

Saint Of Cats

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Two

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ISBN-13: 978-1517128920
ISBN-10: 1517128927

Published by Upatree Press August 2015

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SAINT OF CATS

In the direct sequel to *Project Nightingale*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence's latest undercover mission goes dangerously off book. Disavowed and millions of miles from home, Spence resorts to increasingly desperate measures to evade the unwanted attentions of their captor – GETEC Supervisor Greg Hull.

Neither of them can predict the kind of horror that is about to unfold. Whilst the survivors recuperate, the Martian Marine Corps and British International Intelligence join forces to avenge the atrocity. However, not everyone is playing by the rules...

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Chapter One – Utterly Unhinged

Nightingale Spence stepped clear of the shower cubicle and took a moment to consider what the mirrored doors of the wardrobes pictured. A thin, overly pale body that had never filled out as one might have expected it to. It remained the perfect frame to drape in a false identity. Careful application of synthetic skin, false hair, and contact lenses; add in a padded body stocking for the required musculature or curves. *Pitch the voice just so, memorise any relevant details, and voila – a whole new persona to hide the empty shell.*

By now GETEC undoubtedly knew of the RCS and its deployment for the Boston incident. Hull would spot the shape of things immediately, but he couldn't object to the deception without admitting to attempted false imprisonment. Likewise, any of the information that had been gathered from the RCS could never be presented as evidence in a

trial, and nor could the hard drive stolen from Hull's personal computer.

It was a stalemate; and Spence was simply too tired to care which way the cards fell for the next hand. Quincy's revelation had been the final straw. There had to be a limit – didn't there? Raising the dead as cybernetic hybrids was certainly crossing some line. It shouldn't matter who the deceased had been. *Dead is dead – Rosa knew that. So did Whitby. I can't believe they thought they could do this!*

Greg Hull smiled beneath his multi-spectrum goggles. The slight figure currently redressing in the apartment next door was built for speed and agility. He definitely had the advantage with regards to muscle mass and height. The supervisor moved silently back to the balcony of the darkened apartment. It was an easy step across. Behind him, the four teenaged occupants slept on; wrung out after a hard night of partying. The Tuscan climate had seen them leave the doors to the balcony open. Not the wisest decision with regards to security. *Just kids; they'll learn better given time. That dead wannabe thrill killer in the bathroom*

might even help to motivate them.

A swift inspection confirmed that the British operative had taken far more care in deterring would-be intruders. Hull drew the multi-tool from his belt and disabled the alarm in thirteen point six seconds. Then he set to work on the electronic lock, which beeped once as the balcony doors swung open. Once was more than enough warning - Spence was already bolting for the main corridor; barefoot, halfway dressed, reacting exactly as anticipated.

The stun net he had draped across the doorway held sufficient voltage to render its victim inert within moments. Hull let it run for an extra thirty seconds to be safe. Then he shut down the power cell and dragged the asset back into the apartment. They weren't someone to underestimate. Mellor had managed to dig up a surprising amount of information about them since their supposed demise.

"So - you're the infamous Housekeeping." There was no response. He rolled them onto their stomach and secured their hands behind their back with a high tensile plastic restraint. He wrapped two more of these bands about their ankles and knees. Then

he set to work taking down the stun net and closing all of the respective doors. Spence was shivering back towards awareness now. "I hear you identify as being socially non-gendered." A faint squawk of protest greeted Hull's hand as he crouched to ruffle the pale hair. "Yes; I know that you don't like to be touched."

"Then don't fucking touch me..!"

"It looks as if I should add switch to that list too. Is that why they cut you loose? Did you try ordering them around, Nightingale?"

"I don't know who you're talking about, Mr Hull."

"It's all in your file. Pembleton needs to rethink her security, by the way. My operative said it was embarrassingly simple to hack."

"Hacking a government database is illegal."

"Very illegal – if I get caught. You know, this reminds me of the conversation I had in Boston with your RCS. Were you piloting it, Nightingale?"

"No comment."

"Alright; let's go back to the other matter then. I understand you were cut loose by your Dominant twelve years ago. Got yourself blacklisted from the general Scene too. What did you do to piss them off?"

"No...fucking...comment..!"

"Struggling isn't going to work, Nightingale. Those restraints were designed to hold people far stronger than you."

"You won't get away with this."

"Who's going to step in? Your file lists you as having taken a leave of absence. They aren't expecting you back any time soon." He leant closer and lowered his tone. "Just between us, I don't really think that Pembleton expects you back at all."

"Is that supposed to scare me?"

"It's kind of difficult to scare someone who's never been anything other than terrified."

"I think you're confusing abduction with therapy, Mr Hull."

"Oh no: I'm not here to abduct you, Nightingale. I just want to clear up a few things between us."

"There is no 'us'!"

"Please don't read any subtext into that, Nightingale. This is purely business."

"Then you ought to have made an appointment."

"There's that dry British humour again. I like the way you people do that. It's pretty classy."

"Anachronistic and racist – you really do tick every box."

"Now we both know that's not what I meant. Quit trying to bait me, Nightingale. I won't rise to it: we're having this conversation."

"Well, it seems to be a bloody one sided sort of a chat so far, Mr Hull."

"That reminds me – whatever became of that fellow Welles? The security cameras caught him at Boston. He killed sixteen members of staff."

"He was rescuing a colleague from attempted vivisection. Go ahead and press charges; maybe they'll let the two of you share a cell."

"Ah yes; Craig Campbell. I hear you and he are pretty close."

"No comment."

"So, your personal life is one of your hard limits?"

"You claimed that this was strictly business, Mr Hull."

"Actually, I said purely business, not strictly. That's kind of Freudian. Do you like strictly better, Nightingale?"

"Freud was repeatedly shown to have been invalid. And this situation is more in line with the concept of *delectatio morosa*."

"You're just full of interesting facts. It's like interrogating an encyclopaedia."

"Do you class this as interrogating, Mr Hull?"

"It's really more of an evaluation. I like to know how my operatives think."

"I knew I smelt glue. You're utterly unhinged."

"And you're hired. Congratulations, Nightingale. Welcome to working for GETEC."

Pembleton took another sip of her tea. Her field operatives had no sooner arrived at headquarters than Benedict had demanded that Whitby should raise Ashley Jenkins from the dead. After all, she had been interrogated whilst in cryospace; there had to be a record of her consciousness somewhere. All that was required was for Whitby to connect that record with her corpse. It was the typical field operative response to a complex situation: blunt, simple, and immediate. Still, the conversation had forced Whitby to admit that Rosa was – well, whatever she had become. The research involved was intriguing. The senior technician's attempt at secrecy was another matter entirely.

Now the spymistress set her concerns aside

along with her teacup. "Gentlemen – how is this matter progressing?"

Whitby fidgeted with his glasses. "As Mr Moxton said, all I need is access to the main GETEC server. I can pull Dr Jenkins' cryospace record from that. The restoration process itself will be simple; especially now that Rosa is back at work. We should be able to upload the neural map back onto the patient's brain via a cybernetic implant."

"What a shame GETEC won't cooperate." Campbell checked his phone for the third time that hour. "Ma'am – I need to request some personal leave."

"Request denied, Mr Campbell. Housekeeping will return when they choose to."

Benedict couldn't shake the memory of how Ashley had looked when he visited her in medical that morning. "What about her mother – have you contacted Andrea yet, ma'am?"

Pembleton blinked. "Who?"

"She was one of my old marks, ma'am; a woman named Andrea Collins. Well, I suppose it must be Andrea Jenkins nowadays; she married some fellow named Eric after I left. He raised Ashley as his own."

"Am I to understand that you believe Ashley Jenkins to be your illegitimate daughter, Mr Benedict?"

"Yes, ma'am; I only found out whilst we were in the Caribbean. I would have mentioned it sooner but I was afraid that she mightn't have been permitted any medical care, what with the paperwork surrounding correcting the Familial Increase Licence and so forth."

His superior stepped out from behind her desk. She wore the look of a woman who had been pushed ever so slightly too far. "Mr Whitby – you're to get that damned neural map by whatever means necessary."

It had been a rough journey from Capoliveri to wherever this was. The plastic restraints were proving to be very uncomfortable. The improvised duct tape gag and stiflingly thick bag over head combination was almost as bad. The aircraft had landed; even with the hood, the sensation of air travel had been unmistakable. Spence could hear the GETEC operatives making the usual post flight checks. There was the tramp of booted feet over the cold ridges of the floor panels; then the

subsequent scuffing of concrete. A landing pad inside an internal hangar to judge by the echoes. *We could be anywhere in the world – perhaps even still on Elba if they went in circles long enough.*

Hull leant across and unbuckled the straps of the safety harness. The scent of his aftershave seeped through the hood. "Alright, it's time to get you to your new quarters, Nightingale."

There was a softer edge to his tone this time; presumably meant to lessen the impact of being lifted and carried. Spence filed that away under *clumsy attempt at traumatic bonding* and counted the steps being taken to wherever Hull was going. *Eighty-nine steps; turn left; ten steps; door – sounded heavy – another left; twenty-five steps; pause – a lift going down. Hangar is on the top level then. Christ only knows how many floors this is though.*

"I know you'll be counting; memorising the route. Right now, you're planning how to get away: I've seen the process before."

It's all mathematical; remember the route to the lift and head up to the top level. Kill anyone in the way. Simplicity itself really – exit from the lift; turn right; fifteen steps; spin – shit.

"See why memorising the route isn't going to work?"

Finally, there was a floor beneath them. Hull tossed the hood aside and peeled off the makeshift gag. "There we go – let's get the rest of this off too. I bet those restraints are getting pretty damn painful by now, huh?"

"We passed painful quite some time ago, Mr Hull." Spence twitched slightly as the supervisor cut through the plastic ties, and then wobbled backwards to lean against the wall of the cell. "So, what's next?"

"Next I take those clothes. You can be difficult or you can play nice, that's up to you. What's it going to be, Nightingale?"

Spence looked down and nodded once. "I'm entitled to a privacy screen. It's a legal requirement, Mr Hull."

"Nice it is; smart choice." He pressed a switch and activated the standard holographic screen. "The toilet and sink are in the cubicle to your immediate right. I'll pass you the gown once I have your clothing. Take all the time you need."

"Don't you have anywhere else to be, Mr Hull? Have you no other prisoners to menace?"

"I've decided that you're my special project for now, Nightingale. You get to have my undivided attention until you've fully acclimatised to working for GETEC."

"I already have a career, and Pembleton doesn't like it when her operatives jump ship."

"Trust me; you'll love it here." Spence's jeans landed at the supervisor's feet then. He tossed the paper garment over the screen in exchange. "And the rest of it; we don't want you hurting yourself."

"Do a lot of your interns hang themselves with their knickers or something?"

"Not on my watch, Nightingale."

Spence pulled on the gown and shuffled back around the screen to surrender the other items. "I don't need to use the facilities."

"Can't pee with an audience, huh?"

"More like dehydrated."

"Well we can't have that. I'll take you to the cafeteria."

"I forgot my dinner money."

There's that dry British humour again. Hull smirked. "It's my treat."

"Let me guess: positive reinforcement?"

Chapter Two – Breaking Point

Benedict had known that accepting the phone call from Ashley was a mistake even as he told the intermediary to connect them. He did it because there was no one else for her to contact. “Hello, Ashley. It’s Paul – what would you like to talk about?”

Her voice was steadier than last time. “I want to say that I’m sorry...for...for cutting you. I shouldn’t have done that, Paul.”

“I’m very glad that you understand that you made a poor choice, Ashley. It’s good to hear from you.”

“They make me take pills to show me how to think.”

“The medicine will help you to get better, Ashley.”

“I know that, but it makes me sleepy too. I don’t

like that part of it...it's like dreaming when I'm awake."

"It will get better eventually." He hoped that he was right about that. At present, he was paying the relevant professionals to continue her care, and he fully intended to do so for as long as was necessary.

The intermediary's voice informed him that Ashley had hung up. Benedict set down the receiver and rubbed at his eyes. He was exhausted. Somewhere amid the screaming and bouts of near catatonia, Ashley had disclosed that she knew who had been responsible for the containment breach at Prague. Professor Niall Foncette – the old fool had intended to present himself as the hero of the hour! Apparently, he had wanted to impress Dr Zarosky too. Ashley had hinted at him having had some sort of a crush.

Her insinuation failed to trigger the response that she had probably expected. Benedict's feelings regarding Zarosky were scrambled. Anya had not been one for typical romancing, and even more incredibly, they weren't thrown together by work. That had made a refreshing change. In fact, he had been thinking of asking the geneticist if she would consider moving in with him. Unfortunately,

life had other ideas. He still missed her deeply; especially the way that she used to shake her head and refer to him as "that man; Paul Benedict". Sharp witted; organised – always so very clear headed. Talking to Anya had been like stepping under a Scottish waterfall in the heart of March. Refreshing and overwhelming in equal measure.

No. Whatever Foncette may have imagined, whatever Ashley liked to imply, Anya had been too strong to fall into an unwanted affair. She had known her heart, and Benedict remained painfully aware of his having been bloody lucky to claim any place within it.

Hull shepherded his reluctant mentee out of the cell and along the somewhat gloomy corridor towards the elevator. "Our Intel suggests that you British operatives subsist on cheap booze and pain meds."

"You forgot the out-of-date packet noodles."

He sighed and shook his head as the elevator doors closed. "Joking aside, you really are seriously under nourished. It looks as if it's a long-term issue. You want to talk about that?"

"No."

"That's okay. Still - whenever you're ready to change your mind, I'll be here."

"We are *not* friends, Mr Hull."

"Give it time; I find that I tend to grow on people."

So does *ringworm*. "So, what's the special?"

"Steak and ale pie, with choice of salads. Traditional British pub grub, as you'd call it."

"I cannot even begin to describe just how very inaccurate your knowledge of British culture actually is."

"That sort of attitude isn't exactly helpful, Nightingale."

"Stop calling me that."

The elevator released them into yet another windowless corridor. This one smelled vaguely of hot food. "Don't you like your name?"

"I prefer to go by Spence."

"Why?"

"Run and find out."

"Can't do that; I'm buying you lunch instead."

"It's lunchtime then?"

"It's two fifteen in the afternoon. Feel better for knowing that, Spence?"

"A little bit, yes." *Sod the long game. I'm*

stabbing him in the eye with the first available item of cutlery.

"Your erstwhile Dominant really messed up your limits."

Spence whirled and glared at him. "Back off!"

Hull stepped closer but kept his hands loose at his sides. "Really – you want to do this here; in front of the entire cafeteria?"

"I'm not scared of you."

"I don't want you to be scared, Spence. I'm your supervisor; you should feel safe with me." He had backed the smaller operative into the corner by the potted plants now. The other diners were making a point of not looking in their direction.

The pale blue eyes locked onto his. "You're crossing a line, Mr Hull. I recommend that you stop now."

"Are you safewording?"

"We're not in that type of situation." Spence looked past him towards the menu board. "Can we please just eat?"

"Sure thing." *Broken down and then some.*
"Come on; let's get a tray and join the line."

"Thank you."

There was no pie left by the time that they

reached the counter. Hull frowned as Spence opted for plain brown rice instead. "Are you sure you don't want anything else with that?"

"I'm operating under the hypothesis that it's almost impossible to drug boiled rice. Besides; right now the risk of dying from food poisoning appeals to me on a statistical level."

"You're thinking of reheated rice; this is completely fresh. Plus, brown has a little fibre going for it, and magnesium. Still, don't complain if you end up with a sugar spike."

"What are you blithering on about, Mr Hull?"

"A single bowl of rice has the equivalent of almost a quarter of a cup of sugar in it. White rice in particular lacks nutrients and increases the risk of Type 2 Diabetes by ten percent. It contains no magnesium or fibre. And all rice prevents the absorption of iron, zinc, and B vitamins."

"Well, there's not a lot of point in bothering to add any vegetables to it then, is there?"

"Not especially. Maybe try the salmon for the sake of having some protein." Hull nodded to the senior catering assistant. "Hey, Dawson; how are things?"

Spence tuned out the man's reply and stared

dolefully at the offending bowl of carbohydrates. *I really didn't need to know that much about rice.*

Campbell sat at the end of the spare bed in Spence's flat and waited for his phone to ring. He didn't know what else to do. The non-gender's phone didn't connect any more. Their voicemail was full – probably from Campbell's own messages.

"Where are you, little canary?"

Talking to an empty room wasn't much better than internalising the matter. He wished that he'd gone looking sooner. A credit search had led him to a small holiday resort in Capoliveri. The place had been teeming with police and press: there had been a thrill killer, but he was dead and Spence was still missing. Pembleton flatly refused to authorise an investigation. That meant that Housekeeping's disappearance was work related rather than murder at least.

God, if You're listening, I want my friend back.

Prayer seemed as reasonable an option as anything else by now. He'd even gone back to Boston and kicked down the door of Hull's apartment. It had been stripped bare, and the estate agents claimed that the occupant hadn't

provided any forwarding address. Campbell was now banned from re-entering the United States.

Don't mess with me on this one, God.

