scott Tracy! I felt those baby blues of yours boring into my back all the time during that rum plant fire!"

Jeff shook his head and sighed. "Let's get back to the topic at hand, shall we?" He turned to Cassie. "What was your assessment of the scenario?"

Cassie put down her cup. "Well, everyone did very well with building the firebreaks, even though the Fire Tender unit didn't get theirs done. And they did a fine job dealing with the situation when the fire jumped the break." She frowned a little. "I understand that an injury is important, but John's didn't seem to be a serious one so I'm not sure why they felt they should return to have it

looked at instead of finishing the firebreak."

Jeff made a note on a data pad he had with him. "Our policy has been to get our people to medical treatment as quickly as possible. But with a minor injury... I suppose it will have to depend on the situation. I'll think about that, and talk to Dianne." He turned to Virgil. "What do you have to say?"

"I could really see the need for that dicetyline cannon that Cassie mentioned." Virgil sat back, propping an ankle on the opposite knee. "The missiles are good, but having a more controlled and sustained method of spreading the dicetyline will be more effective."

Jeff nodded, and made another note. "Ah yes, Virgil. I remember you mentioning that to me when you returned from Paris. I've put that on Tin-Tin's list." He glanced up at Cassie. "I'd appreciate it if you could get together with her and Virgil to flesh out your ideas."

"Yes, sir," Cassie replied.

"Scott, what's your assessment?" Jeff turned to his eldest son.

"The general impression I got was that everything went well. Elise did a great job in coordinating the teams; everyone was confident; everyone remembered what they'd been taught. My only thought is that the Fire Tender might not be the best choice of equipment for this kind of fire." Scott smiled. "I think we had a successful training session, thanks to Cassie here."

Cassie colored a bit. "I'm glad you think so, Scott."

"Good. I'll expect written reports with your impressions by 1800 hours tomorrow." Jeff nodded a bit, then glanced around at everyone else. "Is there anything else?"

"Sir?" Cassie raised her hand a bit. "Is there any way I can get some training on Mobile Control? I understood some of the information provided, but not all."

"I think that's a good idea." Jeff said. "Scott?"

Scott nodded. "That's fine with me, or Elise can do it. Whichever you prefer."

"I'll let you know," Cassie said.

"Well, then." Jeff saved his notes and put down his data pad. He freshened his coffee and stood. "This meeting is adjourned. Good work, everyone."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:29:22 GMT
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October 23, 10:40 AM; Portland International Jetport, Maine

Lena headed toward the waiting area, scanning for the man she expected to be meeting her. She wasn't sure she'd recognize him, but when she'd called, giving him her itinerary, he said he'd have a sign with her name on it. She was surprised when she saw her name, held by a young woman in a chauffeur's uniform. Walking up to the holder, she said, "I'm Lena Matumbo. Where..."

"Oh, Mrs. Matumbo. Welcome to Portland. Mr. Dolan got held up, and I was sent to meet you." She reached inside her jacket and pulled out an envelope. "He asked me to give this to you." She handed it to Lena. "May I take your bag? Did you have a good flight? Do you have any other luggage?"

Lena laughed. "Tank you, yes, and no - in dat order. Shall we go to de car?"

A few minutes later, they were driving away from the airport. Lena opened the letter the Portland I&M director wrote.

Lena,

I really wanted to meet you myself, but a meeting of all the department heads was called for 9AM. I didn't know about it until I got in. It'll probably be the usual waste of time, but it's mandatory.

I hope the car and driver I hired to pick you up is satisfactory. You'll be taken to your hotel, where you can freshen up and relax, if you need to. I should be able to get away by noon, and I'll come and take you to lunch.

Everett

She put the letter in her purse, then looked out the window, and gasped in amazement. "How beautiful! Autumn is certainly putting on a colorful show up here dis year."

Miriam glanced at her through the rear view mirror and smiled. "The weather people say it's because we had plenty of rain this summer. And then the chilly days we've had the last few weeks helped bring out the colors. It's my favorite season."

"It certainly is a beautiful one."

They chatted easily until they reached the hotel. Miriam took Lena's bag inside and waited until her charge was checked in, then left. Lena headed to her room to unpack, and do a little work on her laptop (since the flight took only an hour, she wasn't tired) until her Portland counterpart arrived to take her to lunch, then to his office.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:29:32 GMT

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Wednesday October 24th, the Cliff House, mid-morning....

Elise hummed to herself as she leafed through the piles of papers on her table. They were all her

notes for the upcoming Halloween party. "OK, we have chicken wings, bat wings, salad, some sweets, Grandma is insisting on making the cake..." She continued skimming and making notations, idly patting Henry, who had jumped up on her lap. "Well, it looks like we have most of the food all set. Just need to work on decorations and games. And I hope everyone decides to dress up!"

She looked up at the knock at her door. Answering it, she gasped in surprise. "Luke! Is everything all right?"

Luke looked at her with bleary, bloodshot eyes. "Want a dog?" he growled, glaring down at Rommel, who whined.

"You'd better come in and talk to me." Elise led them both inside. Luke held up his hand, commanding Rom to stay on the rug next to the door. The dog let out a sigh and flopped down, his eyes watching Luke's every move. Elise hid a smile. "Why don't you sit down? Can I get you anything?"

"I'd kill for a cup of coffee," Luke replied hoarsely, sitting down on the couch and putting his head in his hands.

"It'll take just a minute," she said. A noise made her turn. "Henry, you behave. Leave the dog alone." The kitten was sidling up to the dog, his hair on end, hissing. Rom merely ignored the tiny creature.

She came back a few minutes later and handed Luke a steaming cup. He took it and drank deep. "Oh, God, I needed this."

Elise chuckled. "Want to tell me what's going on? You look like you haven't slept. You're not sick, are you?" She automatically reached out and felt his forehead.

Luke shook his head and glared over at the dog again. "I didn't. Sleep, that is. The mutt there was upset that I didn't take him yesterday, and didn't give me a moment's peace all night."

She frowned. "That's kind of weird, isn't it?"

He shrugged, sipping at his coffee again. "Sort of. We're partners. He's trained to be with me pretty much at all times. But he's not a fire dog. There was no one missing; he's not trained in this type of situation, so I left him home. Then when I got back, smelling of ash and smoke, he sort of freaked out. Kept me up all night, nudging, licking...I swear, Elise, if you laugh..."

She bit back a smile. "You have to admit, it's kind of cute. He was worried about you!"

"Yeah, lucky me." He muttered and set the mug down on the coffee table. "He's done this once before. On another rescue. It was a flash flood and I didn't want him anywhere near there."

"I don't blame you." She looked thoughtfully at the dog, who was slowly creeping forward, trying not to catch his master's attention. "You know, it probably was the soot that set him off. And, he could probably smell the fire from over here. He was just worried about you, weren't you, baby?"

Elise snapped her fingers and the dog trotted over to lick her hand.

"Yeah, I suppose," Luke said grudgingly, still glaring at Rommel.

She laughed and squeezed his hand. "Are you hungry? I could scramble up some eggs or something?"

He looked up. "Really? That would be great. If it's no trouble."

"None at all. Just give me a couple of minutes." Elise wandered off into the kitchen as he lay back on the couch.

"Are you and Nikki still planning on coming for dinner tomorrow night?" Luke called out, closing his eyes.

"And turn down a free meal? Of course we'll be there!" She quickly got out eggs and fried them up, adding some toast to the side. She poured another mug of coffee and made her way back to the living room. The sight in front of her made her freeze.

Luke had fallen asleep. Rommel had crept up next to him, resting his muzzle on the couch under his master's hand. Henry, meanwhile, had gotten over his snit with the dog, and was curled up on top of Luke's chest. Elise smiled and tiptoed back into the kitchen. She put the eggs in the fridge, and munching on a piece of toast, picked up the phone. "Nikki? There's been a slight change of plans. Do you mind if we meet at your place instead?"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:29:39 GMT

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Wednesday October 24th, late morning

Scott quickly slipped into the laundry room. The clothes were folded neatly and in piles. One of the dryers was still running while Kyrano was fixing lunch. He went straight for the pile he wanted, took some things off the top, and hid them in his own pile of clean clothes.

There. Anna and I can do these tonight. Then tomorrow I can substitute these for the ones in his dresser, do them and put them with tomorrow's laundry when I'm done. He'll never realize these disappeared for a day. Scott put the pile of clean clothes in his room and headed out for lunch.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:30:16 GMT

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Luke leaned on the patio railing, gazing out at the sea. He felt much more refreshed after his unexpected nap on Elise's couch. He'd woken up and gone back to his apartment, indulging

himself in a long, hot shower. Spying the pile of dirty clothes on the floor, he'd made his way down to the laundry and thrown them in. One more thing to get Rom off my back, he thought to himself. Currently the dog was sprawled at his feet, dozing in the sun.

Suddenly Rom sat up, ears twitching. "What do you hear, boy?" Luke asked.

A moment later, a blond whirlwind came flying out of the doors at the far end of the patio. "Joshua Aaron Kelley! You get back here!"

Giggling, the toddler rushed forward, his father close on his heels. Spying Rommel and Luke, Josh paused in mid-flight. "Doggie?"

Knowing Dominic's aversion to dogs, Luke quickly stepped in front of the animal, giving Rom the signal to stay. "Hey there, Josh. What's up, buddy?"

"Doggie," Josh said again.

Dom scooped up his son in his arms, keeping a wary eye on Rommel. "Luke, sorry about that. I'm tryin' to get ready to leave in the mornin'."

A funny pang went through Luke. "Leave?"

"Aye, gotta head back to Ireland for a bit. We shouldn't be gone more than a couple of days," the Irishman replied. "Got some stuff I need to take care of."

Luke didn't press. "No problem." He grinned at Josh, who was trying to wiggle out of his father's arms. "Let me guess, laundry and he's not helping."

Dom chuckled. "You can say that again. The fire yesterday put me a bit behind schedule."

"You and me both!" Luke thought for a moment. "Look, I'm just about done here; I've got my last load in the dryer. Why don't I take Josh for a bit and give you a chance to finish up what you need to do. We can go to the beach and look for shells, play by the pool, anything. I'll just run Rom upstairs and come back."

Dom shook his head. "Nah, I'll manage."

"Dom, don't be a fool! Here's a chance for some peace and quiet for a few hours! It's no problem, really. I have nieces and nephews who were once his age. We'll be fine, won't we little man?" Luke said, making a face at the boy.

"Well, if you're sure you won't mind..." Dom said, visibly torn.

"Not at all. In fact, I'll have him back for dinner. I could whip up some spaghetti or something easy like that."

"I suppose..."

"Good, it's settled then," Luke said, taking Josh. "We'll be back later. Wave to daddy!"

"Bye, Da!" the toddler cried happily.

Luke hefted the boy over his shoulder. "Do you have a bag for him? Just in case?"

"Yeah, over here." Dom led the way back to the other common room and handed Luke a well-worn carry all. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. We'll have fun won't we?" Luke tickled the boy's belly. "First we'll have us a snack, then I'll show you how to run with scissors and play with fire." At Dom's stricken look, he laughed. "Stop worrying! We'll see you in a couple of hours." Together the man and the toddler made their way up to Luke's apartment, Rom tagging along at their heels. When they got inside, Josh instantly dropped to the dog's side and began playing. Luke watched for a few minutes, grinning. "Well, buddy, what do you say we get ourselves some cookies, then go and pay a visit to Brains?"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:30:27 GMT

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The Cliff House, early evening, before dinner...

Elise laughed as she ran the carpet sweeper across the floor. Henry was all fluffed up, trying to chase it, yet running away hissing when it got too close. "I'm sorry, but if your buddy Rommel is going to come and visit, he's going to have to learn to clean up after himself. Look at all this hair!" The chime of the doorbell made her pause. "Let's go see who that is." She walked over and opened the door. "Tyler! Alex! This is a surprise, come on in."

"Hi, Elise! We came to visit Henry," Tyler told her.

"And give you this," Alex added, handing her an envelope.

"Thank-you. Would you guys like a snack, or something to drink?" she asked, taking the envelope and placing it on the table.

Henry pranced over to the boys and started playing with Alex's shoelace. "Wow! He's gotten really big!" Tyler commented, getting down on the floor and eye level with the kitten. "Patches is big too. You'll have to come and see him."

"I will. How about that snack?" Elise asked.

Alex pulled his shoe away. "No thanks. We just stopped by for a minute, to deliver your letter. Mom told us not to be late for dinner."

They played for a few minutes before heading back to the Villa. Once they had gone, Elise sat down on the couch and opened the note.

Dear Elise,

Things have been so hectic since I got back that we haven't had time to catch up! I was wondering if you'd like to join me for dinner tomorrow night. I can fill you in on my trip and you can tell me what I missed while I was gone. Give me a call when you get this.

Virgil

She smiled and reached for the phone. Within moments, Virgil answered.

"Did you get my note?"

"Yes I did. Charming delivery boys, too."

"Yeah, try living with them sometime!" Virgil kidded. "So, do we have a date?"

"I'd love to but I already have plans," she told him. "I'm sorry."

"Plans? Should I be jealous?" he teased.

She laughed. "Luke invited me for dinner tomorrow. As a thank-you for helping get his apartment all set up."

"Oh. OK then." Virgil tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

Elise continued without seeming to notice. "John and Nikki are coming too. Can we do it another time?"

"John and Nikki too, huh? Sounds like fun. What about Friday? Got a hot date then?" he asked, only half-jokingly.

"Nope, Friday would be fine," she told him. "I'm all yours."

Don't I wish... Virgil thought to himself. "I'll pick you up around five."

"Sounds perfect."

"Well, goodnight then, Elise."

"Goodnight, Virgil."

"Oh and Elise? Wear something dressy." With that last remark, Virgil hung up leaving Elise wondering just what he had planned.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:30:47 GMT

"Thanks again fer givin' me this bit of time off, Mr Tracy," Dominic said.

He was speaking with Jeff in the hangar. The older man had been checking on something and had dropped by to bid his employee farewell. Dominic had just finished loading the last of his luggage into the hold of Tracy One as Jeff had approached. Joshua was already strapped into his seat in the plane, Horsey clutched in his hands.

"I'm more than happy to, as with everyone," Jeff said.

"It's going to be a long ol' flight from Christchurch to Dublin, but sure, has to be done."

"Yes, it is a lengthy flight. I hope Joshua copes well with it," Jeff said.

Dominic chuckled.

"Aye, me too. He didn't do too terribly badly comin' from Kansas to here. Hopefully he'll just sleep."

This time it was Jeff who chuckled.

"I wouldn't bank on that."

Virgil climbed down from inside the plane and gave his father a wave.

"Hey Dad. Ready to go, Dominic?"

"Am indeed. Tin-Tin inside?"

"Yeah. She's entertaining Josh. I think he's in a bad mood."

Dominic shot Jeff a weary look, who chuckled.

"Good luck," Jeff said. He turned to Virgil. "Radio in when you reach Christchurch. Have you got your grandmother's shopping list?"

"Right here, Dad," Virgil said, pulling a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

"All right." Jeff turned back to Dominic. "Have a safe journey, and let us know when you arrive in Dublin."

"Yes, sir," Dominic said, grinning.

Virgil beckoned Dominic to join him in climbing back into the plane.

"C'mon. Gordon isn't going to want to play air-traffic-controller all day."

Dominic gave Jeff a final wave, before climbing into the plane after Virgil. Soon enough they were

airborne, and he was on his way back to Ireland, his home.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:30:53 GMT

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Thursday, October 25, Early morning

Gordon went out for his morning swim just as the sun was rising. As he was getting out of the pool, he noticed Scott on the balcony, drinking coffee. "Hi, Scott. Done with breakfast already?"

"No, I was just going in. I was just watching you."

"I'll be at the table in about 10 minutes. See you there." Gordon went to his room, took a quick shower and hung his suit up to dry.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:31:04 GMT

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Thursday, October 25, 2068, 2:30 p.m., Tracy Island

Jeff sat with Kyrano and Emily in the study, going over the applications that had been received.

"Lands' sakes! There are dozens of them!" Emily said, putting down the data pad she'd been reading. "I don't know how we're going to choose!"

"It is a difficult decision to make," Kyrano said, his eyes fixed on the pad he held.

"These are just the ones who have cleared the background checks." Jeff sighed and picked up another pad, then laid it down again. "The key is: what do you want in an assistant? Come up with a priority list and let's start eliminating from that."

"Well, I suppose we should have someone young and strong," Emily said, giving Jeff a sideways glance.

Jeff ignored the slight gibe. "All right. What age do you want as a cut off?"

Kyrano looked thoughtful. "We should look for a balance of age, strength, and experience." He glanced at Emily. "Perhaps forty?"

"I think thirty's a better age," Emily said, a firm set to her mouth.

Shaking his head, Jeff sighed. "Let's split the difference, and say thirty-five." He put the age into a filter on his laptop. Several of the data pads went blank. "There, that cuts the number down. Now, what else is a priority? Gender? Experience? Education?"

"Gender is not an issue to me," Kyrano said. He glanced at Emily, who nodded. "I would say education would be next. At least a degree or certificate in gourmet culinary studies." He smiled slightly. "We do have a standard of excellence to uphold."

Emily frowned. "And, at the risk of sounding discriminatory here, I'd say no single parents." When both men looked at her, she added, "Joshua is one thing. He's a joy to have, and I don't mind taking care of him when Dominic's on duty. Lisa says she doesn't mind either. But having another child to watch is a bit too much, especially when the reason for their parent being here is to relieve our burden -- mine and Kyrano's and Lisa's." She shrugged her shoulders, her palms up. "A single parent isn't going to have the flexibility we're going to need for this job. Dominic is a different story." She paused. "A two-parent family might work, though."

Jeff drew a deep breath in through his nose and let it out noisily. "I see your point, Mother." He plugged another variable into his filter, and a few more data pads went dark. "There. That's the education." He tapped a few more keys and blanked still more data pads. "And there's the parenting issue." Glancing from his mother to Kyrano again, he said, "What's next?"

"Experience," Kyrano replied promptly. "This will sound strange, perhaps, but I do not wish to have someone with too much experience in the kitchen. I would like to guide and mold whoever we choose to the way we do things." He made a wry face. "From my own days as a chef, I know that many are arrogant and insist that their own ways are best. So... no one with four or five-star experience."

"Hm." Jeff rubbed his chin. "I don't know if I can filter for that, Kyrano."

"Maybe I can put it better." All eyes turned to Lisa, who came in, balancing a tray in her hands. Jeff rose to help her put it down on the table, and Kyrano, smiling, began to serve the lemonade she had brought. She sat down at the table and idly picked up a data pad.

Jeff picked up his glass tumbler. "Go ahead, Lisa," he said, before taking a sip.

"Well," she began, "most of our meals are served family style or buffet. A restaurant chef will know how to do a buffet, but family style is a different matter. Someone with cafeteria experience will know how to do both. So, perhaps putting more of an emphasis on cafeteria or buffet cook rather than short-order restaurant cook will help."

"All right." Jeff began to type again. "I'll prioritize by latest experience. If the candidate's latest food preparation experience was in a buffet or cafeteria style establishment, then they'll be flagged green. Short-order restaurant will be flagged yellow."

The two women glanced at each other, and Emily cleared her throat. "Jeff, we wouldn't mind having a little help with the housekeeping as well. Can you flag for other experience, like maybe

cleaning work... or as a housekeeper?"

Jeff raised an eyebrow, slightly surprised, then nodded. "Sure. I'll add that. Now people with cafeteria and housekeeping or cleaning experience are flagged blue. The others are as before."

Kyrano began sorting through the data pads. "Lisa, if you will take care of the blue, I shall sort the yellow, and Mrs. Tracy? The green, if you will."

"You can hand me the blank ones," Jeff said as he handed a pad over to Kyrano.

When the sorting was done, the piles of data pads were far smaller, with the pile in front of Lisa the smallest of all. "How many do you have there, Lisa?" Jeff asked, holding out a hand.

"Eight," she replied, passing the pile down the table.

"Ah, good." Jeff shuffled through them quickly. "This will suffice for now. I'll flag these for Human Resources, and the offices closest to these folks can contact them for a preliminary interview." He began the process of highlighting the names. "In the meantime, you might want to give some consideration to just how we're going to make the final choice. I am not revealing IR to every candidate we get. Just the final one."

Kyrano glanced at the two women, and nodded sagely. "We will discuss it."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:32:14 GMT

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Jenny paused by a clothes rack in the local shopping centre and glanced at the price tag attached to a suit. "Mum, have a look at this!" she said to Sandra, who was busy inspecting a skirts rack.

"What is it?" her mother asked, turning her head.

"A navy suit. Fairly cheap, too. I reckon it'll look well on me. I could wear it to an interview."

Sandra Finch walked over and surveyed it critically.

"I don't think that suits your figure, though, Jen dear. Oooh, look at that!"

"I'll try it on, anyway," Jenny answered, eying the suit with some doubt. Perhaps her mother was right.

"Before you go, Jenny, have a look at these pants. A lovely burgundy colour. You love deep reds, don't you?"

Jenny nodded. "That looks nice." She turned and headed toward the changing rooms.

"I reckon it suits you, too. You could wear it with that red silk blouse your sister gave you."

Jenny remembered. Wendy had said that she had found it in a store, and bought it, but when she got home she found that it didn't go with any of her clothes, so she had given it to Jenny last week.

When Jenny returned from the changing rooms, Sandra had a pile of pants for her to try on.

"Here," she said, "try these on, Jenny."

"I don't think I want pants," Jenny said firmly. "I prefer a skirt, particularly as it's summer soon. Skirts are generally cooler, I think. Hey, here's a nice one." She held up a light grey skirt.

Sandra stared at it for a moment. "It wouldn't go with the blouse, though."

"It's a shame I'm low on funds, or I'd buy a new blouse," Jenny lamented, putting the grey skirt back on the rack.

"Well, my mother always used to say that you can't go wrong in navy. How about this?" Sandra asked, handing Jenny a navy skirt with a matching belt.

Jenny examined it closely. There was some embroidery detail in one corner, and the belt had some tiny embroidered flowers between the holes. She held it up against herself and liked it immediately.

"I'll go and try it on," she said, and disappeared into the changing rooms.

She returned in a few minutes, looking quite pleased.

"How much does it cost?"

"Let's see. \$59.99."

Jenny felt her heart sink. "I can't afford that. Not if I want to get a nice pair of shoes."

"Oh, wait a minute! Everything's half price! That'll be thirty bucks then!"

Jenny sighed and draped the skirt over her arm. "Let's have a look at the shoes then."

Sandra quickly led the way to the shoe department.

"Oh, Jenny! Have a look at these!" Sandra held up a pair of black high-heeled sandals.

Jenny took one glance and groaned. "Mum! I hate wearing high heels!"

"Jenny, love, they're not that high. Anyway..."

Jenny hastily moved away, leaving her mother holding the offending shoes, and made her way to

the back of the shop.

"Now, these look good." Jenny whispered to herself, noticing a pair of navy pumps. They suited the skirt quite well.

She picked the box of shoes up and found a nearby stool. She sat down, pulled off her own shoes, and tried the pumps on. They were a couple of sizes too big, so Jenny got up and hunted for another, smaller pair. She soon found a box, and tried them on. They fitted just about right.

"Mum?"

"Yes, what is it, love?"

"What do you think of these?"

Sandra appeared around the corner, holding a couple of shoe boxes.

"Ooh. They look smart. Well, are you going to buy them?"

"I certainly will." She pulled the pumps off and slipped her own shoes back on, while Sandra put the pumps back in the box.

"Let's go." Jenny sighed, feeling that it was about time she had a drink. A fruit juice sounded good, and perhaps a chocolate bar to go with it.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:32:53 GMT

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It was as if all life had been sucked out of Dominic as he unbuckled his son from the aeroplane seat, and joined in the sea of people waiting to disembark. His steps were shuffling and his back bent as he carried the small boy down the gangway and towards the baggage reclaim. Dom was vaguely aware of people bumping into him and throwing him disgusted and angry looks, but he didn't care.

Joshua had only fallen asleep one hour before. Dominic shifted the sleeping boy in his arms to look at his watch, still on Tracy Island time. Ten p.m. Left at ten a.m. Ugh... Joshua curled his fists into his father's t-shirt and rubbed his cheek against Dominic's shoulder. Wish I was asleep, Dominic thought, suppressing a yawn. He walked over to the luggage carousel, and began the inevitably long wait.

Eventually he had the bags loaded onto a trolley and Joshua snuggled up in his baby backpack. Taking a deep breath, he forced his limbs to work once more and walked towards the terminal exit.

The cold October air blasted fresh memories into his body, giving him a brief surge of energy. It was so different and so familiar, beautiful and terrible strands whipping around him in colours and

light, bringing a crescendo of love and hate thumping under his sternum.

"Tynan, dear!"

