

FROM THE JEOPARDY DIRECTIVE



OPERATION CONTAINMENT

SOME
MISSIONS
TRAVEL
IN STYLE

CLASSIFIED

SECTOR 7
NORTHBRIDGE
DEPARTS
20:00



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Operation: Containment

“I didn't know if he wanted me there or not. I don't know why I cared. But when the frost and fire closed in, Solomon Grant was the only person I trusted to have my back.”
— Monique Strange, field notes

The corridor outside the briefing room reeked of sterilized metal and recycled air—clean, sharp, artificial. It was the smell of the agency's central hub, familiar enough, but tonight it clung to the back of my throat until my tongue felt like sandpaper. My first mission. I'd told myself the nerves would come, but I hadn't expected them to hit this hard, this fast.

I pressed a hand to the flat of my stomach, as if I could quiet the restless churn inside, and forced myself to breathe evenly. The door slid open with a hiss, and for one terrifying heartbeat I thought my knees might refuse to carry me through.

Inside, a long table gleamed under the cold white lights, so polished it looked untouched, as if no one dared to sit there. At its head stood Gravis Denaley, tall, sharp-featured, and radiating an authority that made my spine snap straighter before I even realized it. His gaze swept the room like a blade, sharp enough that I fought the urge to look at my boots.

Everyone knew his name. Gravis Denaley—son of Sebastian Denaley, the legendary founder whose shadow still hung over these halls. He had only recently taken over the agency, and though I'd caught

glimpses of him in passing, this was the first time that stare had pinned me. It was enough to make my pulse thrum in my ears.

He was Pendellan. They all carried the same intensity, as if their blood itself hummed with some deeper current of power. Around him, the air felt heavier, charged, and for the briefest moment I wondered if he could see straight through me—rookie nerves, dry mouth, fluttering stomach and all.

Barnabas Loomis was there as well, older, late fifties, and carrying himself with the quiet steadiness of someone who'd been the agency's backbone for decades. An Ensullian—our resident diplomat. I had met him before, and I even worked alongside him a few times when I was still safely behind analyst reports instead of fieldwork.

He was always kind, well-spoken, and considerate in ways most operatives weren't. He had only just returned from a sabbatical after losing his wife, and the grief still seemed to hang around his shoulders like an extra weight. I felt for him. Everyone knew how much he'd loved her.

"Monique Strange," Gravis said, gesturing me forward. His voice was calm, precise—each word cut clean, leaving no room for small talk. "Sit. We have little time."

I obeyed, forcing my legs to move and lowering myself into the chair. My hands wanted to fidget in my lap, but I pinned them together tightly, willing them to stay still.

"This is your first field mission," he continued, scrolling a holographic dossier across the table. The light from it flickered across his sharp features, making him look even more severe. "I doubt you will have many issues. Your file from training ranks you in the top five, and your year as an analyst for the agency gives you the knowledge of field missions."

Hearing it laid out so clinically should have steadied me, but it only made my pulse kick harder. Top five or not, numbers on a file weren't the same as being in the field.

Gravis adjusted the controls, and a man's face spun slowly into view, suspended in three dimensions above the table. "Dr. Leor Veyne," he said.

The image showed a man with graying temples, sharp cheekbones, and the faintly smug expression that told you he thought he was smarter than the entire galaxy.

"He's a biochemist," Barnabas said, his voice even but heavy. "Brilliant—and dangerous. He's carrying a designer pathogen. Airborne, lethal, and undetectable until it's too late. We have intelligence he intends to sell it aboard the *Sky Serpent*, a luxury mag-train crossing the Arasven Mountains, on Ruteria tonight."

I nodded, but my heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might shake the table. This was it. A real mission. No simulations, no classroom drills—just me, the field, and stakes high enough to wipe out entire cities.

"You will not be alone," Gravis added, pausing as the door slid open behind me.

I turned.

And forgot to breathe.

A man filled the doorway like a shadow brought to life—broad shoulders beneath a tailored black jacket, dark hair swept back, a day's stubble sharpening an already firm jaw. He carried a quiet, devastating kind of presence that didn't need to announce itself; the air seemed to shift around him. His brown eyes swept the room, landing on me for half a second, and heat crawled straight up my neck.

"This is Agent Grant," Gravis said. "You may have heard of him."
Who *hasn't*?