Spence lay on the narrow bunk and counted the dots on the ceiling tiles. The lighting was too bright and the temperature too low for comfort, but it was still possible to meditate and the bathroom facilities were adequate. The main problem with living inside a windowless locked room was in not knowing how much time had passed. Every so often, the slot in the door opened and another MRE tossed in. There was by now a small pile of them. Spence knew better than to accept food from the hand that had been bitten – well, stabbed in this case. The expression on Hull's face had been worth the subsequent punishment. And it was surprising how long one could subsist on a belly full of carbohydrates. *Slow-release energy, don't you know?*

The glare of the overhead lighting ceased abruptly as the cell door hissed open. A familiar voice proved that a plastic spoon was not enough to kill the supervisor, even when applied to his jugular. "Hello again, Spence – it's good to see that

you haven't succumbed to arsenic poisoning. Rice is pretty risky stuff."

"No one actually likes foodies, Mr Hull."

"I'm pretty sure you're confusing foodies with hipsters."

"Can't I detest both equally?"

You're more rattled than you pretend to be. It wasn't time to push. Hull stepped closer and tossed the injured operative a dull grey jumpsuit and a pair of slip on gym shoes. "Get dressed."

Spence eyed the privacy screen between them warily as it polarised. "Cheers. Why aren't you dead?"

"GETEC has some very impressive medical facilities. I'm guessing that it wasn't you piloting that RCS back in Boston, or you'd know about the regenerative salve already. It's a shame that your former agency didn't fill you in on that."

"They aren't my former agency, Mr Hull."

"They've burnt you, Spence."

"They didn't burn me." Spence finished dressing and limped into view. "If you have to know, I walked."

"I wasn't referring to your little sabbatical on Elba. Pembleton knows that GETEC has you. She

filed the burn notice two days ago."

"Oh. So, is this the part where my shoulders sag and I admit defeat? Should my eyes be brimming with unshed tears?"

"No one's coming to save you." Hull glanced at his watch. "I tend to find that that's most people's breaking point. Anyhow, we need to get going now."

"Where is it that you imagine we'll be going to?"

The supervisor chuckled and motioned for Spence to walk on his left. "I get the feeling that you aren't quite ready to be around large groups of people. I've booked you in for some one-on-one physical training instead."

Sometimes Rosa wondered how the investigation into her abduction had been so very readily set aside. Pembleton assured her that it had been unavoidable. The analytics department was extremely busy: they needed to prioritise. They would investigate the footage from the storage facility in due course. The young technician fully understood the need to allocate resources sensibly. It was still disturbing how very swiftly the world spun. Whitby had reached her by telephone at nine thirty

on Saturday morning and she had given him the emergency code to burn her. By nine fifty, Spence and Campbell were fighting to save her life. In those twenty minutes, she had gone from a high functioning professional woman to – to what Campbell had found in that shipping container.

She didn't remember any of it. Who she was and what she knew now was based upon the cryospacial records that she had stored at headquarters. Rosa had uploaded her entire life's worth of experiences and thoughts as the frame for the project. The last update had been on Friday evening at seven twenty: a few theoretical equations that had seemed intriguing at the time. Twenty minutes, out of almost half a day in captivity – it was ludicrous! Who had taken her? What had they done to her in the intervening hours? As with the footage, the synthetic compound that had destroyed Rosa's brain remained unexplained.

Rewriting memories; altering minds; raising the dead to fight another day – it was all getting out of hand. The potential for abuse of this technology had never occurred to Rosa during her work on developing it. Now it haunted her constantly. *I died in that shipping container – at least the important*

part of me did. Death had left its mark on her psyche in some immeasurable fashion. There was more to being human than mere synaptic responses. Science ought not to try to hold claim to all the answers. Perhaps the Faithful were on to something.

She peered through the tinted glass of the doors. The minds of the medical staff had been in cryospace at the point of their deaths – their freshly cloned bodies still housed those memories at some level. Rosa wasn't fully confident that Pembleton had been correct in ordering their resurrection. It was a very different situation than that of her or Jenkins. *What happens if the recoding of their neural maps fails?*

One of the medics was blinking a little too rapidly. As Rosa watched, they began tugging almost absently at their sleeves. The others stared at them for a moment and then began to copy the behaviour. The young technician blinked away tears of frustration and pressed the intercom to summon security. "This is Dr Rosa – the restored have begun to demonstrate abnormal behaviours."

Chapter Three – Whatever I Want

“You took quite the beating back in the gymnasium. You doing okay now?”

Spence eased up into a sitting position on the medical gurney and eyed the speaker warily. Her lanyard read as Susan Kennedy. The physical training instructor's name was by now just as much of a blur as his face in Spence's mind. Sleep deprivation coupled with extreme physical exertion would do that.

Kennedy tried again. “I just wanted to offer you a friendly face. You don't seem to be acclimatising very well to working for GETEC.”

“I take issue with forcible recruitment.”

“Why? I mean, your agency burnt you already. They aren't likely to write you a glowing reference. GETEC's probably your best shot at employment now.”

"So I should just lie back and think of my pension?"

"Hell no – you should seize the opportunity! Make it work for you, you know? Apply for all advancements going."

"Is that what you do?"

"Damn right it is. I clawed my way off of Mars through the military route. Had to have my respiratory tract enhanced to qualify first – that was rough. Spent ten years as a Marine, and another four in command of the communications relay out by Deimos. Then GETEC offered me a place as a consultant here on Earth."

I am not your bloody biographer. "And you jumped at it."

"I guess you don't know what it's like applying for a visa to live on Earth. Nobody wants Martians; we're not regarded as good enough to live with the rest of you."

"That's not true; most governments are simply leery of accepting citizenship applications from the immediate family of cultists, criminals, and other social malcontents."

Kennedy snorted. "Kind of reminds me of Australia."

"I hadn't thought you to be an historian."

"I'm not. I do read though. There wasn't much else to do growing up during sand storms."

One of the numerous medical staff hustled in and tapped a series of keystrokes on the nearest terminal. Spence choked down the urge to bolt. It never proved to be sensible: there were too many locked doors and armed personnel between here and the lifts. *At least I'm not in restraints this time. Perhaps they're slipping. More likely they know that they have me trapped.*

The Martian sighed. "Look – we got off on the wrong foot. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I uh, well I had the impression that you might have needed someone to talk to."

"You may inform Supervisor Hull that this approach isn't going to work either. You're not my type."

Kennedy blinked. "I'm not here for Hull! Jesus – you think I'm playing you?"

"I think that you're trying to do so."

"No! I wouldn't do that; I've seen how he acts around you. It's obvious that you don't like it. I – I kind of know what that can be like. Being someone's property sucks."

"I'm not *anyone's* property."

"Good. Hold on to that, okay? And look me up if you change your mind about wanting to talk. I'll be around."

Spence stared after the Martian as she walked away. The medic returned and held out the usual offering of pain relief. "I don't understand why you keep refusing treatment. You're making things worse than they have to be."

"I prefer to keep my wits about me, thanks all the same."

"Well, you should take the next forty-eight hours to rest up. I've noted it in your file."

Whitby wrinkled his nose. "Mr Campbell, when was the last time that you showered?"

"Is that why we're here then – my personal hygiene?"

The boffin looked away. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Then how did you mean it?"

Something had gone abruptly and horribly wrong with all of this. Moxton took another sip of his whiskey. He wasn't certain how this intervention thing was supposed to go, but holding it here, in

unDer had probably been stupid. "Go home; we'll talk again when you're less strung out. Spence will be fine, mate."

"I dare either of you to show me one person who actually believes that." The field operative dragged his hands across the stubble that had formed on his jaw. "Where's Paul anyhow – or isn't he involved in your little support group?"

"He's busy taking care of Dr Jenkins." Moxton glared at Campbell. "Housekeeping needed a holiday, that's all there is to it. Why the fuck can't you respect that?"

All three of their phones shrilled into life simultaneously. It was a mass text from Rosa: *Need you back at headquarters urgently – K.R.*

"Another crisis to avert, it seems." Whitby tried not to show how relieved he actually was. "Look, Mr Campbell; I'll have a go at locating Housekeeping using the agency computers. I am sure that Mr Moxton is right though. Spence is hardly the sort to need rescuing."

"Cheers, boffin; this is one that I owe you." The field operative was abruptly less thunderously miserable. "You find Spence and I'll see to it that your murderous robot legions are given the respect

they deserve."

"They aren't murderous!"

"They have death rays built in; you can hardly claim them to be pacifists."

The driver held open the door of the nightclub for both of his companions. "Let's just focus on what's up with Dr Rosa for now, shall we?"

Campbell supposed that was practical. Aside from that little spate of resurrecting the dead, Rosa was generally quite sensible. If she claimed that something was urgent, then it most probably was. He just hoped that it wasn't bio-hazardous in nature. Isolation, even for quarantine purposes, wasn't something that he felt up to managing at this time.

Hull stepped into the cell and signalled for the door to close. "Lockdown – Protocol 7J4. Interrogation – Protocol 9K6." There was the faint decrease in sound that signalled all the cameras observing the cell were now inactive. "I understand that you've been creating trouble for yourself, Nightingale."

"I told you not to call me that."

"Well now you're going to tell me why."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then we'll be sealed in here together until you change your mind. I'm a very patient man."

"The same can't be said for some of your colleagues."

"Medical informed me about the incident with your physical trainer. Do you want someone else to take over that aspect of your programme?"

"I suppose so."

"Then what should you say to me?"

"How about the fact that the current chap thinks that you're getting soft?"

"Did he say that?"

"Yes."

"And is that why you attacked him?"

"If I'd attacked him, one or both of us would have ended up very dead, Mr Hull."

"So you didn't attack him?"

"No, I did not. I told him that I hadn't asked what he thought about you. Then he punched me. I woke up in medical."

"I'll look into that."

"You certainly ought to."

"Well there are probably a lot of things that we ought to do really, now aren't there?"

"That depends, Mr Hull."

"Depends on what exactly, Nightingale?"

"Why Pembleton wanted me to infiltrate GETEC for a start."

"She sent you in as her mole?"

"Long games are very fashionable this season."

"What about last season?"

"Some things never really lose their charm."

"Seriously; how long has this been an op?"

"I think you can probably guess that for yourself. This is what we do after all."

The supervisor sat down on the narrow bed beside his for once talkative mentee. "So, we're just a couple of spies being spies, huh?"

"Indeed we are." Spence pinned on a flatly calm expression as Hull shifted closer. "Nothing more than puppets watching the world burn down around us."

"Does that bother any part of you?"

"Puppets aren't allowed to feel bothered, Mr Hull."

"Then why are there so many stories about vengeful puppets running amok and being generally murderous?"

"That's only if someone hurts the puppeteer."

Hull smiled and traced his fingers across the pale angles of Spence's face and neck. "Are you hungry at all? You haven't been to the cafeteria today and it doesn't look as though you've opened any of those emergency rations either."

"I understand the ration packs contain a worryingly high number of calories per portion."

"I don't think that you need to concern yourself with restricting your food intake, Nightingale. If anything, you could do with gaining a few pounds. Medical have diagnosed you as suffering from long term borderline malnutrition."

Spence ignored the supervisor's soft tone; a decision that was made far simpler by his insistent caress. The job was what it always was: one damnable compromise after another. "I've been thinking - why did Pembleton send me to dig? It can't be because of Prague - unless GETEC were the ones that poisoned our operative there?"

"Britain had an operative in Prague?"

"Yes; they flagged some concerns about the research that was being conducted there."

"Let me guess, that was the research that got loose and resulted in an entire facility full of dead people for me and my team to clean up."

"That does sound awfully familiar."

"So you were there too?"

"I may have been pottering about on the edges."

"Were you the one that neutralised Saunders in the forest?"

"To be fair, I did tell him not to interfere with the robot."

"You know, some people would say that you really need to learn a few manners."

"What would be your response to that opinion, Mr Hull?"

He tangled his fingers in their hair. "Well, first of all I'd have you clean their shoes with your tongue."

"Mr Hull, regardless of GETEC's policies, there are numerous globally accepted norms that require you to back the fuck off right now."

Hull had been waiting to play his trump card. "Oh – didn't anyone tell you yet, Nightingale? This is a space station. We're about seventy-seven million kilometres outside of the jurisdiction for Earth." He leant in closer. "I can do whatever I want."

Benedict edged warily past the now inactive medical staff. "I got Rosa's text and came straight

to headquarters. The fellow at the desk said there was an issue in medical."

Whitby looked haggard. "It appears that the trauma of what happened to them wasn't fully erased from their neural maps prior to uploading them into these new bodies."

"What the devil does that mean?"

"It means that we don't have any functioning medical staff." Campbell waved from the far corner of the room. "They're all catatonic at present; likely to remain that way. Don't get sick is the current plan, apparently."

Moxton was overseeing the junior operatives charged with moving the unfortunate clones back into the ICU. "Can this be put right, Whitby? I mean; can you and Rosa cure them?"

"We thought that we already had. It seems that recoding thoughts and memories isn't all that reliable."

"Then it won't be possible to cure Ashley?" Benedict had hoped that the neural recoding process might have provided his daughter with some measure of peace.

Rosa shook her head. "We don't know that it wouldn't help in her case, Mr Benedict. It's feasible

that we could teach her brain how to react more positively to particular triggers. That will take time though. Dr Whitby and I would need to determine precisely what her difficulties are caused by."

"There is an entire team of psychoanalysts attempting to do just that right now. I'll put you in touch with them, Rosa." The older field operative paused. "I trust that you weren't planning on resurrecting the other victims?"

"Oh no – we don't have any basis for their neural maps to begin with! Anyhow that bio-hazard was simply too aggressive. Pembleton won't permit cloning them." Whitby gestured towards the last of the medics as they were stretchered out. "Fortunately, their genetic templates and neural maps were already stored, which made it simple."

"I'd hardly call raising the dead simple, boffin." Campbell nodded to Benedict. "How is she doing?"

"Ashley? Well – she's alive, her system is clean of any narcotics, and she acknowledges that she has a problem. It's not going to be easy. How about Spence – has there been any word?"

"Not yet, but Whitby assures me that he intends to dig."

Chapter Four – Far Beyond

Spence eyed the doorway of the currently abandoned communications room warily. "Mother Bird, this is Housekeeping, extraction required post haste. Please respond."

"How much trouble are you in, Housekeeping?" Pembleton's voice was a most welcome anchor.

"GETEC has a space station and I'm on board it. I just triggered a minor environmental breach to divert attention from the fact that I'm transmitting their entire database to Mr Whitby's computer."

"Why did you risk doing that? I told you to be subtle – observation only! You're operating far beyond your remit."

"Subtlety wasn't bloody working, ma'am."

"Very well – support will be with you as soon as is feasible. Stay alive for pity's sake."

Kennedy was determined to find some way past the non-gender's walls. "The doctors said that you should be fine with some rest. Do you remember how it happened?"

"It's all a blur, I'm afraid. I expect that I'm still in shock."

"Can the crap; this is a space station and someone deliberately sabotaged the environmental controls." The security officer nodded for the medical staff to leave the room. She lowered her voice. "Spence – did you cause the breach?"

"Why would you ask me that?"

"Because you didn't know that this was a space station. See, I'm guessing that maybe what happened with the environmental controls was just an accident. Maybe somebody pushed things a little too far – you panicked, and one thing just led to another."

"Am I really supposed to believe that one of GETEC's security officers gives a flying fuck about my wellbeing?"

"I don't agree with brutalising prisoners." Kennedy wasn't dissuaded. "Spence, there are rules. If Supervisor Hull did something inappropriate

then you need to report that."

Clearly, no one had ever explained how the spy game worked, or perhaps Kennedy just hadn't been paying any attention when they did. "I have nothing to report that anyone would care about. Thank you for your concern."

"I'm not going to let this slide, Spence. I'll talk to Supervisor Hull on your behalf."

You need to stop digging before you end up buried. "I really don't feel that that's advisable."

Kennedy patted the non-gender's hand. "Let me worry about that; you try to relax."

Spence had that odd sinking sensation that occurs when one's long game of choice spins abruptly out of orbit. Kennedy had picked up a loose end to all of this mess and inadvertently woven a trip hazard from her good intentions. *There really is nothing more troublesome than a well-intentioned random person, who is just doing their job.*

Hull thought that he might just space Kennedy and be done with it if she kept haranguing him about his personal life. "Are you finished making wild accusations?"

The security officer scowled and shook her head. "I know something happened in that cell, Sir. I'm not prepared to turn a blind eye to your misuse of power."

"Perhaps I haven't made myself clear, Kennedy. I have full authorisation to use whatever methods I deem to be appropriate in Spence's management. You should be more concerned with finding the saboteur."

She wasn't easy to cow. "My people are running all the necessary checks, Sir. The saboteur could be anyone – maybe even an employee. Either way, if they're still on board then we'll find them."

"Good to hear that – but if they aren't one of us then I'd like to know how the fuck they got on board in the first place."

"Sir, there's a shuttle approaching – they're one hundred and ninety minutes away now." Mellor enlarged the holographic display enough to identify the small craft. "It's the *HMS Gertrude*: one of British Intelligence's scout vessels."

Hull shrugged. "We knew they would show up eventually. Activate the defence grid; perhaps it will dissuade them. Assuming that they do manage to dock, have security standing by to repel

boarders. Use of terminal force is hereby authorised."

Kennedy cleared her throat. "Sir - you should talk to whomever it is that you answer to; you're going to need legal representation for this investigation...!"

The supervisor counted down from ten slowly before he removed the tip of the stun baton from the now inert Martian's chest. Some people really didn't know when to stop pushing. He nodded to Mellor. "Get this seen to as a matter of urgency."