Dominic's heart twisted for a moment, thinking, Who knows? And suddenly he remembered the voice, and then the plans that had been made. Granny.

A small, sinewy woman and a tall thin man were waving from across the terminal, and Dominic broke out in a wide grin.

"Granny, Granda!" He said, and swung the baggage trolley around.

Étaín and Stiofán Kelly walked over and embraced their grandson for the first time in over five years. Dominic, careful of his sleeping son, smiled more widely than he had in weeks.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:33:10 GMT

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"Dublin Air Control from Arrowhawk One, request permission to land."

Crackle.

"Acknowledged Arrowhawk One," the controller said. "You're right on schedule. Permission granted. Please use runway five and taxi to hangar B-seven."

"Acknowledged Dublin Air Control. Arrowhawk One out."

Beatrice Henry's hands rested on the private jet's controls as she brought it in for the final descent. Her passenger, the owner of the prestigious jet and CEO of the company she worked for, would expect nothing less than perfection from her. She brought the craft down for a graceful landing, and taxied to the appropriate hangar.

She pressed one manicured finger on the cabin intercom button.

"You're now safe to disembark, sir."

"Beautiful landing as always, Bea. Enjoy your furlough."

Beatrice smiled and nodded, though her boss couldn't see. While on his business trip, he had given her four days of paid holiday to enjoy the sights Dublin had to offer. And I only mentioned I wanted to see the city once -- and that was months ago!

"I will, sir."

She smiled again, and began running through her post-flight diagnostics.

XXXX

A set of silver steps had been wheeled over to the open cabin door of Arrowhawk One, and its owner descended onto the tarmac. Matthew Hawkins pulled on his heavy coat as he strode over to the waiting buggy that would transport him to the terminal, shielding his eyes from the beating rain. There was no business to attend to as his pilot thought. Not Hawkins Aerospace business, anyway.

I'm going to sort things out with Dominic once and for all, he thought. No matter what the price.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:33:23 GMT

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"Matthews snaps the ball....it's caught by Jeffery in the end zone...Touchdown, Raiders!"

Luke poked his head out of the kitchen and swore. Muttering under his breath, he turned back and checked in the oven. Nodding, he grabbed a beer out of the fridge and went out to sit on the couch. He immersed himself in the football game for a few minutes, jumping in startlement when the door chime sounded. Rommel looked up from where he was laying on the floor, and watched his master walk across the room. Luke opened the door. "John, c'mon in."

John stepped into the room. "Hi, Luke. Something smells good."

"Chicken parmigiana. Can I get you a drink? I have a nice Merlot for dinner, but there's beer, juice and water in the fridge."

"Water would be great, thanks." John sat down on the couch and Rom trotted over to him. "Hey there, big guy." The dog's tail thumped happily as John patted him.

Luke came back in and handed John a bottle of water and a glass. "Here you go."

"Thanks. What are you watching?"

"Broncos vs. Raiders. They were on Monday Night Football this week. I can't watch live with the time difference so I record it and stay away from the news until I watch." He glanced up at the TV and shook his head. "We're losing. Bloody defense has holes big enough to drive a truck through."

John caught the score. "I take it you're a Broncos fan."

Luke nodded. "Yeah. Sadly, I've been one since I was a kid. We haven't won a Superbowl since the forties." He shook his head. "My brother is a Seattle fan. He constantly rubs it in that they've won the past two years. You follow football?"

John nodded. "Only college. I'm a Harvard man."

"Good team." Luke chuckled. "Glad you're not a KC fan or this friendship would go downhill fast." John laughed as the doorbell rang. "That must be Nikki and Elise." Luke opened the door and both women walked in.

Nikki paused and looked around. "Very nice. I'll admit I didn't think you'd ever get unpacked!"

"Ha-ha," Luke replied as he shut off the television. "Want the grand tour now? There's still a few minutes before supper." He gestured around him. "Living room, complete with curtains," he swung his arm grandly at the navy drapes on the patio doors. "And couch cushions." This time John held one up and displayed it, turning it back and forth. Both women giggled. Luke chuckled. "I'll admit the tan worked well on the walls too."

"Desert Sands," both women said at the same time.

Luke rolled his eyes. "Desert Sands then. Anyway, you were right, it warmed the place up." He led them all into the bedroom.

Elise glanced around and nodded. "Well, not too bad, Luke. You aren't as hopeless as I thought."

"Gee, that's a compliment, I think," Luke replied with a smile. "Let's eat."

They sat down at the table, as Luke served the meal. Elise looked down at hers. "You cooked this? All by yourself?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did," Luke shot back. "I can handle a few things. This being one of them."

She nudged Nikki. "He's not as good with breakfast."

Luke pointed his fork at her. "Watch it or no chocolate cheesecake."

John's ears perked up. "You made cheesecake too?"

To their surprise, Luke's face reddened. "Well, I took it out of the freezer. Does that count?"

They laughed and continued their meal. At one point, John glanced around the room, a puzzled expression on his face. "Are those hockey sticks?"

Luke followed his gaze. "Behind the chair? Yeah, I got them in the last mail shipment. Now if I only had a place to use them," he said wistfully.

"Hockey, what a barbaric sport," Elise stated.

Luke glared at her. "Excuse me?"

She calmly stabbed a piece of chicken and popped it into her mouth. "I don't believe I stuttered."

John chuckled under his breath and nudged Nikki. "This ought to be good."

"For your information, hockey takes skill and determination. It's not all fights and gore like they show on TV. You have to be able to concentrate on your own game as well as your teammates and opponents. At the same time, you're trying to control a three inch piece of vulcanized rubber that can potentially hit you at 100 mph!" Luke said heatedly.

"Skill? Have you ever done a double axel on those skates of yours?" Elise asked.

"Have you ever hit a slap shot from the blue line?" he countered back.

"Yeah, that's real skill. To hit a piece of plastic with a stick!"

"Do we need to separate you two?" Nikki asked with a smile.

"They sound like an old, married couple, don't they?" John added. Luke and Elise shot him such identical looks of disgust that he burst out laughing. "OK, what do you say we call a truce?"

"I will if she will," Luke said, an angry glower on his face.

"Only if he says figure skating is just as hard as hockey," Elise replied.

"You know, there is an easy way to settle this," Nikki said. "Next time we all get some leave time, let's head to the mainland. I'm sure we could find a skating rink there. Unless we can convince your father to put one in here?"

John shook his head. "Somehow I don't see that happening. Though, he did let Brains make it snow once...anyway, I think a skate-off is a great idea."

"She wears hockey skates and gear," Luke said, pointing at Elise.

Elise pointed back. "And he wears figure skates and--;"

"I am NOT wearing tights!"

John interrupted. "OK, children, before we start up again, let's agree that there will be a contest in the near future. Terms to be discussed at a later date. Deal?"

"Deal," Luke said grudgingly.

"Deal," Elise replied in the same tone.

"Great." John turned to Luke. "Now I believe you said something about cheesecake?"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:33:30 GMT

Friday, October 26 , Early morning

The next day both Scott and Virgil were watching when Gordon finished swimming. He sometimes saw Scott watching him while waiting for breakfast but Virgil standing with him was unprecedented. Virgil was holding his high resolution camera.

"What's up?"

"Nothing. We were just admiring your swimming and taking some shots of the sunrise." Virgil and Scott clinked their coffee cups together and went inside. Gordon shrugged and headed to his room.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:34:32 GMT
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Absolute bliss: that was the only way to describe it. The feather pillow cushioned Dominic's skull perfectly. The down duvet was gloriously soft, and he burrowed into it even further. He inhaled deeply, letting the memories wash over him. Visiting his grandparents had always been the highlight of the year.

After the months of torment, changing from school to school as his mother got new jobs, left or was fired, the summer months spent in the Dublin suburbs were always a respite. The weather was always terrible, and there wasn't much for a young boy alone to do, but Dominic sighed and rubbed his cheek against the floral pillowcase as he remembered the wonder that was stability. The pillow smelled of dust and washing powder, the faded smell of age and love, and he smiled. There was nothing like it.

It was after twelve noon before Dominic managed to lift his head. Immediately he looked towards the old, empty crib that had been set up against one wall. It was newly painted, Joshua being the most recent baby held inside its wooden embrace since Dominic himself, and before that Dominic's mother. His grandparents had already taken Joshua out.

Dominic reached his arms up in a stretch, his vertebrae popping back into place. He rolled his shoulders and neck, before taking up the lotus position on the floor and beginning to centre himself.

He went through a variety of yoga poses in a routine he had devised to help beat jetlag before bringing himself back to the lotus position, and then rising. He hummed as he dressed himself in a pair of baggy jeans, a t--shirt and a hooded sweater, before going downstairs, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Mornin' Granny, Granda."

Stíofan Kelly let his newspaper fall to the table as his only grandson bounded into the room and went straight to the refrigerator. He smiled widely. Étaín was holding Joshua on her lap as he attempted to eat a banana. Her face was rosy with joy as she hugged the little boy and smiled at his father.

"Good morning, Tynan, dear," she said. "This little one is an absolute joy! He took to his granny like a duck to water."

"Ducky!" Joshua said through a mouthful of banana. Most of it sprayed out onto the table.

"He's my pride and joy," Dominic said as he poured himself some orange juice.

The kitchen was more modern than he had imagined it. He was half-expecting there to be brass pots hanging over an open fireplace, a coal-fired oven to bake the day's bread, and a cold pantry for the perishables. This was all in spite of the fact that his grandparents had never actually possessed any of these things. I've been away from Ireland too long. I'm starting to think of this place like a tourist! He sipped his juice as he watched Joshua devour the banana, and Étaín laugh deeply as the child tried to use her blouse as a hand towel. Stíofan chuckled and picked up his paper, muttering something that was probably "like father, like son". Dominic shook his head, finished his juice and went to rinse the glass.

"What are your plans for today, Tynan?" Étaín asked, jiggling Joshua on her knee.

"Well, first things first," Dominic said. "What's for breakfast?"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:34:45 GMT

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Friday, October 26, 2068, 2:30 p.m., Tracy Island

The day was sultry, but a breeze stirred up the humid air and made it bearable. It rustled through the leaves of the bushes in Kyrano's garden, and set the flowering stems to waving. It was here that Lisa found him, pruning carefully the orchids he loved, his old clothes stained with sweat and his woven, wide-brimmed hat drooping.

He looked up as he heard her footfalls on the pumice path, and straightened, wiping a sleeve across his brow. "Hello, dear one." Nodding at the data pad she held in one hand, he asked, "What brings you to the garden?"

"Besides you?" Lisa smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek, gently guiding him to the bench swing. They both sat and Lisa waited until the gentle motion stopped before attending to the data pad. "Tuan, we've done a lot of talking about what we'd like to do at our wedding, but we haven't set the most important thing: the date. It really is time we did so."

Kyrano nodded. "You are right, my love. We should set a date." He peered down at the screen.

"When would you like to be wed?"

She blushed. "I was hoping that we'd have more flexibility in choosing a date, but... well, I had an email from Jared today. He'd like me to come out and visit him during the school vacation in February." She shrugged a little. "It's hard when I want my family here to share in my joy and they all have such varied and sometimes opposing schedules." Looking over the data pad, she scrolled down. "Dianne's schedule is the most flexible in some ways as she can suspend schooling for a few days when the need arises. Douglas hasn't gotten back to me on when Stephanie's likely to have a vacation. But I'm not sure that her school system will align with the twins'."

"So, the most ideal time would be when all of the children are not in school." Kyrano sounded thoughtful. "That would most likely be during the Christmas holidays, would it not?"

Lisa nodded. "I wouldn't want to have it on Christmas, or even before Christmas." She glanced down at the calendar again. "I think the children -- all of them -- will start that holiday period on the 21st. It's a Friday. Christmas is Tuesday. Perhaps... the following Friday? The 28th?" She turned to him, her voice almost pleading. "It would let the families have their own Christmas celebrations, then they could come here for the wedding, and return with a day or so to recuperate..."

Kyrano laid his hand on hers, and patted it gently. "I think that is the wisest plan, dear one. Let us set that as our date." He reached over and took the data pad, marking the calendar page. "We still have much to do, but we have started the preparations."

"Yes, we've selected quite a few items." Lisa rested back against the swing. "I just hope we can get them finished in time."

"We will, dear one." Kyrano smiled, and Lisa smiled with him. "We will."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:35:05 GMT

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Tracy Island, late afternoon...

Elise paused in front of the mirror. She tucked a stray lock of hair back behind her ear and eyed herself critically. I wish Virgil had given me more idea of what we're doing tonight. Dressy? To eat at the Villa? She ran her hand over her dress, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles.

Instead of her red one, which Virgil must certainly be tired of seeing by now, she had pulled an older one out of the closet. It was a deep emerald green which perfectly matched her eyes and set off her hair. Callie and Nikki had come over and helped with her hair, sweeping it up in the back and leaving tendrils framing her face.

Henry wound around her ankles, purring. She bent down to stroke him. "I won't be too late, baby." She looked up as the doorbell chimed. "And there he is now." She opened the door. "Hello, Virgil."

"Good evening, Elise. You look...spectacular," he told her.

She blushed. "Thank-you. You're looking pretty fine yourself." Virgil wore a dark navy jacket, with a cream colored turtleneck underneath. She could practically see her reflection in the shine of his shoes. Henry peeked out around the door and seeing Virgil, let out a hiss.

"He just doesn't like me, does he?" Virgil shook his head.

Elise bent down to pat the kitten again. "Yes he does. He's just shy, aren't you baby?"

Virgil bit back a reply and instead, handed a yellow rose to Elise. "Are you ready to go?"

"Oh, it's beautiful. Thank-you." She shooed the kitten back inside and shut the door. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll see." He led her to the monorail, and a short time later, they were exiting near the air strip.

"Aren't we going up to the house?" she asked, puzzled.

"Not tonight." They made their way to one of the private jets. "After you, my lady." Virgil took her hand as she walked up the plane steps. "Feel free to sit here in the cabin, or join me up front."

"I'll come sit with you. Though I'm not wearing a headset!" They both laughed and a short time later, they were airborne across the Pacific. "So, why the mainland? Why not just stay and eat at home?" Elise asked.

"I wanted to spend some time alone with you," Virgil answered. He glanced over at her. "But I can take you back if you'd rather eat with my brothers."

She laughed. "No thank you! A night out with just you is perfect." They chatted comfortably until they landed in Christchurch. As they walked down the plane's steps, Elise's eyes widened. "We're going to dinner in that?" she asked, staring at the black stretch limo in front of her.

"Only the best for us," Virgil replied, taking her hand and leading her to the car. He held the door as she stepped inside. They drove through the city streets, then started towards the outskirts of town. The car lumbered up a hill, finally coming to a stop. The driver opened the door and both exited the vehicle.

Elise looked around in astonishment. "Virgil, this place is gorgeous." The restaurant stood at the edge of a cliff overlooking the harbor. Flowers surrounded the grounds and what looked like private dining nooks were tucked around the main building.

He smiled. "I thought you'd like it. Come, our table is waiting." They went inside and paused in front of the maitre'd. "Hello, I have a reservation under Tracy."

The man beamed. "Welcome, sir, madam. Right this way, please." He led them through the restaurant, and out a door in the back. They walked down a short path and he paused in front of an ivy covered trellis. "Enjoy your dinner."

Virgil thanked him, then he and Elise stepped around the trellis. Elise stared in awe and even

Virgil had to admit he was impressed. The table sat overlooking the bay, a flower bedecked pergola overhead. There was a waterfall at the other end of the clearing, the splashing water loud enough to drown out any outside noises, but still quiet enough for conversation.

Elise sat down and gazed out at the sunset. "I feel like I'm in fairyland." She turned back to him. "How did you find this place?"

He smiled. "Penny of course."

"Of course!"

They both looked up as a tuxedo-clad waiter approached their table. "May I pour you a glass of wine? Chef Etienne has recommended a fine 2051 Merlot to compliment your meal tonight."

Virgil nodded and the man poured a small amount into a glass. Virgil sniffed the liquid, then held it up to look at the color, swirling it around the glass. Finally he took a sip, rolling the wine across his tongue. He smiled. "Perfect, thank-you."

The man nodded and filled the two glasses. "Your meal will be out shortly."

Once the waiter had left, Virgil raised his glass. "Cheers." They clinked glasses and sipped.

"Mmmm...this is good wine. Did you pre-order dinner?" Elise asked.

"No. The chef makes one specialty meal a night and everyone eats the same thing. Don't worry though, I've heard it's fantastic," he told her.

"Who said I was worried?" Elise looked over at Virgil and smiled. "So, you planned all this..." she gestured around her. "For me?"

He nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Thank-you. I'm having a wonderful time!"

"It gets better. Here, from Paris." He slid a thin box, wrapped in gold paper, towards her.

She carefully slit the tape and unfolded the paper. A velvet box rested inside and she opened it. "Oh, Virgil! It's beautiful!" She held the comb in her hands. It was cloisonné, with inlaid patterns of blue, green and red enamel. The image formed a lily and was trimmed in gold.

"I'm glad you like it. I was strolling down the street one afternoon and saw it in the window. It just seemed to call to me."

Elise looked up at him, her green eyes luminous. "Thank-you," she said softly.

They sat there, lost in each other, until the waiter interrupted them with the first course. Over the next two hours, they chatted and laughed, trading stories about their friends and families, growing up, school. Finally, their plates were cleared and they sat awaiting dessert.

"Well, are you ready for the party?" Virgil asked.

"As ready as we can be! Nikki and I have all the food assignments and the decorations are just waiting to be put up. Nikki came up with some fun games too. Bobbing for apples, a scavenger hunt, things like that."

"Great. I've got a good selection of music. Stuff people can dance to and some Halloween favorites too."

"This is going to be so much fun!"

The waiter returned and placed their dessert in front of them. "Oh my. I don't think I have room left for this," Elise said.

Virgil grinned as he popped a bite in his mouth. "There's always room for strawberry-chocolate mousse." She laughed and took a bite herself. "So, do you have your costume all set?" he asked.

Elise nodded. "Yes. I found a great costume for myself, Luke and even Rommel! Wait until you see us."

Virgil placed his fork down carefully on his plate. "You and...Luke?"

She nodded, not noticing the change in his tone. "He mentioned needing help with a costume."

"So you two are going together?"

"I suppose you could say that. But I'm sure we won't stay that way all evening. Luke has other interests than hanging out with me all night." She smiled up at him. "Actually I'm hoping to spend more time with you."

Virgil's irritation dissolved. "Well, it's a date then."

They finished their meal and had the limo drive them back to the plane. Sometime later, Virgil walked Elise to her door. "I had a great time tonight," he said softly.

"So did I." She looked up at him, her green eyes boring into his. "Virgil..."

He leaned forward, placing a soft kiss on her lips. Elise wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling him closer, deepening their embrace. When they finally drew apart, Virgil rested his forehead against hers. "We'll have to do this again."

"We will. Only next time, maybe we could just stay in." She smiled and kissed him again.

Virgil ran his arms up her back, gently caressing the soft skin at her neck. She shivered and pulled away. "Virgil..."

He sighed. "I know. If I don't leave now, I won't be able to." He placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Good night, Elise."

"Good night, Virgil. Thank-you again, for everything."

He answered with a smile, and watched as she went into her apartment. He then made his way back to the monorail, his thoughts already planning their next date.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:35:13 GMT

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Saturday, October 27, early morning

Gordon was aware of several people coming out to the balcony to watch him during his morning swim. When he stopped mid lap to look, his father, Dianne, Cherie, Alex, Tyler, John and Grandma were watching. Grandma had a camera.

"Ok, what's up?"

"Just admiring the view,' Cherie piped up.

Dianne snorted then added, "Come on kids. Breakfast will be getting cold." The group went inside with Alex smirking.

Gordon tread water for a minute. Something was definitely up, but he couldn't imagine what. He finally gave up trying to figure it out and went back to swimming his laps.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:35:26 GMT

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Luke finished up his cup of coffee and put his mug in the sink. He glanced up at the clock. "It's after ten, Will should be up by now. Rom! C'mon." He led the dog out the doors leading to the balcony, heading towards Will's apartment. Luke was about to knock on the door, then glanced down at Rommel. "Now no begging for cookies." He ruffled the fur on Rom's head, then knocked. "Will? Are you home?" he called out quietly.

Will came to his door, drying his hair. He grinned when he saw who was knocking and opened it, saying, "Hi, Luke. Hey Rommel! Your timing is perfect. I just got out of the shower after my workout. Come on in." He led them into his living room, pausing to toss his towel into the bathroom. "What's up?"

"A couple of weeks ago, Mr. Tracy asked me about building some sort of mailbox system for the Cliff House here. It's hard for Kyrano to track us all down when the mail plane comes in, so I

thought if we came up with something like this." Luke pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. "Sort of like the ones you see in city apartment buildings, only with a little more personality. I figured between the two of us, we could get it built."

"I like personality," Will replied as he took the paper from Luke and examined it. "And this looks good." He looked up. "I take it you have the materials to make these. Do you have the tools to put them together?"

Luke shook his head. "I have the wood left over from a few projects I did on my own. There're plenty of tools down in the shop, I just need a helping hand. Someone who I don't have to baby-sit if you catch my drift." Luke chuckled. "Scott helped me build the shelves for my place but...let's just say it's a good thing he knows how to fly."

Will snorted. "Well, if he built them the way he took care of his jet when he was aboard the McCain, I'm surprised you can put anything on a shelf he put up." He handed the paper back to Luke. "It's been a while since I built anything made of wood, but I'd like to try this. And I'm ready if you are."

He stood up. "Shall we?"

Together the two men and Rommel headed down to the shop. Luke led Will over to a back corner. "I've got a big piece of oak and some smaller scraps. Got a few pine boards left too." Luke shrugged. "If worse comes to worst, we can always get more next time someone heads to the mainland."

"Okay. We'll need to see your design again, so we can cut the wood to the right dimensions. And I think these pine boards are long enough and wide enough for shelves."

They got to work, measuring and cutting the large piece, and soon had the pieces to make the outside of two good sized mailboxes.

Luke reached out and his hand bumped Will's. Looking down and not seeing what he wanted, he looked up at the redhead and asked, "What were you going for?"

"A planing tool."

"Me, too. But I don't see any here."

"Neither do I. I thought I saw one here a minute ago. What happened to it?"

Luke looked over at the dog, who was watching him curiously. "Rom wouldn't have eaten it, and it couldn't have walked away. I'll go looking for it and start the planing. Why don't you start sorting the pieces to make sure we have the right ones and enough wood for both boxes."

"Good idea. Happy hunting."

He glanced around, trying to find the tool he wanted. "Must be one around here somewhere," he muttered as he headed towards the tool box on the other side of the room.

Rommel had flopped himself down a short distance away, seeming to doze. His head snapped up when he saw his master walking away. He got to his feet, starting to follow when Luke came back. "Easy, boy. I'm not going anywhere." He gave the dog an affectionate pat then turned back to work.

Will picked up four of the cut pieces and put them on their edges, leaning them against each other, so they formed a square. It didn't look right to him, so after checking the design, he looked down at the cut panels and slapped his forehead.

"Will, you already forgot that you cut two different sizes. What were you thinking?" he muttered to himself. He saw Luke looking at him curiously and said, "I must be getting old. I almost made one large and one small mailbox." He put back two panels and took a couple of the shorter ones.

"My older brother says kids kill brain cells. Since all I have is the mutt here," Luke nodded in Rommel's direction, "I blame him. I'm really trying not to think it's because I'm getting old." Will laughed. Luke gave the piece of wood he was working on one more shave, then brought it over to his friend. "How's it looking?"

Will took it and ran his hand over it on all sides, then looked across it from one end. "You do good work. It's smooth, straight, and not a splinter to be found. Is there another plane? There're a lot of pieces to be smoothed before we can put anything together. If not, I have an idea for the inserts, so they don't have to be nailed together."

"Why don't you go ahead then. I'll keep up smoothing on this end." Luke glanced at the box, which was slowly taking shape. "You know, with any luck, we might get this done today and even throw a first coat of stain on it." He frowned. "Gotta figure out something for name tags though."

"Yeah. Just putting their names above or below their slots is too ordinary. Hey, maybe we can come up with a word or phrase that matches the person. Like, 'C'mon, you overgrown mutt' for you." He grinned at Luke.

Luke laughed. "I love it! What else can we come up with..." He pondered for a moment. "Elise: I'm flying. Emphasis on the I'm."

"That's a good one," Will said, grinning as he double checked to make sure he had the right wood pieces. "How about 'Is it football season yet?' for Callie? And maybe for Dom, 'I'm up for a bit of craic now and then.'? You've been here longer than I have, so let me know if I'm off."