I struggled to keep my face neutral, but the name alone carried weight. Solomon Grant—living legend of the agency. The man who had pulled off impossible operations and survived missions that should have killed anyone else. I'd studied his debriefs during training, traced every line of his strategies like scripture.

But I had not expected him to be... this. Handsome didn't even cover it. He was magnetic in a way that made me self-conscious and, to my irritation, a little annoyed.

He nodded once in my direction. "You're Monique?"

His voice was smooth but flat, carrying neither warmth nor mockery—just fact.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me sir." He crossed the room and sank into the chair opposite me with a kind of quiet grace that spoke of control I couldn't quite fathom.

Gravis's eyes flicked between us, measuring, assessing. "We're aware Agent Grant is... working through personal matters," he said carefully. "This mission will be beneficial to both of you. He will provide the experience; you will provide fresh adaptability. Together, I expect success."

I nodded again, forcing the movement even though my curiosity spiked hard at those two words—*personal matters*. Whatever they meant, I shoved it down. Not the time. Definitely not the time.

Gravis activated another holographic screen, and the image of the *Sky Serpent* shimmered into motion above the table—sleek lines of steel gliding over snow-drenched peaks.

"Agent Strange, you will pose as a high-society passenger. Grant, you will infiltrate as onboard security staff. We believe Veyne will make his move in the VIP car."

The screen shifted to a close-up of a pendant, an emerald winking at its center.

"This," Gravis said, "is likely the containment vessel. Intel suggests it's currently in the possession of one Celene Ardra, a twenty-year-old socialite. She is likely unaware of what she's carrying. Your task: secure the pathogen and neutralize Veyne without incident."

"Without incident," Solomon repeated, his tone dry as desert sand.

Gravis didn't smile. "The train departs in two hours. Good luck."

Barnabas cleared his throat gently. "You'll want to report to Quartermaster Services before you depart. They'll issue clothing, tools, weapons—everything you'll need for the mission."

I nodded quickly, relieved at the practicality of it, then blurted, "Do I get a fur coat, too?" The words escaped before I could stop them, and I winced, heat rushing into my cheeks.

Barnabas's eyes softened, a flicker of amusement breaking through his usually solemn features. "Only if you ask nicely."

Even Solomon's mouth twitched, though he hid it a second later.

The mountain air bit at my cheeks as I stepped onto the glass platform. Snow glittered under the station's lights, and the sleek silver body of the *Sky Serpent* stretched out like a blade against the night.

My gown—a deep sapphire chosen for elegance and movement—swished around my ankles. The fur coat was heavy and warm, though I felt like a fraud draped in it. Still, this was my first mission, and I had a feeling I'd better get used to becoming someone else. A chameleon, they'd called it in training—ready to shift personality and tactics at a moment's notice, or on the whisper of a wind.

I lifted my chin, trying to summon the confidence the role demanded, and presented my forged invitation.

From my earpiece came Solomon's voice, deep and calm: "*Breathe, Monique. You'll pass out before the mission even starts.*"

"I'm breathing," I muttered, stepping onto the train. "... professionally inhaling."

A low chuckle slipped through the line—short, rough, gone almost as soon as it came. But it sent a jolt through me all the same, sharp as the mountain air.

The *Sky Serpent* purred beneath my heels as I stepped into the grand entrance car. Crystal chandeliers swayed lightly above plush red carpets, scattering light across polished brass trim. At the far end, a string quartet played, their music weaving through the air, blending with the hum of well-dressed passengers chattering about winter estates and vintage wines.

Posture straight. Shoulders back. Eyes ahead, but not too sharp. I could almost hear my instructors drilling it into me. *Walk like you belong. Listen more than you speak.*

I straightened, trying to embody every note of that training, but my stomach still performed backflips, like it hadn't gotten the memo.

I didn't have to look far for Solomon.

There he was—Agent Grant—dressed in a tailored black uniform with silver trim, a discreet badge pinned over his heart. He stood near the coat check, scanning guests with an expression that bordered on bored, though I could tell his sharp eyes missed nothing. When his gaze flicked briefly to me, heat threatened to rise to my cheeks again.

Professional, I reminded myself. *Professional and composed.*

"Your ticket, madam?" a uniformed attendant asked.

I handed it over with what I hoped was a practiced smile, smoothing my voice until it came out silk-smooth. "Of course."

As I glided past, I caught Solomon speaking softly into his earpiece.
"You're clear, Monique. Keep walking. VIP car is three down."

I resisted the urge to respond aloud. Instead, I let my gaze drift toward the passing windows, twitching my lips in the faintest acknowledgment.