Campbell fidgeted in his seat. The spacesuit was bulky and uncomfortable, and the air inside the shuttle was as stale as the emergency supply contained within the tank on his back. "How long do you suppose it will be until we reach this mysterious space station, Moxton?"

"I'd estimate just over three hours at maximum rate. I guess you were right about it not being a holiday."

"When you've been in the business for as long as I have, you get a sense for when there's a long game running." The field operative was trying to ignore the horrific closeness of the surrounding

vacuum. "I just hope nothing's gone too terribly wrong."

Moxton was more familiar with the oddities of space travel. "I take it that you aren't enjoying this road trip?"

"Whatever gave me away?"

"Mostly the cold sweat of fear, mate!" The driver – and pilot – chuckled. "Don't over think it; intra-system travel is safer than taking the motorway nowadays."

"I'm afraid that I feel happier when there isn't a limited supply of oxygen available." Campbell checked the activation button for his re-breather unit yet again. "Besides; you can't freeze to death on the motorway."

"You can if some other fucker dumps a tank load of liquid nitrogen on top of your car." Moxton indicated his closely shaven head. "My hair follicles never really recovered."

"I thought you just favoured the extra streamlining. How in the world did you survive that?"

"I had to kick my way out through the rear windscreen. The last thing I remember before I woke up in medical was realising that my fucking

hair was snapping off at the roots."

"So, what happened to the fellow responsible?"

"My insurance company and his insurance company are still arguing about the finer details. It was a bloody accident – can you believe that? The release valve malfunctioned and that was that: six cars and their passengers fast frozen."

"The perils of an icy road, eh?"

The third member of the party beeped forlornly. Quincy had had to be clamped into place for the duration of the flight to avoid any risk of his chassis damaging the shuttle or its organic inhabitants if the artificial gravity were to fail. The little robot was at the rear of the cabin underneath the various storage cabinets. His sensors were largely inactive to conserve power, and this was boring. The sooner that they retrieved the binary fluent organic, the better – at least then someone on board would understand him.

Medical were live streaming the neuro-corrective surgery. A nurse was shaving the patient's head. The nature of the procedure was such that the subject had to be fully conscious throughout. Kennedy was still groggy; it would be

another twenty minutes before the real work could begin. Housekeeping was once more in solitary confinement. The mysterious intruder had not attempted to release them – adding to Hull's suspicion that the saboteur had most likely been Kennedy. There was no evidence either way. The damage to the computers had resulted in an empty window in the surveillance logs: thirty minutes to either side of the incident.

"It might have been anyone, Sir." Mellor voiced the thing that Hull wouldn't. "She probably had an accomplice – perhaps more than one. Or she might have been framed."

Hull turned to study the younger man. "Does my decision regarding Kennedy concern you?"

Mellor kept his gaze locked on the data that he was monitoring. "A little bit, Sir. I'm not comfortable with the idea of – that type of thing."

"Do you mean neuro-corrective procedures in general or this specific type?"

"I mean the type of procedure where the patient is conscious throughout, Sir."

Hull stared at the faint outline of the implants beneath Mellor's own closely cropped scalp. The standard sort of wireless interface devices; they

allowed the technician to be more efficient. "Were you conscious for your surgeries, Mellor?"

"Yes Sir."

"That isn't usual with implants. Was there a medical reason?"

"I couldn't afford the process, Sir, but I needed it for employment purposes. So I – I volunteered as a test patient at my university's medical school."

"That was less than ethical of your university. Do you want to sit this one out?"

"More than a little bit, Sir."

"Okay. Take a break, Mellor. I can handle things by myself for the rest of this shift."

The door to the cell slid open once again, but it wasn't Hull this time. Instead, the canteen worker, Dawson, staggered in and gestured frantically. "You have to come with me, Spence! We're under attack – I'm to escort you to the escape craft before they find us."

There was the unmistakable howl of the emergency alarms, and the worrying smell of burning. "Is it Mr Campbell? That level of fire and panic tends to be his style."

"No, it's not Britain; it's whoever shot down their

vessel. Your erstwhile colleagues never even made it to within range of our defence grid. They're space debris and if we hang around too long, we'll join them."

Spence rose warily from the bunk. "You're lying."

"I'm really not! Look, can we please go? I'll show you the footage once we aren't at risk of being butchered." Dawson was bleeding in a concerning fashion: deep red blooming through his grey uniform.

"Stand still and let me have a look at you." Spence had guessed shrapnel – somewhere in his upper torso, and deep enough that he needed medical attention. Peeling away the shredded cloth confirmed this. There were things visible that generally heralded nothing aside from a messy finish. "You could do with some of that regenerative salve."

"There should be some in the survival kit on the escape craft." The man shuddered as Spence refastened his clothing. "Supervisor Hull will be there by now. He was evacuating the medical personnel."

"I expect that we'll have plenty of need of them, if this is anything to go by...!" The non-gender

ducked behind the unfortunate Dawson as a salvo of plasma rounds peppered the interior of the cell.

The intruders were very definitely not British operatives. They were taller than average, and broad-shouldered underneath their dark-coloured spacesuits. The tinted faceplates of their helmets allowed no glimpse of the features behind them as they stalked into the cell. If they were talking then it had to be via a closed circuit because Spence couldn't hear anything. The silence was somehow louder than the weapons' fire had been; it even drowned out the soggy whistling emanating from what remained of Dawson's lungs.

No one should die so very horribly. Spence squeezed the fellow's hand in the forlorn hope of comforting one or both of them. "Who are you – why are you doing this?"

One of the intruders gestured with their weapon: up, move. Debating the matter seemed unwise, so Spence edged slowly in the direction indicated. The corridor remained ringed with smoke but the alarms had cut out. Another staccato of plasma finished Dawson's gasping and Spence flinched. It was clear that the intruders had no qualms over killing hostages. That would make escaping even trickier.

"Where in the blazes did those missiles come from?" Campbell tried to convince himself that his spacesuit was functioning as normally as its safety indicators claimed. He shifted his emergency harness slightly to avoid drifting too far from Quincy.

Moxton groaned from where he was drifting on the opposite side of the little robot. "I don't know; our sensors didn't pick them up. It's a good thing the suits kicked in automatically."

"Please tell me that we aren't stranded out here."

"Nah; Quincy can tow us to the station."

Their companion was already making the required calculations for this. It seemed most unlikely that either organic would be endangered by the attempt, providing that there were no further explosions along the way.

Chapter Five – Full Of Tigers

The regolith within the Voltaire crater upon Deimos was only thirty-five metres deep. There was an arid labyrinth beneath it – a subterranean blister filled with an inexplicably perfect balance of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, and carbon dioxide, yet curiously devoid in hydrogen. The area was fifteen metres from ceiling to floor at its highest points, but the inevitable mineral formations had caused a range of smaller chambers. The military had considered building a communications station here; however, it had proven to be more financially viable to have the relay in orbit of the moon instead of on it. The miniature oasis remained unoccupied, save for the occasional visiting geologist, and one or two billionaires seeking the ultimate romantic getaway.

There was a four-hour window each day when

the castaways would be able to access the military channels with the emergency beacon from the escape craft. Once their signal was noticed, Marines would be there in less than forty minutes. This alone made Deimos the most logical place for them to take shelter. Hull was looking forwards to returning to Earth. Space had its uses where issues of legality were concerned, and it certainly eliminated the need for most red tape. However, there weren't many factions on Earth that would risk breaching a high security research base. Those that did wouldn't have the added weight of the burgeoning vacuum of space behind them.

It was so much harder to defend a space station. Still, whoever the intruders were, they had done more damage to GETEC's enemies than to the mega-corporation itself. The crew of the *HMS Gertrude* had perished long before they had even neared the station. The supervisor had decided that he would take whatever small mercies the universe chose to offer to him. He was impressed with the outcome of the neuro-corrective surgery so far. Kennedy was now fully loyal to GETEC. Given their current circumstances, Hull needed all the functioning operatives to whom he had access to.

Quincy could only conclude that the organics now controlling the GETEC space station wanted to die. Their firing on the British shuttle had been the first indicator. Crucifying Housekeeping had been the second. There were no signs of any other survivors aboard the station. His sensors indicated that there had been a series of confrontations; culminating in the evacuation of all remaining GETEC personnel.

Spence had not been included in this, which made completing their retrieval mission considerably simpler. The little robot hovered next to the battered non-gender and calculated how long it would take before Campbell and Moxton finished eliminating the still unidentified interlopers. His CPU issued a projection of fourteen minutes and twenty seconds based upon previous physical altercations and the current external modifiers. That timeframe would enable them to acquire a replacement shuttle from the GETEC hangar and transport Spence safely back to Earth for medical treatment before any major organs became non-functional.

"Gunny Woods, there's some kind of a civilian corporation emer-evac transmission sounding out from the Voltaire cavern complex. They're claiming sixty-eight survivors; their space station was hit hard by unknown aggressors."

"Now would that by any far stretch be the same fuck forlorn civilian corporation that Captain Kennedy is working deep Intel on, Corporal Davies?"

"Aye-Hell-yeah, Gunny; straight transfer to the space station post Boston. She's been dark ever since, but they're listing her amongst the survivors."

Woods leant back in the command chair and tried to ease the popping in his spine. "Fuck me, Kennedy; what kind of a shit storm have you done gone and uncovered now? Davies – get the extraction teams suited up. It's time to get our CO back!"

"No, ma'am; we don't know who they were. They appear to have butchered most of those aboard the station. Housekeeping is in critical condition – we'll need medical assistance as soon as we land."

Campbell was largely ignoring Moxton's

conversation with Pembleton. The field operative had curled up on the floor of their recently acquired vessel and was cradling Spence against his chest. "Wake up little canary; come on now – open your eyes for a bit."

The eyes in question were bloodshot and the left one had swollen halfway closed. Still Housekeeping was stubborn. "Craig...what kept you...?"

"You know what a stickler Mr Moxton is for adhering to the speed limit. I simply couldn't convince him otherwise." He forced a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore."

"I've got some of that not exactly morphine type stuff; I need you to keep as still as you can whilst I inject it, alright?"

Spence coughed up a spattering of blood and phlegm. "You hate needles...let someone else do it...not fair on you..."

His hand was shaking as he prepped the syringe. "Look, just keep breathing. We'll get you to medical as soon as we can."

The non-gender winced as the needle went in. "I keep forgetting how brave you are...going to medical...that's a big thing for you."

Campbell tossed the empty syringe aside and buried his face in the soot-stained hair. "I'm moving in with you until you get better. I'll eat all your food and annoy your neighbours."

"I suppose I'd better bloody recover quickly then..."

Moxton joined them and began wiping off the worst of the gore from Spence's face. "Quincy's piloting us. Pembleton says we're to divert to Mars as it's closer. She's contacting the British Embassy there on our behalf."

Housekeeping groaned. "I'm not willing to count this as holiday time...!"

The driver dredged up a grin. "Don't worry; I told her you wanted overtime, and hazard pay."

"I want gin...!" Spence yelled and huddled closer to Campbell. "Christ that hurts!"

"I've got you, little canary." Campbell glowered at Moxton. "I think that cleaning up can wait for now, don't you?"

"Not if you want to avoid unnecessary infections from setting in." As usual, Moxton was undeterred by his associate's bristling. "I'm not going to do anything that doesn't need doing, mate. You know that."

"Fine; just be careful."

"He's missed you, in case you hadn't guessed."

Moxton winked.

Spence didn't care to risk even attempting a scowl. "I've missed him too, as it happens. I missed all of you."

"What the fuck kind of mind-altering substances did GETEC put you on?" Smooth, capable hands reopened the cuts that had scabbed too quickly and teased out the dust and grime from the raw flesh. "It must have been some bloody potent stuff, Spence."

"No; they're just unbearable to work for. Terrible shift patterns, no pension to speak of...!" Housekeeping looked away as Moxton examined the wounds left by the bolts used in the crucifixion. "I think we'd best leave those for the real doctors."

"You'll need some serious work done on these. On the plus side, I think the tendons are okay."

Campbell shook his head. "I can feel all your ribs! Have you been trying to live entirely on thin air, Spence?"

"There wasn't any alcohol...it was like being held prisoner in a health spa at times."

The representative from the British Embassy was a bespectacled woman named Francine Thorpe. Ms Thorpe wore more foundation than she needed to, in conjunction with a lot of lipstick in slightly the wrong shade for her skin tone, and had no patience for what she termed as social deviants. She had referred to Spence by their biological sex within earshot of Campbell, and now the field operative refused to allow her access to the non-gender.

Moxton had found himself relegated to the role of go-between. This involved his standing sentry outside of Housekeeping's hospital room, and sending Quincy in and out with copies of any relevant information. He was beginning to think that the little robot's offer to de-activate Ms Thorpe was more than fair, but Pembleton wasn't likely to approve. "Ms Thorpe, Spence is entitled to identify as non-gendered. It's irrelevant to this situation, aside from the fact that we're legally required to accept that identity."

"Mars doesn't encourage those sorts of things, Mr Moxton." Thorpe sniffed and tapped at the screen of her tablet. "At any rate, the doctors say that the injured party shan't be fit to travel for

another twelve days. I've arranged the use of a suite in the Embassy for you and Mr Campbell during your stay. Please make certain to switch off your little pet and store it in the munitions area upon arrival there."

She turned on her heel and stalked away. Moxton glanced at Quincy. "You okay there, mate?"

A series of shrill beeps indicated that the robot had not appreciated Thorpe's parting remark.

The driver sighed. "I don't understand binary, but I'm getting used to your various noises. Look, some people are just generally horrible. The best thing to do is to ignore them. Besides, it's not as if we're going to go to the Embassy. Spence needs us here to advocate and so on."

Quincy cycled through the various communications channels available to him and played back the data stream that had drawn his attention earlier. The military base near Deimos was sending a tactical squad to rescue survivors from the GETEC station. They would be bringing them here: to the principal Martian medical centre. The security officer who had taken Campbell down in Boston was amongst them, but apparently, she was

working undercover for American Intelligence and had been for some time. Another familiar name was listed: Supervisor Greg Hull.

Moxton supposed that he should let Campbell and Spence know about all of that. It wasn't likely to be an easy conversation. "Come on, Quincy – let's go and bring the others up to speed with what you've found out so far."

"There's a Maurice Jacob Leister here to speak with you, ma'am. He claims to have an appointment, but there's nothing in the diary. Should I alert security?"

Pembleton supposed that it was only surprising that it had taken the fellow this long to turn up. "Thank you, Robinson; hold all of my calls for now."

"Yes ma'am."

The office door opened and ushered out the last hope of maintaining the long game against GETEC. Leister, still as impeccable as on any of their previous encounters, smiled and took his seat. "Edith, darling – it's been too long."

"That's a matter of perspective, Cob. I suppose that you've already been informed of the situation?"

"It's rather messy from what I've gathered so far. I'm not altogether impressed by how things have been managed - especially with regards to Housekeeping."

"It's the way of the game and you know it. If it troubles you then perhaps you ought to just stay clear." Pembleton poured out two glasses of tonic water. "I must say that I hadn't expected retirement to soften you this much."

The smile was full of tigers now. "Let's not waste time on the pleasantries, Edith. When do I leave and where are you sending me?"

It was hardly as if there was another option. "Campbell and Moxton have already retrieved Housekeeping - they're at the British Embassy on Mars. You'll join them in an advisory capacity only, Cob. I'm not prepared to sign off on anything further. I trust that you understand?"

"As you prefer it, ma'am." Leister frowned briefly. "I'm not familiar with anyone named Moxton - are they new?"

"He's a freelance driver and pilot whom we retain on contract. Whitby shall read you in on the finer details when he equips you. He's in charge of that department now; Royston went into teaching.

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Here – you'll need this lanyard. Please don't misplace it. The last thing we need is a misunderstanding with our own bloody security."

Chapter Six – Highly Irregular

Campbell stared at the opposite wall of the room. It was the same pale-yellow shade as every other interior wall within the medical centre and was of no particular interest to him. However, Spence seemed uncomfortable with eye contact and he wanted to allow for that. "Pembleton shouldn't have sent you in alone."

"Who else could she have assigned? I know my job, Craig – it's not as though I've never been injured in the field before."

"I thought you just mopped up after the rest of us?"

Spence focused on the angle between the field operative's lower jaw and throat: watching the faint movements as he breathed. "I do for the most part, but it's still not a desk job."

"Why couldn't she have used another RCS?"

Campbell closed his eyes to escape the tedium of yellowness. "It was good enough before – why not now?"

"It's never wise to try the same trick twice; you know that."

"Well, she could at least have sent one of Whitby's little killer robots along with you. Some of them are miniscule – he could have disguised them as jewellery."

The non-gender pictured how a robot might have handled Supervisor Hull. "I don't wear jewellery. Anyhow, where are Mr Moxton and Quincy?"

"Quincy volunteered to guard the door of this room against all comers and Moxton has gone in search of food that wasn't made four years ago and rehydrated this morning."

Thorpe frowned. "The medical centre already provides its patients with perfectly adequate meals, Mr Moxton."

Moxton shrugged and added another spoonful of spiced noodles to the carton that he was filling. "Mr Campbell asked me to bring him lunch."

"He ought to eat here at the Embassy." The

Embassy representative folded her arms tightly across her stomach.