"That sums up Callie and Dom to a T. Cassie...Out, out damned fire!" He chuckled. "This is turning out to be more fun than I thought. I usually stick to smaller projects, picture frames, miniatures, stuff like that. I did tackle a coffee table for my folks a few years ago; it didn't come out too badly. And when I got here, I figured it was just easier to make stuff than go out and buy it. Shopping..." Luke shuddered. "I loathe shopping."

"I feel the same way. And about laundry. I hate doing laundry." He began marking the wood he was going to cut. "Hmm, who's left? Well, Brandon would probably be 'If it's adventurous, I'm in.'." He put the piece of wood aside and picked up another, measuring and marking. "And what color

stain were you thinking of? Or how about more than one color?"

Luke frowned. "I was originally thinking dark, but that's a personal bias. But combining different shades might look really good." His head snapped up. "Nikki, we forgot Nikki. What about 'Ain't no big thing, mon'?"

"That's right! I forgot about Nikki, but if you tell her I said that, I'll deny it to the grave." Will grinned. "And I remember someone telling me that her mother was from Jamaica. Hmm. We've forgotten someone, but who? There are eight of us..."

"Hello! Earth to Will!" Luke tapped his friend on the head. "Did you leave your brain in California? Or did it melt in this heat?"

"Oh man!" Will put down what he was working on, and hit his forehead again. Then he laughed. "Mom's always telling me to put others before myself. I guess it finally took." He glanced over at Luke and said, "No, my brains I brought with me. I left nothing in San Francisco, not even my heart. Hey! That could be mine - 'No, I didn't leave my heart there.'"

Luke nodded. "Perfect." He glanced over at Rommel, who was sleeping in the corner. "Good thing he doesn't get mail. We'd have to put 'What? Are you talking to me?' on his." He shook his head. "I need to get someone to pick up shampoo on the mainland for me. Rom loves the water, but the salt is really doing a number on his skin."

"He loves the water, but not when it's bath water, I bet." Will finished marking the last piece, and started double checking his work, before going to the jigsaw to make his cuts. "We had a family dog when I was a kid. He loved running through sprinklers, jumping in the pool, and made a nuisance of himself whenever we tried to water the plants with the hose. But bring out the doggie shampoo and he disappeared fast."

Luke gazed fondly at his dog. "Not this guy. I swear, he has no fear. He was dumped at the pound when he was about six months old." He gave a low whistle and Rommel got up and trotted over to him. "Owners couldn't handle a puppy. I went with a friend who wanted a cat, saw this guy and the rest was history." He glanced up at Will. "I've been training some of the team to work with him on rescues. Are you interested?"

Will straightened up suddenly and turned to look at Luke, a stunned look on his face. "You mean it? I'd love to! Although I probably wouldn't be able to use what I learn too often; as a mechanic, I wouldn't be going on too many rescues."

Luke shook his head. "You don't know that. From what I've seen, Mr. Tracy tries to utilize everyone. I mean, you're getting trained the same as the rest of us, right?" Will nodded. "We sort of figured out that Rom might be somewhat of a security risk. So, I'm training a few of the team to handle him. Nothing too serious, mostly basic commands. A few of the rangers I worked with in Colorado were trained the same way."

Will shrugged. "I've been considering my training to be in the area of maintenance, but I suppose I could use vehicles like the Mole if I went on a rescue. Scott did say something about teaching me to fly, which would be terrific. But I haven't been in any of the Thunderbirds yet, except when we

all went in Two to Mateo Island. Now that was something!"

"Isn't it? Hard to believe something that mammoth can actually take off. But I guess it's like the bumblebee principle. If you analyze a bee, figure out it's weight to wing span ratio, the bumblebee can't fly. But no one told him that, so he ups and flies away." He grinned. "To tell the truth, it gives me the willies until we do take off. I'm trying to find a way to bribe Scott for a ride in Thunderbird One."

Will chuckled as he laid the first board in place to be cut, then grabbed some protective goggles and put them on. "You might talk to Elise about that. I heard that she knew him when they were both in the Air Force. She'd probably have a suggestion or two." He picked up the boards to be cut and headed to the jigsaw. "But like I said, I'd love to be trained in handling a rescue dog like Rom. So count me in." He began cutting the sections out, and was able to finish the first board quickly and cleanly. "How about that? I haven't lost my touch."

Luke looked over. "Nope. It's coming together better than I pictured." He went back to the planer. "You know, the only bad thing about doing such a good job on this, we may get special requests." He grinned over at his friend. "Instead of payment, we could barter laundry and cooking!"

"One can only hope." He put the next board in place, and quickly cut the pieces out of it. Then he said, "You know, maybe I should be the next person to have something built for me. One good thing about having a mother like mine is that she loves to shop, and especially shop for me. The bad thing is that I don't know where to put everything sometimes."

"I can take a look if you want. See if we can figure something out. Scott wants me to make some stuff for him too. Good thing I'm honest. I could have a potential gold mine here." Luke critically eyed the piece of wood he was working on. "Hmm....this one has a bit of a natural bend. But we can fix that." Luke carefully ran the plane across the board again, then grabbed a level.

"Better, much better."

The two men worked in silence for a while until all the boards were ready to be assembled. They worked together on this, one man holding the boards together at right angles while the other one nailed them. Once the two boxes were complete, Will showed Luke how he had the inner boards fit together via slots. They slipped into the boxes perfectly, and could be nailed from the sides. "How are we gonna hang these?" he asked.

"I'll put up some brackets. Then she'll slide right on. I've got a bunch of extras upstairs." Luke's stomach rumbled and he grinned sheepishly. "Guess we've been at it a while. Want to come up and grab a sandwich, then come back down? All the pieces are cut, just have to put them together." He thought for a moment. "We should glue the joints too. In this humidity, I'd hate for the wood to crack. We'll probably have to do a thick polyurethane coat too." He shook his head. "Looks like we've got our work cut out for us."

"I suspect we need to worry about the wood warping more than cracking, but you're right. Polyurethane is a very good idea. And we've got time. Besides, I'm hungry, too. So you're on for the sandwich. I'll stop at my apartment to wash up and grab some dessert - Mom sent plenty of that with me - and meet you at your place in a few minutes."

Luke perked up. "If you've got chocolate, I'll make any shelves you want!" He snapped his fingers and Rommel stretched then walked over to him. "I'll catch you in a few."

Will took off his goggles and laid them down, then headed for his apartment. "Chocolate, huh? No problem. I think we'll be good friends, especially if Mom keeps sending those care packages." He grinned to himself and moved faster.

Building mailboxes by lillehafrue and hobbeth

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:35:36 GMT

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Saturday, October 27, afternoon

Gordon went to his room to change for swim. The women had just challenged the men to a water volleyball match. He grabbed one of his swimsuits out of his dresser, put it on and headed out for the pool. Cherie sitting by the side of the pool working on an art project for her class. Elise and Virgil were sitting in the loungers talking.

During a break in the game, Gordon pulled himself onto the edge of the pool. Elise noticed him out of the corner of his eye, then did a double take. "Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" she whispered.

Virgil looked up just as Gordon pushed himself off the edge and back into the pool. "Yup. Something like that has been there the past couple of days."

Elise looked at Virgil. "I thought all his swimsuits were black."

"They were," Virgil replied and started to grin.

"Who did it?"

Virgil stretched and sat forward. "We've asked most of the usual suspects and they've denied it. Scott took the fifth when I asked him if he knew anything about it. He's been out here taking pictures every chance he gets. But this is much better than anything he normally comes up with. The current favorite is Anna. She warned Gordon: 'Beware the wrath of a patient man' after he dyed her skin blue."

"Should we tell him?"

"No, let him find out for himself. Did you see what was on them?"

"Yup. Empathizes his very nice tush. Should I tell him that?"

"Oh, please do!" Virgil laughed. "Preferably at dinner. Grandma always likes to hear her

grandchildren complimented."

"She won't be offended?"

"Hell, no. She'll probably agree. Maybe bring out some baby pictures."

Elise sniggered.

"Speaking of pictures," Virgil pulled out his camera. "I think I'll get a few more. Scott has said he wants as many as possible. The blackmail possibilities are endless."

About an hour later, Emily poked her head out of the house. "Dinner in 15 minutes." The swimmers hauled themselves out of the pool and went for the towels.

Gordon heard a snort behind him. He turned around to see Nikki staring at him. "What's up?"

She quickly replied, "Nothing. New swimsuit?"

Gordon looked down. "No, just one of my regular ones. Why?" Several people had turned to look at them. A chorus of chuckles came from behind him. Gordon turned back. "What? Is there a tear back there?"

"No, there's nothing wrong that I can see. What do you think, Elise?" Virgil was holding his camera and grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh, I've been admiring the view for quite some time." Elise was managing to keep a straight face. "The colors are spectacular."

At this, Cherie and Tin-Tin started giggling. When he turned around to look at them, they both tried to look innocent. Then Cherie said, "He's soooo cute!" and they both burst into giggles again. Another round of snorts and laughs had started behind him.

Gordon turned his head to look at his rear. His suit was still black. However, it looked like there was some sort of design on the back. He quickly wrapped a towel around himself and muttering, "Excuse me," headed for his room.

By the time he got to his room and got the suit off, the colors had faded. He threw on some clothes and headed for his balcony. He laid the suit out in the sun and waited. In a minute the colors were back.

On the rear of the suit was a pair of large yellow and white daises. The "He's so Cute" in florescent hot pink along the waist band was the final touch.

With a feeling of impending doom, he grabbed his swimsuits out of the clothes hamper and then the rest of them from his dresser. There were two notes beneath the swimsuits in the dresser.

"Gordon. Enjoy. Anna."

"I'm planning on taking pictures. Scott."

With a sinking feeling in his stomach he put the suits out in the sun.

The front of all the suits remained black. However, on the rear of his suits an assortment of colors were now visible. His suits were decorated with bunnies, flowers, hearts and teddy bears in pink, yellow, pale blue and lavender. All of them had something printed on the waistband: "My cutie pie", "doll baby", "honey bunny", "Rear of the Year", "grab here" (with arrows) and other similar comments were printed in bright neon colors. One had a bright red "Kick Here" written on the waistband and the two red and white targets strategically placed. The suit he had been wearing this morning said, "Nice cheeks" with twin yellow smiley faces, their cheeks red.

Gordon stared for a second and closed his eyes. His brothers were never going to let him live this down. And it would take at least a week to get new suits if he ordered them online. Maybe he could talk Dad into letting him head over to Christchurch for some shopping tomorrow.

He started grinning and headed to the dining room. At last. A worthy opponent.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:36:45 GMT

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The monorail glided with grace, snaking through the Irish countryside like a long swan's neck, glinting silver and green under the pale October sun. The old railway line had been fully replaced since 2050. As the carriage streaked by, Dominic could see the indents where the old track had lain. The heavy steel bars that curled around the monorail cars were planted heavily into the ground, like a one hundred mile long millipede connecting the cities of Dublin and Belfast together.

"Twain twain twain," Joshua chanted as the scenery rushed by with increasing speed.

"Twaaaaaain!"

Ducky and Horsey were following one another as if chained together; Dominic smiled as his son pushed them around the table. A woman with bright red nails and severe eyebrows coughed loudly and shot a glance across the car at them, and Dominic just about resisted the temptation to make a rude gesture. He smiled at her instead, and she snapped her newspaper before going back to reading it.

She exited the train at Newry, just across the Northern Irish border. Dominic waved at her as she got up, and she shot him another stern glare. Joshua waved too; the woman thrust her paper into her handbag and strode towards the automatically opened doors. Dominic shook his head, and Joshua giggled.

"Ducky!"

It was just over an hour and a half since their departure from Dublin that the monorail glided in to Belfast's Europa Monorail Station. It was built on the site of the old train station behind the Europa

hotel, which as far as Dominic knew still held the title of 'Most Bombed Hotel in Europe'. I'm not at all surprised, he thought. He sat Joshua up on the table as he reached into the overhead lockers for his bag and the child's stroller. They exited onto the platform without too much trouble and thankfully no injuries (when Joshua had been a newborn, Dominic was well-known for his accidentally lethal usage of prams and buggies). Dominic cajoled Joshua into wearing the heavy bomber jacket his grandmother had bought the child, and strapped him into the stroller.

"This is where Daddy grew up," he said.

Joshua, oblivious, started chewing on Horsey's ear.

Dominic delved into the afternoon hubbub of Northern Ireland's capital city. In the few years that Dominic had been living across the pond in the USA, taller and taller buildings had shot up. The wide swath of cars that was Great Victoria Street was lined on both sides by towering office blocks, their bottoms lined with brightly coloured stores of all types. Most of them hadn't been there when Dominic had left.

He spent a little while in the city where he had done the most growing up in, the place where he had once held down three jobs and a full-time regime in school just to keep he and his mother afloat and his own dreams of medical school alive. Maybe I'll head up to the hospital later, just for old time's sake, he thought. He wheeled Joshua over the streets with their patchwork of old and new flagstones, swerving between rushing businessmen and busy mothers. He was tempted to stay in the city centre and soak in every last detail like a sponge, but knew that he had something more important to do. I'll enjoy it more after I've made the visit, anyway, he thought.

He pulled Joshua to the side of Donegal Pass and glanced up at Belfast City Hall. A huge, white stone, dome-topped Victorian structure, it stood proudly in its grounds, carrying with it millions of memories in the minds of many people. It had withstood decades of rioting and war, eventually becoming a symbol of a divided community finally beginning to work together. Dominic smiled. I'll take Jak up there later. He'll love the dome; his yells will be five times louder 'cuz of the acoustics!

He manoeuvred the stroller back around and made his way to a flower stand that he had passed a few minutes before. Handing over some of the money his grandparents had given him, he bought a bouquet of roses, and tucked them in the basket underneath Joshua's seat. He thanked the vendor, took his change, and made his way to the bus stop he used nearly every day when he was at university. When the bus arrived, he pulled Joshua's stroller onboard, paid, unbuckled Joshua, took out the flowers and folded the stroller up. Stowing it in the racks above, Dominic sat Joshua on his knee and set the flowers down beside him. He cuddled his son tightly, and whispered in his ear.

"Daddy will never leave you."

XXXX

The black hire-car that had arrived in Belfast a half-hour before the monorail had slid into the station had circled the station until Dominic and Joshua had emerged onto the street. Bingo, thought Matthew Hawkins. He tailed the two as best he could in the heavy traffic, fortuitous for once. The main problem was the gear-shift car, and the fact that it was right-hand drive.

Eventually Dominic wheeled Joshua to a bus stop. Matthew consulted the car's sat-nav, and made his own way to the cemetery where he knew Roisin Kelly, Dominic's mother, was buried. I'll bet that's exactly where Dominic is headed, Matthew thought. And it's where we'll settle this.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:37:28 GMT

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"Thanks," Dominic said to the driver as he hauled Joshua and the folded stroller off the bus.

The bus doors closed with a swish, and Dom quickly snapped the stroller back into shape. He strapped Joshua in, and began the short walk. The bus stop was situated just outside Milltown Cemetery, and Roisin's grave wasn't too far away from the gates. It was in one of the rows close to the large swath of clergymen's graves at the very front. Dom could see it in his mind before it actually came into view. He made a left turn and took a deep breath, before parking the stroller and unclipping Joshua. He picked the boy up and turned towards the headstone with a tight smile.

"Hey, Ma... I've brought someone to see you."

The grave was overgrown; Dominic was on Tracy Island thousands of miles away, and his grandparents weren't able to make the trip to Belfast as often as they had before. But the headstone was clean of any mould or moss. Thanks, whoever did that. He scanned his eyes across the text that was burned into his mind.

May God Have Mercy on the Soul of
ROISIN MARIE KELLY
November 21st 2013-April 01st 2062 (aged 49)
Beloved mother and daughter.
R.I.P.

Dominic held Joshua close, and the little boy curled his fists into his father's jacket. Dominic kissed his son's temple.

"You're such a good boy, Josh," he said. He shifted the boy a little higher on his waist, and looked back at the grave. "Ma, this is your grandson, Joshua. I also brought you these," he leaned down and picked up the bouquet of roses. "I know how much you liked them," he said, and laid them down on the grave. "Well, lots of stuff has happened with me since the last time I was here. I got married, had Joshua, got divorced. Got my eyes fixed, too. And I've got a great new job. I'm sure you'd be proud of me if you knew. As it stands I'm talking to a gravestone like a lunatic," he said, and felt a hot tear run down one cheek. "I wish you were still here," he said, his voice breaking. "I know everything I have now I probably wouldn't if you hadn't...hadn't died. But...I miss you so much, Ma."

Dominic wiped his face with his free hand and looked upwards briefly, breathing in.

"Your granny would have loved you, Joshua," he said.

Dom let out a long, steady breath, and felt composure return. He brought his brows together, however, when he heard footsteps crunching over the gravel path. The cemetery had been deserted when he had arrived. He looked over his shoulder, and felt as if his heart had just exploded, exuding a deep, purple rage through his veins.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

Matthew Hawkins stood at a short distance, his hands in the pockets of his long trench coat, tears streaming down his face.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:41:05 GMT

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"Dominic, I --"

"DON'T," Dominic said. "Don't say one bloody word."

Joshua began to whimper as his father raised his voice, and Dominic quickly deposited the child into his stroller, strapping him in safely. He gave the boy a quick peck on the forehead, but Joshua strained against the straps.

"Da! Da!"

"I'll be back in one wee minute, son," Dominic said, fighting to un-grit his teeth. "I've just got to have a word with someone."

Matthew dabbed at his face with a handkerchief and breathed in deeply. Dominic strode up to him until they were practically nose-to-nose.

"Would you mind telling me what on earth you're doing here?"

"I --"

Matthew's words caught in his throat as the eyes of his eldest son blazed in his face, a deep fury he had seldom seen before in anyone.

"I came, because, because I want... Damn, this isn't coming out as I'd planned. I want...to say sorry, Dominic. I want to make amends."

He stopped short of saying, "I want to be your dad."

Dominic glared at his father with wide, red eyes, gasping in every syllable that came from the man's mouth.

"You're sorry," he said, and choked out a laugh. "You're sorry." Dominic took a step back and

turned away. "I've heard it all before, Matthew. You're sorry, you were young, you had a career, you didn't know better. Well you know what?" He swung back around to face his father, and in his heart, a dam burst. "You bloody-well should have! You should have known better! You knew her, you knew what she was like, and you knew she wouldn't be able to cope alone!"

"I --"

"Shut up! Just shut up! You have no right to speak! Not here, not about her, not ever!"

Dominic thrust a finger into his father's face with the last word, before retracting it and balling his hands into fists.

"You have no idea what it was like! And you'll never know what it was like. I carried my mother all through my life because of you."

Tears were once more streaming down Matthew's face as he listened to his son's rant. It's all true.

"Dominic --"

"NO! There is nothing you can say that will make this better! Ever!"

Joshua had started crying, his wails piercing the air. No one but his father and grandfather were around to hear them. And Dominic wasn't listening. Dom pushed his face right into his father's again and grabbed the lapels of the man's coat, pulling them chest to chest.

"Dominic," Matthew whispered, "I'm sorry!"

"That doesn't bring her back!" Dominic screamed. "She died because of you! She loved you! She never got over it. You ruined her life! And eventually she killed herself!"

Matthew closed his eyes and nodded.

"I know," he whispered. "You told me the last time we met, and I haven't been able to get it out of my head."

"She's dead because of you," Dominic whispered. "Because of you!"

Dominic launched himself at his father, fists flying, and one connected with the man's jaw. Blood red rage descended upon him, overflowing through every one of his pores. His fists exploded with pain each time they made contact with his father's body, but he couldn't stop. He felt a heavy hand clamp down on one of his shoulders, and a split second afterwards a ham-like fist cracked into his face. Dom stumbled backwards in shock, holding his nose, but a heavy crash cleared the stars right out of his eyes.

Matthew Hawkins had crumpled to the ground. Blood streamed from Dominic's nose as he watched the fallen man for a few moments. He's not breathing. He's not breathing!

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:41:15 GMT

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Dominic fell onto his knees beside his father, the rough gravel cutting through his jeans.

"Matthew, can you hear me?" he called in one ear. No response. "Matthew, it's Dominic. Can you hear me?"

Still no response. Dominic held a hand over his father's mouth. He definitely wasn't breathing. Immediately Dominic pulled his satellite phone from his jacket pocket and dialed 999.

"I need an ambulance. My father's fallen unconscious; he's not breathing," he told the operator. "Quickly!"

When he knew the ambulance was coming he threw the phone aside and quickly loosened Matthew's collar. He then pinched his father's prominent nose before forming a seal over the man's mouth with his own, and performed two rescue breaths. He then placed one hand over the other, lacing his fingers together, and started to pump the man's chest. After thirty compressions he placed his cheek just above his father's mouth. He still wasn't breathing. He gave another two rescue breaths and performed the compressions again, and continued to do so for what seemed like days.

The air became crisp and sharp, grating against him like steel knives. Every breath stung his lungs, every pump of his father's chest sending searing pain through his whole body. Oh my God, he's going to die, Dominic thought. Oh my God, oh my God. What have I been doing? He's my father; he's a human being; he made mistakes. And he's going to die. No! No!

Dominic was vaguely aware of a set of hands pulling him away from the body, of paramedics moving in. He heard the jump that followed the use of a defibrillator several times, and he turned away, rushing over to Joshua who was in the arms of a tall woman. He snatched the screaming child to his body and held him tightly, feeling sobs wrack his body and the heat coming from the little boy's red face.

Eventually he found himself corralled into the back on an ambulance, his father strapped to a gurney with tubes and wires snaking in and out of his body, accompanied by the systematic beep, beep of a heart monitor.

"He's alive," one of the paramedics told him. "He's alive."

Dominic felt his breath catch in his throat before suddenly he was wracked with fresh sobs. He's alive...

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:41:54 GMT

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It was several hours later that Dominic found himself sitting just outside the hospital's crèche. Joshua was happily playing with the other children, oblivious to what had happened. Better that way, Dominic thought. At least he's forgiven me for leaving him strapped in the stroller, which is still at the graveyard. Not that it matters. He looked at his watch and huffed out a breath. 8 p.m. Joshua should be asleep. Though he certainly doesn't seem sleepy. But it makes it around 8 a.m. island time. I reckon I could make the call now. He pulled out his satellite phone, and pressed the speed dial for the island.

xxxx

Jeff Tracy had just sat down for breakfast with his family when Virgil, who had been on night-shift at the desk, appeared in the doorway.

"Father, there's a phone call for you. It's Dominic. He said it was important, and he didn't look good."

Jeff glanced over at Dianne, who frowned.

"Right, Virgil. I'll take it at my desk."

He placed a hand on Dianne's shoulder as he rose.

"Back in a minute, love," he said.

He quickly walked to the lounge with Virgil in tow, and sat down at his desk. Dominic's face was displayed on the vidscreen. He looked haggard, and was sporting a bloodied nose and a black eye.

"Dominic, what's happened?" Jeff asked.

Dominic gave the man a withered smile, and dropped his gaze for a moment.

"I'm in Belfast, Mr Tracy," he said. "I had a bit of an encounter with my father."

"Your father? What in blazes was he doing out there?" Jeff asked.

Dominic shrugged, not wanting to give any details just yet.

"Well, long story short, we scuffled and he ended up having a heart attack. It was a bad'un, but they're telling me he'll make a good recovery."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jeff said, his brows drawn together.

"Yeah. It looks like he'll have to stay here in hospital for at least a week before he can travel back to Kansas. I'd like to stay on until he's repatriated. As I say, it won't be that long."

"Of course, Dominic," Jeff said. "Keep in touch and let me know when you'll be travelling back to Kansas. I'll have one of the pilots pick you up from there."

"Cheers, Mr Tracy. I appreciate this."

"I understand," Jeff said. "Get some rest. That's an order."

Dominic chuckled softly.

"I need to sort myself out with some accommodation first," he said. "But I will."

"All right," Jeff said. "As I said, keep in touch."

"I will," Dominic said.

xxxx

Dominic let the hand holding his phone drop to his side, and leaned his head back against the wall behind him. Oh, God... he thought. What a mess.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:42:03 GMT

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Sunday morning, before breakfast, Tracy Island

Gordon grinned in satisfaction. He'd turned his swimsuits inside out and put them out in the sun before going to dinner last night. No painting had appeared on the inside rear of the suits. So this morning he put on his suit inside out and headed for the pool as the sun was rising.

When he climbed out of the pool after finishing his morning laps, he noticed Scott standing on the balcony with a camera. "Sorry, Scott. The show's over," he yelled up at him, smiling. "I'll just wear my suits inside out for a few days. I ordered new ones last night. They should be here later this week."

"Ok," said Scott, moving toward the door. "By the way, what's that on the front of your suit?"