Blend in. Flow with the crowd. Every step measured. Every glance accounted for. That was the lesson, and now it wasn't theory. This wasn't a simulation room where they erased mistakes at the end of the day. The stakes were real. Every movement, every breath, mattered.

The VIP car was a palace of glass and velvet, with private alcoves glittering like miniature thrones for the wealthiest passengers. I chose a seat with a perfect view of the room, legs crossed, posture poised exactly the way training dictated.

It didn't take long to spot the pendant—an emerald teardrop glinting on the bosom of a young brunette socialite. Celene Ardra. She laughed too loudly at her companion's jokes, all bright smiles and nervous energy, clearly unused to such extravagant attention.

She had no idea.

A soft chime buzzed in my ear.

"Target confirmed. You're eyes-on?" Solomon's voice was steady, low, cutting through the hum of chatter.

"I see it," I murmured under my breath, letting my lips barely move. "And... she's twirling it around like it's a party trick. I feel like we should bubble-wrap her."

A low hum of amusement vibrated back through the line.

"Stay put. I'll sweep the train for Veyne."

The channel clicked quiet, leaving me with nothing but the music and laughter around me. My smile stayed fixed, but my heart kicked harder. Training was *blend in, hold your cover*, but suddenly the room felt too bright, too sharp, and I was painfully aware I was on my own.

I didn't want to just sit there looking decorative, but the opportunity presented itself when Celene's companion rose and wandered off toward the bar. For a moment she looked ready to stand as well, then hesitated and dropped back into her seat.

I leaned in, seizing the moment. "Why don't you join me?" I asked lightly, letting my voice carry just the right touch of warmth. "I hate these trips without conversation."

She smiled, relieved, and slid into the chair across from me. "Celene Ardra," she said brightly.

"Amara Delynn," I replied, offering the name printed on my false identification, careful to let it roll off my tongue as if I'd worn it all my life.

We slipped easily into chatter—clothes, travel, the ridiculousness of luxury menus. She was young, eager to talk, and that made it simple enough to keep her distracted.

At the right moment, I let my eyes flick to the emerald pendant. "That's beautiful," I said, admiration soft in my tone. "Wherever did you get it?"

Her fingers brushed the stone. "A gift. A mysterious man pressed it into my hand at a party last week. Said it suited me." She giggled, twirling it once before letting it fall back against her chest.

Before I could press further, her companion returned, and Celene excused herself with another smile, drifting back to her alcove.

I sat straighter, the weight of her words pressing harder than the fur coat on my shoulders. *Mysterious man*. I didn't need Solomon in my ear to know what that meant.

Half an hour slid by in elegant discomfort. I pretended to sip champagne, letting the bubbles touch my lips but never swallowing, all while angling my ears toward nearby conversations. Every creak of the train, every clink of a glass, set my heart thumping like an alarm.

I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. And when I finally dared a glance up, there he was—Solomon—across the room, leaning casually against the wall. He looked almost detached, but his eyes were razor sharp, sweeping every corner, every shadow.

For a heartbeat, our eyes met.

I resisted the dangerous urge to smile. Instead, I reached into my purse and flipped open my compact, pretending to update my make-up. *Blend in. Don't draw attention. Always give them a reason for the glance.*

The intercom crackled, and the train gave a sudden lurch, plunging us forward at breakneck speed into the Arasven Mountains.

I'd just relaxed into the rhythm of champagne glasses and string music when a uniformed attendant lingered a few steps away, his eyes narrowing on the invitation I'd already handed over. He looked again at me, then back at the manifest on his tablet, lips tightening.

"Pardon me, madam," he said, edging closer. "May I see your ticket again?"

My pulse stumbled. *Stay calm. Breathe. Smile.* Training whispered through my head, but theory differed from having his suspicion aimed squarely at me.

I tilted my chin, letting a touch of impatience into my tone. "Really? Again? I thought this was a luxury train, not a courtroom." I laughed lightly and slid the folded card across, careful not to grip it too tightly. "Perhaps you should double-check everyone else as well—I'd hate to be singled out."

The attendant blinked, surprised by my sudden confidence. He glanced at the card, scanned it again, and his posture shifted. “My apologies, madam. Enjoy your evening.”

I gave him a gracious smile as I tucked the ticket away. Only when he walked off did I let out the breath I’d been holding, my fingers tingling with leftover nerves.