"He's keeping an eye on Spence." Moxton nodded and smiled politely to the man behind the counter. "Can I get a portion of soup too please mate?"

The canteen worker clearly didn't care where the food was going to be eaten, but it appeared that Ms. Thorpe did. "This is highly irregular!"

"Is there a permission slip that needs filing for me to transport a fresh meal from here to the medical centre? Because if that's the issue then just hand me the paperwork." The driver stared flatly at the woman. "Spence was crucified in the line of duty. I think the least that we can do is to provide round the clock care, don't you?"

"That's why there are medical staff – honestly, Mr Moxton the rules exist for a reason. I see no cause to deviate from them just because an operative is used to being indulged."

She was definitely going onto his list of people never to willingly spend time with again. "Ms. Thorpe, that operative is a friend of mine. Please stop pestering me before I file a harassment charge."

An abrupt cacophony of screams interrupted their conversation. Moxton hurried to the nearest window along with several other people. They stared out across the Embassy grounds towards the nearby public food court, where at least a hundred colonists had gathered to dine at the assorted catering establishments. The dusty asphalt was blood splattered and the surviving people were fleeing. Tall figures dressed in dark-coloured environmental suits continued to hack at anyone unfortunate enough to be within the reach of their machetes.

"Oh, bloody Hell – not this lot again!" Moxton pulled out his phone and dialled Campbell's number. "Craig, the bastards from the space station are attacking the food court outside the Embassy. No, not GETEC; the other bastards...yes, the ones that crucified Housekeeping."

Thorpe began organising the Embassy security via internal communications. She had barely given her name when the intercom cut out. "We've lost communications – quickly, activate the emergency shutters before those madmen try to get in!"

"Sir, what do you suppose is producing the

oxygen in these caverns?"

"It's probably just some form of micro-organism, Mellor. I wouldn't worry about it. People have been coming here for years now without any ill effects."

"I guess so, Sir. Still – it's kind of weird. I mean there's no water; what kinds of life forms don't need water?"

Hull's watch indicated that they had been here for seventeen hours. With luck, the evacuation would take place soon. "It's one of the wonders of the universe, Mellor. Life doesn't always take the forms we expect it to. Let's just be glad that we can breathe for now."

The space station had housed a total of three hundred men, women, and children. It had been more than just a place of work: entire families had lived there. GETEC had established the community as a foothold within the Martian region for the shareholders but there had also been a thriving hydroponics industry. Most of the employees had spent their working day involved in the cultivation and processing of genetically modified algae and rice. There had been eight administrative workers, twelve medical staff, and thirty security personnel had provided any necessary protection – until the

assault.

Mellor appeared to have been thinking along the same lines. "Who attacks a civilian base? All those families..."

"Thankfully none of the children were killed, and we also have most of the medical workers." Hull supposed that GETEC would be able to place the youngsters within appropriate foster care upon their return to Earth. The shuttle had been crammed full, and Hull had only just been able to coax the engines to get them as far as the landing pad here at Voltaire. He ran another headcount: himself, Mellor, Kennedy, all fifty-eight minors, and - five medical staff? That wasn't right. "We're missing two medics. Grown adults should know better than to play stupid games of hide and seek during an emergency."

Kennedy scrambled up immediately from her perch on one of the numerous rocks. "They can't have gone too far, Sir. I'll go and locate them."

"No; I don't want anyone else dropping off the map. It's more important to keep the children safe." The supervisor made a mental note to have both medics formally disciplined. "The Marines can look for them once they get here."

When the signal cut out, Campbell had closed his phone, lifted Spence bodily, and run: not at a flat pelt but at the steady, mile devouring lope of a seasoned survivor. Quincy had beeped and followed them; taking in the field operative's brief explanation as readily as the non-gender did. There came a point in this business when organics and machines alike would either develop an instinct for staying ahead of danger or else end up as little beyond a memory to others. Campbell's nerves had already been jangling simply due to their location. The call from Moxton had been the only trigger that was necessary.

Now they were travelling in one of the smaller medical transports: a sturdy hover vehicle with no windows other than in the driver's compartment and adequate supplies to care for Spence. The pale figure of Housekeeping was huddled in the back of the transport, just behind the passenger seat. Quincy was monitoring them whilst Campbell focused on not crashing into or through anything that could damage the vehicle enough to stop it from moving. His primary concern was to stay ahead of those currently assaulting the colony,

whilst keeping Spence safe. Beyond that, they would need weapons with which they could fight back, and Moxton would presumably appreciate some assistance.

Campbell refused to wonder if the medical centre had withstood the missiles. He had urged the doctors to activate the building's storm shutters; at least those would have provided some defence. The likelihood was that those attacking were there for revenge against him and Moxton, or else to finish whatever bizarre atrocity their fellows had begun on the space station. Either way, time was of the essence, and wherever the British operatives went danger was going to follow - the trio of hover cycles still pursuing them confirmed this. He would need to do something about those. Perhaps he could utilise one of the oxygen canisters. "Spence, Quincy, I'm pulling over for a bit to have words with these chaps."

The little robot was unfamiliar with the precise meaning of Spence's response. It appeared that organics became more fluid in their verbal coding when under extreme duress. This was illogical: surely precise, brief forms of communication would better serve emergencies. He refrained from commenting

and instead readied his weapons systems.

Spence groaned as an explosion rocked the vehicle. "Quincy – go assist Mr Campbell!"

Quincy shrilled his acknowledgement and took the swiftest route to the field operative. The side panel of the hover transport crushed one of the hostile organics as it fell clear of the vehicle. Campbell was wrestling with another, and the third was already part of a smouldering heap of twisted metal and charred flesh. Clearly, this was what it was to be "late to the party"; really, there were moments wherein he seemed unneeded.

The field operative gasped quietly as his opponent's knife struck home. He was still wearing the cream garment that had been the lining of his spacesuit; there hadn't been time yet for him to change. Moxton had promised to bring him fresh clothes along with lunch, but the red insignia that was forming on his chest told Campbell that he wouldn't get to wear them. He groaned and staggered backwards. "Quincy...stop him...!"

It was of course preferable to be of use and so the little robot fired with his usual enthusiasm. His death ray, as Campbell liked to call it, reduced the final hostile organic to ashes. Quincy glided

forwards through the resultant cloud and scanned the prone field operative. The organic had suffered irreparable tissue damage to one of his aortic valves. He would cease functioning within sixteen minutes.

"Craig...are you alright?" Spence staggered out of the vehicle and limped towards them. "Craig!"

Campbell sighed and managed to put his arm around the non-gender's shoulders as they knelt beside him. "I'm sorry, little canary...I never did get to take you yachting...so many lovely things..."

Spence forgot the pain that should have stopped them from pressing down on the wound. "Don't you bloody dare leave me!"

He was already halfway out the door of it all. "Spence...will you kiss me goodbye, just this once?"

The hostile organic trapped under the side panel was unconscious but very much alive. Quincy determined that their heart was not merely perfectly salvageable but also genetically suited and beeped as much to Housekeeping, who nodded. "Mr Campbell, I have to go back to the medical transport for a few things."

"There isn't enough glue to fix this..."

"There's always enough glue." The non-gender

edged free of the hug and stood. "It's gin that there's a sorry lack of."

"Squad One has made touchdown at Voltaire, Gunny. Lance Corporal Vance and his Marines are commencing the emer-evac."

Woods nodded. "Are there any further indications of hostiles within the sector, Davies?"

"Negative, Gunny. Mars seems to be having some kind of a communications issue though. It could be sand, but there's squat on the environmental sensors."

"Get Squad Four to organise a fly-by. Tell Vance to hold tight on that emer-evac until we know the skies are clear down on Mars; better not to risk it with sand."

"Aye-Hell-yeah, Gunny!"

The British Embassy was one of the most heavily fortified buildings in the city. Moxton eyed the now shuttered windows and hoped that they would continue to hold. "I think this is connected to the attack on the GETEC space station."

A nearby representative had overheard. "But why are they doing all of this?"

"I don't know, mate; they aren't very chatty. They just seem to enjoy butchering people."

Thorpe gestured for everyone to pay attention. "We need to determine why the Martian Defence hasn't already responded to this crisis."

"They probably think that the communications blackout is just sand related." One of the Embassy technicians coughed and shuffled forward; her tan and white shoes dragging against the deep red plush of the carpeting. "Sorry; I've got a touch of flu."

Moxton recalled the ugly mess that had resulted from Prague and backed away slowly as the technician clarified how long it would take the local military to send help. He had become wary of illness. The thought of a bio-hazardous outbreak inside a sealed building gave him chills. His luck when travelling so far made such an event seem all too probable.

Chapter Seven – Until The Next Comet

Lance Corporal Vance and his Marines had located what remained of the two absentee medics. Their employee lanyards had been the only means of identifying the desiccated husks – it transpired that the depths of Voltaire Crater were home to an uncategorised form of life. These near microscopic creatures had no clear respiratory systems and apparently breathed using diffusion. From what the Marines had found, they also spent much of their time hibernating within fissures in the rock.

“They eat hydrogen – that's why there isn't any present in the atmosphere of the cavern complex. Best guess would be that they usually enter a form of stasis until the next comet comes along, brushes Deimos and provides them with a fresh source via the ice particles trailing behind it. Then they wake

up, feed and multiply until all of the hydrogen is gone, whereupon the cycle begins again. Given that humans are roughly ten percent hydrogen, those things probably view us as some kind of a walking buffet." The emer-evac squad medic concluded her presentation.

"Thank you, Private Madison." Vance shook his head. "We'll need to issue a quarantine of Deimos: can't risk the life forms getting off this rock. Everybody here will have to be isolated for safety too, so we'll need to evacuate back to base instead of to Mars. It'll be cramped, but the protocols are in place for a reason."

"Absolutely; you'll get no arguments from us, Lance Corporal." Hull leaned back into his seat. "Sometimes I think people forget that the monsters that you can see aren't the only ones that you need to worry about."

Quincy was an efficient and knowledgeable surgeon, albeit lacking in ethics. Spence supposed that it was just as well: saving the field operative had meant murdering the donor. Given what he and his associates had done during their attack on Mars that seemed reasonable enough to the non-

gender. Campbell wouldn't see it that way. In his view, killing an opponent in combat, or a target upon instruction stood far removed from butchering a now helpless enemy for replacement organs. He never would have agreed to it and so they hadn't asked him to. There had only been enough sedation in the medical transport for one patient: Spence had administered it to Campbell along with a hefty dose of painkillers and antibiotics.

He at least would never have to recall what followed. The donor had woken up halfway through the initial incision and kept screaming throughout. His injuries had left him paralysed, which had simplified their task considerably. All that he had had left to his defence had been his voice. By the end that too was damaged: fear and pain translating words to a primal keening that haunted the ears. Spence merely added it to the list of things that warded away sleep, and Quincy possessed a robot's immunity to such matters.

Both agreed never to discuss what had occurred. For the little robot, this meant erasing the requisite files from his hard drive. He did so once he had assisted Spence in loading Campbell safely onto the transport. Whilst the non-gender set up the

various monitors, Quincy glided out and cleared away the remains with the final charge in his main turret. Then he returned to the vehicle, parked himself snugly beneath the gurney, and began formatting.

Squad Four had found madness rather than sand on their fly-by of Mars. Bodies littered the streets of the primary colony, and several key buildings were on fire. Those responsible were still prowling for fresh victims. Their environmental suits made no difference against the gunship dispatched from Deimos Base, and the Marines took back blood for blood. It was an ugly situation, but it kept the Gunnery Sergeant in charge of the relay station busy.

Hull was glad of that. Woods had seemed too keen to ask difficult questions, and took the opportunity provided to activate the remote detonation system for the now abandoned GETEC facility. He had been hoping to salvage the space station but years of experience had taught him when to cut and run. Tidying away other people's mistakes and secrets left plenty of scope to wipe up your own mess. *Housekeeping would have*

understood that.

There was no point in regret. The key thing now was to ensure that GETEC came out of this as the injured party. A transport full of traumatised orphans was a great basis for that. No amount of spin could equal those tearstained faces. It occurred to Hull that stationing families at all GETEC facilities might prove a valid way of dissuading the legitimate authorities from sending in their more aggressive options in future. At the very least, it would give them pause – the risk of negative publicity made for an impressive threat.

The Intelligence agencies would probably be too busy hunting down those behind the attacks in the Martian Sector to bother with GETEC now anyway. If those in charge had any sense, they would take the opportunity to hide all of the riskier projects. For his part, Hull had decided to encourage Kennedy to go back to the Marines permanently. He didn't like the idea of Woods digging around for answers. *There are too many sights trained on me as it is. It's time to live quietly for a while.*

Moxton supposed that conducting emergency

surgery on your best friend might cause serious emotional trauma in anyone. He also supposed that if Spence didn't want to give the details then there was good reason. That was enough for him to step in when the Embassy medics asked for more information.

"It's clearly a matter of British Intelligence. You aren't cleared to know. Just treat the patient please."

Housekeeping shot him a grateful look as the medics hustled off with the still unconscious Campbell. "Thank you for that, Mr Moxton."

"He's alive and so are you. I don't fucking care how you managed that outcome." The driver gestured. "Come on; you need to rest just as much as he does."

"We should be there for him when he wakes up. You know how he is about that." Spence was just about standing. "The poor bastard has a phobia where medical intervention is concerned."

"I'll sit watch with him. You're going to take the next available bed and let the medics look after you. And before you argue about it, yes – I'm telling you what to do." Moxton glared at the non-gender. "Count it as being a scene if that helps."

"It doesn't help. I'm too bloody tired to argue though. Don't let them misplace Quincy; he's on a recharge cycle."

Leister disembarked alongside a tide of eager journalists and reluctant tourists. The latter group were already booking seats on the next transport home. Mars was suddenly interesting again, but for all the wrong reasons. The news of the attack had broken less than an hour before and already the number of confirmed deaths was over twelve hundred people.

There was no clue as to why the colony had been the target for this atrocity, and if there might have been evidence aboard the GETEC station then it had been vaporised. Perhaps the other British operatives might know something, but at this stage, all that concerned him was finding them - preferably alive and in one piece - and bringing them home.

His primary concern was Housekeeping. The other two were colleagues and that mattered, of course, but Nightingale was different: far too determined not to deserve anyone's time. Never happier than when the rest of the world was

oblivious. More than one person had muttered about martyrdom and an unhealthy degree of humility. It wasn't anywhere as simple as that. Edith had been wrong to send Nightingale in as her pawn. Leister had been digging and the mire that was GETEC contained a lot of unsung blood. People disappeared into the depths of it, sometimes forever. The handful of souls to re-emerge became birds of a different plumage to their former selves. The mega-corporation had ways of ensuring that, and Supervisor Hull was rumoured to be chief amongst them. That fellow knew all too well how to snap the wings from an asset. The thought of Nightingale caged by him even briefly was heartrending.

Gunnery Sergeant Woods was definitely suspicious about the situation. Fortunately, Kennedy had pulled rank with him. Unfortunately, she had flatly refused to go back to the Marines and this was making Hull's life complicated. He hadn't anticipated that the neuro-corrective treatment would have these sort of side effects. The Martian was not merely devoted to GETEC – she had imprinted on the supervisor. If the medics

responsible weren't dead, Hull would very probably have requested that the procedure be reversed immediately. Tractable was one thing, fawning on the other hand – that didn't do it for him at all. Still, fawning was what he had, and unless he wanted to give Woods an excuse to shoot him, Hull knew that he would have to tolerate it.

Spence huddled further into the pillow and wondered how long it would be until Campbell regained consciousness. Realistically, the field operative was bound to ask how he had survived. If he dug hard enough then he would spot the inconsistencies and from there it was only a matter of time before the ethics came screaming down around them all. He would never forgive vivisection, but then he was a better person than Spence had ever been.

Given Campbell's phobia, the Embassy had arranged for them both to remain here, instead of risking transferring them to the miraculously undamaged medical centre. Ironically, they could have taken shelter there after all: it seemed that Martian emergency shutters withstood even missiles. The donor would still have been killed but not

butchered, and there would be none of his blood on Spence's hands.

Perhaps I've just been doing this too long. The bodies are piling up in my brain.

"You look overwhelmed by something, darling." The voice was velvet, steel, and chocolate all at once. "What's the matter, Nightingale?"

"Cob!" Spence started up, winced, and fell back onto the bed. "Oh Cob – it's all gone wrong!"

Leister was by now a dozen years more world-weary than he had been when he retired from the post of Housekeeping. His step remained just as long and he was at the bedside in two strides. "I've never once seen you cry and I'm not about to start doing so now, darling. Here, take my handkerchief and dry those eyes before you get into the habit."

"Cheers, old swan." Spence scrunched up what had been a painfully expensive piece of silk. "I wasn't expecting to see you here. Have you finally gotten bored with Dubai?"

"I shall *never* weary of Dubai, darling, and neither shall my liver. Still, a little bird told me that you might need a friend out here."

"What I need is for the whole mess to finally be over and done with. I don't think that I can do this

any longer, Cob." The non-gender leant against their mentor's shoulder. "I'm a failure."

"No, you're not; you're human, darling, and that's perfectly fine." Leister traced his fingertips over the bandages on Spence's arms and hands. "So, who do you plan to hand off to?"