He hadn't made it all the way inside before he heard a, "SCOTT!!! I'll kill you!!!" coming from the direction of the pool. He grinned and headed for breakfast. They'd left the inside rear of the suits alone. On the inside front of the suits they had used the sun activated paint to put a 'Mr. Yuk!' symbol in a very appropriate place.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:42:12 GMT

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Tracy Island, the jungle, mid-afternoon...

Luke whistled as he made his way through the thick foliage. He glanced up at the cloudless blue sky and grinned. "What a gorgeous day!"

"You're in a good mood."

He turned to Cassie, who walked behind him. "Why wouldn't I be? I've got the day off, Mom sent me cookies, and I'm outside enjoying the flora and fauna. Though, it's a lot warmer than I'm used to at this time of year."

She nodded. "Me too. Granted, New York isn't as cold as the Rockies, but I'd usually have the heat on instead of running around in shorts!"

He laughed. "Tell me about it! We'd have snow!"

"That I won't miss." They fell into step along the path again, Rommel trotting along in front. "Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"The fire scenario? It went well?"

He stopped and looked at her. "You know it did. Why?" She shrugged and looked down at her feet. "Cass, talk to me. What's bothering you?"

"I've been talking to Alex," she said quietly.

"What?" Luke exclaimed in surprise. "As in your ex, Alex?"

She nodded. "He sent me an email about a week ago. He got a promotion at the company he works for. He's working more regular hours now and has been doing some thinking."

"Thinking about what?" Luke asked when the silence had gone on too long.

She toyed with a leaf. "About me. Us. He's finally going to therapy."

"Well, that's a good thing, right?" Luke sat down next to her, hearing her unspoken question. "Cassie, what do you want to do?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, I thought this, but now..." She got up and walked a few paces. "I just don't feel like I fit in here, Luke."

"Why not? Look, Cass, how long did it take you to feel at ease with your gang at the fire department?"

"I don't know, a few weeks maybe."

"Then give it time. You've been so busy trying to prove yourself as one of the team, that you really

haven't tried becoming one."

Cassie looked up, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"How often have you just hung out with someone? Other than me, I mean? And heck, you haven't even done that! We had dinner what? A week ago? Have you tried, really tried to get friendly with the others?" She didn't reply and he went on. "You bake, incredibly I might add. Why not invite a bunch of people over for cookies and chat? And the Halloween party, do you have a costume? What are you bringing? Do you know what anyone else is dressing as?"

She drew herself up. "I've hung out with the others. Tin-Tin and I had tea one day. And I've met with Callie a few times too! As to the party, I'm cooking and I already have my costume."

"Great, that's what I mean! Don't hide behind training exercises all the time."

She frowned thoughtfully. "I...I never thought about it that way, I guess."

"Maybe you should." Luke sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "I know, I'm one to talk. You need to drag me out of my place sometimes. But, thanks to Elise and the others, I'm getting better."

Cassie frowned slightly. "If you're so concerned, why didn't you invite me to dinner the other night? You had a bunch of other people there."

"It was a thank-you for all the help I got with my apartment. Nikki and Elise chose the color scheme and the linens, John's been there for moral support, and both he and Scott have helped with the painting and the furniture moving. Scott was invited, but couldn't make it," he told her. "I never excluded anyone; it was just a friendly get together. And what's stopping you from inviting people over yourself?" Luke was beginning to get irritated. "Cassie, the only reason you're not fitting in is because you're not trying."

Her eyes flashed angrily. "I have been trying! I set up the fire training so we could all work together as a team!"

"Is that the real reason, or are you trying to make yourself look good in the eyes of everyone else?" Silence filled the clearing as they glared at each other. Then Luke sighed. "Cassie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." He pulled her into a hug. "I just hate seeing you like this. I want the fun Cassie back; the one I knew in California."

She pressed against him, blinking back tears. "I don't know what happened to her," she whispered.

He tightened his embrace. "Cass, no one here is out to get you. You were chosen out of how many people? Doesn't that tell you anything?"

She wiped her tears and tried to smile. "I guess you're right."

"I'm always right." He smiled. "Honey, I'm not trying to be mean. You're a good person who got

thrown some bad curves. But you've picked yourself up and moved on, which is more than most people could have done." He pulled her close again. "I'm sorry about what I said. I wasn't trying to hurt you. And you know whatever you decide, I'll be here."

"I know. You and Mark are the only ones who'll really tell me without pulling punches." She grinned up at him. "You know, now that you're single..."

Luke held his hands up. "No! No fix ups! I'm quite happy the way I am, thank-you very much!"

She laughed and started down the path. "Ah well, can't blame me for trying."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:43:29 GMT

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Dominic clutched a cardboard coffee-cup tightly in his hands and took a deep breath as he stood outside his father's hospital room. Recovering, Matthew had been moved to a side-ward. The doctors had told Dominic that his swift action had prevented severe damage to his father's heart, and with pioneering treatment methods the man would have few permanent problems.

Huffing out a breath, Dominic pushed the room's door open and walked inside. Matthew was awake. Dom set his cup down on the bedside table and washed his hands with antibacterial foam, before sitting down in the chair beside his father's bed, shoulders hunched.

"Dominic..." Matthew said, reaching one tube-covered hand over to his son.

Dominic smiled tightly, and slowly reached his hand up to touch his father's.

Behind the oxygen mask Matthew tried to smile and turned his head towards Dominic, blue eyes glittering with tears.

"Matthew," Dominic said, and took another deep breath. "I'm... I'm so sorry."

"Dominic..."

"No, please. Let me speak." Dominic tentatively squeezed his father's hand, and sighed. Everything he had been contemplating since the moment he had seen Matthew hit the ground was going to come out, once and for all. "I've spent my entire life hating you; truly, deeply hating you. I blamed you for everything wrong in my life, everything that was wrong with my mother." He snorted a rough laugh and dropped his head. "I had never even met you. You were the scapegoat. I'm not saying that I think you didn't do anything wrong, but...you didn't deserve all of the hatred I gave you. Even when you finally invited me back into your life, I treated you with malice. I don't think I even wanted to fit in with your family. I don't think I knew what I wanted."

Matthew's hand slipped over on top of Dominic's, and he squeezed it as hard as he could.

"And when I saw you at Ma's grave I just exploded. I...I just hated you so much. I hated you for

being there, for intruding on my space, on her. I shouldn't have screamed at you; I shouldn't have raised my hand against you. I couldn't understand why you were there."

"I wanted to show," Matthew said, pulling the oxygen mask from his face.

Dominic brought a hand up and placed the mask gently back over his father's face.

"Keep it on, please. It'll help."

Matthew made no further attempt to remove it. When he blinked, tears escaped from his eyes.

"Dominic... I wanted to show that...I care about you, no matter what. I know...that I can't make up for what I've done... But I'd like to have the chance...to...to get to know you, and be your father starting now..."

Dominic felt a strange flutter in his chest. Before he would have bristled at the very thought of Matthew being a father to him, but not now.

"I'm surprised that you still do, after what I've done."

Dominic glanced around the sterile room, watching his father in the bed, punctured by needles in all places.

"You didn't do this," Matthew said, trying to smile. "Look at me. I smoke, I'm fifty pounds overweight; the doctors told me...to diet and exercise. But I didn't listen."

"I guess Elizabeth will be flying out to see you any time now," Dominic said. "I'm sure she's worried."

Matthew laughed slightly, and it quickly turned into a cough.

"No, she won't be," he said.

Dominic frowned and cocked his head to one side.

"Why not?"

"She's divorcing me. She...said that if I went through with my...plans to come out and see you, she would leave me."

"My God," Dominic said. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Matthew said. "If she can't accept that I want my...oldest son in my life...then she's not worth it. Not at all."

Dominic squeezed his father's hand as hard as he dared to, and hung his head.

"I don't know what to say," he murmured.

"Just say that you'll give me a chance," Matthew said.

Dominic lifted his head and kept a steady gaze at his father for several moments. Then, he sniffed heavily and nodded slightly.

"I will. It's not going to be easy, but, I will." He paused for a moment. "Dad."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:44:11 GMT

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Monday, October 29, 9:00 a.m., Tracy Island

"I can't believe you waited until now to watch this," Virgil grouched as he followed John into the home theater.

"Well, it's not like I wasn't there," John replied, good natured. "I just didn't hear what was going on. But I wouldn't have remembered it if Gordon hadn't been indulging in some so-called singing yesterday evening."

Virgil made a face. "Oh, yeah. That. I don't know how he managed to sound human at the party, but he did."

"Maybe it was his partner that raised his vocal output or something," John said. He put a data chip in the player, then settled back in one of the comfortable chairs ranged around the room, a remote in his hand. "Going to watch with me?"

"Might as well. I'm sure there were things that went on in other parts of the party that I didn't get to see." Virgil sat down next to John. "Wish I'd brought popcorn."

John snorted, and clicked a button. Gordon's voice came over the speakers. "Welcome to a party with the Tracys! Guest of honor: Virgil Grissom Tracy, the birthday boy! And here he comes!" The camera showed Virgil entering the lounge, adjusting his tie, and smiling widely. Scott followed a few paces behind. John smiled, and stretched his long legs out, crossing one ankle over the other.

The video he had was edited by Gordon, so most of the moments left in were the more comical ones. He caught Josh zooming in like a firefighter, and Dom coming in after him, which made both men laugh. He smiled when he heard Kat singing, and guffawed at the word play between Heather and Gordon. He paused the recording, then turned to Virgil, asking quietly, "Is that Heather Kennedy?"

"Yeah. She and Gordon were like birds of a feather. Maybe that's why they sang together so well."

"Any more news on her or her family?"

Virgil shrugged. "You might ask Gords; I think he's been emailing her from time to time. Just as

friends."

John nodded, and turned back to the screen, turning the recording on again. Nikki approached, and Gordon said something about red and mermaids, to which Nikki shook her head and told him to keep dreaming. In the background, Scott had approached Grandma, with her new hairdo, and John could see him making the motions of asking for a dance. Jeff was deep in conversation with Penelope and Drew Carmichael. "Uncle Drew," John muttered, sounding pleased.

The party continued, with Gordon, and sometimes Alan, filming the various guests. Nikki and Alan twirled on the dance floor. Elise laughed and tried to push Gordon away. John shot a quick glance over at Virgil, who was chuckling, then sitting back with a sigh. Both of them laughed, and John clapped his hands when Grandma came rushing over to hug and kiss Virgil. "You looked like a deer caught in headlights there, Virge," John said, grinning.

"So did you last time she did that to you," Virgil said smugly.

The music continued in the background, and John caught Kyrano and Lisa dancing to it. "Hey, I'd forgotten this. Here's where Kyrano makes like Fred Astaire!"

"I don't think... wow! How'd I miss this?" Virgil sat forward.

"I think you were dancing with Elise."

"Back that up; I want to see it again."

John obliged, and the image of Kyrano swinging Lisa around and catching her with one arm moved across the screen again. "Crazy!" Virgil said, shaking his head. "Where'd he get that move?"

"If you'd listened, you would have heard: a Fred Astaire movie. Now, be quiet."

Tyler and Alex, covered with frosting and waving, appeared, calling, "Hi, John!" Alex made a silly face, making both men laugh. Nikki reappeared, accepting Virgil's offer of a dance. "Eat your heart out, Alan!" she said, blowing a kiss before heading off with Virgil. In the background, Elise began to sing.

"Well, I didn't think that one was for me anyway," John murmured.

There were other snippets. One of Gordon dancing with Anna. Virgil dancing with Penelope. A sweep of the dining room showed people talking in little groups, enjoying the food, with Parker mixing drinks at the bar. John heard Jeff ask Dianne's permission before asking Heather to dance. As he swept the redhead away onto the dance floor, the focus turned to Cherie.

"Smile, Cherie! You're on candid digital camera!"

Despite the dirty look the teenager gave the photographer, the focus remained on her and Scott, and a discussion about the upcoming vacation ensued. John frowned and paused the vid again. "I don't remember them going on vacation."

"They didn't," Virgil said. "Mom still wasn't well enough. Cherie was pretty cut up about it."

"She would be." John resumed the vid, and soon, Jeff was dancing with Maggie, and Dianne was blowing a kiss at the lens, signing and saying, "Hi, John! I love you!"

"At least I didn't have to hear that to understand it," John said, smiling slightly. The scene changed to Virgil dancing with Kat, then Cherie and Alex both trying to sing. "Why didn't Tyler sing?" John asked.

"Don't know," Virgil said with a shrug. "Guess he wasn't up to it."

The view shifted to a see a squeeing Cherie clapping her hands. Dianne had her by the arm and was giving instructions about curfew. Dianne stroked Alex's cheek and ruffled Tyler's hair, before letting them loose to run out of the room, followed by Emily, who was carrying a sleeping Joshua. Scott arrived, then Jeff, and Dianne started saying her goodbyes and goodnights before being rolled out of the room. Then the camera shifted to Gordon, who was stalking the group of women sitting at a large circular table, microphone in hand. His intended victim was Heather, who gamely headed for the karaoke machine.

As she sang, John found himself nodding along to the beat. He chuckled with glee as she sat in Virgil's lap for the first verse, then as his brother followed her, playing the part of the spurned lover. When the song came to an end, the mike was handed back to Gordon, and Virgil whisked Heather off for a dance.

"She's good," John said, turning to Virgil.

"She certainly knew how to play it up," Virgil agreed, grinning.

"Didn't see you protesting too much, either."

Elise now stepped up to sing again, and Virgil leaned forward. "If you think Heather's good, just listen to Elise!" he whispered.

John could now hear what had so captivated the room that evening. Elise was better than good; she was spectacular. Her throaty voice lent a sultry air to the song, and when the number was over, John applauded. "Have to get that girl to sing more often!" he declared, turning to Virgil. "You are so right!"

The microphone was handed to Nikki, who refused it in favor of the birthday boy performing for them. Maggie called out her favorite, and Virgil responded, playing the jazz piece to perfection. "Nice work, Virge," John said, turning to his brother.

"Thanks," Virgil said, smiling. "I've always enjoyed that one."

It was obvious that Alan had the camera, because Gordon was looking for the music to his "special number". The camera changed hands, and Alan went over to ask Nikki to dance. Then Cherie appeared, looking tired. She waved. "Goodnight, John. Love you and wish you were here."

She blew him a kiss and waved again, then Scott said, "Okay, now. Time for bed."

Gordon was the one who whined, "Aw, do I have to?" Scott rolled his eyes and drew Cherie away. The Carmichaels exchanged words with them as they passed, then rose to leave themselves, calling their goodnights.

The song "Lady in Red" began to play, and Virgil asked Elise for a dance. Brains did the same for Tin-Tin, and Kyrano took Lisa to the floor again. Nikki rested her head on Alan's shoulder as they swayed to the music. The dancing couples were thinning out as the party wound down.

Then Heather approached Gordon again, and another lively song sounded out. "This is where you wonder if it's really Gordon singing," Virgil said.

John nodded and listened as Heather and Gordon belted out a song together. He had to agree; the sound Gordon was putting out now was far better than the rather pathetic noise he had supplied the previous evening. "Wonder where he hides it?"

"Maybe he only brings it out for pretty girls," Virgil theorized, as on the screen, Gordon took Heather to the dance floor.

The video was near an end, and Virgil was thanking people for coming to the party. "You look as if you'd had a few here, Virge."

"Yeah, well... I had. Still, we had a lot of fun, and I enjoyed kissing all the ladies' hands."

"What did you say to Tin-Tin that made her giggle?"

Virgil put his hand over his heart. "I'll never tell!"

John rolled his eyes. "Man, some of the lines you're coming out with here are so corny!" He caught Heather's response and laughed. "She zinged you there but good!"

The vid ended there, as both Gordon and Alan had left the room, and Virgil felt relieved. He hadn't known for certain if his mind and soul bending moment with Elise had been caught. Though he wasn't about to hide his new relationship with her, he also didn't want it trumpeted from the highest height -- not until he was ready.

John stood and stretched, then removed the data chip from the player. "Well, that was fun." He looked at his watch. "Hm. Time for lunch. That took a while."

"It was a long party and lasted into the wee hours. You're lucky it got condensed as much as it did." Virgil also stood, then yawned. "Gordon and Alan are amazingly good at editing."

"Yeah, they seemed to hit all the highlights, didn't they?" John tossed the chip up once, then caught it. "I'll put this back in the files for later viewing. Has Grandma pulled stills from it yet for her scrapbooks?"

"I don't know, but you could ask her at lunch."

"Speaking of which," John said, feeling his stomach rumble, "we'd better get going."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:44:20 GMT

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Monday, October 29, Tracy Island, afternoon

Dressed in her bathing suit and beach cover-up, Cassie picked up the bag she had packed and headed out of her apartment. Instead of buying a birthday card for Dominic she had decided to make one. The time she put into it would make it more special than a store-bought card and given that she couldn't seem to think of a gift idea, the extra effort definitely seemed worth it. She had started it the night before and planned on finishing it up down by the pool today and then maybe taking a swim.

Cassie made her way down to the pool. Several of the others had already gathered and were playing a game of keep away as they were throwing a ball around. From the looks of things, Callie was currently it.

Luke's words from the day before came back to her. Though his words had hurt, she couldn't deny they had been true. Other than inviting Tin-Tin and Will to her apartment she hadn't interacting much with her new co-workers outside of work. Sure, Gordon had helped her get settled, and Cherie had agreed to help her with the mural but they weren't purely social callings.

She had defended herself to Luke with the time she had spent with Callie. Even that was more coincidence than us spending time together. Not to mention the second meeting was work related. I haven't talked to her much since then.

She glanced to the lounge chair and then back to the pool, wondering if she should take the initiative and ask to join. Then she thought of the card. She really did want to get some work on it. Making her decision, Cassie walked over to a lounge chair and sat down.

Unzipping her bag, she pulled out her clipboard, and the card she was working on. Reaching back in, she pulled out the bundle of colored pens. She had done the calligraphy work the night before as well as settling on a design for the border of the card. Now, she had to create the border.

Selecting a pen, she got to work. It wasn't long before the laughter of the others faded away and she became absorbed in her work. The design she had sketched last night took shape before her. Cassie wasn't sure how long she had been working when footsteps caught her attention. Looking up, she saw Tin-Tin approaching.

"Hello," she said, greeting the Malaysian woman.

"Hi. What are you working on?"

"A birthday card for Dominic," Cassie replied, turning the clipboard for the other woman to see.

"It looks good," Tin-Tin replied.

"Thanks." Cassie sat the clipboard down and stretched her arms over her head. Her shoulders ached from bending over her work. "Unless I think of a gift between now and Wednesday, the card might be all I have to give him."

"Perhaps instead of giving him a gift you could do something for him," Tin-Tin suggested.

"Maybe."

"Are you up for taking a break from your card and joining our game?"

Cassie considered the offer. Her task was almost completed and the water did look inviting after being out in the sun for a while.

"Sounds like fun."

Cassie slipped the pen she had been using underneath the rubber band, and dropped the bundle of pens into her bag. She then slipped the clipboard inside, pulled out her towel and zipped the bag. Pushing the bag under the lounge chair, she stood up and slipped the cover-up over her head, dropping it on the chair.

"Hey guys, Cassie's going to join us," Tin-Tin announced as the two women approached the pool and jumped in.

"Great! Virgil's currently it so don't let him catch the ball," Gordon told her, throwing the ball to the firefighter.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:44:28 GMT
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Monday, October 29th

Anna grabbed a long tunic from the back of her closet. "Honey, have you seen my belt? The blue one with the Celtic knotwork?"

"It's with the rest of your old archery stuff. Look in Terry's old room." Ryan Hanson looked into his bedroom to see an open suitcase on the bed. "Packing to go to the Tracy's already?"

"They're having a Halloween party, and I need a costume," Anna replied absently as she packed a pair of leather slippers. "I was thinking of going as Maid Marion. And I want to show Scott my bow -- the one I made. He says he does archery and they have a range on the island."

"That's right, it's Halloween in the states. The Yanks in the office are talking about the annual party to celebrate. I wonder what sort of costume I should make this year."

"I'm sure you'll whip something up in no time. Just don't add too much embroidery." Anna smiled up at him. It was an old joke between them. Anna couldn't sew to save her life. Ryan loved sewing and did wonderful embroidery and bead work. He nearly didn't get one outfit done because he kept adding to the embroidery on it. It wound up taking two years to finish. His persona in the historical reenactment group they were in was a sixteenth century fencer. Men's clothing in the sixteenth century put anything Liberace or Elton John did to shame.

"Actually, I was thinking something simple. I want to dress up as one of the International Rescue pilots."

Anna froze. "Oh?"

Misinterpreting her comment, he went on. "Hey, I'm a guy in my 50's. They're young studs. But a guy can dream, can't he?"

Anna got herself under control and turned towards him. "I suppose it does give new life to the 'damsel in distress' fantasy." She closed the suitcase and set it by the bedroom door. "Now to find my bow case and my quiver."

Chuckling, Ryan put his arms around his wife from behind and gave her a quick kiss. "I'm glad to see you're enjoying your new job so much. Someday you'll have to introduce me and explain exactly what is going on over on that island."

She turned to face him and raised an eyebrow.

He raised both hands and stepped back. "I agree, if it's Tracy company secrets, I'm better off not knowing. But you're an awfully heavy hitter for one kid and one pilot recovering from a crash. And that wouldn't take two days a week. But you're enjoying yourself too much for me to worry about it."

She reached up and gave him a kiss. "Thank you, dear. Did I ever tell you how smart I was to marry you?"

"Yes, I believe you were telling me that the other day. Of course, I still think I got the better deal. You got someone who could sew. But I got someone who could cook."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:44:43 GMT

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Wednesday, October 31, 6 a.m.

The sounds of the country group, Mississippi Mud, floated through apartment D3. Given the time of day that was about the only noise heard, except for those associated with baking cookies.

Cassie originally planned on making only sugar cookies but then decided against it. Luke for one would be looking for chocolate. So, she had started out the morning cooking Chewy Chocolate Cookies. The Halloween theme chocolate cookies were just about done, the last batch in the oven. She didn't plan on decorating them.

Now she was mixing the dough for the sugar cookies. She already had several ideas on how to decorate them and the icing she had mixed up the night before was ready to go in the refrigerator.

A new song started, and Cassie started singing along. She continued to roll out dough, cut shapes and bake the cookies. The table was soon filled with plain sugar cookies in the shape of witches on brooms, ghosts, pumpkins, witch's hats, tombstones, bats and cats.

The baking done, Cassie set to decorating her cookies. As the cat and hat cookies became black, she felt a glimmer of excitement building. Sure, she had agreed to go to the party and had picked out her costume, but she hadn't really been looking forward to it like the others had. Truth was, Halloween had never exactly been one of her favorite holidays. Sure, her parents had taken her trick-or-treating in their apartment building and there had been parties at school. Still, she had been glad when she was old enough to not participate in trick-or-treating without raising questions and even happier when Mark quit going. She had gone to a Halloween Party her freshman year at college with her friends. They had dressed as characters from The Wizard of Oz. She forgot what character she had been though she did remember leaving early.

Cassie had felt obligated to go when she had received the party invitation. She was sure everyone else was going to be there. Not going hadn't really seemed like an option. After giving the cats each a yellow eye, Cassie put aside the black icing and picked up the orange. It was time to turn the pumpkin cookies into jack-o-lanterns. After that, she planned on simply outlining the witches and the bats with different colors to add some color to the cookies. That left the tombstones.

As she worked on the pumpkin-shaped cookies, she thought about how to decorate the tombstones. She had considered writing RIP on them but didn't want to use black lettering because it seemed to be used a lot already. I know; I'll use red icing for the letters, she thought.

She got so into her decorating that she lost track of the time. As she finished the last cookie, she glanced at the clock.

"Shoot, if I don't hurry I'm going to be late for my session with Virgil," she said, hurriedly gathering the icing bags and tossed them into a drawer in the fridge.

She quickly packed the cookies into containers and looked again at the clock. The rest of the clean-up was just going to have to wait.

Turning off the music, Cassie left the apartment at a brisk walk. For the first time since receiving the invitation, she was actually looking forward to the party that night.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Wednesday, October 31, 9 a.m., Tracy Island

"Now, is it my imagination, or are we having a lot more parties recently?" Emily asked as she stacked breakfast dishes in the autowasher.

"Don't ask me," Lisa replied from the sink, where she was washing her hands. "I haven't been here that long."

"Indeed, Mrs. Tracy, we have been celebrating more than has been our practice," Kyrano replied, backing out of the refrigerator with some of the ingredients for frosting. "But then, we have had much to celebrate, and many more with whom to do so."

"True," Emily admitted, washing her hands. "I'll get the cake from the freezer. I do hope Dominic likes this."

"I'm sure he will, Emily," Lisa said before ducking into the pantry. She came back out a moment later with a clear, air-tight container. "This is the confectioner's sugar, right?"

Kyrano took one look at the container and nodded. "Yes, it is."

"Good." She set it on the central work area. "Exactly how much food are we making for this evening, anyway?"