Improvisation, I reminded myself, trying to slow my heart. *Chameleon. Blend in, adapt, move forward.*

A soft chime buzzed in my ear.

“*Not bad, Monique,*” Solomon’s voice murmured, low and smooth. “*But next time, don’t let him see you hesitate.*”

Heat crept up my neck, though I kept my expression serene for anyone still watching. *Of course he noticed.* He always noticed.

Celene’s laughter rang out from her alcove, bright and too eager. She leaned forward, twirling the emerald pendant between her fingers as though it were a toy instead of a weapon waiting to happen.

“Isn’t it exquisite?” She gushed to the older gentleman seated beside her, tilting the jewel toward him so the green light danced across his face. He leaned closer, clearly more interested in the sparkle—and in her neckline—than in polite conversation.

My stomach knotted. *Don’t draw attention to it. Don’t pass it around.* But Celene was already sliding the chain into his hands, letting him lift the pendant for a better look.

I nearly choked on my champagne. If she handed it off—or worse, if he pocketed it—Veyne wouldn’t even need to make his move. The prize would float casually between cocktails and card games.

I forced myself to smile, angling my compact mirror just so, pretending to touch up my lipstick while keeping the necklace in sight. *Stay calm. Stay composed. Eyes on the target.*

But a cold thread of fear wound through me. The pathogen could change hands before Veyne even sets foot in this car.

"Monique." Solomon's voice crackled in my ear, crisp and flat. *"Status."*

"I've got eyes on the pendant," I whispered, careful not to move my lips. "It's—she's—showing it off like a party favor."

A beat of silence. Then his voice, steady as stone: *"Hold position. Don't spook her. Report if it changes hands."*

That was it. Clinical. Efficient. Like I was nothing more than another set of eyes in the field.

I forced a smile for anyone glancing my way and angled my compact mirror again. *Cold, dismissive.* I knew he was only focused. Still, my chest tightened. To him, this was a mission. To me, it was a mission—with him.

I kept my posture elegant, champagne glass poised, doing my best to vanish into the glitter of the car. Celene, predictably, drifted back toward me once her companion turned away, eager for conversation.

"It's terribly dull, don't you think?" she sighed, twisting the pendant again like it was nothing. "My father says these trips are important for networking, but honestly, the food's the only redeeming feature."

I let out a polite laugh; the kind drilled into me during training. *Blend in, listen more than you speak.* "The menu is impressive," I agreed smoothly, eyes flicking to the emerald without betraying the tension coiling in my chest.

"*Update.*" Solomon's voice cut into my ear, clipped and professional.

"Target still in possession," I murmured softly, lips brushing the rim of the glass. "She's flaunting it, but it hasn't changed hands."

"Copy. Maintain cover." That was all—no warmth, no reassurance. Just instructions.

I swallowed the prickle of disappointment and flashed Celene another polite smile. *Professional, Monique. He's doing his job. So should you.*

Static buzzed faintly in my earpiece, then Solomon's voice came through—steady, unshaken. But something was wrong with the comms.

"Monique. Status."

I swallowed, keeping my expression calm for anyone watching. "Still in position. Target's secure." My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

"Good. Stay put. Don't draw attention."

That was it. No comfort, no softness, just the same clipped authority as before.

I told myself it was fine—that this was who he was, who he had to be. Yet, a little piece of me ached for something more. For him to say *you're doing fine*. For him to sound like he saw me, not just the mission.

I straightened my shoulders, plastered on another calm smile for the car, and let the thought go. Professional. Always professional.

The minutes dragged, stretched thin. Beyond the windows, jagged peaks loomed, ghostly white in the moonlight.

My comm crackled with static. Solomon's voice had been sharp a moment ago, but now it dissolved into garbled fragments I couldn't piece together. I pressed a finger to my ear, straining to catch anything coherent. Nothing but broken syllables and static hiss.

Cut off.

My smile stayed fixed for the benefit of the surrounding passengers, but inside the knot in my stomach tightened. No signal meant no anchor. I was on my own.

That was when I noticed a movement near the far alcove. A man—not staff, not a passenger I’d seen before—slid into the car. His coat was expensive enough to pass, but the way his eyes scanned the room wasn’t casual. They landed inevitably on the emerald around Celene Ardra’s neck.

My heart skipped. Was it Veyne? Or one of his people? The man didn’t look the image Gravis had shown me, so I assumed he was one of Veyne’s scouts or someone who liked emerald pendants around the necks of naïve, pretty young women.