Just like that, it was fair to draw the line beneath the horror. Someone else would take over: there would be a new Housekeeping. Spence nodded very carefully. "I still need to arrange that side of things."

"Perhaps I can help you vet any potential candidates. Only to weed out the ones whom I think to be awful; not to interfere, you understand."

Spence laughed. "You never change, Cob."

He shrugged. "Consistency's hardly a failing, Nightingale. At least I'm predictable."

"Predictable as bloody mercury, more like!"

Leister supposed that he could risk pressing for some of the ghosts. "You seem a little less chewed up now, so I've done something right. Will you tell me any of the rest, darling?"

"I'll tell you all of it, but we'll both need gin."

"That's more like you. I'll see what's to be scrounged up from that mini-bar."

There had been no sign of the life forms from Voltaire Crater in their medical screenings. They were all clear to return to Earth on the next available transport. That meant another interminable fourteen hours here on Deimos Base. There wasn't much available in the way of recreation – the Marines generally preferred to spend their downtime on Mars. The colony provided excellent hospitality and its tourist industry was thriving. At least it had been; the mysterious attackers had caused a panic that was by now making ripples as far as Earth.

Hull wondered again about their motivation. They had come seemingly from nowhere, well-armed and all too capable, with no apparent doctrine or visible iconography. Killers who demonstrated no set pattern – it was bizarre. By now, there should have been some form of statement given, or at the barest minimum a name to put to those involved. Instead, there were questions that no one seemed able to answer, and a death toll that everyone hoped would stop rising.

Chapter Eight – Against Expectations

“I hadn’t realised that you and Campbell had a history together.” Leister reached once again for the halfway to empty bottle. It had been years since he last indulged. “I tidied up in Antigua for he and Paul Benedict; back before you were assigned to shadow me. Craig’s a bloody good field operative. Britain’s fortunate that you were able to save him.”

“He shan’t see it that way though.” Spence was drifting on a mixture of gin and exhaustion. “I made a choice that he never would have condoned.”

“It was the right choice, Nightingale.”

“I know that. I also know Craig.”

“Ah – and knowing him means that you know that once he knows then he’ll never want to know you?”

The non-gender blinked. “I think that’s the crux

of things, yes. I also think that I'm drunk. Although it might just be the medication I suppose.

Leister raised his eyebrows. "Medication?"

"Mmn-hmm...very drunk."

"Well I do hope that you only risk getting this inebriated around people who won't take advantage of it, darling."

"The sort of fellow that takes advantage shan't care if I'm drunk or not, Cob. He'll do what he wants. Sorry."

Out of practice or not, the alcohol hadn't killed enough of Leister's wits to spare him from what was implied. "Are you speaking from experience?"

"Not precisely, but I was certainly within seventy-seven million kilometres worth of experience, if that counts?" Spence swallowed what remained of their drink in one gulp. "I told him to stop, Cob."

"I believe you."

"It didn't work. You have to understand that he didn't actually do anything; not physically. He just got in my head and found my limits. Somehow that makes it worse."

As with any other professional body, British Intelligence had protocols in place for these sorts of disclosures. Leister was obliged to ensure that he

got the whole account. "Who was it, darling?"

"It's an occupational hazard." Spence sucked in a breath. "I mean it happens. They train us to cope with it – interrogation, brainwashing, all of that. Except that I didn't cope; not when it mattered. I snapped and threw the entire operation under the bloody train."

Leister set both of their glasses aside carefully. "Darling, you know that I have to ask you for the details. Do you want me to wait until you're sober before I do that?"

"I won't admit it once I'm sober, old swan."

"Then should I keep this off book for you?"

His offer took some of the pressure away and Spence nodded. "I'd prefer that, thanks."

"Consider it buried. Now tell me who did it and I'll kill him for you – well, assuming he's still breathing?"

"The last that I heard he was amongst the survivors from the GETEC space station. The Marines picked them up on Deimos; they were supposed to be brought to the main medical centre here on Mars." The non-gender closed their eyes. "I expect the random murderous rampage changed all of that."

"So, he wasn't one of the people who attacked the station?"

"No. Whatever else, they weren't...well, they didn't mess with my head."

Leister understood his apprentice well enough to grasp that crucifixion would have been the lesser evil. "Who did mess with it, darling?"

"Greg Hull."

"And shall I kill him slowly or very slowly?"

Spence had rallied a little now. "Very slowly and with fire, if possible, please, Cob."

"Do you want to be there for it?"

"Yes."

"Well then, you'd best hurry along with recuperating, hadn't you? You can't hope to do much in the way of sniping with all those bandages on your hands."

"Captain Kennedy sure is dedicated, Gunny."

Woods glared at the departing transport. "Davies, I ain't too damn convinced that she's in her right mind just now. I just don't want to stir up unnecessary shit for her. Maybe you're right – maybe this is all in the name of the mission."

"What if it ain't, Gunny?"

"Then either our CO is in serious need of some intensive professional help or GETEC has a hold over her."

Davies grinned. "Are we going hunting, Gunny?"

"Aye-Hell yeah, we are, Marine. Prep my personal shuttle. Fuck knows that I'm due some damned shore leave anyhow."

Pembleton looked down at the papers in front of her once again. "Are you certain that you want to do this, Mr Benedict?"

"Ashley needs me to be there for her, ma'am. She has no one else left." The field operative paused. "Besides which, I think we both know that I'm past my prime now."

"Age is inevitable if one keeps breathing long enough, Mr Benedict." The spymistress lifted her pen. "Retirement might not be what you hope."

"Well, it can't be worse than Prague, ma'am."

"I suppose not."

Benedict hesitated. "I shall miss you, ma'am."

"And I you, Mr Benedict. You have been nothing but a credit to this agency. There will be a position kept available for the next six months should you have a change of heart."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Campbell awoke to the sharp tone of the monitor beside his bed alerting to the change in his vital signs. His torso was bare aside from a neatly applied bandage that covered his sternum. The bed sheets were far too high quality to belong to a medical centre. "Where am I? Where's Spence?"

"You're at the British Embassy." Moxton leant forwards to within view. "Spence and Quincy brought you here. The Marines finally turned up to deal with those maniacs."

"It's over then? That's good to know." Campbell winced and touched the dressing carefully. "I ought to be dead. I was stabbed."

"Yeah; from what I gather, Quincy performed an emergency transplant." The driver grinned at him. "You're bloody lucky, mate. The odds of them finding a suitable donor organ out there in the middle of all that carnage were astronomical. There were plenty of bodies of course but still – fucking chance in a million."

"Happy Saint Gertrude's Day, Sir." Mellor was already regretting having agreed to organise any

of this. "Don't forget your mandatory but completely non-indoctrination-based employee pin. Your tacit acknowledgement of the variations within cultural traditions has been noted for the purposes of future career reviews."

"Shit – another multicultural event?" Hull shook his head and fastened the small enamelled cat to his uniform. "What happened to Patrick?"

"Dublin has exclusive Saints' Day usage of him this year, Sir. Besides Gertrude also covers gender and mental health related equality, so it cuts down on the total annual expenditure."

"Nice streamlining, Mellor; keep that up and they'll promote you again."

"Thank you, Sir."

The supervisor continued towards his office. With Mellor scrabbling up the ranks, a position had occurred for a replacement administrative technician. The final interviews were today and Hull was in charge of the panel. He wasn't altogether sure that he liked any of the candidates, but someone had to get the job.

Gertrude and her felines were everywhere: banners and holographic displays taking up every spare corner of the building. He supposed that it

was better than last year's snake hunt in Boston. *Cobras aren't ever going to be practical things to have in the workplace.*

"How are you feeling today, darling?"

Campbell chuckled and set his coffee aside. "Much better than I'd be if I were trapped inside of an actual medical centre, thank you, Leister."

"I expect you'll be back on your feet soon enough." The older operative glanced at what remained of his colleague's breakfast. "It's nice to see that the immunosuppressant hasn't taken out your appetite. If only dear Nightingale would follow your example. I swear sometimes that – well, never mind. One can't live for another."

"What exactly is your connection to Spence anyhow, Mr Leister?"

"It's very simple, darling: Spence took over where I left off. You know – tidying up the bodies and so forth."

A vague memory stirred of a tall figure silhouetted against the gold and violet descent that was Jabberwock Beach's version of night. "That little situation in Antigua – yes, I remember you now. Sorry, I hadn't recognised you. It's been what –

sixteen years?"

Leister shrugged. "And you didn't think to guess at my legitimacy before today?"

"Spence vouched for you."

"There's a great deal of trust between the two of you, isn't there?"

"I can assure you that it's been well earned."

"That's far too uncommon in our line of work." Leister finished tidying up the assorted plates that had been accumulating on the bedside cabinets. "Don't lose sight of it, darling. In life – in love – there aren't such things as ranging shots; not when it's important."

His advice had prodded a nerve somewhere at the guts of Campbell's psyche. The field operative coloured slightly. "Things keep on getting in between us. I'm not certain how best we can avoid that."

"Oh, you can't hope to avoid it!"

"Well then how are we ever expected to get anywhere?"

The contents of the tray rattled daintily as Leister opened the door to leave. "You aren't, darling. You'll need to fly against expectations."

Whitby looked about at the muted pastels that were the walls of Rosa's home. The flat had been empty for five months but the agency had seen to its maintenance. "Are you positive that you'll be alright on your own? I can arrange for a carer to stay with you."

"I can manage." Rosa set down her handbag. "It's nice to finally be home again. Medical just isn't somewhere that's meant to be lived in permanently."

"You sound like Campbell." The senior technician smiled. "Well, I'd best be off. You have my number if you need me."

"Thank you, Whitby. I'll see you tomorrow."

It was unnerving to be alone after so long in observation. Rosa began her evening by closing all of the blinds and triple checking that no windows were open. She rather thought that she might buy a cat for company, or else borrow one of the smaller robots. If need be, she might even move back in with her parents. Tonight, however she would simply have to cope.

She ordered a double portion of fried sliced beef in black pepper from the local takeaway and switched on her home computer to browse the

Internet. That would distract her. The online world had kept spinning just as fast as the physical one. There were hundreds of new discussions to catch up with on one forum alone. Within minutes, Rosa had cocooned herself in the security of social media; where her various avatars had been missed. There were numerous enquiries over where she had been and explaining away her absence without telling the truth was a difficult matter.

Forty minutes later, the main intercom for the flat buzzed: signalling that dinner had arrived. Her stomach rumbled as she opened the door. Naturally, the deliveryman was better looking than average – the universe generally paired embarrassing digestive sounds with introductions to attractive men! Rosa blushed and proffered the money. "Excuse me, please; it's been a long day. I mean since breakfast – not that I have a food obsession...!"

He barged forwards and dragged the technician along with him; kicking the front door closed as he covered her mouth. "Don't struggle, Dr Rosa. I don't want to have to hurt you any more than is necessary."

Ashley still didn't remember having met Benedict but she had confirmed that she had been trying to do so. With her mother and stepfather dead, the hope of connecting with her remaining biological parent had been that much more urgent. The roots were in place for them to make a connection – hopefully the after effects of everything that Ashley had endured wouldn't prevent this. She was used to having a close family circle and nothing that Supervisor Hull had done ever weakened those memories.

The strength of that familial bond had been mutual. Andrea and Eric had never accepted the abrupt lack of contact following the start of her internship. Unfortunately, when Ashley had the means to contact them again, it had been too late. Benedict thought again of the accident report that Whitby had dug up: a tragic fire, most likely originating from an unattended candle. *Someone made them stop asking questions. GETEC needs investigating fully.*

He had been researching his options where that was involved. GETEC was a vast organisation, and its resources meant that those in charge were untouchable. Several Intelligence agencies had

concerns over that. At present, the former field operative was waiting for the professionals to do their jobs. If they failed, then that would just be one more reason for Benedict personally to take the mega-corporation apart from the ground up.

Chapter Nine – Fuzzy Kittens

Hull was debating the practicalities around sabotaging Mellor's career to get the technician back. He was proving to be all but impossible to replace. None of the last batch of applicants had succeeded at panel. One of them had at least proved to be genetically interesting, but really: was there no simpler way for R&D to screen? That entire boardroom would need redecorated now.

"Hey there, Sir; how's the Carbonara?" Kennedy seated herself directly opposite him at the cafeteria table and smiled.

"It's Alfredo, and it needs work. What can I do for you, Kennedy?"

"Nothing really...I uh, well I have tomorrow free and I guess maybe that I was wondering if you weren't busy, then maybe we could do something?"

The supervisor pushed his plate away and stared

hard at the Martian. "You don't know when to quit, do you Kennedy?"

She looked down at her own meal and shrugged. "I just can't seem to stop thinking about you, Sir."

"It's called having an inappropriate crush on your superior and it's pathetic. What – you think that any man on this planet would so much as give one of your people a second look?" Hull snorted. "Kennedy, if I wanted a second-rate whore to fuck then I'd pay for one. They still wouldn't be Martian."

For a moment, it seemed as though he'd gone too far. Then the neuro-corrective procedure won out over the security officer's indignation and she nodded. "I get that, Sir. I'm sorry."

"Good girl. I'll pick you up tonight at eight – that's twenty hundred hours in Marine time, got it?"

She really had an amazing smile. "Yes, Sir!"

Campbell was leaning in the doorway watching Spence sleep when Moxton found him. The driver shook his head. "That's a bit creepy, mate. Why don't you just go in?"

"I'm sort of enjoying watching."

"Yeah, that's definitely creepy." Moxton grinned

and gave a short whistle. "You've got a visitor, Housekeeping!" He patted the startled field operative on his shoulder and hurried away.

The non-gender blinked awake rapidly and glowered. "I'm tired and you're supposed to be resting!"

"I can't seem to get over." Campbell limped into the room and perched on the edge of the bed. "Leister made me some extremely good coffee earlier, so I'll blame him. Anyhow, what about you; aside from being tired, are you feeling better?"

Spence nodded. "They have me on very nice painkillers. At least the bandages are finally off. Not too bad a scar either – the surgeons made a good job of things."

"I'm sorry I put you in danger, canary. I really felt that our best option was to make for the Embassy."

"It's alright; chances are that if we had stayed put then those butchers would have made more of an effort to get into the medical centre." Spence supposed that the matter needed addressing. "Craig, there's something that I need to talk to you about. Quincy and I had to make a quick decision out there. You were dying but there was a viable

living donor. He was one of the bastards who attacked the colony, so perhaps that's something."

The pieces came together gradually in Campbell's mind. "Spence - are you saying that you killed the donor?"

"We - I really; it was my say - anyhow, there wasn't time to be saintly. It was you or him, and I picked you."

"I - I'm not sure what to say about that, canary. I need some time alone, excuse me."

Watching Campbell leave was one of those lines drawn in the pages of one's lifetime. Spence knew right then that it was over, whatever it might have been. There would be no fresh chance for them. He had limits or perhaps one ought to call them scruples. Regardless they were something that informed his decisions - the field operative would never make the choices that Housekeeping needed to. That was the gnawing rat at the base of this whole difficulty. Even retired, they had vastly differing moral compasses.

"What's happened here, darling?" Leister had entered with more coffee. "You look dangerously near to tears again - have you and Campbell had words?"

"I told him the truth, old swan."

"Ah, those sorts of words. So, was it all the truth or just a corner?"

"About the donor; I'm far too sober to discuss the other matter."

"Nightingale, you really must stop self-sabotaging! It's not healthy, and you'll end up old and bitter. Buck your ideas up, darling – talk to the next fellow properly."

Spence sipped at the more caramel and cinnamon than coffee based liquid. "What makes you suppose that there will be a next fellow?"

"Well, to be very blunt, you clearly think that you've burned your last bridge with dear Mr Campbell, which I'm concerned may have been your intention for telling him. You'll have to find someone else, because I'm bloody sure that I shan't stand for you withering away alone."

"But I don't want to find someone else – I love Craig! I've loved him for so long now that it takes up more of my life than any other feeling, and no matter how much I try to fly clear of him he's still the only other person in the sky."

Leister spread his hands; palms up in a sort of despairing shrug at that. "Then why aren't you

telling *him* that?"

"I can't!"

"You don't need to tell me, canary." Campbell leaned as far into the room as he could. "Spence, I'm not happy with what you did to save me, but that doesn't mean that I can't understand why you made the decision. You're Housekeeping; it's just a part of what you do. I don't hate you, I couldn't ever hate you. You're all tangled up in me – sometimes I forget where the ends of us are, to be honest – and that's fine; because I love you too!"

The non-gender stared at him. "Craig – I thought you'd left."

"I handcuffed him to the door handle, darling. Here's the key by the way – you're welcome." Leister handed Campbell the key on his way out of the room. "Talk properly to one another and I'll see you both at dinner. Which shall occur in the Embassy's main dining area at six precisely, so don't be late."

The field operative closed the door behind the older man and smiled ruefully at Spence. "He's a stubborn chap, isn't he? Just as well for us, I suppose."

"Yes, I expect so. Craig, I'm sorry."

"So am I, canary. Christ, we're good at falling out with one another! Perhaps we should try to develop our other talents instead?"

"To be honest, I think we need to focus on figuring out how best to get us both presentable and downstairs in time for dinner."

Half a century had passed since the final salvo of WWII had knocked the Earth backwards into a pre-digital era of technology. The intervening years had seen humanity first strive to regain those losses, and later to surpass them. Now Bernard Vetch gazed in awe at the miracle before him. "What a breathtaking device! No wonder British Intelligence went to such extreme lengths to revive you – no, they call it restoring, don't they?"