"The meal will be mostly hors d'oeuvre and finger foods," Kyrano explained as he began to measure out the powdered sugar into a small stand-up mixer. "The guests are supposed to bring foods of their own; I am told by Miss Elise that most are bringing dessert-type items, though Mr. Luke, for one, is bringing wings." He pointed to the white board near the kitchen's tiny desk. "You will find a list of what we are making there. I believe Dr. Tracy desires some time in the kitchen later to bake brownies."

"Probably her double chocolate brownies, unless I miss my guess." Lisa moved over to the board and used a soft stylus to scroll down the list posted there. "Well, I'll get started on the turkey and ham roll-ups then."

"I'll start assembling the fruit trays," Emily told them. "Get those out of the way early." As she headed for the refrigerator, she asked, off-handedly, "What are you two planning on coming as?"

Kyrano cleared his throat. "Lisa would like our costumes to remain a surprise." He didn't sound too enthusiastic.

"You mean that you'd like that, Tuan," Lisa chided. "I like what we've picked out."

"You're not happy with what you're going as?" Emily asked, curious.

"I am... uncomfortable with the character I will be portraying, yes. He was... a criminal, and I do not like to glorify such." He squirmed a little. "And I am not used to such a different style of

clothing."

"Well, if it's any comfort to you, Kyrano," Emily said, in a matter-of-fact tone, "I'm going as the Wicked Witch of the West. Can't get much more evil than that!" She paused, then added, "Not to mention the green make-up. I just hope I don't scare poor Joshua!"

"See, Tuan?" Lisa said smugly. "We'll be in good company."

"I see, my dear." Kyrano replied, sighing. "But that does not make me comfortable with the role."

The two women exchanged glances, then shook their heads slowly.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:45:35 GMT

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After several days in hospital in Ireland, Matthew Hawkins had arranged a private plane with medical staff to fly him back to the States. I want to be back with my own doctors, he had said. Dominic and the doctors in Belfast had not wanted him to travel so soon, but as always, Matthew's opinion could not be changed.

Now safely in hospital in Kansas, Matthew was settled, and Dominic was ready to leave for Tracy Island.

"Keep in touch, son," Matthew said.

Dominic nodded and gave his father a small smile. "I will. And you know how to reach me."

"I do."

Dominic moved towards the door, but turned on his heel and walked back towards the side of the bed. He faltered for a moment, before leaning down and giving his father an awkward hug. He couldn't see, but Matthew's face lit up with a wide smile.

"I know it's not going to be easy, but I'm so glad, Dominic."

Dom didn't answer immediately, but smiled as he pulled away. "Me too," he said.

"Gwanda!"

Joshua broke away from the nurse and ran to the side of the bed. Dominic lifted the boy up, and Joshua gave Matthew a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Bye-bye, Josh," Matthew said. "I'll see you soon."

"Bye! Bye-bye!" Joshua said, waving his pudgy hand.

Dominic set the child back down on the ground and took his hand. He nodded to Matthew. "I'm sorry I can't stay longer," he said. "Duty calls. Let me know how things go?"

"I will, son. Goodbye for now."

Dominic nodded again.

"Goodbye for now."

xxxx

"Sot!"

Scott smiled as Dominic and Joshua made their way across the airport terminal towards him. When they were close enough Dominic relinquished his grip on his son's hand and let the boy run towards Scott, who ruffled the boy's hair as Joshua hugged his leg.

"Sot! Sooooot! Hi Sot!"

"Hey, Josh," Scott said, laughing.

Dominic rolled his eyes as he caught up with Joshua. He was loaded down with luggage, and was breathing heavier than usual. Scott raised an eyebrow.

"You could have used a baggage trolley," he said.

Dominic looked up, thinking, before his pale face coloured. "Well, I could have..." he said.

Scott chuckled, before reaching out for some of the bags. "I'll help. The plane isn't too far anyway."

Dominic gratefully handed some of the luggage over and straightened up as the weight on his back was lessened.

"Cheers," he said.

With his free hand he took Joshua's again, and the small group began to walk to Tracy One.

"How was the trip?" Scott asked.

Jeff had mentioned that there had been a family issue and that Dominic was now being picked up in Kansas instead of Christchurch, but hadn't given any more details.

"Eventful," Dominic said. "My father had a heart-attack. But he's improving by the day; there shouldn't be any major permanent damage."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Scott said, "but glad he's getting better."

Dominic thanked him before scolding Joshua, who was trying to wriggle out of his father's grasp. "Well, things will work out," he said.

They're already starting to, he thought, before ducking his head briefly and smiling. I think this will be a happy birthday...

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:45:44 GMT

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The mail plane had arrived bearing the final delivery of supplies for the party. Nikki and Elise had spent a few hours online, ordering anything that they couldn't make themselves and a few items just for fun. Gordon had toted the big box over to one of the lounges in the cliff house before going off to work on Thunderbird Four. The two women had a few hours off each, and decided to start preparations.

They had opened the box and were sitting on the floor for ease of access. The inside of the package was a treasure-trove for Halloween-lovers.

"Oh, wow. This stuff is great!" Elise said, lifting out a long string of foil pumpkins.

They glittered in the sunlight pouring in through the window and twisted in the faint airflow from the A.C.

"Yeah!" Nikki said. "Though our decorations are better, I think."

The friends laughed and continued to go through the box.

"Oh, the prizes!" Nikki said.

She had pulled out a box with a clear plastic top. Nestling within there were several small plastic trophies. They each had a black pedestal bottom, on top of which stood a large, gold pumpkin.

"It's not much but it's better than nothing," Elise said. "The games should be good."

"Yeah, and at least the winners will have something to show for it."

The two continued going through the box, chatting and organising.

"Hmm," Elise said when the box was empty and everything was separated into neat piles. "We should probably start putting this stuff up around the pool."

"Yeah," Nikki said. She glanced down at her watch. "Too early for the kids; they'll still be in school. But we do need some help."

"Well, let's make a few calls and see who's free, and we can meet back here with the decorating crew in, say, an hour?"

Elise smiled. "Sounds like a plan!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:45:52 GMT

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Around the pool, later that day...

Elise placed the jack 'o lantern on the table and looked around. The decorations had arrived just in time, and slowly the pool area was being transformed. Orange and purple fairy lights were strung about the patio. The foil pumpkin streamers accented them perfectly. Elsewhere, ghosts and bats hung and flapped in the wind. She waved at Scott, who was draping nylon spider webs on the plants and deck chairs. Gordon and Nikki were in the pool, arranging floating candles and other various creepy crawly things.

"Hey! Things are looking great!" Virgil said, walking up next to her.

She smiled. "They are! What's that you have?"

"What, this?" He held up a box. "Check it out. Dry ice to make things smoky and spooky. I'm heading inside to put it in the freezer with the severed hands now."

"Severed hands?" Nikki called out.

Virgil nodded. "I filled some latex gloves with water and froze them. Figured a gory hand would be funner than just regular ice cubes. Also have some dyed cornstarch to drip like blood."

Gordon laughed. "That's great, Virg! Who'd have thought you'd come up with something like that?"

Virgil glared at his younger brother. "I can come up with plenty," he said slyly.

"Shaking in my shorts here."

"I would be too, considering your latest style of swimwear," Virgil shot back. Everyone burst out laughing.

"Low blow, bro," Gordon remarked, but grinned as he said it.

Scott joined them. "Are we working here, or has the party started early?"

"We're just about done actually," Elise commented. "I think just a few more tables will do it."

Nikki nodded. "One for the cake and deserts, one for the main foods and one for drinks?"

"That sounds good. Though we'd better make sure everyone knows which is the plain and which is the spiked punch," Scott added.

Gordon chuckled. "Aw, Scott! You're no fun!"

"Was he ever?" Elise added with a wink.

"Ha ha, all of you," Scott said, pretending to be hurt.

"But, much as I hate to admit it, he's right," Elise commented. "What if we put one on each end and maybe mark it with something."

"Good idea. And we'll need a table for presents too!" Nikki said.

Virgil glanced down at his watch. "All right then, troops, to your posts! Let's get this done so we can party!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:46:12 GMT

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Dominic yawned widely as consciousness returned. He sat up in bed and stretched, before getting up and padding barefoot into Joshua's room. The little boy was fast asleep, catching up on all the rest he had missed over the course of the past few days. Poor mite, Dom thought, resting his hands on the crib's side. Everything was so out of whack for him. Routine out the window, spending half the time in hospital... But he came through it like a right wee trooper. I'm so proud.

After spending a few minutes watching his sleeping son, Dominic walked out of the bedroom and to the kitchenette to make himself some coffee. As the kettle was boiling he walked into his bedroom to change, and pulled his Halloween costume out of the back of the wardrobe. He grinned. Now this is what I call a scary costume. Joshua's is cute, and matching! He hung it up on the outside of the wardrobe and then dressed in a pair of wide-legged jeans and a baggy t-shirt.

He went back to the kitchen to finish making his coffee. He picked up the warm mug and sat down on the sofa, tucking his legs up underneath him. So much has happened, he thought. It doesn't even seem real. But, I'm happy. Yeah: happy. At least now I've realised what a complete idiot I was being. I guess it'll be good to get to know Matth... Dad. God, I don't know if I'll get used to calling him that. Dominic sipped his coffee, and stood up. He went to the patio doors and opened them, and stood outside in the sun for a while until Joshua began clamouring to be let out.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:46:28 GMT

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Nikki looked into her dressing table mirror and added the final attachment to her Halloween outfit. She then proceeded to curl a lock of her hair behind her ear. She wasn't used to having her hair in loose ringlets, but she had to admit she liked it like that.

"Right, that's that. I'm ready to go," she concluded to herself.

Moving to the full length mirror in her bedroom, she gave a twirl and took in her appearance. She had to admit the flamenco dress was beautiful. It was a red slanted dress which ended from just above her knee to her calf, married to black lace which was also slanted at the end from just above her knee to her ankles. The red sleeves were also made of lace which widened as it reached her wrist. And to finish off and accompany the outfit, Nikki wore an artificial red rose in her hair and a black and red laced fan to match.

She knew her dad would've loved to have seen her in her dress, although she thought he wouldn't appreciate it being worn for Halloween.

The thought of her dad made Nikki think of the past with him after he and her mother divorced. He really tried to connect with his children afterward so that they didn't lose touch with the heritage from his side of the family but being as stubborn as they were, they didn't want to listen and they didn't want anything to do with him. It took a long time for relations between them to get back to some sort of normalcy.

Nikki sighed. She wondered where she would be now if her father hadn't betrayed the unity and trust of the family with his affair. Well, no use dredging up the past. It can't be changed, Nikki thought as she shook her head slightly, bringing her back to reality. She looked at her clock. I better get going. She picked up her fan from her bedside table, opened it and made her way to her door.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:46:35 GMT

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October 31, 5:30 PM

Will laid out his costume, making sure everything was there. He grinned to himself as he remembered the day he'd gotten the invitation. He'd had no idea what to go as, until he'd remembered one year when he was twelve, and he'd gone to a friend's birthday party, which had featured a magician. He'd been fascinated by the tricks and managed to find out where to go to learn them. He'd become pretty good, but as other things became more important, his interest had waned.

It had never completely vanished, though, and he'd kept all the paraphernalia he'd collected. So it seemed like a good choice for a costume. But he had to get what he needed, and that meant a call to his folks. He'd calculated the time difference, determining the best time to phone, and called them the next afternoon, while taking a break from his duties.

His mother had answered and was delighted to hear from him, as usual, but worried that something was wrong, since he usually called on the weekend. He'd reassured her, then explained what he needed, and why. She'd assured him that she knew exactly where to find his

"bag of tricks", as she liked to call them. She'd even send his tuxedo, saying, "You look so handsome in it, and even though most magicians haven't worn one in ages, I think it would be perfect. Besides, what else do you have to put all those odds and ends in?"

He went out onto the balcony and leaned against the rail. He chuckled, knowing his mother had an ulterior motive for suggesting the tux, but he agreed that it was the best outfit for his costume. As he stood there, enjoying the view and reminiscing, he heard a child's laugh from below.

Oh man, Will thought. The invitation said that today was also Dom's birthday. I'd really like to give him something; he's a cool guy. But what?

He walked back into his apartment and began looking around. His meanderings took him into his kitchen, and he had an idea. Opening the freezer, he took out a rectangular package. Perfect. He headed to the second bedroom and opened the closet. Locating a long plastic container, he took it out, thinking, Mom, you think of everything. Even gift wrap and ribbon. You made unpacking an adventure, with surprises in every box and bag. He found the ribbon color he wanted, and wrapped it around the gift.

"Now, where would I put this? I can't just put it with the other packages, now, can I?" He grinned as he figured where it would go, and how he would present it to the "birthday boy".

The timer went off in the kitchen and he hurried to the oven. After putting on the mitts, he pulled out two cookie sheets of stuffed crescent rolls. He put them on two platters, then placed more unbaked rolls on the sheets. He also had labels ready; one said Mexican style and the other Spinach and feta cheese. Glancing at the clock, he thought, I'd better start getting ready. I should have most of my costume on by the time these are finished baking. He started the timer again, and went back into his bedroom.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:46:43 GMT

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*****Research Laboratory, 4:30 p.m.*****

Callie had worked a lot of the day on the airplane fuel from the Malaysian plane crash. She had barely eaten any food all day long as she continued learning about the fuel's elemental make-up. "There's got to be something here to make it work," she said to herself. "I need to figure out the best way to deal with this fuel so we don't have a repeat of Canaveral, should we encounter it again."

For the next hour, she continued looking up information about the fuel, so much so, she had no idea what time it was. When she noticed the clock, she said, "Oh, man. It's almost time for the party. I'm gonna have to stop and get dressed in my costume."

Her costume, which had arrived three days earlier, was a perfect fit when she had tried it on. "I wonder how people are going to think of me wearing it. No, I shouldn't worry about tonight. I need

to have fun and let loose. It's time to put the past behind and be fresh this evening."

*****5:30 p.m.*****

She returned to her apartment and started getting dressed in her costume. It took her nearly an hour to get all her components on. She adjusted her boots, made sure there were no runs in her fishnet stockings, adjusted her bustier properly, and saw her jacket fluff right at the shoulders. Finally, after putting a patch over her left eye and the hat on her head, she was finished. "That's it. Now it's time to head to the party." Loosen up, girl. Have fun tonight.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:46:52 GMT
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Wednesday, October 31, 5:55 p.m., Tracy Island

Cherie left her room, heading down the hall toward the stairs. Ahead of her, someone was walking along at a very measured pace, as if they were having difficulty. From the size of the figure, Cherie guessed it was Alex.

"Hey, Alex!" she said as she drew alongside him. "Looks like you're having a little trouble. Why'd you have to choose Shibuka, anyway?"

Alex, who was dressed in what could only be called armor, and carrying an ornate lighted sword, lifted his red and white marked helmet. "Well, he is my favorite vid game character. I thought that the costume would be easy to wear, but this helmet... ugh!"

"So, leave it off until people start coming. Then put it on for pictures and the costume contest, and take it off for the rest of the night."

"I think you're right," Alex said wearily. He tucked his helmet under one arm, turned the lights off on the sword, and hung it from his belt.

At the top of the steps, Cherie started down, her blue skirt with its white poodle swirling around her calves. Alex stopped and made a face.

"I think I'd better take the elevator."

Cherie turned and looked her brother up and down. The armor, which was painted in sharp lines of red, white, and black, covered her brother from shoulder to ankle. The major joints -- shoulders, hips, elbows and knees -- allowed for movement, albeit with limited range. Alex's waist was also free and covered with fabric to close the gap between chest and lower torso. She wondered just how he was going to sit in the costume.

"I think you're right," she said with a nod. "Meet you in the dining room."

"Meet you there."

The dining room was full of activity when Cherie skipped her way in. The dining room table was stacked with plates and tumblers. A woman in a tall, pointed hat and a green face was putting out trays of fruit, and when she looked up, Cherie gasped.

"Grandma Tracy?"

"I'm the Wicked Witch of the West," Emily said in a high, quavery voice, "and I'll get you, my pretty!"

"Not if I can help it!" Alex, helmet back in place, held up an arm. He pulled his sword off his belt, and pressed a button that was nestled in his left palm. A ray of red light shot out to hit Emily on the shoulder.

She laughed, a high-pitched and evil sound. "Your weapons are no match for my eeeeevilness! There's only one thing that can stop my beautiful wickedness!"

"Then you'd better not bob for apples," said a voice behind Emily.

Lisa had come out of the kitchen. She wore a deep maroon skirt that flared out just short of her ankles, a sweater of the same color with a series of cream colored Vs stacked down from the neck, and a tiny little short sleeved bolero jacket. She wore a beret on her head, covering her hair, and a pistol in her belt. Kyrano came out after her, wearing an old-fashioned brown suit with cuffed trousers, a white shirt buttoned at the throat, and a brown tie with a design on it. He also wore a brown fedora, and glanced toward the replica shotgun in the corner.

"Well, you two look nice! A bobby-soxer and a... warrior of some kind," Lisa said.

"His name is Shibuka, the warrior prince!" Alex said, taking a few swipes with his sword.

"Who are you supposed to be, Grammy?" Cherie asked, cocking her head to one side, her pony tail swinging behind her.

"Why we're the most famous robbers there ever were, honey," Lisa said as she put an arm around an uncomfortable looking Kyrano. "I'm Bonnie Parker and this here is Clyde Barrow."

"I see! You're Bonnie and Clyde!" Alex exclaimed. He'd taken his helmet off again. "I read about them in US History."

"Indeed we are," Kyrano said, nodding. "I must get the finger sandwiches, and Dr. Tracy's brownies. Excuse me." He turned and hurried back to the kitchen.

Lisa watched him go, then sighed. "I'm afraid he doesn't like the costume very much. He thinks we're glorifying a couple of criminals."

Alex and Cherie glanced at each other, and Cherie shrugged. Neither of them really knew what to say.

"Well, you two can help bring some of these down to the pool area," Lisa began. She stopped, then looked closer at Alex. "Maybe you'd better help up here, Alex. I can see you're going to have problems navigating those steps."

"Yes, Grammy," Alex said.

"Cherie, you and I can carry things down," Emily said. "Anna's there to help with the food, and Elise, Virgil, Nikki and Luke are setting up games."

"Where's Rommel?" Alex asked, his eyes lighting up.

"He's down by the pool," Emily said.

"Poor thing!" Lisa added, chuckling. "They dressed him up, too!"

"I want to see that!" Alex hurried over to the doorway as best he could.

"I can see that someone's going to be taking his costume off early," Emily murmured to Lisa.

"Those kinds of costumes don't last long," Lisa replied.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:47:01 GMT

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Luke looked in the mirror and shrugged. "Well, it's not as bad as it could be. Pretty comfortable really." He was wearing a pair of olive green shorts and shirt, left over from his days as a forest ranger. He pulled on a faux fur vest and fastened a rubber ax at his belt. A whine made him look down and he grinned. "Poor Rom. It's only for a little while, I promise." The dog laid his head down, his face an expression of pure patheticness. He was also in costume, wearing a pink night dress and mop cap. Luke chuckled and grabbed his hat. "C'mon, mutt, time to meet Elise." He picked up some sealed containers holding his hot wings and condiments, then he and the dog went down stairs.

Luke knocked lightly on the door, then stepped inside at Elise's greeting. "Come in! I'll be right out!" A few moments later, she moved into the living room. "Well?"

"Looks good!"

Elise wore a blue and white peasant dress, with pale blue stockings. She had a bright red cape tied around her shoulders. "See, the costume isn't that bad!"

"Yeah, but don't say that too loud. Rom isn't too impressed." They both glanced over at the dog, who whined.

Elise laughed. "Poor baby." She knelt down and gave him a quick pat. "It won't be for long. We just need to make an entrance." She spied the containers in Luke's arms. "Are those your wings?"

Luke nodded. "Yep. Made them good and hot too."

"Great!" Elise looked around in confusion. "I thought I left my shoes out here..."

Luke turned and saw them under the table. Reaching down, he grabbed them, glancing quickly inside. He grinned then handed them to her. "These what you're looking for?"

"Thanks!" She quickly slipped them on, then grabbing a small picnic basket; she hooked her arm through his. "Ready?"

"It's off to Grandmother's house we go!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:47:08 GMT

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"Do I have to wear a tie?"

"Yes, you do." John sat on the edge of his bed, helping Tyler knot a skinny black four-in-hand. "It's all part of the costume."

Tyler shuffled his feet and sighed heavily. "Can I take it off after they judge the costumes?"

"I suppose so, but then you won't be a man in black anymore." John eyed his work critically, and nodded. "There, done." He stood and went to put on his black suitcoat, while Tyler struggled into his. "Remember, we could actually be two different sets of people: Men in Black and the Blues Brothers."

"Who are the Blues Brothers again?" Tyler buttoned just one button on his coat then picked up his sunglasses.

"They're brothers who play blues music, and they're on a mission from God." John adjusted his sunglasses. "We really should have hats to play them; the men in black don't wear hats. Still, we can use their lines."

"Okay." Tyler went over to the mirror and looked at himself critically, then put on his sunglasses. "Hm. I've got to admit, I make this look good."

Behind him, John snorted a laugh. "Okay, Agent T, let's get going."

"Right, Agent J." Tyler picked his big, brightly colored Nerf dart gun off the bed, while John chose a smaller model. "I'm ready! Let's go!"

The pool, around 6:00 pm...

Elise smiled as she looked around. Things had fallen perfectly into place. The spooky Halloween accents added just the right touch to the party atmosphere. She and Nikki had made sure that other than the nylon webbing, there were no spiders to be found. No use freaking Dom out at his own party, she thought to herself.

She carefully arranged the plastic Halloween plates on the table, placing them in front of the food. She was just folding some napkins when someone slipped their arm around her waist. "Hey, Red, don't go into the woods alone."

She turned and smiled at the black masked man behind her. "Why, Señor de la Vega, am I in danger?"

"You could be." Virgil glanced around then placed a swift kiss on her lips. "You look terrific."

"You don't look so bad yourself," she replied. Virgil was dressed as Zorro, complete with black cape, hat and mask. "I hope everyone has fun. And that we've managed to keep the birthday party part a secret from Dominic," she added.

"I'm sure we did. Hey, look at this." Virgil led her over to the punch table. "See, I knew I'd find a good use for the goop." He had rimmed the glass beverage tumblers with red dyed corn syrup. The syrup ran partway down the edges of the glass, looking like blood.

"That's perfect! And I see you've marked the punch bowl too," she added, pointing to the Jolly Roger, "Drink if you Dare" sign adhered to the spiked punch.

Virgil chuckled. "Poor Alex. I can see he isn't going to stay long in his costume."

Elise followed his gaze to where the boy was playing with Rommel. "I just hope neither of them ends up at the pool! Ah, Luke took care of things," she said, watching as the man calmed the dog with a word.

Virgil's forehead furrowed. Of course he would. But he smiled. "Good. I imagine Alex would sink pretty fast in that outfit."

"Rommel too!"

"Have we got everything all set?" he asked, changing the subject.

Elise nodded. "I think so. Nikki hid the scavenger hunt clues, the tub for apple bobbing is all set, all we need is a plan for the costume contest."

"Hmmm. What if we put out some ballots and asked everyone to vote on their favorite costume? Then we'll tally up the votes and award the prize. That way no one's feelings are hurt and we're

not omitting someone to be a judge."

"Great idea!"

They both looked up as the music blared. Luke flinched and turned it back down. Then he shot an "I've got everything under control" wave over to them. Elise giggled. "I told him to wait until Gordon got here, but he insisted that he knew what he was doing." She watched a moment longer as Luke fiddled with some dials. "There, he's got it now," she said as the music sounded again, much softer this time.

Virgil bit back a retort, instead, taking Elise's hand. He bowed gallantly and kissed it. "Well, my lady, I must return to my duties. Perhaps you can save a dance for me?"

"Of course, sir. I would be honored." She blushed as he kissed her hand again and watched as he sauntered away.

Luke walked over and draped his arm around her shoulders. "Well, that looked cozy," he teased.

She elbowed him in the ribs. "You're just jealous."

"Of Virgil? I don't think so." He smiled down at her. "You two look good together. You just...match somehow."

She looked up, her eyes twinkling. "Really? That's sweet." She gave him a hug. "Now scat! I have to finish here."

Across the patio, Virgil watched in annoyance. I'll have to keep an eye on this.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:47:31 GMT

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"Jeff, stand still and let me help you."

One of Jeff's bushy eyebrows, dyed a dark brown, rose in challenge. "And just what do you know about putting on a fake mustache, m'dear?" He peered into the mirror as he adjusted the small hairpiece. "I let your mother help me in LA because she does know about wigs and such. But you, my deah, don't."