I kept my posture poised, glass in hand, even as the air in the car seemed to thicken. Passengers muttered, attendants whispered into their links, and the chandeliers swayed overhead with every faint tremor from the mountains.

This man drifted toward Celene’s alcove with an ease that felt practiced, leaning down to murmur something that made her laugh. Too quickly, too trusting. She lifted the emerald pendant between her fingers as if to show him, and my stomach twisted hard.

No. Not now.

My comm hissed with nothing but static. No Solomon, no calm instruction, no anchor. Just me.

This was his chance. And if I hesitated, the pathogen could vanish into the chaos before I even blinked.

The stranger leaned closer to Celene, his smile polite, his voice low enough I couldn’t catch the words. But I didn’t need to. His eyes weren’t on her face. His eyes fixed on the emerald at her throat.

My fingers tightened around the stem of my champagne flute.

Static fizzed in my ear, then Solomon's voice broke through—sharp, fractured. “...*hold position... don't spook her... repeat, hold*—“The rest dissolved into garbled noise.

I froze, pulse hammering. *Orders are orders. Don't move. Don't draw attention.*

But then Celene laughed, tipping her head back, and the pendant swung free like bait in the water. The man's hand drifted toward it—casual, practiced, a fisherman waiting for the tug.

If I wait, it's gone.

My training screamed one thing; my instincts screamed another. My throat felt dry as ash. Solomon wasn't here. The comms were breaking apart. It was just me.

And if I hesitated, the pathogen would walk right out of this car before Veyne even showed his face.

I rose from my chair with what I hoped was effortless grace, the smile still frozen on my lips. The stranger's hand hovered, fingers almost brushing the emerald. Too close.

“Celene, darling,” I began, lifting my glass in a little toast—and let it tip.

Champagne splashed down the man's sleeve and across his expensive coat. He jerked back with a curse, patting frantically at the spreading stain. Gasps and laughter rippled around us as passengers turned to watch.

“Oh heavens, I'm so terribly clumsy!” I cried, reaching forward as if to dab at him with a napkin. My other hand slid fast and certain, plucking the emerald pendant cleanly from his distracted grip.

Celene giggled behind her hand, half-apologizing for me, half enjoying the spectacle. “She's hopeless,” she told the man, who was muttering darkly at the mess.

By the time anyone looked again, the necklace was back where it belonged, dangling safely against her chest.

I sank into my seat, cheeks hot, heart hammering. *Rookie move. Absolutely rookie.* But it worked, and the man left the car in a huff.

Crystal chandeliers swayed gently as the Sky Serpent glided through the mountains. Laughter rose over the polished notes of the string quartet, champagne glasses clinked, and the soft rhythm of conversation filled the luxury car. Even the storm outside felt far away, shut out by velvet curtains and the hum of the engine.

Then the world lurched.

The brakes shrieked. The chandeliers crashed against their chains. Crystal flutes shattered as passengers pitched forward, tumbling over tables and into one another. Panic rippled through the car as attendants rushed to calm people, their voices straining to sound reassuring.

Someone screamed.

Steam hissed into the car, curling like smoke. The quartet's instruments clattered to the floor in a discordant wail, and for a moment panic rippled through the crowd. Voices shouted over one another, frightened, angry, demanding answers.

And then—the speakers crackled.

“Good evening, passengers.” The voice was smooth, calm, too calm. “I regret interrupting your fine journey, but introductions are in order. An avalanche blocked the track ahead. No need for alarm. The conductor is... otherwise occupied. My name is Dr. Leor Veyne.”

A ripple of confusion spread through the car. People leaned toward one another, whispering. The string quartet had gone silent, bows frozen mid-air.

I have business to conduct. One of you . . .” his voice sharpened, with the faintest edge of a smile beneath it, “. . . is wearing my merchandise.”

My eyes shot back to Celene, who sat stiff and pale, her hand rising unconsciously to the emerald at her throat.

“Don’t look so frightened, my dear,” Veyne said, as though speaking directly to her. “You were simply... chosen to carry it. Consider it an honor.”

I tightened my grip on the champagne flute, forcing myself to sit tall, to smile faintly, to be nothing more than another passenger weathering a sudden stop. Inside though, my heart hammered. *Avalanche. We’re stuck. And Veyne... this is exactly when he’ll make his move.*

The lights still trembled from the sudden stop when the intercom crackled to life once again. “*Ladies and gentlemen, remain calm. We won’t be long. Security staff, stand down. If something blocks my signal, I will shatter the emerald, and the pathogen will bloom in every corner of this train.*”

Gasps rippled through the passengers, followed by a terrified silence. My chest constricted as the voice continued, deliberate and unhurried.