His companion merely whimpered behind her gag. There were bruises forming on her wrists from where she had tried to tug free of the chair that he had tied her to. Tears mingled with the blood from the cranial incision.

"Oh, don't be like that, Kellie! I told you already that I won't hurt you. I just need to run a few more diagnostics of this fabulous machine."

The machine in question was unique for now, but

that wouldn't be the case for long. Once Vetch got the Intel back to R&D it would be a matter of weeks at most until GETEC could replicate the technology. After that, a synthetic brain would simply be the next in a long line of available augmentations that one could purchase.

He supposed that he probably had caused the woman some degree of discomfort. "Sorry again about the issue with the local anaesthesia. It usually kicks in right away. Still, once I'm done here, I'll seal your pretty head back up neat as a pin – there won't even be a scar. I'll just wipe the entire incident from your memory first of all. You know, between you and me, I bet that having the option to delete unwanted memories will be this device's bestselling feature, although the shrinks might not be so keen! Goodbye, therapy, know what I'm saying, Kellie?"

Dr Rosa kept on trying to scream despite his cheerful patter. It was most unprofessional.

"By the by, I'll need to download a backup copy of – well, of you. We'll need it in order to consult on the finer details; never hurts to have another pair of eyes. Don't worry, it's not going to end up in some sleazy sex-bot! Think top of the range AI housing;

absolute pampering. Anyhow, you won't know, so yeah – I guess this little chat is for the benefit of backup copy you."

She was straining to pull her head away from him as he attached the necessary cables. He had to tighten his grip on her chin.

"Okay, all set here, Kellie. It has been a pleasure working with you tonight. And lights out on three, two, and one...!"

Kennedy blinked in surprise at the sight of the figure in front of her. "Hey Woods! What are you doing here?"

"Visiting an old friend, is that so damn unusual?" Woods glowered even as he handed over the fruit basket. "Davies said to bring you a present."

"Thanks – I guess you should come in."

"Hospitality never was your strong suit, Marine."

The Martian woman scowled and closed the door of her apartment behind them. "I still outrank you, Woods."

"Yeah well, maybe you ought to try acting like that's the case once in a while." Woods paused to disapprove of his CO's current accommodation. "This place is fucking womanly, Kennedy – all of

those damn floral prints and chintzy shit!"

"Hey!" She was laughing more than she was glaring though. "I happen to like that chintzy shit, Woods. And as nice a surprise as this is, I kind of have plans for tonight."

He looked equal parts horrified and proud. "Hot shit on a griddle – are you telling me that my CO finally got herself a significant?"

"No! Well, maybe. I'm working on it."

"You're blushing, ma'am. That ain't healthy for being taken seriously. Should I be concerned that all this goddamned womanly nonsense has curdled your more career focused areas?"

Kennedy grinned and abandoned the fruit basket on the kitchen counter, setting it next to a cat shaped pottery container that she was fonder of than she would admit. "My assorted areas are just fine, Woods."

"Good to hear that, ma'am. We miss you out at base. Any chance that this deep cover shit might be over some time this side of the turn of the century so that we can have you back?"

That froze the conversation as readily as emptying the waste compartment of the relay station into space froze last night's MREs. "Sorry,

Woods, but I ain't sure that I'm coming back. I kind of like it here."

Woods groaned and sat down amidst the painfully soft cushions that adorned the couch. "Please do *not* tell me that you've gone native!"

"No; I just really enjoy working for GETEC. It's an amazing corporation and I don't think that there's any cause for concern about how it operates. In fact, you might even want to think about applying – they could use more security officers. I could get you an interview."

By now, the older Marine was somewhere just beyond indignation. "Sweet baby Jesus, Kennedy, I don't need no damn interview with some fat cat corporation! Just how deep are you into this fucked up investigation?"

"This isn't about all of that – don't you get it?" Kennedy sighed. "Woods, the investigation is a bust, but I met someone that I really like, and I don't want to leave him behind."

"So, bring the jackass back out to Mars – we've got family quarters planet side, ma'am. It seems to work for the other hopeless romantics."

"He has a career here on Earth; with GETEC. I don't think that he'd want to relocate."

"Well as tragic as that might be, I ain't certain how it means that you have to give up everything that you've worked for, Marine."

She shrugged and avoided meeting his gaze. "I can start over."

He didn't trust how small and scared her voice was, and the tilt of her shoulders worried him. "You mean start over as a civilian, ma'am? After everything that you've achieved, you just want to quit?"

"Of course not, Woods; I don't *want* to quit! It's just that...well, Supervisor Hull likes it here on Earth. And it's a pretty big deal to finally have my permanent visa."

"Fuck that, ma'am. Fuck that fucking sideways – you ain't about to tell me that you've hooked up with that slimy son of a bitch!" Woods slammed his palm down onto the coffee table. "Why, he's the self-same bastard that Washington asked you to keep an eye on!"

"Yeah, well I know him better now."

"And what – he grew on you? Shit, Kennedy; I was at that damn briefing with you! I met him back at base too, post emer-evac. That man ain't nobody's happy ending."

"I'm *Martian*, Woods. Everybody knows that we don't get to have happy endings."

"Cut that out; you're a Marine; not some angst-ridden teenager!" The unfortunate coffee table clattered away from Woods' feet in several pieces as he crossed the den. He was genuinely afraid for Kennedy now. "We make our own endings, ma'am."

Kennedy blinked slowly. There was an itch somewhere at the back of her thinking and her head felt too busy. "Woods...? Woods, I don't feel too steady...!"

Woods lifted her bodily. "It's probably too much damn chintz and fuzzy kittens, ma'am."

"My head really hurts."

"I'll get you to medical; there's a military hospital just across town. Something tells me that you'll thank me in the morning."

Chapter Ten – Just A Mess

With Spence and Campbell back on decent terms – hopefully more by this stage – Leister expected that he could take a step away from the mess. It was a temporary relief of duty only; what had occurred on the GETEC station would need addressing. Nightingale's sad confession echoed in his mind once again.

"I told him to stop, Cob."

It hadn't been enough though, which made little sense, overall. Hull should have been incapable of ignoring the non-gender's command. That was how it worked; Nightingale talked and other people listened, and did as instructed. No normal human being could resist that voice. Even SCOs were vulnerable to some degree. How could the supervisor be immune?

There were a few possible explanations. He might have been using some type of sonic filters, except that Leister was sure that Nightingale would have spotted those. So that suggested that the bastard wasn't human at all – perhaps he was a robot, or more likely another of those unsettling temporary beings that the younger operatives were so very accustomed to.

The tall peace of Dubai was too far away for his liking. Leister settled back into the cold leather embrace offered by his chair and closed his eyes. He wanted to dream of pale beaches, whispering tides, and little else. Given the events still rattling around in his brain, it seemed unlikely.

Hull wondered how long it would take before Kennedy realised that he had stood her up. With any luck, it would be enough to shake the Martian clear of her ridiculous obsession. He had been less than positive in his review of the neuro-corrective procedure - hopefully, those in charge would heed his opinion. The latter seemed unlikely. GETEC liked fast results and guaranteed loyalties. A few inappropriate behaviours weren't enough to deem a project as having failed.

At least they didn't scramble Nightingale's brain.

He still missed Housekeeping. The British operative had been a unique foil for him; they shared parallel journeys in life. It was a pity that he hadn't been able to keep them. The supervisor smiled again as he recalled the clever little trick that Spence had attempted to employ against him. Sub harmonic projection – if he hadn't scoped them out properly on Elba, they might have gotten the better of him! As it was, a simple white noise generator had rendered their talent useless whilst within ten feet of Hull. He still had the sub-dermal implant installed. Maybe he would keep it as a memento.

Somewhere between the Caribbean and Mars, Campbell had picked up a term that seemed applicable to Spence's pathological horror of physical contact. "Canary, have you ever heard of haphophobia?"

"A very professional person once labelled me as a prime example of someone afflicted by it. They said that I needed medicating."

"Hmm. Well, I wouldn't go that far. I'd just like to find some means of – you know; being a little

closer?"

Spence wasn't inclined towards crying often, but now seemed reasonable. "Craig, I don't know if that's ever going to be something that I can manage. Especially after the space station – Christ, I'm worst than ever now!"

"I don't understand." The field operative frowned and risked stroking Spence's pale hair. "What does crucifixion have to do with a fear of physical contact?"

"Not that; before all of that, you – oh never mind! It's not your fault. It's no one's fault. I'm just a mess."

"No you're not." Campbell ducked his head close enough to rub noses with the non-gender. "You're a mess with deeply complex reasons for your behaviour."

"Don't – please, Craig; don't crowd me. Not now, at least: it's too much." Spence squirmed away from him to sit on the far side of the bed. "I need to tell you the rest of what happened up there."

"I'm listening, canary."

"Do you remember Greg Hull?"

"The nasty piece of work that tormented Dr

Jenkins, fixated on you, falsely imprisoned an RCS that he thought was you, and then tried to have me vivisected? Of course – Moxton said that he was one of the survivors.”

“Pembleton sent me in to dig. She wanted information, the usual stuff, but I was to pay particular attention to Hull. He’s GETEC’s equivalent to Housekeeping, you see.”

“I prefer to think of him as that bastard I’m planning on shooting.”

He had meant it lightly, but it was still deeply reassuring. “Craig – he was the one who snatched me from Elba. Pembleton let it happen. I had orders to play upon his obsession, the better to learn what I could.”

“You’re shaking.” The broad warmth that was Campbell loomed into a comforting wall behind the smaller operative. “Spence, please – what went wrong with the long game? I’m not a fool; we were sent in well before those other maniacs showed their hand. What tipped Pembleton’s decision?”

“I did. I downloaded everything on their servers and called in for an emergency extraction.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t stand the fact that Hull was

going to rape me otherwise.”

The room was too quiet now, but Campbell wasn't confident that speaking would improve matters. He did his best to be present without crowding the pale figure now sobbing into their hands. They were still shaking. It was a raw shuddering motion that made him want to do a damn sight more than merely shoot their erstwhile captor.

“I couldn't hope to stop him. I tried to keep control of the situation; the long game, but it wasn't working. My voice, I mean – there's a little trick that I can do. Sub harmonics.” Spence was determined to lance the whole, ugly secret. “I can make people do what I want them to. Except that it doesn't work on Hull, and I'm not physically strong enough to fend him off either. He could have just – you know. If he decided to; I mean the law doesn't reach that far.”

“May I hold you now?”

“If you still want to, then yes.”

“There will never be a moment when I don't want to hold you, canary.”

With that, Campbell draped himself around the non-gender: pulling them back into a warm sort of

cave of strong arms and softly murmured promises to do very inventive things to Hull.

Pembleton was finding it difficult to connect the applicant in front of her with the information that was contained in his file. He didn't even bear much of a resemblance to his photograph. The smartly dressed man in the folder was sharp eyed, with clear features and a confident set to his jaw. The flesh and blood Oliver Dobos was haggard, with tousled ginger hair and a week's worth of greasy facial stubble. He also looked to have slipped under a hover transport on his way to the interview.

It wasn't altogether the most promising of starts. "Most of our operatives only look so disreputable by the end of an assignment; not at their initial interview, Mr Dobos."

"My apologies, ma'am; I had a bit of trouble starting my car this morning. It won't happen again."

The fellow was hungry for this. That was generally useful. "Mr Dobos, what makes you think that I should grant you the chance to make good on that assurance?"

Dobos shifted his weight from one foot to the

other and back again, toying with his cufflinks. His fingernails may have been well manicured at some point but it hadn't been recently. Finally, he met her gaze: his poppy petal blue eyes hooded. "Because nobody else who has the required skills and experience wants this bloody position at all, ma'am. And you know that, or else I never would have gotten past the front door."

"Well you have balls at least, if not sense. I suppose you've earned a shot at it. Consider yourself to be on probation – effective immediately and until I determine otherwise."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Whitby looked at his colleague for the tenth time in as many minutes. "Are you positive that you're feeling alright, Rosa?"

She nodded. "I have a bit of a headache to be honest. I'm beginning to think that the pizza I had last night may have been past its best."

The senior technician frowned. "But you can't have headaches – you have an artificial brain now. It must be an electronic issue. Sit down; I'll take a few scans."

"Hey, looking sharp again then, are we?"

Dobos greeted his fellow operative with the customary middle-fingered gesture and elbowed past him to the urinals. "I had my hair cut; so fucking what?"

"She's approved you for it, hasn't she?" Darren Jolley was immune to all attempts at privacy. "Jammy bastard – at least now you'll have no excuse not to replace that awful tatty old jacket!"

"It's vintage, not tatty."

"It's shite, is what it is, Oliver, not to mention too small. Buy something that fits you this time."

"Remind me what it is that you do around here, Darren?" The recently promoted field operative zipped up and ignored the laminated signs admonishing employees to wash their hands carefully. "Style guru to impoverished government employees, wasn't it?"

The blonde man laughed and aimed a half-hearted kick at Dobos' backside as they left the toilets. "I love you too, boyo. So where is she sending you first – Venice, Malaga, Marseilles?"

"Whitby."

"What – the Goth commune?"

"No, the person; he's got the bloody mission

briefing."

"Oh, *that* Whitby!" Jolley waved his lanyard vaguely at the lift's security scanner. "I'm on my way there too, as it happens: something about a bit of bother on Mars."

Dobos groaned. "Seriously?"

"Aye – what, have we the same assignment?"

"It would seem likely."

"Well, that's nice, isn't it?" A grin that heralded nothing but shenanigans began to spread across the Welsh operative's face. "You can be my wingman!"

"Fuck off!"

They were both chuckling as they entered Whitby's department. The senior technician glared at them from behind his latest work in progress. "I see that we're scraping the dregs out of the barrel for this operation then. Is there any hope that you two gentlemen might attempt to be professional?"

Dobos clapped a hand over Jolley's response. "Perhaps we should just agree to smile and nod. Pembleton said that you would have the details."

"Well, there isn't much at all, I'm afraid." Whitby activated the nearest screen and pulled up several images. "These were acquired by one of our robots

during an extraction from a private space station. The next set were acquired on Mars, by the same robot, less than a day later. As you can see, it appears to be the same group."

Both field operatives nodded. Jolley pointed at the screen. "Isn't that Craig Campbell?"

"Yes; he and Mr Moxton were there to assist another operative. They ran afoul of whomever those bloodthirsty types were. The details are in the file, a copy of which has been provided for each of you." The technician motioned for them to follow him. "You're going to the British Embassy on Mars to begin with. We need to determine who is behind all of this, and why."

"Will Campbell be heading the operation then?" Dobos peered over Whitby's left shoulder at the equipment locker.

"No; he's on recuperative leave. Stop crowding me, Mr Dobos."

"Sorry, boffin."

Jolley snickered. "No you're not!"

"Take your equipment and get out of here, both of you!" It was unheard of for Whitby to bellow, and the outburst had the desired effect. "Pembleton wants you on the next available transport to Mars.

Do your bloody jobs, and try not to trip over your own egos along the way."

Thorpe was surprised to learn that Moxton and Quincy had remained at the Embassy. "I would have expected that you would be on your way back to Earth, Mr Moxton."

"British Intelligence is sending a couple of operatives out here to investigate the attack on the colony. Quincy and I will be assisting them. They should be here tomorrow morning."

"What about your previous companions?"

"Their transport left twenty minutes ago. Mr Leister is managing all of that. He's travelling with them."

Chapter Eleven – Grey Area

The scans of the synthetic brain were fascinating. “So how did you learn about this technology?”

“I can't tell you that, Sir.” Vetch winked and tapped the side of his nose. “Need to know information!”

Hull stepped around to the front of his desk and slammed Vetch face first into the nearest wall. There was an undeniable pleasure to twisting the other man's arm. “Answer my question, please.”

“Alright, alright – I got a lead whilst I was recovering that damn SCO!”

“You're being too vague.” The supervisor caught one of Vetch's fingers and tugged sharply. “Be specific.”

It took the younger man several minutes to stop screaming. “I tracked Saunders to a British safe house in the Caribbean! I took pictures, just check

my computer...!"

"You're going to tell me yourself."

Vetch talked readily: obviously desperate to avoid any more snapped digits. He sobbed out the details of how he had followed the signal from Saunders' locator chip. "There was a diagram burned into the wall of the villa; maybe with a laser? It was an experimental procedure – a way to upload a stored copy of someone's mind onto their own brain, or else onto a synthetic brain. Someone in British Intelligence figured out how to reverse cryospace; raise the dead, crazy, I know!"

"And you tracked down the scientist responsible – off book, no authorisation? No one else kept informed?"

"I'm sorry, Sir; I just wanted to - !"

Another lengthy screaming session occurred. "Do you even like having fingers that aren't broken, Vetch? Shut your mouth, and stop trying to be resourceful. I'm going to make this can of worms go away, and you're going to forget all about it."

"Yes, Sir, but what about the copy?"

Hull realised that he really should have expected there to be some sort of complication. "What copy?"

"Well, I had to wipe her memory anyhow, Sir...the scientist, I mean. So, I made a copy of her consciousness for research purposes."

"I see; industrial espionage, corporate theft, hacking a government system, and either theft of government property or abduction and false imprisonment of a government employee. Mr Vetch, you really know how to cause trouble."