Dianne sighed and shook her head carefully. "Please hurry then. I need to find the shawl that goes with this." She touched the wig, with its brown sausage curls. "I don't think I could ever get used to wearing this hairstyle." She fanned herself with a decorative fan. "Or so much fabric! I'm beginning to think we should have gone with the superhero costumes."

"Oh, I don't think so," Jeff said, smiling. "I think I like this. Sure, it's a lot of clothing, but it looks kind of... classy. Much better than spandex." He found the shawl and brought it to his wife. "And I must admit, this dress looks very good on you." He paused, and chuckled. "Just think, you could

have chosen that... that green velvet thing."

"Oh, I'd be sweltering in that!" Dianne said with a little shudder. She regarded him for a moment, and smiled, a sultry expression "Ah must say that hair color looks terribly sexy on you, suh." She raised a hand to smooth her fingers over his temple. "The little bit of silver we left here... so distinguished!"

"I'm glad you like it. I'm also glad it'll only be for a few days." His brow furrowed with a worried thought. "That is what the color instructions said, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear. It'll wash out in three to five days." She held up a fine lace shawl. "Please help me with this?"

Dianne draped part of the shawl over one shoulder, and Jeff, glancing at a picture, spread the rest neatly over the bustle and the wide, hooped skirt. He stopped to kiss a smooth, bare shoulder. "Why don't we party right here?"

She blushed a little. "Later, love. After all, we have a birthday to celebrate."

"You're right, m'deah." Jeff picked up the gift he and Dianne had chosen for Dom. "Now, John has the boys..."

"Correction: John has Tyler. Alex said he could handle his own costume, and Cherie said the same." Dianne picked up her fan, made a final adjustment to her chestnut wig, and headed for the door.

"Can you get through there with all that?" Jeff asked, just now noticing how little difference there was between the width of his wife's copious skirts and the doorway.

"I'd better!" Dianne replied as she eased her way through. "Women used to wear these all the time and could get through doors!" She turned to pick up the end of the shawl, which had become dislodged in passage. "We can drape this again outside the suite; I don't want it to rip on the way." Turning to Jeff, she smiled mischievously. "At least my mother didn't have to break the laces on my corset trying to get me into this!"

Jeff lifted an eyebrow and smiled slyly as he followed her. "Corset? What corset? Franky, mah deah, you don't need one!"

Dianne sighed slightly. "I can see we're going to have a whole evening of you trying to sound Southern."

Jeff's sly smile turned into a grin. "Bettah Southern than English, m'deah."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:47:39 GMT

6:23 PM

"Welcome, Will. Happy Halloween."

"Why thank you, Miz Scarlett." He placed his platters on the refreshment table, putting the labels in front of them. "And may I say how lovely you look in that gown?"

"You may." She smiled slightly and waited.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then realizing what was said, grinned. "In that case, you look very lovely. That gown must have been created with you in mind." He noticed Jeff standing close by, amused at the interplay between his wife and his mechanic.

Will executed a slight bow and said, "Your servant, Mister Butler."

Jeff grinned. "Not tonight, young man. We're all more or less equal here."

Will looked around at those who were already there and replied, "I suspect, though that some will think they are more equal than others." He noticed Rom. "And some less so. Especially our four-legged guest."

Both Jeff and Dianne laughed. "Poor thing," she said. "He looks so embarrassed."

"Are you a real magician? Y'know, you shouldn't wear a magician's outfit unless you are. I think it's part of the magician's code," said Tyler as he walked up.

Will grinned down at the boy. "If I can show you a trick, will that satisfy you?"

"Depends on the trick. Let's see."

"Okay." Will lifted one arm and reached behind the cape. He drew out a large black and white kerchief by one corner, and flicked it up into the air, catching it as it came down, transformed into a wand. "How's that?"

"A very good start," said Dianne, effective forestalling her son, "but I suspect he'll want to see more later. Right now, however, you should go enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, Miz Scarlett. Until later, Mister Butler. Tyler, or whichever Man in Black you are..."

"I'm Agent T."

"Of course. Why didn't I think of that? Anyway, Agent T, I'll see you later, and I'll show you another trick or two."

"Promise?"

"Promise." He winked at the boy and walked off.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:47:49 GMT

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Tin-Tin spun around in front of the full-length mirror, her gold costume jewellery twinkling in the light. She admired herself in the mirror and smiled. Oh, I do love this costume, she thought. She was dressed as Cleopatra, wearing a long white sleeveless robe with a wide, embroidered collar of many colours. A beautiful, wide gold, cloth belt was wrapped around her slim waist, the ends flowing down towards the ground. Gold arm and wrist bands, low-heeled shoes, bracelets, and a bejewelled tiara completed the look. She had brushed her hair down around her face, and put on thick black eyeliner. Perfect!

"I think I'm ready to go now," she said, and walked towards the door.

Just as she was about to open it, the chime sounded, and she smiled. Brains is right on time as always. She opened the door; had she not known previously what Brains was dressing up as, she would have died of shock. In fact, the only reason she knew that it was Brains was because of the glasses -- tinted black, but still with his trademark blue frames..

"Brains, you look absolutely wonderful!" She said.

"Why, uh, thank-you-very-much, Tin-Tin," Brains said in his best Elvis impression. He smiled, and said to her, "You look beautiful," and held out his hand.

He was wearing white satin gloves. Tin-Tin's eyes travelled up the arm of his white jacket, which was embellished with gold. The collar was wide and open -- though Brains had put on a white t-shirt underneath. A golden cape hung from his shoulders, and his bell-bottom trousers were laced in gold.

"You know, it's funny," Tin-Tin said, taking the proffered hand. "Even though our costumes are so different, with the white and gold, we almost match!"

"I suppose you're right, Tin-Tin," Brains said. "Shall we?"

"Of course," Tin-Tin replied, and the two began to walk up to the lounge to make their way to the pool.

As they reached the top of the stairs they were greeted with a resounding 'BOO!' Tin-Tin nearly toppled backwards; Brains caught her around the waist.

"GORDON!" She yelled. "That was dangerous!"

Gordon grinned widely at them.

"But I got you, didn't I?"

Tin-Tin frowned, then her eyes widened in surprise. "Gordon! Your costume!"

He grinned again. "Like it?" he asked, turning. The aquanaut wore long flowing robes of blue,

accented with a paler blue sash. He had either shaved his head or wore a bald cap. A deep red earring twinkled in his left ear. Suddenly, Gordon noticed exactly what Brains was wearing. Instantly, the smile dropped from his face. He placed his hands inside his sleeves and bowed. "Greetings, Prelishelvihamo. I am honored to be in your presence. And also in yours, Undlieek-asjaphe. May Undlieek keep and bless you."

Brains groaned. "Oh no! I'm not going to have to put up with this all night, am I?"

Tin-Tin looked from his stricken expression to Gordon, who was still bowing. "I'm afraid so."

Brains groaned again. "Terrific."

"Prelishelvihamo, your every wish is my desire," Gordon told him.

"Then I desire you stop this insanity!"

"Hey, what goes on here?"

The little group turned around, and Tin-Tin smiled.

"Oh, Scott; that's a very good costume," she said.

Scott smiled, showing off some impressive sharp incisors before pulling his cape up to his face.

"Vhy tank you, Tin-Tin. Perhaps I shall spare your blood tonight...for now!"

Gordon crossed his arms and shook his head.

"That's not scary at all -- or even original. In fact, didn't you wear that same costume a few years ago?" He asked.

Scott let the cape's edge drop back towards the ground, and he pinned his brother with a no-nonsense stare.

"At least I didn't decide to dress up like an insane cultist," he said.

Gordon rolled his eyes.

"Whatever," he said, before turning back to Brains. "Now, Prelishelvihamo, shall we make our way to the party?"

He bowed to Brains once more.

"Oh, boy," Brains said.

The group made their way down to the pool, and the party.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:48:04 GMT

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Cassie made her way to the pool area, carrying her camera, bow, and the card for Dominic. She had taken Tin-Tin's advice and had decided to do something for him as a gift. A made-up coupon for that service was tucked away in the card.

"Shoot," she grumbled as her foot slipped out of the flimsy gold sandal that was part of her costume, for the second time. Pausing, she slipped her foot back into the sandal.

She had chosen to dress as the Greek goddess Artemis thinking the costume would be simple. She had bought the main part of her costume- the white, ankle-length, sleeveless Greek goddess chiton - on a costume website. It had come with the laurel leaf wreath and the sandals. To distinguish herself as Artemis, she had bought a bow and a quiver of arrows. She had thought the quiver of arrows would be the nuisance part of the costume. The sandals were quickly proving her wrong.

Footwear back in place, she continued down to the party area. Many of the others had already arrived.

"You're actually wearing a costume that involves a dress," Luke commented teasingly as Cassie joined them.

"Watch it, Morel, I'm carrying a weapon," she replied lightly.

"I might be scared if I thought you knew how to shoot that thing," her friend told her. "Seriously though, nice costume. A little more creative than mine."

"Thanks. Your costume suits you, though I'd have to vote for Rom over you in a best costume contest," she told him, as she took a quick picture of the dog and his trainer. "Think I'll go take some more pictures. I'll talk to you later," she then told him, turning away.

She spotted Tin-Tin, Brains, and Scott not far away. Approaching them she asked if she could get a picture of the three of them. They happily agreed, Tin-Tin handing Cassie her camera so she could take one for her, too.

"Here, Cassie, why don't you stand with Brains and Scott and I'll get a picture of the three of you," Tin-Tin said, stepping forward.

Cassie handed over the cameras and approached the two men. As she did, she caught the front of her sandal, stumbling a bit. Instinctively she reached out for the nearest thing, which happened to be Scott's arm. The Thunderbird One pilot reached out with his other hand to steady her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, as Cassie regained her balance.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied, feeling her cheeks growing warm. "These sandals are getting to be a nuisance though."

"Could make for a long night," he commented, trying to hide an amused smile.

"No, because this is one Greek Goddess who is going barefoot tonight," Cassie told him, taking off the sandals. She tossed them under a nearby deck chair so they were out of the way.

The footwear issue solved, Cassie took a place between Scott and Brains for the picture.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:48:12 GMT

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Brandon arrived at the party, dressed in the outfit Shannon had sent him. He walked over to the food table, and stopped suddenly when he heard two overlapping wolf whistles. He grinned sheepishly at Nikki and Elise, then was stunned when he heard a third one, and saw Gordon grinning. Blushing slightly, he put his dish of meatballs on the table, then turned as he heard the redhead call to him.

"Hey, Brandon, are you gonna dance for us later? If I'd known what you were coming as, I'd have provided the proper music."

"Very funny, Gordon." Brandon reddened somewhat, but grinned back. "With my two left feet, I'd make my grandfather look silly."

"Your grandfather?"

Brandon looked around to see that Nikki had approached him. "What's your costume got to do with your grandfather?"

A few others moved closer as he answered. "I found out from Shannon that our maternal grandfather was a Chippendale's dancer when he was younger. She'd found his costume in the attic. I thought it'd make a great costume for the party, so I asked her to send it along. She also sent me a couple of pics of him, as well as a copy of a page from our grandmother's diary. Seems they actually met at a Chippendale's club."

"Now that's a cool story," said Elise. "But doesn't it feel a little weird, being about your grandparents?"

"Tell me about it!" Brandon exclaimed, then he chuckled. "Fortunately, I was able to get over it enough to wear the costume."

Not far away, Emily was watching Brandon as he arrived, and chatted with the others. "Land sakes," she said to Jeff and Dianne, who were standing nearby. "That costume sure takes me back."

The sound of breaking glass made her turn, to see that Jeff no longer had his drink in his hand. "Mother!"

"Oh, Jefferson, don't be such a prude. I'll have you remember that I wasn't always this old. And I am still able to appreciate a fine figure of a man." She smiled mischievously at Dianne (who was struggling hard to contain her laughter) as she turned back to watch the others.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:48:32 GMT

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*****6:30 p.m.*****

Callie finished wrapping her birthday present for Dom and then wrapped her chicken-battered bat-shaped wings in plastic.

Looking at the mirror, she double-checked to make sure nothing was wrong with her costume. "Okay, stockings are fine, no runs. Skirt fluffs just right, shoulders are fine, eyepatch is okay, and the hat's perfect. All right, time to get out of here."

She walked out of her apartment and made her way down to the monorail. As the monorail made its way toward the launch bay, she smiled. I can just see the guys' faces...total shock. I'm not gonna hold back anymore.

As soon as the monorail reached its destination, she walked to the elevator and took it up to the Villa. She did another check of the costume. "Good, nothing wrong so far."

After the elevator stopped, she stepped out and walked towards the pool. Okay, this is it. Make this impression count!

The minute she stepped outside into the pool area, she said, "Hi, guys."

Brandon was the first to see Callie in her costume. "Hi, Ca--" His mouth was left hanging. "Oh, my God...Callie, is that you?"

When they heard Brandon's remark, the other gentlemen looked at her. Gordon wolf-whistled and said, "Wow! Callie, you sure caught me by surprise...dressing up as a gorgeous pink pirate."

Dianne smiled. "Your costume is absolutely beautiful. I never would've expected to see you like this. What convinced you to take such a bold step?"

"I needed to let go a little and do this for myself," she answered. "I held myself back because of something which happened to me several years ago. I couldn't quite let go of it...until now."

"Well, you picked the right night to do it," Virgil said. "Even Lady Penelope would be impressed if she were here."

Alex walked up and said, "Have there really been female pirates?"

"Sure," she answered calmly. "There's a history of female pirates but not many that would dress up like this."

Elise was busy with presents when she saw Callie in her pink pirate costume. "You look so stunning!"

"Thanks." Callie placed her bat wings on the table and handed Elise the birthday present for Dom. "Here it is, a remastered collection of jazz legends of the 20th century."

"Oh, Dom will love that!"

"I think he will, too. And it looks like he's the only one left."

"Yes, and he'll be in for a big surprise."

Callie smiled. "I can't wait for his reaction." I also can't wait to see what he thinks of me in this costume...

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:48:48 GMT

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Anna walked up to the group around Brandon. She was wearing a long, green tunic with matching leggings. A bow was slung across her back and a quiver filled with arrows hung from her belt along with a knife and a metal tankard. She looked Brandon over, slowly. "Nice, very, nice. Can we compare you to your grandfather's pictures?"

Brandon turned slightly pink but nodded.

Gordon grinned at her. "What would your husband say if he saw you drooling like this?"

"We have a deal," Anna replied. "Window shopping is fine as long as you don't go into the store." The women laughed and Anna continued. "Can I get a picture later? It's too late for the 'hunks in trunks' calender but my daughter will probably like it anyway."

Gordon looked at her. "You're giving your daughter a calender of men in swimsuits?"

"Oh, no. I'm not. She's having one made up. Seems a friend of hers, DeeDee, was a big fan of yours during the Olympics eight years ago. She was going to ask me to get an autographed picture from you but we figured this would be better."

"A new saying and design every month? Did you get enough different shots?" Nikki inquired.

Gordon was smiling. She had got the better of him but he could survive having one college girl see him in those suits.

"Oh, yes. Although we might not be able to use the 'Mr. Yuk' shot. This is a family calender, after

all."

"You think she'll take it home instead of keeping it in her dorm room?" Elise asked.

"It's not just for her. Her sorority was trying to think of a fund raiser for the Forgotten Children's Fund. They came up with the 'hunks in trunks' calender idea and were getting shots of guys around campus. I told them I had these pictures of you and I was sure I could talk you into helping out. I need a legal disclaimer but it is for a charity, after all." Anna smiled serenely and went to put the plate of brownies she had brought on the table.

"Are all of the pictures of guys swimming? And how do I order a copy?" Nikki asked, glancing at Gordon. "I have some friends back home I need Christmas presents for."

Gordon stood there shaking his head. "For charity. Never let it be said I don't do things for charity. Which suit are they going to show me in?"

"Most of the shots are of guys in swimsuits, although someone sent in a photo of a guy stretched out in a streamer trunk, he wasn't wearing a swimsuit. Actually he wasn't wearing anything just holding a hat box in front of him. They haven't picked the final photos yet. There are thirty finalists and three of your photos made it in. The entire school is voting on what shots to use. At a dollar a vote, they've already raised over a thousand dollars. I think 'Rear of the Year' will make it. It shows you stretching after climbing out of the pool. 'Grab Here' has a lot of support, too. Scott caught you from above, diving into the pool. They might use both. 'Nice Cheeks' is cute but it just shows your rear, not the whole body."

"How much a copy? Can we pre-order?" Elise was standing next to Virgil who was trying not to laugh.

"They're \$15 each. I can take any orders and have them to you by mid November." Anna looked at Gordon, who had a bemused look on his face. "Your Grandmother has already ordered three copies. She wants one for your baby book and one to send to a friend of hers back home, someone named 'Aunt Tina' I think." Anna finished a brownie and brushed some crumbs off her hands. "She and Lisa were sure they could find somewhere to hang the third copy. They were deciding where in the kitchen to hang it when I left to change."

Thanks to BoomerCat for the use of Aunt Tina. If you haven't read 'Whirlwinds', you should.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:50:19 GMT

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Dominic adjusted his wig and pursed his lips in front of the bathroom mirror. He only held the pose for a fraction of a second before dissolving into laughter.

"Oh, I look so stupid. Great!"

He walked back into the apartment's lounge and picked Joshua up out of his play-pen. The little boy had smudged his face paint a little; Dominic licked his thumb and scrubbed at a particularly messy part. Joshua scrunched up his nose and tried to push away from his father.

"Ack, give over," Dominic said, before taking the boy in both of his arms and throwing him into the air.

Joshua squealed with delight. Dominic caught him and then hung him upside down, causing more delight. When the boy was pinned down on the sofa and was being tickled mercilessly, he could do nothing more than laugh.

Dominic chuckled as his son's face lit up with joy, and he picked him up again.

"Ready to go to the party, Josh?"

"Wooooooof! Woof-woof!"

"Yes, woof. You make a lovely dog," Dom said, and kissed the boy on his forehead.

The little tail attached to the back of Joshua's puppy costume swished as Dominic picked up the diaper bag, and made his way to the monorail.

John and Tyler were posing back-to-back in their identical costumes as Tin-Tin snapped a photo of the two.

"Lovely, boys," she said, and waited for the picture to come up on the camera's screen.

She showed it to the brothers, and Tyler's face broke into a huge grin.

"Cool!" he said. "We look awesome!"

"That we do, Ty," John said.

He was about to open his mouth to speak to Tin-Tin, but something red and shiny flashed in the corner of his eye. He turned around, and immediately felt like his lungs were going to explode.

"What the --" he managed to get out, before he doubled over in laughter.

Dominic was descending down to the pool, carrying Joshua in his arms. That was normal. Nothing else was. The man had donned a long, dark wig, split into two pigtails tied with blue bows. His lips were painted bright red, and he was wearing a knee-length blue gingham dress over a puff-sleeved white t-shirt. On his feet were the items guilty of grabbing John's attention: a pair of sparkling, high-heeled shoes. To top things off, Joshua was dressed as a Scottie dog.

"Hey guys," Dom said as he approached.

"Dude..." Gordon said, walking towards him. "That is...awesome!"

Joshua began to reach for Gordon, and Dominic handed the boy over.

"Thanks, Gordon."

"No problem, Dorothy."

Dominic smiled and made his way to the drinks table. He smiled and waved at the dropped jaws and laughter that accompanied him. Awesome. Callie came over and poured herself a drink.

"Dom -- Dorothy. You're ridiculously good on those heels."

Dominic had to take a moment to take in Callie in her costume, and he nodded appreciatively.

"Nice one, Callie. You're gorgeous."

"Thanks!" she said.

She waited for a few moments as Dom ignored her comment, before she coughed significantly.

"The heels?"

"Hmm? Oh. I was part of a charity drag act in university. We performed quite frequently, especially for the Freshers at the start of the year. Believe me, I've walked in higher than these!"

Callie laughed and shook her head.

"I get the feeling there's a lot I don't know about you," she said.

"I get the feeling that you're right," Dom replied.

He held his glass up in a toast, and the pink pirate tapped hers against his.

"Who's that dark-haired guy standing with Dr Tracy?" Dom asked.

"Are you serious? That's Mr Tracy!" Callie said.

Dom's head swung between Jeff and Callie, before he downed the rest of his punch.

"Whoa. I've got to go over and sleg him."

"Sleg?" Callie asked.

"Make fun of, in a nice way," Dom answered, before walking towards the man and his wife.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:50:54 GMT

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"I must say, Jeff, I do like your hair this way." Lisa took a sip of her drink, then smiled. "If Dianne hadn't come out on your arm, I might not have recognized you." Her gaze turned critical as she reached up to touch the darkened hair. "Looks like you didn't use a permanent dye, though."

Dianne shook her head. "No, Ma. He decided that he'd earned every gray hair..."

"And wanted everyone to know it?" Emily completed the sentence. Dianne chuckled and nodded. Emily shook her head. "Land's sake, Jeff, a little bit of vanity never hurt anyone." She smiled, an expression made ghastly by the green make up she wore. "I remember when you actually did look this way. Brings back lots of good memories."

"Not to mention the fact that, without the mustache, you look very much like Scott," Lisa added.

Jeff sighed. "I just don't like coloring my hair, all right? Makes me feel..."

"Girly?" Dianne offered.

"Fake?" Lisa said.

"Conceited?" Emily chimed in.

"All of the above," Jeff replied, an embarrassed scowl on his face.

"Well, I think you look wonderful, very youthful," Dianne said, kissing him on the cheek.

"And if we ever run into the situation where IR's commander has to make an appearance, I think coloring your hair would be a far better solution than a fake beard," Lisa said, nodding firmly.

There was a moment of quiet as they sipped their drinks. Then Emily asked, "So, Dianne, what made you choose this blue dress over the green one?" She looked Dianne up and down with an appraising eye. "Not that I think the blue doesn't suit you, but I don't remember it much from the movie. The green one, made from the curtains, is far more memorable."

Dianne sighed. "True, it is." She turned slowly to show the wide, dark blue skirt. "This is Scarlett's portrait dress and I just liked the look of it better than the 'curtain' one. The off-the shoulders look was far more... attractive to me."

"Don't you mean sexy, m'deah?" Jeff said, raising a dark eyebrow in challenge.

"Ah s'ppose it's possible, Mistah Butlah," Dianne added, fanning herself and giving him a coquettish look. "Though if Ah'd wanted to go 'sexy', Ah would have chosen that red numbah from Ashley's pahtay." She sighed. "Truth be told, Ah've always thought that curtain dress was hideous."

The foursome laughed. Jeff idly scanned the pool area, but when he reached the stair, he started

and his eyes widened. "Oh my God."

Dianne turned to look, and her jaw dropped. Lisa and Emily followed her gaze, and Lisa covered her mouth, while Emily laughed. "Oh, my!" she said as Dom, dressed as Dorothy, entered the scene. She rubbed her hands together and gave out a witch-like cackle. "This is gonna be fun!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:51:36 GMT

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As Dominic trotted along on his heels towards Mr and Mrs Tracy his face broke out into a huge grin as he spotted a familiar face...painted green.

"Awesome!" he said loudly.

Emily was rubbing her hands together and had hunched her shoulders.

"Who killed my sister?" she cackled, walking towards Dominic. "Who killed the witch of the east? Was it you?"

"No, no!" Dominic said, cowering. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to kill anybody!"

Emily let out a loud cackle, and Dominic and the others couldn't help but laugh.

"Man, that's a nice coincidence," Dom said as the two walked back towards 'Scarlett' and 'Rhett'.

"What on earth gave you this idea?" Dianne asked, shaking her head slightly.

"I dunno," Dominic said. "It was just a silly idea. I wasn't going to come in costume tonight, what with all that happened. But then I thought, 'why not!' It's just a bit of fun. I like your costumes. Very nice!"

"Thanks, Dominic," Dianne said.

Dominic gave Jeff a toothy grin and nodded to his hair.

"Is this a new way of life?" Dom asked.

Jeff rolled his eyes.

"You're the seventh person who's asked me that. No; it's just for the party."

He looked over at Dianne, who was smiling and trying not to laugh.

"You're taking it so seriously," she said.

Jeff reluctantly smiled.

"I guess you're right," he grouched. "And Dominic? Make sure you keep that skirt weighted down. There's Halloween-scary, and then there's just plain nightmarish."

Dominic smiled widely again, and gave his employer a thumbs-up.

"FAB, sir," he said, before going off in search of his son.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:52:32 GMT

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Virgil shook his head in disbelief, staring at Dominic's costume. Chuckling to himself, he walked over to Elise. "Well, now that the guest of honor is here, should we bring out the cake?" he asked.

She nodded. "I have it hidden over there, near the covered table where the presents are." They made their way over, winking at the others as they passed them. Taking the cover off the cake, Elise smiled. "Your grandmother is a genius."