“*This train runs on sealed ventilation. I’ve rigged the valves. One command, and the pathogen will ride the air like smoke. No survivors.*”

I turned toward the privacy alcove just in time to see Celene yanked back into her seat by the so-called steward, now clearly no steward at all. The emerald pendant glinted against her trembling chest. The

privacy screen between alcoves had shattered in the chaos, leaving me a narrow line of sight into the room where she sat frozen.

“Solomon,” I whispered, heart slamming. “He’s got her. He’s got the pendant; he’s threatening to break it.”

A hand touched my arm, grounding me. Solomon was suddenly there, dark uniform streaked with dust from the sudden stop. He leaned in close, eyes sharp, voice low enough for only me.

“Breathe, Monique.”

I swallowed hard. “We can’t just wait—he’ll do it—”

His gaze flicked to the alcove, reading the situation in a single glance. For a heartbeat, something unreadable passed over his face—then he masked it with steel.

“We do this smart,” he said, clipped and certain. “One wrong move and we kill everyone on this train.”

My throat tightened, torn between the urge to act and the bitter truth in his words. The pendant gleamed in the stranger’s grip, and Celene’s eyes were wide, brimming with terror.

Solomon’s eyes swept the shattered privacy screen, calculating angles I couldn’t see. “He’s rigged more than the pendant,” he murmured. “Gas valves, maybe explosives. I’ll go under the train, trace the wiring, get close to the VIP car from below.”

My pulse kicked harder. “And me?”

He studied me for a moment, unreadable. Snow swirled in through a crack in the alcove’s window, stinging my cheeks. Finally, he said, “The roof. You’ll climb up in the storm and drop down at the rear exit. When he’s distracted, we move together.”

The word *we* steadied me, even as my stomach twisted at the thought of scrambling across the roof in this weather. I nodded, keeping my voice calm. “We don’t act until we have eyes on Veyne and the pendant.”

“Correct.” He adjusted the comm in his ear, already slipping into motion.

After a moment, a burst of static hissed, then his voice cut through my line, low and almost amused: “*Still breathing, Monique?*”

I couldn’t help it. My lips curved. “Still professionally inhaling.”

For a heartbeat, silence, and then a brief, rough laugh, gone as quickly as it came.

A flicker of warmth lit through me. Then the channel clicked quiet, and we moved.

The wind hit me like a slap the moment I cracked open the emergency hatch and hauled myself onto the roof. Snow lashed my face in horizontal sheets, stinging like needles, while icy gusts clawed at my gown. I’d stripped down to the black thermal mission suit just before climbing out, but it did little against the mountain cold roaring over the *Sky Serpent*’s sleek exterior.

“Monique,” Solomon’s voice came through my earpiece, low and steady against the howl of the storm. “You’re sure about this route?”

I crouched low, boots catching the thin traction lines etched along the roof. My teeth clenched against the sting of the wind. “Unless you’d rather trade places with me on this rooftop runway, yes. This is the best angle. I can drop in behind the rear door.”

A pause, filled only with static and the roar of the gale. Then his voice again, softer, carrying something I couldn’t quite name.

“You don’t have to prove anything.”

The words caught me off guard, warming me more than the thermal suit ever could. I pressed my body closer to the roofline, heart thudding. *Maybe not. But I have to prove it to myself.*

His words stopped me for half a breath. *He thinks I'm showing off?*

"No," I said firmly, breath frosting in the air. "I'm just doing the job, what you asked me to do."

Another pause.

"Copy that."

Then the line went quiet.

I pushed forward, crouched low, one hand steadying myself on the icy roof ridge, the other gripping the sidearm holstered at my thigh. The wind screamed past, tugging at me with every step, but I kept moving.

Below, the VIP car glowed with warm golden light, a golden cocoon against the storm. Through the vents, muffled voices rose and fell—the clink of glasses, nervous laughter that didn't reach the heart. Somewhere in that car, Dr. Leor Veyne was preparing to unleash a nightmare.

No pressure, I thought grimly, forcing my focus forward. *None at all.*

The storm roared around me, drowning out almost everything—except his voice.

"I'm under the train, moving toward the VIP car. The maintenance lattice is intact. Ice is bad, but I can crawl it."