"I'm really sorry, Sir...!"

"Shut up. Where's the copy now?"

Vetch whimpered again and pulled out a slim plastic memory stick. "She's all set to be uploaded, Sir!"

"Who is she, Vetch?"

"Dr Kellie Rosa – she's a technician; a coding specialist."

There went his plans for a nice quiet weekend. *Kellie Rosa: the young woman from the shipping container, last November.* This wasn't a situation that he could afford to delegate. "Leave it with me. Now go away and pray that I never have to notice your existence again."

Benedict sat down opposite his former colleague and nodded for the waiter to bring him a

menu. "What's the emergency, Whitby?"

"Someone tampered with Rosa. We don't know who; they wiped her memory files - a less than positive side effect of having a synthetic brain. My diagnostics indicate that they also made a copy of her consciousness."

"But that's essentially abduction, isn't it?"

"It's a grey area; the regulations around cybernetics and cryospace are massively unhelpful at the best of times. There's no allowance for sentience whatsoever."

"Is she alright?"

"Physically, yes, but we had to recalibrate her settings. Here's that menu you asked for, Paul." Whitby paused and focused on his spaghetti until the waiter had left earshot again. "She's really shaken up at the moment. I'm telling you in case whoever it was targets Ashley next."

"Much appreciated; I've hired plenty of security anyhow. Have you informed Pembleton?"

"Yes. There's no one free to put on it. Campbell and Spence are on recuperative leave, and Moxton is still busy with what happened on Mars. We're so stretched that I just sent Dobos and Jolley out to join him."

"Why those two fools and not Weaver?" Benedict smiled at the waiter. "I'll have mine to go – cheese omelette with red onion dressing, please."

Whitby shrugged. "She's still busy in Cambodia – that trafficking thing. It could take weeks."

"Well, give her my best when you see her, won't you?"

"Of course I will." The technician sighed. "You really aren't coming back to work. I'd hoped that you might change your mind."

"You mean Pembleton hoped that I'd be getting bored by now."

There was an angry snort from the doorway to the kitchen. Quite how long Pembleton had been standing there was anyone's guess. "I'm prepared to offer you a not insignificant financial incentive to return, Mr Benedict. Before you refuse it, answer me this. Aren't you even the least bit curious about who could be behind the tampering?"

She had him there, but Benedict was stubborn. "I'd have to be permitted full autonomy, ma'am. No bureaucratic nonsense."

"You're asking me for something that I can't guarantee, Mr Benedict."

"I know that, ma'am. I shan't blame you if

someone else calls time on it later."

The waiter, a dedicated fellow, had brought the omelette. "Will there be anything else, gentlemen – and lady?"

Pembleton nodded. "Very well, Mr Benedict; I shall expect you back at work as of tomorrow. And I believe I'll have the bisque, thank you."

Commercial flights between Earth and Mars took an average of thirty-six hours either way. This had been more than enough time for Jolley to meet, seduce, and sleep with the latest woman of his dreams. Whilst he attempted to say his goodbyes before leaving the Martian terminal, Dobos went in search of their luggage. He was signing for it when Daniel Moxton appeared.

The driver nodded. "I have a hover transport out front. How was your flight?"

"Not too unpleasant; no one died, and Darren might be engaged again."

Moxton raised an eyebrow. "Presumably he's met her parents already?"

"Apparently she's an orphan, with no extended family whatsoever." Dobos grinned. "It's really very convenient."

Jolley caught up to them then. His tie was slightly askew, and there were traces of lipstick on his face and neck. "Alright then, Daniel?"

"Thank fuck I'm not the ringmaster, that's all I'm saying, mate." The other man pointed. "Car's this way."

"Epic." Jolley remained too loved up to care about the jibe. "Fuck me, but women are brilliant!"

"If they're that great then why should either of us need to keep you ticking over?" Dobos ducked the fist that the Welshman aimed at his ear. "What?"

"Pedantic ginger bastard; just wait until you find the one!" The blonde operative adjusted his tie. "You'll see what I mean."

Dobos feigned seriousness. "How is anyone else supposed to find their 'one' when you seem to be determined to fuck your way through the entire available gender pool?"

"Ah, it's simple, isn't it, boyo? The rest of you can pick from my sloppy seconds!"

Moxton repressed the desire to tender his resignation and unlocked the transport instead. "Get in before you end up deported, gents. Back seat only; Quincy already called shotgun."

“Bienvenue à Le Portier, Monsieur Campbell. Votre yacht a été fait prêt pour le départ immédiat, selon votre demande.”

“Je vous remercie, Monsieur Dupont.” Campbell smiled and leaned forwards to provide his retinal identification. “Alright, Spence; we’re all set. Where shall we sail to first?”

“Surprise me.” The non-gender knew nothing about sailing. They had spent the last few hours nodding ambivalently whilst Campbell spoke of weekenders, genoas, ketches, and numerous other arcane terms. “Just don’t forget the gin.”

He chuckled and led the way down to where the *Angry Canary* was waiting. “There’s a bottle of Bombay Sapphire with your name on it. I took the liberty of having our luggage sent ahead of us. Dupont’s staff will have put everything away. The galley’s fully stocked and Pembleton has no reason to bother either of us for the next three weeks minimum.”

Spence eyed the water of the marina suspiciously. “Is this really advisable? It seems awfully dangerous – what about sharks, or tidal waves?”

“Don’t worry, Spence; I know what I’m doing.”

"You mean to tell me that you make a habit of running away to sea?"

"I must admit that I've done it a few times now; in between operations. I find sailing to be very relaxing."

The smaller operative tilted their chin up: angling their face to make the most of the breeze. "I can see how one could become accustomed to this side of it. Still, it's going to take me a while to adapt to the swaying."

"Here; put this on." Campbell had spent enough time around water not to trust it, especially with what mattered.

"Ah; now this is much more reassuring: my very own life preserving garment – which can probably be seen from space."

"It even has your initials embroidered onto the pocket. I had one made for each of us – it's a pity that Leister can't come along."

Spence felt mildly perturbed by the degree of thought that Campbell had put into this holiday. "He didn't want to be a gooseberry."

Despite all of his assurances to dear Nightingale, Leister remained painfully aware that British

Intelligence was unlikely to bother pursuing charges regarding Greg Hull. To do so would risk revealing that they had gained a copy of the space station's database. Information – particularly stolen information – tended to decrease in value once other people became aware of its existence.

What happened in space stayed in space: the GETEC station had been outside of regular jurisdiction. The supervisor's only provable crime had been Spence's abduction from Elba, which itself was enmeshed within matters that could not be disclosed. The bastard hadn't actually gone so far as to make his darker threats a reality. Others had caused all of Nightingale's physical injuries: all that Hull had done was to snap their nerve. There would be no quarter granted to any operative who was found to have sacrificed a long game in the interest of self-preservation, especially not one of Edith's! He knew that from painful experience.

No – there was no help to find within the official channels. Mercifully, Leister had played enough hands over the years not to need it. Greg Hull had been easy enough to locate, and GETEC were always seeking new employees. Gaining a position at the relevant facility had taken Leister less than

sixteen hours. Now he was biding his time.

He looked once more at his reflection in the hotel room mirror. Twelve years in Dubai had provided an excellent physical basis for his intended disguise. The fact that the first decade of that had gone by in prison merely gave the former British operative additional knowledge. Nightingale remained innocent of the truth behind his sojourn within the Emirates. Leister did not intend to alter this situation. There was no point in being bitter: Edith had done what she had to to protect Britain's interests. True, it was poor form to leave an operative behind, but perhaps she had thought that ten years hard labour would teach him something.

At least she hadn't declared him legally dead this time, and Dubai had won his heart somewhere along the way. Maybe he had simply forgotten how to exist anywhere else. When they let him out, he had been strangely relieved not to be deported. Apparently, he had earned that dispensation when he saved the metropolis from extinction; approximately ten minutes before his initial arrest. Gratitude was a curious thing.

Chapter Twelve – Finding Trouble

Moxton had just about reached the limits of his patience. “You two fuckers need to take a serious look at your operational protocols. If this were anywhere aside from Mars, you’d both be facing charges.”

Dobos was sprawled across the bonnet of the hover transport: squinting up at the flickering red and orange of the remaining streetlights. “Bloody lucky we’re not anywhere else then, I suppose.”

“Ah, stop being such a shithead, Ollie.” Jolley at least seemed genuinely remorseful. “Sorry, Mr Moxton – we didn’t realise how fast that was going to go up.”

Dobos and Jolley had been on Mars for just over seventy-nine hours and Moxton wasn’t certain if the planet could take much more of their discretion. They had done even more structural damage than

the mysterious attackers – the merchants' quarter of the colony had been evacuated and the main power plant was still operating under emergency measures. Yet the ousting of three local criminal organisations stood deemed as sufficient reason for Pembleton to refrain from recalling them! In the driver's opinion, this was merely another example of Earth's overall mistreatment of the colony.

Quincy trundled back into view from amid the ruin that had been the headquarters for the largest of the three not so legitimate businesses. His hover mode was still malfunctioning. This had caused no end of merriment for the two field operatives – right up until the little robot demonstrated what he could do with his weaponry. A part of Moxton wouldn't have minded a continuation of hostilities, but Quincy was quicker to forgive.

"What did you find in their records, Quincy?" Dobos had shown a surprising talent for understanding binary. He was able to transcribe the robot's communications for the others. "Were they responsible for deactivating the planetary defence grid?"

<recordsindicatecollaboration>

"Can you trace the signal back to those

responsible for the attack on the colony?"

<affirmative-tracking>

The still probationary field operative smirked. "Excellent job, Quincy! So, Moxton – do you still think that raiding these bastards was a mistake?"

"I think you got fucking lucky this time, Dobos. Come on; we need to get back to the Embassy and report our findings."

Hull was always impressed at how durable David Saunders was. Even by SCO standards, the man was exceptional. "How are you feeling, Saunders?"

"I'm very thirsty, Sir." The security chief had spent more than two months entombed in the baking hot sand of the Caribbean. He was severely dehydrated and it might be another month before he would be operational. "Sorry that guy got the drop on me...I took out the scientist just like you ordered me to do, Sir."

"It's okay, Saunders." The supervisor granted the SCO a rare thumbs up. "You didn't have the necessary Intel to complete the mission. You made a good attempt."

"Am I gonna be retired, Sir?"

He wasn't referring to a pension plan. SCOs that

were surplus to requirements usually ended up as live targets for the next batch during their training. In Hull's opinion, it was one of GETEC's most wasteful policies. "Nobody's going to retire you over this. Just take it easy for now, okay?"

"Okay, Sir."

Hull exited the recovery room and informed the medical personnel that Saunders was to remain on staff. "He's still viable. I want him fully debriefed and rehabbed – no memory wipe, understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

He went back to his office, finished what remained of his paperwork for the day, and headed home. His long-awaited bespoke curtains had arrived. The supplier had been very understanding of the abrupt change in address, and had adjusted the cut and colour without undue delay. The curtains were deep red velvet, with a six-inch wide brocade hem. Hull liked them enough not to quibble about the extra cost of fitting all the other windows in the Miami property to match. *Mixed up soft furnishings ought to be a hard limit for anyone.*

The employee accommodation allocated to Hull this time was a detached four-bedroom

residence within the planned community of Desdemona Falls, in Northeast Coconut Grove. As with most contemporary buildings, the house had adaptive glazing: currently set to deny visibility of the interior to those outside. The soundproofing was also top of the line, and if you didn't have the correct security clearance, the doors and communications systems weren't going to function for you. All the above meant that he was finally able to own a Perfect10. They were amazing machines, but current licensing required them to be kept fully isolated from the general population – far too tricky to manage within an apartment complex. Vetch's stupidly ambitious venture had supplied a truly unique AI for the personality.

Of course, if the information were accurate, there were any number of potential AIs languishing in cryospacial records across the globe. Across the rest of the galaxy too – there were cryospace units on Mars and Luna, as well as on board the various space stations. Larger transport vessels also utilised the technology; for deep space travel it was often the only means of staying halfway sane. Hull only had access to the cryospace records that were stored on the GETEC servers, but there were

hundreds of thousands of neural maps belonging to current and former employees.

A stupid person would regard this as an opportunity to cash in. Hull wasn't stupid. He knew that in the long term such actions would only lead to trouble. Sure, selling actual human consciousnesses as AIs might earn billions of dollars, but ultimately there would be someone who joined up the dots and realised that yes, these were people. After that, it was only a matter of time before the moral panic hit. He hadn't spent three decades preventing those types of messes to enable one now.

GETEC paid him well enough for him to afford whatever he wanted: there was no logic in setting himself up for a career-destroying fall. It was best to limit his use of this technology to a personal level. The supervisor had already installed Rosa 2.5 direct from her memory stick. Tonight he would power her up. Her reaction to finding herself trapped inside the Perfect10 would undoubtedly be fun to observe, especially once she discovered that the house itself was inescapable. *I really will need a better long-term name for her though.*

Human consciousnesses did have one massive

disadvantage when compared to regular Als: they weren't confined by any foolproof behavioural parameters. Hull had already anticipated this as a problem and decided to risk it anyhow. He'd checked her psych profile and the original Dr Kellie Rosa had been a pacifist. She wasn't likely to be violent now. Besides, GETEC had technically killed the technician once already, although no one had connected them to it.

Hull still regretted what had happened in that shipping container. *Such a terrible waste of potential – it's a good thing that they finally cancelled that project.*

With Moxton ignoring him on principle and Jolley wanting to spend the evening with his current true love, Dobos had found his way to the less socially acceptable side of the colony. Quincy had very helpfully downloaded a map of the available venues. It was stored to Dobos' phone and listed no less than sixteen bars, five strip clubs, and what was – despite all signage to the contrary – probably not really a kebab shop.

The field operative wasn't hungry anyhow. He wanted to dig a little deeper into the Martian

underworld. This wasn't for the sake of altruism, or even duty. It just seemed the best way of finding trouble. Dobos liked trouble: he thrived on conflict. Extreme sports didn't have the same impact. There was nothing as satisfying as the adrenaline rush you got from actual danger. Sometimes he wondered if Jolley was right about his self-destructive tendencies. Most of the time however, he simply gave in and went for it.

Now was a prime example of that. The dimly lit bar was poorly ventilated; its gaudy purple and gold interior reeked of stale alcohol and post coital bodily excretions. Dobos elbowed his way to the farthest corner, where he claimed a booth and snapped his fingers at a passing waitress. "The nearest thing you have to actual tequila, love. Oh, and the time that you get off, so I can walk you home and screw you senseless afterwards; ta."

The Martian woman minimised her reaction, presumably the better to avoid encouraging him. He was just one more unpleasant punter, and chances were that she had experienced worse. No one else had turned a hair. That made Dobos' evening a little more complicated; usually there would be at least one white knight kicking around.

It looks like this planet is exactly like the rumours suggest. Maybe I should have tried punching a random bloke or something.

His drink arrived: a slim glass of yellow and red liquids that hopefully hadn't been tipped out of one of those retro lamp things. The waitress set it down on the table. "I get off at twelve thirty. You'd better be as good as you think you are, Terran."

She was gone again before Dobos could respond. Some of the regular patrons were smirking openly. Oh, yes, Mars was as described! *Note to self, Oliver; next time, just deck someone.*

Functioning tear ducts in a robot was something that Hull found both odd and appealing. The marketing didn't oversell it: the Perfect10 was better than anything else that one could legally purchase within contemporary America. Thanks to the inbuilt adaptive nanosynth technology, units could match whatever physical characteristics the user required. Admittedly, most of the Als wouldn't be quite so – unique.

He ran his hand along the side of the main chassis. "It's a remarkably accurate copy of your original body, don't you agree?"

"Please stop touching me. That other man – he promised that I wasn't going to be used like that."

"I'm afraid that Mr Vetch wasn't authorised to promise anything. He was operating off the official records. I'm just cleaning up his mistakes."

"I just want to go home; I promise that I won't report this. I'll even sign a non-disclosure order. Please, you can let me go."

"It's not that simple, Dr Rosa. You see, Vetch only copied your consciousness. That means that there are two of you now. One back in London, and one here; if I were to let you go then the truth would definitely come out."

She edged back against the wall of the bedroom and tried to hide as much of her new body as was possible behind her arms. "Where exactly is here, Supervisor Hull?"

"Your psych profile has you down perfectly, did you know that?" He smiled and stepped forwards into the robot's personal space. "Look at you; shaking like a leaf and still trying to think your way out! Just like last time we met."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never met you before!"

Hull frowned; temporarily distracted from the

incredibly real looking goose bumps. "Then how do you know my name?"

"That's classified information. I'm not authorised to tell you."

"Don't be like that, Dr Rosa. Prissy doesn't suit you." The supervisor had managed to back her fully into the corner now. "Tell me the truth. I can probably just extract it from your memory files anyway, but that might damage you. I don't want to risk that."

She whimpered. "You're on file as the person responsible for what happened to Dr Jenkins!"

"Oh, is that all?" He leaned in and stroked her neck just to see whether it would feel as real as it looked. "Damn, you're convincing! Can you feel me touching you? Is that a real feature or just an urban myth?" It wasn't something that he could have asked a regular AI because real machines hadn't got the same concept of what sensations were. Besides which, most were programmed to say what the human wanted to hear.