"I'll say," Virgil added, glancing down at the cake. It was in the shape of a Jack 'o lantern, complete with triangle eyes and toothy grin. He held the tray while Elise lit the candles. "Ready?" She nodded. "Then let's go."

They started forward, heading towards Dom. The Irishman's back was towards them, so he didn't see them coming. Elise waved to get everyone's attention, and started singing. Slowly the others joined in and Dominic looked up in startlement.

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday, dear Dominic! Happy Birthday to you!!" The group finished then burst into loud applause.

Virgil set the cake down on the table in front of Dom. "Here you go. Blow out your candles and make a wish!"

Dom still looked shell-shocked but complied and blew them out, setting off another cheer from his friends. "I--I don't know what t'say," he mumbled.

"Then don't say anything! Just cut the cake!" Gordon yelled out, causing everyone to laugh.

Elise handed Dominic a knife. He stared at it for a moment before Emily and Lisa stepped in. "We'll handle this, dear," Emily told him. "You sit back and relax; it's your day after all." The two women quickly sliced up the cake and passed it around.

"When you're done, there are presents too," Nikki added, gesturing over to the table.

Dom's eyes widened in surprise. "You didn't have to do that!" he exclaimed.

"We know." Nikki smiled.

"This is terrific cake, Grandma!" Scott called out.

"I agree, Mrs. Tracy," Luke added. "Chocolate, my favorite."

"Anything chocolate is your favorite," Cassie quipped. Luke merely grinned at her.

"When did you want to open your presents, Dom?" Callie asked as she took a sip of punch from her cup. It tasted a little funny, but she figured it was the sweetness of the cake reacting to the citrus of the punch.

Dom shook his head. "Anytime would be fine with me." He smiled. "There's never a bad time for presents." They chuckled.

"How about we save the presents until a bit later? It's getting dark and we want to get the scavenger hunt started before it gets dark," Virgil said. There were murmurs of agreement as everyone finished their cake.

Once the plates were cleared, Elise clapped to get everyone's attention. "All right, why don't you all get into teams and we'll get this started."

Kyrano quickly excused himself, offering instead to help Emily clear the plates. "I'll skip this one too," Dianne added. "Ah'm not exactly dressed foah the occasion."

Cassie grimaced. "I think I'll have to head back to the Cliff House for shoes." She looked ruefully down at her bare feet. "I may look like Artemis, but I certainly don't have her stamina!"

Tin-Tin frowned. "I remember from your uniform measurements that we're the same shoe size. Would you like to just borrow a pair of mine? That would be faster than going back to your apartment."

"That would be great! Thanks!"

"I'll get them for you as soon as we get settled here then."

"If you don't mind, I'll sit out too. It's been a long day," Dom told them.

"More cake! More cake!" Joshua jumped up and down in front of his father.

Luke laughed. "Yeah, that's just what he needs. Good idea, Dom. Relax and feed your son more sugar."

There was some giggling and shuffling around as people sorted themselves, but finally everyone was separated into teams. Virgil held up five envelopes. "All right. You all have clues that will eventually lead you to the treasure. However, all the clues are different, so you can't cheat by following each other, Gordon."

"Hey!"

Virgil went on, ignoring his brother. "All right, Team A?"

"That's us!" Gordon stepped forward to snag the clue, turning back towards Brains. Tin-Tin handed Cassie a pair of sneakers then joined them.

"Team B?"

"Right here!" John took the clue and joined Tyler and Anna.

"That would make us Team C," Luke waved from his group consisting of Callie and Alex. Rommel's tail wagged with excitement. Luke handed the clue to Alex to hold. "Before we get started, I want to take this getup off Rom. He doesn't need it anymore and I don't need him to get snarled up anywhere." Luke quickly stripped the nightdress and mop cap off his dog. Rommel gave a huge shake and let out a happy, "Wuff."

"Team D?" Virgil called out.

"Over here," Scott waved from where he was standing with Cassie and Will.

"And that would make us Team E," Jeff said, taking his clue and turning to Cherie and Lisa.

Elise called out to everyone. "All right, the first team back here with the treasure is the winner. We'll call the rest of you back in when that happens. Any questions?"

"Is it real treasure?" Tyler asked?

Virgil winked. "You'll have to find it first and see."

No one else had anything so Elise nodded. "Then open your clues! And good luck!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:52:45 GMT

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Alex opened the scavenger hunt clue and peered at it in confusion. "What does it say?" Luke asked.

"F Choose Life U Lung," the boy replied.

"What?! That doesn't make any sense."

"I know, but that's what it says. Here, look." Alex handed the paper to Luke who read it and passed it to Callie.

"That's what it says all right. Any ideas?" she asked.

Luke shook his head. "Not a one." He glanced up to see the others were just as puzzled over their clues. Nikki, Virgil and Elise grinned in satisfaction. He frowned. "OK, this can't be that hard. I mean, they want someone to find the treasure, right?" Callie and Alex nodded. "Then what does this mean?"

"Can I look at it again?" Alex asked. Luke handed him the clue. "I wonder..."

"What, Alex?" Callie asked.

He looked up at her. "Do you think it could be a code of some sort? Or the letters got mixed up? Like one of those anna...anna..."

"Anagram," Luke finished. "Alex, you're a genius. Let's take a look again." Together the three of them worked on the clue. "L-o-o-n-g...no, c-h-e-f...chef....the kitchen?"

Callie shook her head. "There are too many letters. Keep trying."

"G clef? The lounge, near the piano?" Alex tried another track.

"Again, not enough words...Wait. Lounge." Luke beamed. "Cross out those letters and see what we have left to work with."

"F-c-h-o-s-l-i-f-e-u," Alex told them. "House!"

"And that leaves us with l-f-i-c-f...cliff! Cliff house lounge!" Callie exclaimed. Then she sobered. "I hope all the clues won't be this hard."

"Nah, we've got us a crack team here, we'll figure them out!" Luke glanced around. Cassie, Will, and Scott had already started off towards the Villa, with John, Tyler and Anna following in the same direction. "All right, first things first. We'll need fortifications."

"Fortifications?" Callie asked.

Luke grinned. "Provisions. Food. Chocolate!"

"But of course!" Callie giggled.

"Next, Alex, you might want to take off that costume so it's not so bulky."

"FAB." The boy saluted and began removing his outfit.

Luke looked dubiously at Callie. "Are you going to be able to walk in those boots?" he asked.

She raised the edge of her dress and twisted her leg. "I should be fine. I mean, we're not going that far, right?"

"If you say so." Luke glanced over at the food table. "I'll go grab us some snacks and be right back."

"And if we're going to be walking, I'd like another glass of punch before we leave." Callie headed towards the drinks as Luke walked over to the food. He grabbed a handful of cookies and some of the Halloween candy. He paused on his way back to hand some to Josh, who was still eating cake.

"Do you have your clue figured out?" Elise called out from where she was sitting near Dominic.

"Oh, I think we've got it," Luke replied.

"Well, you'd better get going then! You don't want to come in last, do you?" she teased.

Luke leaned over, putting both hands on the table. "Wanna end up being eaten by the wolf, Red?"

"Wolf? You mean that pussy cat you brought with you to the party?" She laughed.

"Very funny. Must be off now. Clues to discover, treasure to find." With a wave, Luke walked back to his group, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "All right, team; to the Cliff House we go!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:52:52 GMT

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It didn't take team D long to figure out their anagram, and Scott led Cassie and Will up to the schoolroom, where they found their next clue: Train to the big donut.

"Big donut? Something that's round and has a hole in the middle," said Cassie slowly. She pondered for several seconds. "That sounds like..."

"Well, the only thing I can think of - though it looks more like a bagel to me - is..." Will began at the same time.

"The Round House!" Scott and Cassie exclaimed together.

"I can't believe none of us thought of that right off the bat," Cassie said as they turned to go to the monorail.

"How often do we go there, or even see it, Cass?" replied Will. "I doubt that even Scott uses it very often. Am I right?"

"Yeah. My duties lie in other areas of the island. Anna would've thought of that right away, or even Lady Penelope, if she was here, since their quarters are there. That's probably why they didn't give the clue to team B."

They hurried down to find the car ready and waiting for them. "Too bad you don't have a trick that would take us to our next clue instantly, Will," Cassie said teasingly.

"Hey, I'm a magician, not a telekinetic," he replied with a chuckle. "And taking the transport isn't that much slower."

"Let's go, then," said Scott, and they got into the monorail that would take them to their next destination and clue.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:53:00 GMT

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Dianne sipped her punch and watched as the small groups first pored over their clues, then went off in different directions. She sighed as she saw Alex take off his costume and leave it in a tangled heap at the other end of the pool's patio.

"Did someone get pictures?" she asked Emily, who rejoined her after dealing with the plates.

"I know I saw Cassie with a camera, but from the family?" Emily shook her head. "I'm not sure."

"I believe that Tin-Tin was taking photographs. She took one of Lisa and myself." Kyrano came out onto the patio area, dressed in his regular clothes.

"Kyrano! You took your costume off!" Emily exclaimed. "Did everyone get to see it?"

"I do not know, Mrs. Tracy," the retainer replied, his tone and facial expression showing his discomfort. "But I could no longer wear it. It... I... was uncomfortable." He glanced across the pool. "I see that Alex has also removed his costume. I will collect it." With that, he hurried over to where both Alex and Rom's costumes lay.

Emily was about to make another protest when Dianne tapped her on the hand. Emily turned to her, and Dianne shook her head. "Don't, Emily. If he's more comfortable without the costume, then let him be."

"All right. I will." Emily sighed. "He's always been so formal; I was hoping that he'd learn to loosen up some."

"He is," Dianne told her. "But it'll take time."

She stopped speaking and sipped her drink again as Kyrano brought the costume bits and pieces to her. Elise followed him over. "I'll take Rom's costume, Kyrano," she said, gathering the nightdress and cap up as Kyrano handed them to her. "Thanks for picking them up."

"You are welcome, Miss Elise," Kyrano said.

Elise smiled. "I'm sorry to see you took off your costume; it really looked nice on you."

Emily and Dianne exchanged glances as Kyrano inclined his head. "Thank you, Miss Elise, for the compliment."

At that moment, Josh decided to toddle over. He was smeared with chocolate cake and orange icing, and put his pudgy, crumb-covered hands up to Emily. "Gramma! Gramma!"

Emily laughed and picked him up. Seeing this, Dom came over to retrieve him.

"See, my pretty!" Emily said in her best Witch of the West tone as she handed Josh over. "I said I'd get your little dog, too!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:53:08 GMT
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"Hey, Dad!" Cherie called out. "There it is!"

Lisa followed Jeff up the stairs to where their first anagram clue had led them: the Villa balcony. Cherie snapped up the clue marked for "Team E" from the sun lounger and opened it, then frowned. She handed it to her father.

"Hm. Eighty-eight keys will lead the way." Jeff shook his head. "That's not hard. Has to be the piano."

Lisa had already ducked into the lounge and pulled their next clue off of Virgil's baby grand. "Here it is." Jeff and Cherie gathered around her as she read the paper. "Where R. and the Shadows live and relax?"

Jeff shook his head. "I don't get this one."

"Neither do I," Lisa admitted.

"R. and the Shadows... R. and the Shadows..." Cherie muttered. Her face lit up. "Of course! R is for Richard! Cliff Richard, Jr. and the Shadows!"

"Okay, I can buy that," Jeff said, nodding. "So, where they live and relax?"

"The lounge, of course," Lisa said. "That's where we live and relax."

"Good call, ladies." Jeff grinned. "Let's hit the monorail and head on over to the Cliff House."

"And when we get there, I'll take the right hand one, and you take the left, Jeff," Lisa said as she strode along in Jeff's wake, with Cherie hustling right along at her side. "After all, the clue doesn't tell us which lounge to look in!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:53:15 GMT

"Here it is!" Tyler skipped back to John and Anna, clue held aloft triumphantly. "I found it on one of the lamps."

John put out his hand for it. "I hope it's not as hard as that last one. I'm not into Cliff Richard."

"Good thing that my daughter has a passing acquaintance with him then, isn't it?" Anna said with a grin. She looked over John's shoulder as they stood in one of the Cliff House's lobbies. "What does it say?"

"'Train to the big donut'." John looked at his companions, a confused look on his face. "The donut can only be the Round House, but... there's no train to it."

"The monorail?" Tyler asked. "Would that be the train?"

"But there's no access to the Round House from the monorail," John explained. "No way of putting in an elevator, so Dad figured that it was just as easy to ferry people down in the carts."

"Well, it is a relatively straight line," Anna said. Suddenly a sly smile crossed her face. "Maybe we're looking at this too literally. Maybe the 'train' is the carts. They do link up... an 'engine' and a 'luggage car'..."

"You may have something there, Maid Marion," John said, grinning. "So, which way do we want to go here? The carts? The Round House? What do you think, Agent, T?"

"I think we should check the carts first, Agent J." Tyler nodded firmly. "I like the way Maid Marion thinks."

John ruffled Tyler's hair. "So do I. Besides, if the clues aren't on the carts, it's only a short walk to the Round House." He grinned again. "In fact, we can even take a cart there and back!" He turned and offered his elbow to Anna. "So, shall we go?"

Anna put her hand on his arm. "Let's."

With that, they stepped out to the platform, where the monorail car they'd put on hold waited for them.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:53:30 GMT
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"I sure hope this next one isn't an anagram," Gordon commented, as team A spotted the clue envelopes in front of the school room door. "Wait, Prelishelvihamo, allow me," he said as he noticed Brains was about to pick up the clue.

Brains let out a sigh, but took a step back to give Gordon room. Gordon bent down and plucked

the envelope off the floor. Opening it, he read, "View the pool."

"That's it?" Tin-Tin asked.

"Yeah," Gordon said, handing it to her.

Tin-Tin took the piece of paper from him. With Brains looking over her shoulder, the two of them pondered what the three word phrase meant.

"Probably means you have a view of the pool from wherever the clue is at," Brains said, thinking out loud.

"Well, the pool isn't exactly secluded," Tin-Tin commented. "I don't remember seeing any envelopes around the area when we were down there though."

"Well, if you're out on the balcony you can see the pool from there."

"You're right! Gordon what ..." Tin-Tin trailed off as she looked up to see Gordon looking around. The envelope with team B's clue was in his hand. "What are you doing?"

"Just putting a little trick into the night," Gordon commented.

"Put that back where you found it," Tin-Tin told him.

"Oh, come on."

"Gordon, Tin-Tin is right. It's not fair to the other teams to go moving their clues."

Gordon sighed, seeing he was out numbered. Then he grinned again, "Yes, Prelishelvihamo," he told Brains, bowing.

"Let's go check the balcony," Brains said, turning away from Gordon.

Slipping her hand into Brains's, she fell into step beside him. Gordon quickly placed the other envelope back on the floor then followed his teammates. "By the way, where are we headed?"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:53:42 GMT

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Team D arrived at the villa lounge. As they walked in, Will, Scott and Cassie all looked toward Virgil's piano. On top of the piano sat three envelopes.

"Looks like the two of you were right, again," Will commented as he walked over to the piano and picked up the envelope with a D on it.

"Guess those piano lessons were good for something," Scott said teasingly who had first made the connection of 88 keys on a piano.

Cassie smiled at Scott's reference to the abandoned piano lessons she had told them about. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't go saying that to my mom. She was very upset when I quit. What's the next clue, Will?"

"Where R. and the Shadows live and relax," he read out loud, his voice reflecting his puzzlement.

The three of them thought the clue over a moment. Scott was the first to speak up.

"Well R. And the Shadows probably refers to Cliff Richard, Jr. and the Shadows," Scott said. "So my guess is somewhere at the Cliff House."

"Okay," Cassie commented, not questioning as Scott seemed so sure about it. "The Cliff House is a big area; where would they put the clue?"

"Live and relax," Will said again. "Well, our apartments are there but they wouldn't put it in a particular apartment due to privacy issues. That leaves the common areas so maybe the lounge. That's a place where we all relax."

"Sounds reasonable. Let's go. The monorail would be the quickest way there," Scott said, as he started heading that way. His two teammates followed.

"By the way, who are Cliff Richard, Jr. and the Shadows?" Cassie asked.

"They're a popular rock group in Europe," Scott replied. "Tin-Tin loves the group. She has all of their recordings."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:54:06 GMT
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Luke, Callie, Alex and Rommel searched the Cliff House lounge, looking for their clue. They found one labeled "Team E" inside one of the dryers. "That's not us," Alex said.

"Nope. We'll try the other one," Luke replied. They made their way over to the opposite side of the building, Alex and Rom racing ahead. Callie stumbled a little and Luke caught her elbow. "Easy there!"

"Thanks," she told him, smiling gratefully.

Luke grinned back. "I love the costume, by the way. It looks really good on you."

She blushed. "Do you think so? I wanted to do something different; something no one would

expect to see me in."

"Well, honey, you succeeded. Pink is definitely your color."

Callie self-consciously smoothed her dress. "Thank-you," she said softly. She looked up at him. "Luke? Do you..."

They were interrupted by Alex's shout. "I found it! I found it!" Luke and Callie joined the boy in the lounge. "It was here on the weight bench!"

"Great job! Wait, don't open it," Luke commanded. "Rommel, come." The dog trotted over and sat down in front of his master. "OK, team, it's time we put the four-legged member of our team to good use." He pulled two objects out of his pocket. One was a lacy fan, the other a piece of gingham cloth. He held them out to the dog, who sniffed them. Luke then let him smell the envelope. "Rommel, find." The dog sniffed both objects and the envelope again, then turned his attention to the floor.

"What's he doing?" Callie asked.

"Watch and see." The dog wandered a moment, then looked back at Luke, giving a short "Whuff!" He then turned and raced out the door. "C'mon, follow him!"

Alex giggled and raced out the door after the animal, Luke on his heels. "Wait, isn't this sort of cheating?" Callie asked as she tried to keep up, wobbling on her high heels.

"Nope," Luke replied. "Just using all the resources we have at our disposal. We can't help it if Rom has a better sense of smell than we do!"

"I suppose that works." Together they followed the dog as he meandered down to the monorail. They took the train back towards the Villa. Rommel paused once they reached the station, sniffing at the ground again. Luke led him upstairs and out the back of the Villa, again giving him the objects to smell. A few moments later, the dog was off, this time heading down the path leading to Kyrano's garden.

The dog moved carefully throughout the foliage, staying on the path, finally coming to a stop in front of a small Buddha statue. He then turned to Luke and barked once. The man walked over and patted him on the head, also giving him something he pulled from his pocket. Rommel gobbled down the treat as Luke searched through the bushes. "Eureka!" He held up a box.

"Oh! Let me see!" Alex took the box and opened it. A tattered piece of parchment fell out. He picked it up and read it.

"Congratulations! You have found the treasure! Enjoy your spoils!" He handed the note to Callie and rummaged through the box. "There's tons of candy in here. And look, squirt guns, bubbles, all kinds of stuff!"

Callie snagged a piece of candy. "I love Halloween candy."

"Who doesn't?" Luke replied, taking a piece for himself.

Alex pulled out a small square packet and held it up. "What's this?"

Recognizing what it was, Luke nearly choked on his candy. "I'll take that, thank-you very much." He quickly grabbed the packet and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Is that what I think it was?" Callie asked, giggling.

His face bright red, Luke nodded. "Yeah. How the heck did that get in there?" He and Callie looked at each other for a moment, then both spoke at the same time. "Gordon."

The three of them sat there a few minutes, examining their "treasure". Luke and Callie both reached for a large chocolate bar. "Here, we'll share." Luke broke the bar in half, muttering as the chocolate melted on his hands. Callie reached for her piece. "No, let me. I don't want you to get all dirty." He gently placed the candy in her mouth.

She smiled shyly. "Thank-you. It's delicious."

"I guess we should head back, before the others get here," Alex said, stuffing a squirt gun into his pocket. Together they made their way back down to the pool.

"So, what are you going to do with your...prize?" Callie asked quietly with a giggle.

Luke chuckled and patted his chest pocket. "Save it for a rainy day, I guess. Man, I almost died when Alex held that up. Wait until I see Gordon!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:54:27 GMT

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Virgil and Elise stood under a tree, a little apart from the others. The sun had nearly set, turning the sky a myriad of oranges and purples. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Are you having fun?" he asked quietly.

Elise smiled up at him. "Yes, I am." She glanced over at Dom who was teasing Joshua with what looked like a toy bat. "I'm not sure what happened to Dominic in Ireland, but it's good to see him smiling."

He followed her gaze. "It is. This was a great idea. Not just his birthday, but the whole party. And your birthday is next if I remember right."

She blushed. "It is. But I don't want a party."

He held her tighter. "No? Then how about a candlelight dinner, just the two of us?"

She turned and looked up into his brown eyes. "I'd like that."

"It's a date then." Vigil bent and placed a soft kiss on her lips. They both looked up as Alex came running down to the patio.

"We found it! We won!!" He held the treasure box above his head.

"Congratulations, Alex," Emily said as Alex placed the box on the table. "Why don't you show me what you won."

"Sure!" The boy dumped the box out, spreading the candy and toys out. Josh toddled up and grabbed a piece of candy.

"Oh no, you've had quite enough, little man." Dominic deftly swept his son up in his arms and took the candy away. Josh squirmed, trying to get it back.

"Well, y'all did that fast. We didn't think you'd be back for a while," Dianne said as Luke and Callie joined them.

Virgil nodded. "That's true. You figured out the clues pretty fast."

"Well, we had help, right Rommel?" Alex said, patting the dog.

"Help?" Elise looked puzzled and Luke laughed. "What's so funny?"

He pulled the gingham cloth out of his pocket. "I believe this belongs to you?" He then handed Nikki her fan. "And this is yours."

Elise stared down at the cloth for a moment, then glared up at him. "You cheated! You had Rommel track us! Cheater!" She walked over and slapped him on the shoulder.

Luke fended her off. "We didn't cheat! We just took advantage of Rom's nose!"

Dianne, Emily and Dominic burst out laughing. Even Kyrano smiled as Nikki helped Elise with her assault. Virgil glowered, his arms folded across his chest. Finally, he spoke up. "Don't you think we should call the others in?"

"Good idea," Dianne added.

Virgil pressed a button on his wrist communicator. "Fellow seekers, the treasure has been found. Please head back to the patio."

A short time later, the others had returned. They gathered around the table, admiring Alex's "treasure". Tyler stood off to the side, pouting. His expression got even darker once the story of how Luke and his team had found the box. "That's not fair!! We had to figure out our clues and they used a dog! It's not fair!!"

John knelt down in front of the boy. "Tyler, it's OK. It's just a game."

"It's not OK! They cheated!"

Luke walked over. "Tyler, maybe we did stretch the rules a bit, but it was all in fun." He waited until the boy looked up at him. "Furthermore, do you really think Callie, Alex and I need all that candy?"

"You mean I can have some?"

"You sure can. Help yourself. In fact," Luke lowered his voice. "If you dig around, there's a little flashlight with a pumpkin on top."

"Cool!" His anger forgotten, Tyler rushed over to the table.

"Well, now that we've gotten that settled..." Elise waited until everyone quieted down. "There's plenty of food, so dig in. And please vote for best costume. There are paper and pencils over near the drink table."

"Not to mention there are tubs and apples for bobbing, music...Enjoy!" Virgil added.

Joshua toddled over to his father, a present in his hands. "Da? Mine?"

Dominic chuckled. "Well, little man, it's actually mine, but you can help." He put the gift on the table, pulling Joshua into his lap. Nikki and Cassie began carrying some presents over, while the others wandered off to find food and drink.

Gordon waved from the other side of the patio. He stood near a large tin washtub that was up on a low table. A large basket of apples sat near the tub. "Hey! Who wants to go first?"

"Me! Me!" Tyler ran over to join his brother.

"You do realize he's going to fall in and ruin that suit," Dianna told her husband.

Jeff took the punch glass out of her hand and stole a sip. "I really don't think he cares," he replied as he watched his youngest plunge his head into the water.

Thanks to Dianne for her help with this!!

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:54:47 GMT

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"Will, I don't see your gift to Dom here. Didn't you bring him anything?"

"Of course I did, Nikki. But you don't expect a magician to simply place his gift on a table, now, do you?"

"Well then, let's see what you've got in mind."

"I'll need a small assistant. Joshua, would you like to help me give your da his gift?"

"Kay." The toddler went over to Will, who put him on a chair and moved behind him. "Now, all you have to do is stand there. Oh, and look at this cloth." A black cloth with a jack 'o lantern on it suddenly appeared in Will's hand. "Now, do you see a present on this?"

Joshua looked at both sides, then shook his head. By this time, several people had gathered around.

"Okay, Joshua. I'm gonna put this cloth against your front." He suited action to speech. "Do you feel anything?"

The boy started to shake his head then, just as the cloth started to move away, he said, "Brrr!" He put his tiny hands against the cloth.