I pressed myself lower against the roofline, straining to hear him through the static.

A pause, then his voice again, grimmer this time. *"Veyne's been here. The control box is rewired—sloppy, but lethal. Fail-safe confirms it. If the pendant's cracked or I cut the wrong line, vents flood the whole train. Aerosolized."*

A chill knifed deeper than the snow. *So it's real. One wrong move and everyone in here is gone.*

He keyed his mic again. *"The train is rigged. We'll only get one chance at this. You in position?"*

I tightened my grip on the icy ridge, breath ragged. "I'm at the rear door. Give me the word."

Silence. I imagined him under there, crouched in the shadows, fingers hovering over the wires. He wasn't a man who hesitated without cause.

Finally: *"On my mark."*

The line went dead silent. Just the wind, the pounding of my pulse, and the glow of the car beneath me.

I reached the lip of the rear doorway, crouching low against the wind. Through the beveled glass, I saw Celene Ardra—terrified but alive—perched rigidly on a velvet bench. Veyne loomed nearby, a small device glowing in his palm.

The pendant at Celene's throat pulsed faintly green.

"Solomon," she whispered, breath misting, "the system's armed. He's ready to trigger."

"Copy. You drop on my mark. I'll breach from below."

Her heart thudded. She nodded, though he couldn't see.

A breath. The storm howled.

Then his voice, low and sharp: *"Now."*

The rear door shattered inward as I dropped from above, boots slamming onto the velvet floor. A flash charge burst white across the cabin, dazzling just long enough to stagger the room.

Veyne spun, ripping the pendant from Celene's neck with one hand and snapping a pistol up with the other. "Don't move!"

I dove, a round crack passing my ear, exploding a bottle behind me in a spray of glass and champagne.

The floor erupted. Solomon rose through smoke and splinters like a phantom of war. In one motion, he tore the pistol from Veyne's grip and drove an elbow into his chest, flinging the doctor across the table.

Monique scrambled to her feet, weapon leveled. Celene sat frozen on the bench, tears streaking her cheeks.

The pendant—the bioweapon—lay between them, casing cracked, pulsing faint green.

“Do not move!” Solomon barked.

Veyne clawed toward it anyway, madness twisting his features. “If I can’t sell it,” he spat, “you’ll all die with it!”

I launched forward, sliding across the carpet. My hand closed around the pendant an instant before his. Heat seared my palm, a sickening tick-tick-tick vibrating up through my bones. “Containment capsule—NOW!”

Solomon snapped a silver cylinder from his belt and tossed it across the room. I caught it, nearly fumbling in my panic, and slammed the pendant inside. My fingers twisted the cap tight.

For two heartbeats, nothing.

Then—click. The glow died.

The silence that followed roared louder than the storm outside.

Snow-weighted quiet pressed down on us. Veyne slumped, gasping, until Solomon wrenched his arms behind his back and locked the cuffs in one smooth, merciless motion.

My arms trembled as I rose, the containment capsule clutched to my chest like it was made of glass—no, worse, like it was made of guilt.

“Is it over?” Celene’s voice was a broken whisper.

I looked to Solomon. His gaze flicked from the sealed cylinder to me. His jaw tightened. “It’s over,” he said.

But the way he said it made the air colder than before.

The Sky Serpent shuddered as its brakes screeched, steam venting into the freezing air. I braced myself against the seat as the luxury cars slowed to a halt on the narrow stretch of mountain track.

Guards herded us into the central car within minutes. The passengers clung to blankets, shaken but alive, while the crew tried to restore order. Celene Ardra dabbed delicately at her lip with a silk handkerchief, her wide eyes never leaving Solomon.

“Mr. Grant,” she purred, her voice trembling just enough to sound dramatic. “You saved us all. I simply must buy you a drink when we’re back in Port Ilvena.”

Solomon pressed an ice pack against his jaw, unreadable as ever. “Appreciate the offer, but no.”

The look on her face nearly made me laugh. Nearly.

The train’s horn wailed as the systems sputtered back online. Outside, snow swirled in the early dawn, and far down the valley I spotted a small aerial skiff approaching—local authorities at last.

I tugged my fur coat tighter and glanced at Solomon. His jacket was ruined, the crisp lines shredded by frost, blood, and combat. And still—he looked unfairly good. “You know,” I said, “for all that drama, you wore the hell out of that outfit.”