"What's in there, Joshua?"

"Cold."

"It is, huh? Then maybe we should see what it is." Will moved the cloth slightly forward, gently shaking it from side to side. As he did, something began to appear at the top. He moved the cloth farther in front of Joshua, and higher. It was a rectangular package, about four by six by two inches in size, with a green bow. Then with a, "Catch, Dom!" and a SNAP!, the cloth disappeared, and the package fell into Dom's quickly outstretched hands.

"That was great! It is cold; what is it? Do I need to put it in the refrigerator?"

"Nah; you can leave it out until it thaws completely. There are butterscotch brownies in it, made by my mother. I had them in the freezer. Personally, I think they're the most fantastic dessert on earth, and I thought you and this little guy here," he reached down and picked up Joshua, who laughed in delight, "would enjoy them, too."

"They sound delicious. But do you really want to share them?"

"Dom, my mother baked six batches for me. If I don't share them, I'll gain so much weight, I won't be able to do my job right." Will winked and grinned at him, then gave Joshua a little toss in the air, catching him easily. The tot shrieked with laughter.

Dom chuckled. "Careful, or he'll expect you to do that every time he sees you."

"As long as I can, I will. Well, Happy Birthday, Dom." He grinned and nodded as he walked away toward the refreshment table.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:55:03 GMT

Alan leaned his head on his elbow and sighed heavily. He stared out the windows of Thunderbird Five, gazing down at the Earth. I'll bet the party is in full swing now. Wish I could be there. He fiddled with the computer a minute, then decided he really didn't feel like surfing.

He sighed again, and leaned back, resting his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. A beep from one of the console's caught his attention. "This is Thunderbird Five."

"Hey, Al!"

"Gordon! What's up?" He glanced at his watch. "It's early still. I figured you'd still be at the party."

"Oh, I am. Just wanted to check in. Hey, give me a few seconds, then check your email."

"My email?" Alan pressed a few keys on the keyboard, pulling up his private accounts. "What are you doing? This isn't going to get me into trouble, is it?" he asked warily.

"Alan, you wound me; just give me a sec." There was the sound of music and laughter from Gordon's connection. "Wait, I can't see you, Virg. Move over! There, now everybody say 'Cheese!'"

An icon popped up on the computer, indicating that Alan had mail. He opened it and laughed out loud. Everyone was standing together, waving at the camera. "Wow! Look at you guys. Hey, what did Dad do to his hair?!"

"I know! Isn't it a riot! We're trying to get him to keep it like that, but he won't bite. Keep going, Tin-Tin has been taking pictures all night. She said she'd send them up to you."

Alan waited a few minutes. "Got them."

"Great. I've got to run. Dom's starting to open presents, and then we'll be announcing the winners of the costume contest."

"OK. Thanks, Gordon! And thank Tin-Tin, too."

"FAB. See you tomorrow sometime." Gordon disconnected the call.

Alan opened the email from Tin-Tin and laughed out loud. Gordon was posed standing next to Brains, who was dressed as Elvis. He had a resigned look on his face as Brethren Gordon stood next to him. Another picture showed his grandmother, Lisa, Kyrano, Josh and... "Is that Dom? No way!" Laughing again, he went through the rest of the photos, pausing as one highlighted Nikki. She was smiling and waving, her fan held coquettishly in front of her. He smiled to himself. "One more day..."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Dominic grinned widely as he unwrapped his first gift.

"Aww, cool!"

It was from Nikki, and was a framed picture that looked like a newspaper clipping of a sports page with the headline 'KELLY SIGNS ON FOR NORTHERN IRELAND' emblazoned across the top, and a by-line that read, 'KELLY SEALS RECORD £10,000,000 DEAL'.

"Thanks, Nikki," he said, marvelling at how authentic it looked.

"No problem," Nikki said. "Glad you like it."

He couldn't quite believe that everyone had gone to as much trouble as they had for his birthday. In shock, he had told them all there had really been no need, though he was shot down on that comment by the entire gathered party at once. It had been a scary moment.

"Ours next," Dianne said, indicating the package.

"Yes ma'am," Dom said.

He pulled off the beautiful wrapping, and his eyeballs just managed to stay in his skull.

"Whoa," he said, and picked up the box of his brand new Musicman K.I., which revealed the box of the appropriate speaker/docking station beneath. He whistled through his teeth. "I've heard that these are awesome; top of the range! Thanks!!"

Jeff and Dianne smiled, and Jeff nodded at the sleek, slim music player as Dom lifted it from the box.

"It's already charged. Turn it on for the rest of the present."

"Rest?" Dom asked, and slipped the earphones on. He flicked the little switch, and watched as the screen lit up, showing the name of his favourite jazz artist. "Awesome. The complete works of Henrietta Xavier! I'm astounded," he said, looking at the couple. "Thank you so much."

"It was no trouble," Dianne said. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it!"

When Dom finally tore himself away from the new music player he picked up the next gift. It was from Cherie.

"Now that is really something," Dom said as he unwrapped the package to find a drawing of himself and Joshua in a neat frame. The best part was that the picture was what he understood to be 'chibified': big headed, cutesie figures that were grinning widely. "Thanks so much Cherie. That was really sweet of you."

Cherie shrugged, but couldn't help but grin.

"You're welcome," she said.

He glanced down at the pile of opened presents beside him. As well as the personalised newspaper clipping, the new music player and speakers and the drawing of himself and Joshua, Kyrano and Lisa had given him a new non-stick wok and a multi-cooker ("Perfect for preparing all of your vegetables," Kyrano had said), Alex and Tyler had given him a large picture book of Ireland ("To remind you of home," Tyler had said, which had made Dom want to reach out and hug the stuffing out of the boys), a new yoga mat and wrist/ankle weights from Elise ("Your old mat was starting to look a little...gross," she had joked), and of course, the gorgeous-looking batch of brownies that Will had given him. So looking forward to eating those! Dom thought. Joshua had been so awestruck by Will's magic trick that he hadn't left the man's side since.

After everything that's happened recently, this is just what I needed. Despite still feeling tired from all the stress and travelling of the past few days, Dom couldn't help but keep smiling, and he reached for the next gift.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:55:43 GMT

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"Open mine next," Luke said, his eyes bright and glinting in the dimming light.

Dom reached for the flattish packet and took a moment to feel the filling through the wrapping.

"I have no idea what this is," Dom said, pressing his fingers against something hard and bumpy.

"Just open it!" Nikki chided, grinning.

Dom's face pinked slightly, and he began to pull off the paper. "Yes ma'am," he said.

He unwrapped the package, and it revealed an intricately carved wooden frame in a design of Celtic knots, and inside, was a beautiful picture of Joshua. Dominic felt his eyes well up, just briefly.

"This is wonderful," he said, looking up at Luke with a smile. "When did you take the picture? Where did you get the frame?"

"Well, the picture is courtesy of Brains," Luke said, motioning to the man, who swung his arms up and pointed to Dominic in a decidedly un-Brains-like and fully-Elvis-like fashion. The crowd chuckled. "He took it one day when Joshua was with Emily. The frame, well, I made it myself."

"You made it yourself?" Dom asked, his mouth falling open. "This is amazing. It's so complex. Thank you!"

"Ah, it was nothin'," Luke joked.

Dominic stood up and looked around for his son. Joshua was still trailing on Will's coat-tails. He stood up and went to retrieve his son, giving Will an apologetic glance, and hefted the little boy onto his hip.

"Look, Jak," Dom said, "It's you. Isn't it lovely?"

"Me, me, me! Lovely me!" Joshua giggled.

Dominic laughed and kissed the boy's forehead, before taking his seat again. This is one amazing birthday, he thought.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:55:58 GMT

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Who haven't I taken a posed picture of,? Cassie thought, trying to remember what photos she had taken that night. She had taken one of all the recruits in their costumes earlier but she had also tried to get individuals too.

She spotted Dom with a sleepy looking Joshua in his arms. Josh was still trying to take in what was going on around him though Cassie could see that sleep was starting to win that battle. Other than the group shot and a couple of pictures while he had opened his gifts, Cassie didn't have any pictures of the nurse.

"He looks about as tired as I feel," Cassie commented, approaching the two of them.

"Aye, he's just about asleep. The lad's had a long day though he's enjoyed it. I've had a lot of fun myself and appreciate all the trouble Nikki and Elise went into planning it."

"I've enjoyed tonight more than I thought I would," Cassie admitted. She remembered her reason for coming over. "Can I get a picture of the two of you?"

"Sure," Dom replied. After a little prompting he got Joshua looking in Cassie's direction.

"Thanks," Cassie said after snapping the picture. "That should be everyone now," she commented.

The uneasy silence that seemed to follow the two of them around fell over them. Cassie found herself watching what was going on around them. She wanted to say something but everything she thought of seemed silly. It was finally Dom who broke the silence.

"Thanks for the gift, by the way," the Irishman commented. "Twenty hours of baby-sitting is definitely something I can use, though ..." he let his voice trailed off, suddenly not sure how he

could finish the thought tactfully.

"It's okay, I understand," Cassie told him looking over at him. "I went back and forth about the decision quite a bit." She paused, thinking over her next words. Did she want to tell him what was on her mind? She had a feeling if she didn't now she might never get the courage up again. "Truth is, though, I know I can't keep hiding from it. I've been in touch with my therapist back in New York and believe me it's been interesting trying to explain things to her without giving anything away. She's convinced me that I can't just keep avoiding you. It's not fair to you, me or anyone else here. At the very least we need to work together, and given the chance I think maybe we could be friends."

"Aye, I do believe that is a possibility," he commented, happy that she had brought up the subject. He had wanted to himself but hadn't wanted to make the situation worse. "Luke's told me a bit about you."

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Cassie said, thinking of the stories that Luke could have told.

"Don't worry. It's all been good."

"Seems you've got the advantage on me. Other than your occupation, that you have a son, you do yoga and that your birthday is on Halloween, I know nothing about you."

"We could change that if you'd like. Truth is, I'd feel more comfortable leaving Josh with you if he knew you a little better. If you don't have plans already, how about coming over for dinner on Saturday, and the three of us could get better acquainted."

"I'd like that."

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:56:11 GMT

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Plate and glass in hand, Will looked around for a place to sit and eat. He'd been entertaining various people here and there (with an excited Joshua as his "beautiful assistant" until his father came over and got him) with card tricks and the old disappearing coin popping out of someone's ear trick, and was hungry.

He noticed Luke, Elise, Brandon, and Gordon at one of the tables, and Luke was waving at him to join them. He headed over to them and said, "Hey, everyone. Great party. Gordon, who are you supposed to be?"

"You haven't heard about the Brethren?"

"The Breth... Oh, you mean those kooks who showed up at the hospital when Dr. Tracy was injured? I saw the retrospective and couldn't believe my eyes. Don't tell me you guys met them!" He sat down, and began to eat.

"Yep; they showed up at one of our rescues, to help us. You should have seen Scott's reaction to them. It was priceless!"

"It was hard for most of us to keep straight faces," Luke added.

"They even have a website. I found out that they call their Supreme Leader 'Prelishelvihamo'. And he's none other than Elvis," Gordon added.

Will choked. "Elvis? As in Elvis Presley? Is that why Brains came dressed as him?"

"I think so. I suspect someone found out who I was coming as, and told him."

"Y'know, it takes longer to say that name than it does to say his real one." Will grinned as the others' eyes lit up in amusement.

"Anyway," said Luke, "I wanted you to come over because Elise and Brandon here were telling me how much they like the mailboxes we made."

"You came up with a cool way of identifying which box belonged to who. Or is it whom?" Elise added mischievously.

"Some of them are really right on the mark," Brandon put in. "I especially liked mine, Luke's and Elise's. I'd love to be there when Scott sees it. How'd you two come up with that way of labeling the slots, anyway?"

Will and Luke looked at each other. "I dunno. We were just talking about labels and the idea came up. We started throwing around phrases, and the IDs were born. It was fun," Will answered.

"Yeah, that's sort of what Luke said earlier," Elise remarked with a grin. "But he's so modest sometimes, I just wanted to be sure."

"You know, it might be cool to have a mailbox or two for those of us who live in the Villa. Then Cherie wouldn't have to go all over the house, delivering it all," Gordon said thoughtfully. A mischievous look crossed his face. "I wonder what the labels would say for us, though."

"Yours would probably be 'What's my next joke gonna be?'," Elise retorted.

"Aww, c'mon. I'm not that bad."

"That's not what I heard," she replied.

"Or maybe it'd be 'Where's the water?'," Luke said.

"How about 'I'll get right on it, Mr. Tracy,' for Brains?" Will suggested.

"That's a good one," Gordon said.

"Of course," Elise interjected, grinning, "Scott's would probably be, 'I'm in charge.'"

The suggestions began to come thick and fast, each one more outrageous than the last. A few others, attracted by the laughter, came up with more ideas, even Jeff and Dianne, who suggested for herself, "Ah'm the doctah and yoah mothah, that's why!"

As the joking died down, Luke said, "Will, these stuffed crescent rolls are good. Where'd you get them?"

"I made them."

"You made them???"

"Yeah; they're fairly easy. I dated a Greek girl for a few months, and she taught me how to make some of their dishes, like that spinach one. Then I experimented with other fillings, and had some of my friends act as taste testers. These two were the most popular. I'm glad you like them. And these wings are great!"

"Luke made those," said Elise.

"Nice going."

There was silence for a few minutes as everyone relished the food on their plates. Then Elise looked around at the rest of the partygoers and said, "We've still got to vote for the best costume, but I'm having a hard time choosing; there are so many good ones."

The others turned to check out who was wearing what, and agreed with her. They began discussing who was their favorite. Brandon said, "I never expected Dom to come in that costume. But," he added with a grin, "I think it kinda suits him."

"Thanks, Brandon."

They looked up to see Dom and Nikki, who had walked up as he said that. She laughed. "But doesn't Joshua look adorable as Toto?" She chuckled as she looked over at the toddler, still in his father's arms, but squirming to get down when he saw Will. Dom put him down and he headed over to the mechanic-turned-magician. Will smiled down at him and gave him a small piece of chicken, which Joshua munched on contentedly, leaning against the man's leg.

"He's so cute, anyway," replied Elise, "that he'd look adorable no matter what he wore."

Dom smiled at her, then glanced down at his son. He squatted down to look closer at the boy. "I don't believe it. He's asleep standing up!"

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:56:27 GMT

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Elise clapped her hands, trying to get everyone's attention, but no one seemed to notice. Virgil put his fingers in his mouth and let out a loud whistle. The conversation died. "Thank-you, Virgil. OK, I've tallied the votes for the costume contest and we have a winner!" She held up a large chocolate pumpkin and a small trophy. "But there is a slight problem. Seems our winner isn't human so he can't really have the prize."

Luke groaned. "Rom! Do you always have to be in the middle of everything?"

There was laughter from some of the others. "As I was saying," Elise went on. "Our runner up is also not human. Gordon, would you come up here please?"

Gordon grinned as he jogged forward. Pausing in front of Brains, he folded his hands into his sleeves and gave a low bow. "Prelishelvihamo, it has been an honor." Brains groaned. Gordon took the trophy from Elise and kissed her on the cheek. Then he turned to the crowd and bowed again. "I thank you, my fellow Tyrikalicans for your support."

Virgil gave his brother a shove, "Get out of here, show-off." Gordon bowed once more and walked over to show his grandmother his award.

Luke nudged Elise on the elbow. "Hey, now that that's over, the mutt and I are going to head home."

Elise looked up in surprise. "You're leaving already?"

He nodded. "I'm not really a partier. It's been a blast, but I'm ready for some quiet."

She smiled and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. "All right, I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Count on it, Red. Watch out for wolves." With a wink he turned, gesturing to Rommel. Together man and dog walked up the steps to the Villa, heading towards the monorail and home.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:56:38 GMT

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Callie enjoyed the exotic-flavored punch so much, she took another cup. "Mmm, this is one of the best drinks I've ever had," she said in a slightly tipsy state.

After she placed her glass on the table with the other dirty dishes, she walked up to the washtub to bob for apples. "Let's see if I can get one with my teeth." She forgot to take off her pirate hat, which fell over her eyes. As a result, she lost her balance and fell forward into the tub. Feeling the cold water hitting her face, she bolted up in surprise, staggering a little.

Scott quickly came to help her and said, "Easy. You okay?"

"I... think so." She looked at her costume. "Oh, no... the top's all wet now. I'd better change."

Scott saw her wobbling a bit. A sudden thought struck him. "Callie, which punch did you drink?"

"Uh... something about 'dare to drink' I... think," she replied.

"Oh, no... that was the spiked punch! How many did you have?!"

With a struggle, she muttered, "Uh... four or five?"

Scott shook his head as Gordon chuckled. "Sounds like someone is going to be hurting tomorrow morning..."

Scott glared at his brother before turning back to Callie. "C'mon, let's get you to the monorail. I think Luke left a few minutes ago; with any luck he'll still be waiting near the train."

"You sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all." With one hand on her elbow to keep her from stumbling, he escorted her through the villa and into the elevator leading to the monorail. Once the elevator reached the bottom, he let out a sigh of relief at seeing Luke. "Hey, Luke! Are you headed back to the Cliff House?"

"Yeah, the mutt and I have had enough partying for one night." Luke looked over at Callie's disheveled state. "What happened?"

"Seems Callie missed the announcement about which punch was which," Scott told him. "She fell into the apple tub."

Luke tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. "Oh, honey..."

"I feel so... weird," she said. "I've never had that much to drink before."

Scott shook his head. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked Luke as the train pulled up.

Luke put his arm around Callie and helped her towards the door. "We'll be fine. I'll get her to her door, don't worry. Go back to the party." Scott nodded and turned back to join the others.

Luke and Callie both entered the monorail and took the ride back to the Cliff House.

Part of her costume still soaking wet, she felt a chill. "Oooh, I'm getting cold. Mind if I... get a little closer to you?"

Luke nodded. "Sure. Lean on me." He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. Rommel lay down at their feet, his tail thumping. "That better?"

"Much better, thank you." She felt very comfortable next to him.

A few moments later, the train pulled into the Cliff House. Luke stood and held out his hand to Callie, who got unsteadily to her feet. He led her out the door, Rommel trotting in front of them.

When the door opened, she said, "Why don't you come in for a bit?"

Luke politely declined, but when she stumbled towards the door, he took her hand and assisted her. "Whoa! Easy there." He helped her into the room, the door closing behind them.

"Thanks," said Callie.

"Well, I guess I'll be heading home myself. Good night, Callie."

Taking a hold of his hand, she said, "Wait. I want to thank you for helping me get home... really want to thank you."

Luke dropped her hand like he'd been stung. "Um, Callie, I don't think..."

"Then don't," she said huskily, moving closer to him.

Luke backed up until his back hit the door. "Callie..."

Callie held his face in her hands and planted a wet kiss on his mouth. Noticing the fear in his eyes, she whispered, "Don't be afraid." Rubbing one finger down his left cheek, she added, "I won't hurt you."

She leaned in again, only this time Luke caught her hands in his. "Callie, wait. This isn't a good idea."

"I know," she purred. "The couch would be much more comfortable." She took his hand again, trying to lead him to the couch.

He pulled himself free. "Wait, you don't understand. Callie, we... I..."

"What's the matter?" she asked, as she removed her costume jacket to expose her bustier.

Luke went pale, then red with embarrassment. For himself or her, he wasn't quite sure. "I... I like you Callie, really I do. Just not the way you're thinking of at the moment."

She sat down on the couch, curling her legs up underneath her. "Why don't you come sit down and we can talk about this," she said, patting the seat next to her.

Luke didn't move. "I can't." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Callie, I don't date... girls." Seeing the confusion on her face, he continued. "I'm gay."

"You're what?" Suddenly she realized what he said and the blood rushed to her cheeks. Callie suddenly felt nauseated. "Oh, my God... I had no idea."

He shrugged. "It's not something I'm ashamed of, it's just who I am." He looked up at her, seeing the stricken expression on her face. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "Luke, I'm so sor--" She had to stop and hold her mouth because she was

about to lose all the food she had eaten for the evening. Getting to her feet, she stumbled for the kitchen sink.

Luke sighed wearily, and snapping his fingers, he and Rommel left for their own apartment.

Two minutes later, she returned to the living room, only to find both Luke and Rommel gone. "Oh, no." She sat down on her couch. "I don't blame him for running off so fast. Why did I drink so much of that punch?" She lay down on the couch, mortified at what had just happened. "I can't believe what I've done. What will Luke think of me? How can I ever face him again?"

Too tired to think anymore, she closed her eyes and was soon fast asleep.

Callie losing her inhibitions with Luke, by TracyFan4Ever and Lillehafrue

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:56:45 GMT

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Will was chatting with Brandon, when he felt a tugging on his cape. He looked down and saw Tyler. "Hey there. What's up?"

"You promised to show me another trick. And I gotta go to bed in a few minutes."

"You're gonna do more magic? This I've gotta see," said Brandon.

"Alright, then." Will moved over to a chair and sat down. "Okay, now watch. Tyler, would you take the handkerchief out of my breast pocket, please?" When the boy complied, he took one corner of it in his left hand with a smile of thanks, and made a show of indicating there was nothing in his right. Then he curled his fingers of his right hand with the back of his hand to his audience, and handed the kerchief back to his helper, asking him to stuff it into the top.

Tyler pushed it into Will's hand until the entire handkerchief was out of sight of the audience, who had grown. Will looked over at ten year old and asked, "Which magic words should I use?"

Tyler thought for a minute, then said, "Alakazam!"

"A good one. Alakazam it is." He moved his left hand so fingers were above and below the right, and opened the hand he'd stuffed the handkerchief into. The kerchief was gone, replaced by a large sized egg.

Amid the applause and exclamations of surprise, he heard Tyler say, "How'd you do that?"

"I'm not so sure I should say. A magician's not supposed to tell, you know."

"Aw, pleeeeeease?"

Will looked at the eager pleading face for a moment, then finally said with a twinkle in his eye,

"Well, I suppose it's okay this once." He put the egg down on a table. "I'll have to start from scratch, though. Okay, first, take the handkerchief from my pocket again."

"Hey! How'd that get back there?"

The redhead grinned. "Magic, of course."

Tyler gave him a look of scorn as he once again took the hankie from Will's pocket, who told him, "After I handed that back to you, I quickly got this from a pocket in my cape." He showed the boy a plastic egg, with a hole near the top, on one side. It was big enough to easily stuff the kerchief into. "You hold the egg so the hole is toward you, and it's all hidden from your audience." He looked at the boy. "Your hands are a bit small for this trick, but as you grow, so will they."

As he was speaking, he had Tyler push the handkerchief into the egg once again. Then he again showed the egg, carefully keeping the hole toward him. "And that's all there is to it."

"Oh man; that's too easy. But what if someone is standing where they can see the hole?"

Will grinned once again, this time mischievously. "Well then, you just," he began peeling a sticker off the egg, "remove the opening." He held up a hole-less egg.

This time, the exclamations and applause was joined by laughter, and a stunned look on Tyler's face. Then Dianne stood up and said, "Okay, time for bed."

As the boy reluctantly turned to leave, Will reached out and drew him closer, so he could whisper, "I promise that when you're older, if I'm still here, I'll teach you how to do that. If you're still interested by then, of course."

Tyler's face lit up and he nodded. Then he happily went off with his mother and brother.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire

Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:56:53 GMT

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Dianne staggered a little as she and Jeff headed toward their suite, causing Jeff to put a supportive arm around her waist.

"Looks like you had a little more than you should have, Miz Scarlett," he said, an amused smile on his face.

Dianne slid her arm around him and leaned on his shoulder, turning her face toward him as much as she could. "Well, you maht could be raht, Mistah Butler," she said, her drawl heavy and her words slightly slurred. "Ah wasn't able to indulge at th' last pahtay."

Jeff's smile faded a little. "I remember," he murmured, his voice husky.

She sighed, a contented sound. "So Ah'm jes' makin' up foah lost tahm. And Ah wasn't drinkin'

alone, eithuh."

He chuckled. "I noticed."

They had reached their suite and the door slid open obediently. Dianne's eyes were closed now, and her weight on Jeff was heavier.

"Hey, there, Scarlett." Jeff gave her a little shake. "You're not going to sleep in this dress. Those hoop skirts..."

Dianne stirred, and drew in a deep breath. "Kiss me," she said in a half-whisper. "Ah need kissing, badly."

He took her in his arms. "I think I will." He laid a long, smoldering kiss on her lips. "You should be kissed often, by someone who knows how."

"An' you sure know how," she murmured.

Jeff laughed, then guided her into the suite.

Subject: Re: Playing with Fire
Posted by [artisticrainey](#) on Tue, 24 Jul 2012 01:57:15 GMT
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And with that, we end Chapter Twelve: Playing With Fire.