He gave me a blank look. “Next time, you’re the security crew.”

A snort escaped before I could stop it. “Deal. I look better in black and white, anyway. I just can’t quite see you as a socialite.”

The skiff descended in a wash of wind and steam. Medics and officers spilled out, taking custody of the passengers. Guards hauled Veyne away in cuffs as he still raved about wasted genius. They wrapped Celene in another blanket and swept her off the platform while she still snuck backward glances at Solomon.

I stayed beside him as the chaos ebbed. The mountains rose sharp and white around us, the morning sun cutting through the mist.

For the first time all night, I let out a long breath. “Mission accomplished,” I whispered.

He didn’t answer. His gaze stayed fixed on the horizon.

Local authorities and medics swiftly offloaded and escorted the Sky Serpent’s passengers.

I stood just beyond the tracks, the crisp morning air biting at my cheeks. The adrenaline had finally burned off, leaving a heavy weight in my chest that hadn’t been there before.

Solomon stepped up beside me, silent.

I glanced at him. He was now bandaged on the side of his face, and his hand carried the thermal case containing the sealed bioweapon. His expression was unreadable as always—but there was something softer in the lines of his jaw.

We stood like that for a long moment, watching the mist curl up from the mountains.

Finally, I said, “So. That was my first mission.”

He gave the faintest nod. “You did more than well.”

I shrugged, trying to disguise the flicker of hope rising in my chest. “Could’ve done without the rooftop frostbite.”

Something escaped him—a breath, not quite a laugh but close enough that it made me want to smile.

I turned toward him fully. “Maybe you didn’t want to be here. Maybe I wasn’t what you wanted for a partner. But—thank you. For trusting me. For not... treating me like a rookie.”

For a moment, he just stared at me. Then, with a tension I felt more than saw, Solomon stepped forward and pulled me into a hug.

It wasn’t tight. It wasn’t rehearsed. Just one quiet, steady moment of warmth in the middle of cold, sterile everything. His arms lingered.

And then he hesitated. Just slightly. His breath caught. His grip loosened.

I pulled back first, suddenly unsure. My voice cracked as I said, “Mission complete.”

He nodded but said nothing.

And when he turned and walked away, I stood there watching him go—hands at my sides, heart doing something complicated I didn’t understand. Maybe that hug meant something. Or it didn’t, just what people do when they’ve been through hell together.

Or maybe it meant everything, but whatever it was all about, I was overthinking it.

I was just about to head home when someone called my name. I turned and found Gravis Denaley striding toward me.

“Monique, where’s Solomon?”

I gestured vaguely down the street. “He went that way.”

“All right, I’ll catch him later.” His eyes lingered on me, steady. “You all did a great job tonight. And I think you and Solomon make a great team. I’m going to partner you with him.”

For a beat, I just blinked at him. *Partnered—with Solomon Grant?*

I pasted on what I hoped was a cool, professional smile. “Sure. Sounds great.”

Inside though, my heart was pounding. Excitement, disbelief... and a flicker of panic. I wasn’t sure which scared me more—working alongside Solomon every day, or finding out if that hug actually meant something.

Personal Note: Solomon and I became partners, and we worked together for a couple of years until the day he disappeared and no one knew what had happened to him. We all suspected he was dead. It broke my heart because I believed I had fallen in love with him until . . .

Author's Notes

You can read more about Monique and the rest of her story regarding Solomon in *Darkness Hovering: The Jeopardy Directive* File 1

I hope you enjoyed the story! When you read *Darkness Hovering*, you'll understand more about why Monique hesitates at the end and puts Garrison off when he proposes. She tells her side of things after becoming Solomon's partner—never realizing what personal struggles he was carrying. It isn't until Book 7, when Solomon takes center stage, that Monique finally learns the truth. With all the pieces in place, she makes peace with the past—and at last agrees to marry Garrison.

It's a great story, so if you haven't had time to read it yet, I hope you will!

Another story you may enjoy –

At the beginning of *Darkness Hovering*, Garrison Wit discovers that his father, the emperor of Astua, is being blackmailed. His father has a plan, but Garrison is too reactive to listen. Instead, he devises a plan of his own and calls on one of his closest friends from his military days. Leland Holland, now a spy working for the GSM Agency. He agrees to help him take down the criminal.

Personal File: Leland Holland tells the story of how Garrison and Leland became lifelong friends after meeting in the military. Through it, you'll see the depth of their relationship.

I hope you have time to read it also!

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