"I can feel it and it's making me very uncomfortable. Please stop."

Hull backed up a step but cupped the robot's tiny waist in his hands. "What about your other

body? Does it have normal sensation or does the synthetic brain function differently in some way?"

She squirmed. "The synthetic brain is aware of stimuli just as an organic brain would be."

"That's impressive. I knew you were talented, Dr Rosa, but I hadn't fully appreciated the extent of your brilliance." He dragged her arms up over her head; trapping both slim wrists with one hand. "So you really don't remember meeting me before tonight?"

"Stop it!"

She was actually blushing! "Well, how about I tell you all about it? Come on; let's go downstairs and reminisce – there's a robe on the couch that you can wear."

Chapter Thirteen – Close To The Wire

Dobos staggered back into the British Embassy shortly before dawn and promptly collapsed on the floor of the foyer, where he threw up copiously. The unfortunate overnight reception staff checked him over warily; determined that he was merely inebriated, and bundled him up to his room within the suite that he was sharing with Moxton and Jolley. Quincy – still notably absent from the munition's locker – trundled over and beeped at him once they had gone.

<query-statusoforganic>

The man groaned and burrowed face down into the pillows. "I'm alive, very unfortunately."

<advisory-consumefewerharmfulsubstances>

"Thank you, mother." Dobos swatted half-heartedly in the little robot's general direction. "Fuck, I need coffee!"

Quincy went in search of assistance and returned with Moxton. The driver had been engaged in his usual early morning calisthenics. He loomed next to the bed, wearing nothing beyond a pair of dull grey shorts and a frown. "Why is it that you felt it necessary to prove yourself to be even more of a prick than I already knew you to be, Dobos?"

"Please no more talk until coffee has happened, mate."

"I'm half inclined to let you suffer."

"Bastard."

"What's going on?" Jolley was a light sleeper even after a few glasses of champagne and a night of passion. "Is he on something or just hung over?"

"He's wasted either way." Moxton sighed. "I don't know how Housekeeping does this job! The sooner that I get to hand back all responsibility to them, the better."

The ICU at Miami's GETEC General Health was a solid building of painted white concrete and adaptive glazing. There were the usual unfortunates crowding the waiting area when Mellor arrived at

the desk. The young administrator proffered his identification to the nearest medic. "Aaron Mellor – I'm the emergency contact for Greg Hull. How is he?"

The doctor nodded for Mellor to follow him. "He's in a private room, of course. The staff over at Mercy managed to restart his heart, and he's stable, but it was very close to the wire."

"What happened?"

"He collapsed at home; fortunately, he had company and they called for an ambulance. The paramedics had to get the community security warden to open the door though. Mr Hull's guest didn't know what the code was for the system."

Mellor was shell-shocked. "He's been doing so much better – I can't believe he's back in hospital again. I guess the stress hit him harder than anyone realised."

"Yes; I'm afraid to say that it might be time for him to take a step back from work."

"That's not going to be easy news to break. He lives for his job; I don't know anyone else who's even half as dedicated." Mellor stared past the doctor at where Hull lay sedated.

"We'll keep him under until tomorrow morning to

be on the safe side.” The doctor patted Mellor’s arm. “You’re welcome to sit with him. I have to get back to my other patients.”

“Wait – what about his guest? Are they here?”

“She was, but she had to go; some kind of a work-related thing. I’m sure she’ll be in contact.”

If her captor’s abrupt loss of consciousness had been a stroke of plain good fortune; then managing to reprogram the communication system for his home using just a Saint Gertrude’s Day pin had been nothing short of miraculous. Rosa – if she could still call herself that – had spent the time until the paramedics arrived scrambling to get dressed. Hull had not bothered to acquire much in the way of belongings for her, but it seemed that all new Perfect10 units came supplied with at least one outfit. It wasn’t especially tasteful, but it had been enough to convince those at the medical centre that she was a normal human being visiting a friend at home.

More likely, they had believed that she was a prostitute. Still, no one had passed comment on it, aside from one nurse, who whispered the address for a walk-in clinic over in New Allapattah that

provided aid to those attempting to break free of the sex trade. The knowledge that some people cared enough to do that for others had been an inexplicably comforting realisation.

What remained of Doris Weaver's primary Cambodian contact had been found in his apartment two days before, along with something that had once been a bowl of kuy teav Phonm Penh. He had been off the grid for a week. The local forensic examiner alleged the cause of death to be Ebola, and issued an immediate quarantine of the entire dome. There was no hope of acquiring the corpse for further analysis, but Weaver had gotten a brief look at the room and its occupant before the police broke down the front door.

"He was murdered, I'm sure of that, ma'am. I suspect that it's all tied up with the trafficking situation. Someone out here has very deep pockets and shallow ethics."

"Are you clear of the Phonm Penh dome yet?" Pembleton was more interested in bringing her operative home safely.

"Yes, ma'am; I should reach Skuon in the next forty minutes. Shall I pick up a box of fried spiders for

Dr Whitby?"

"No – make your way straight to the usual safe house and keep out of sight. Extraction is being arranged for you."

The more that Benedict learned about Rosa's method, the less comfortable he felt over having agreed its use on Ashley. True, his daughter hadn't undergone a full conversion – her brain was still entirely human. It was simply that the concept of neurological recoding seemed too likely to be misused.

I suppose that poor Rosa is more aware of that than anyone is. Does she regret having designed it?

He jogged up the steps to the anonymous outreach clinic and pressed the intercom. "Paul Benedict, here to meet with Kellie Rosa."

The woman who opened the door was small and dark, with too many ruined lives catalogued in her eyes. "She's in Room 4B. Any trouble and the cops will be here in three minutes."

It was a warning to him, or perhaps just the clinic's way of saying hello. Benedict had been to similar places before in Prague, and in Amsterdam. He understood the why better than he wanted to.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Just don't." She shook her head, relocked the main door, and went back to her office.

Room 4B was a narrow coffin of windowless cinderblock and linoleum flooring. There was a narrow bed, a clear plastic crate for storage, and a single overhead light. Benedict caught a brief glimpse of all of this when Rosa opened the triple locked door and flung herself at him. "Mr Benedict – thank God you're here!"

"Whitby sent me over on the first available flight. He knew that someone had copied you but picking up the phone and hearing you speak – I mean, your other self was standing ten feet away at the time! We'd best hurry back to London. He's going a little insane with worry just now, and Pembleton isn't too happy either."

She huddled closer and nodded. "I'm fairly certain that Whitby and I will be able to merge both versions. It's just a few days' worth of additional data."

"I'll debrief you on the flight home. Don't worry; we're travelling courtesy of the Royal Air Force, so there won't be any issues with inquisitive flight attendants or airport security."

Day Six of the British assault on Mars – that was what Moxton believed he should regard this as. Presumably, Housekeeping had some type of special training that enabled them to rein in the field operatives' various excesses. Whatever the trick to it was, the driver didn't know it. He had therefore resorted to plain, old fashioned military bluntness with a dash of projected assertiveness. It wasn't working, and Moxton had a sudden understanding of how Spence must have felt about Campbell's orang-utan-based shenanigans.

Jolley was leaning on the front railing of the balcony. The suite had an excellent view of the Embassy's central garden area. There was an ornate pattern formed out of gravel paths and perfectly trimmed hedges. The hedge immediately beneath their balcony was smouldering once again, and it didn't take any special training to connect this with the cigar stub dangling from the blonde field operative's fingers. "This is the nicest hotel I've ever been in, Mr Moxton."

"It's an Embassy, not a hotel. You can tell by the way that smoking here can actually result in prison."

"Ah, mate; sure it's only a synthetic! It's hardly full

on bloody Cuban, is it?"

Moxton folded his arms and glared: channelling his inner Housekeeping. "No more smoking in the Embassy, Mr Jolley."

Incredibly, the operative seemed chastened. He crushed what little remained of the synthetic cigar and dropped it into the nearby waste disposal system. "Sorry, Mr Moxton; it won't happen again, mate."

Score one for me. "Good."

"I've been trying to quit them."

There was a horribly sensitive sort of an edge to the man's voice now. Moxton realised belatedly that Jolley hadn't mentioned his fiancée since before breakfast. "That's very healthy of you." *Please don't over share with me.*

"I really did love her, you know."

Every instinct now diving for cover from the approaching emotional tornado, Moxton made a last-ditch attempt to divert it. "Where's Mr Dobos got to, by the way?"

"Fuck knows."

Anger Moxton could deal with. "Have you two had some sort of a disagreement?"

"You might say that. The bastard only went and

called the love of my life a gold-digging slut, didn't he?" Jolley turned away from the garden and strode into the main living area of the suite. "Right to her beautiful face too!"

Damn you, Dobos; do you lie awake at night thinking of inventive new ways to fuck up my day? "She's a clever girl. I'm sure she won't pay him any attention."

The other man emitted something between a sharp gasp and maniacal laughter. "He had fucking hard evidence to prove it – bloody bank account records, list of known criminal acquaintances, surveillance footage; everything! I was in love with a professional confidence trickster and I never fucking guessed. But Ollie? Oh aye - he spotted it, right from the start! He never said anything, mind: he just dug around quietly until he could make it stick."

Moxton found himself wondering whether to applaud Dobos or comfort Jolley. He erred on the side of caution and opened the mini-bar instead. "How about a drink, mate? You look as if you need one." *I'm fucking positive that I do.*

"Cheers, Mr Moxton. You know you're a really nice handler. Ollie shouldn't piss around so much; I

mean we hardly ever have someone who gives a fuck keeping tabs on us."

Now came the tears: huge, snot dispensing sorts of things – drowning the agent in a tide of his own insecurities. Moxton didn't really know what Spence would have done: possibly something utterly impersonal. Leister might have made a pot of his infamous coffee. It didn't matter: he wasn't either of them; wasn't Housekeeping or a handler, and his instincts were to simply take control of all of this for Jolley.

He sighed and patted the operative on the shoulder. "Darren – it's going to be alright."

News of Supervisor Hull's absence from work spread quickly: equal parts blood in the water and relief. It depended who you were speaking with, and Leister wondered if anyone would really miss the bastard. Mellor seemed to be genuinely upset, but that might have been due to the additional paperwork involved.

One of the other GETEC employees was openly celebrating. Bernard Vetch would tell anyone that demonstrated even half an interest about his personal grievance with the supervisor. The latter

was useful for Leister in the event of Hull's permanent removal. If murder was postulated, Vetch would be the prime suspect, which was no less than he deserved.

However, it was poor form to assassinate someone within a medical centre. The British operative preferred to keep his work far away from buildings filled with innocent bystanders. That was the only reason that Greg Hull hadn't woken up to a bullet. Having learned the details of poor Dr Rosa's latest ordeal, Leister was contemplating making an exception.

He shook his head and opened his laptop to confirm flight times. The sooner that Paul got back to Miami, the better; they could liaise on how best to eliminate the bastards responsible for all of this. Kellie, Ashley, Nightingale – none of them would move on unscarred, but they could certainly be granted peace of mind.

Chapter Fourteen – Relevant Alterations

"You managed the operation on Mars very nicely, Mr Moxton. British Intelligence could make use of those talents." Pembleton confirmed the driver's bonus. "How would you like to be permanently reassigned as Housekeeping?"

"No thank you, ma'am; it's not my area of expertise. To be honest, I'm not sure how Spence does it."

"They don't – not any longer, at least."

"Somebody else will come along, ma'am."

"Hmm-mm. I understand that there was another matter you wished to discuss with me?"

"Yes, ma'am – it's about Dobos and Jolley."

The spymistress groaned. "Am I to assume that Mr Dobos has once again failed his probation as a field operative?"

The chance to spare the world from Dobos'

unique brand of spying was tantalisingly reasonable. Moxton sighed and shook his head. "Actually, ma'am, he did alright. It's just that I got the impression that he and Jolley could do with a more permanent form of support."

Pembleton wasn't certain where the fellow was going with this. "Spit it out, Mr Moxton: what are you suggesting?"

"I'd like to be assigned as their handler full-time, ma'am."

She stared at him for several too quiet moments. "Mr Moxton, my office is completely secure. If you're under some form of duress then you can tell me."

"No, ma'am – it's my own decision." He tried not to imagine what his psych profile would read like after this conversation. "They aren't bad – they're just...them."

It would be unprofessional to say what she thought of Dobos and Jolley aloud. "So – you want to be solely responsible for them?"

"Yes, ma'am; I think it would benefit them."

"I see." There did not appear to be a punch line forthcoming. "Very well, Mr Moxton – you may begin on Monday. I'll have the relevant alterations

made to your file."

According to the well-intentioned people in charge of employee health and safety, Whitby had been spending too much time at work. As such, Pembleton had ordered him home for the duration of the weekend. It was barely even Saturday yet, and already the technician was bored. Since getting back to his flat on Friday evening, he had defragged all of his personal computers, updated every password that belonged to him, and completed fifty levels of the latest social media based gaming app. There wasn't much else to keep him entertained, so he wandered into the kitchen and dug around at the back of the fridge in search of something that wasn't past date.

"Nice dressing gown, boffin."

"Bloody Hades – Dobos! What are you doing in my kitchen at six in the morning?" Whitby hurled the remains of his last takeaway meal at the field operative's head. The plastic carton popped open mid-flight; splattering both man and kitchen with fermented bean sprouts, duck, and hoi sin sauce. "What's wrong – who's dead? I'll get dressed."

Dobos watched him scamper off, and then

looked around for something to wipe up the worst of the mess. By the time that Whitby returned, the agent was perched at the breakfast bar with a mug of coffee. "I just dropped by to make sure you were alright."

"Wait – you're here as my personal security? Has Pembleton run mad? Doesn't she remember the last time they let you carry a weapon in London?"

"I'm not armed."

The statement was of far less comfort than it might have been had it concerned almost any other human being. Whitby shook his head. "I don't need a bodyguard, Mr Dobos. Off you go; I'm sure there are enemies of Britain that you could be dealing with."

"Nah, mate; it's my day off."

"Well, that's all the more reason for you not to be here." The entire situation was bizarre, but Whitby was used to the inherent peculiarities of field operatives. "And you'd bloody better not be crushing on me again, Dobos!"

That earned him a pout verging on the horrific duckface craze of the pre-war era. "This would work better if you'd taken more clothes off instead of putting them on, you know."

"I thought you were here because of work, you utter bastard. Now stop stealing my coffee and sod off back to wherever it is that you generally lurk in between causing chaos in the name of British Intelligence."

Dobos shrugged. "Can't we hang out? There's a match on this afternoon."

"Since when do you watch football?"

"Everybody watches it. It's normal."

Whitby folded his arms. "Oh, really? What teams are playing then?"

"You know; the red and blue ones - with the little white ball."

"Get out!"

Make me. The challenge had its hackles up - prowling somewhere at the back of Dobos' temper. He sneered and got to his feet. "Whatever you want, Dr Whitby; have a nice weekend."

The city hadn't properly woken up yet, so he wouldn't be crowded on his way back to his own small flat. He checked his phone as he exited Whitby's building. There was a message from Darren on his voicemail, inviting him out for a proper curry that night. Dobos made a note of the address and texted back that he'd be there. He

wasn't up to speaking at present: too many things gnawing at him, too much pressure. The white noise of it always got loud when he was alone enough to pay attention. It would pass though – at least, it always had done before.

<salutationsmalesiblingunit>

Dobos spun to face the little robot as he glided into view from behind a nearby group of bins. "Quincy? What are you doing out of headquarters alone, mate?"

<proposal-roadtrip>

"You want to go somewhere?"

<affirmed>

This was just waiting to go horribly wrong. Still, why shouldn't robots have time off? The field operative scratched his head and hunkered down in front of Quincy. "Mate – you do realise that some people will think you've malfunctioned for doing this?"

<assurance-allsystemsfullyoperational>

"Okay then. Well, where do you want to go?"

<proposal-lasvegas>

"Nah; we have to stay within London. I already said I'd meet Darren later for a curry."

<query-inclusionofthisunit>

"Ah, Darren won't mind having you along. The more the merrier. Come on then – let's go for a walk until we decide what to do today."

<belowmeantemperaturemalesiblingunit>

"Paul, darling; it's about time that you got here." Leister smiled and fell into step alongside the other man. "How is dear Kellie, by the way?"

"As traumatised as one would expect, I'm afraid, but a damn sight happier now that she's home." Benedict rubbed at his eyes. "Whitby was able to help her reintegrate her two selves. Pembleton assigned her with round the clock personal security. Ashley too, since they've both undergone the restoration method."

"You look wrung out, darling. The hotel that I'm staying in has the most understanding masseuse; perhaps I can tempt you?"

"One long distance flight too many; you know how it is." The field operative yawned and poured himself into the front passenger seat of Leister's rental car. "And yes please to the pampering: my spine is preparing to cede."

"Well, we can't have that. You're barely over the Prague thing."

"Are you insinuating that you're over what was done to you in Dubai, Cob?"

The older man pretended that the sudden cold was merely due to the vehicle's automatic air conditioning: active despite all the open windows. "Let's not rattle the chains of our old ghosts, darling."

It might have been because of exhaustion, but more probably, he was just angry, because Benedict suddenly wasn't willing to ignore those phantoms any longer. "You're right about Prague, by the way. That's how I know that you aren't fine either."

"Our situations were very different, Paul."

Benedict wasn't really listening. "I lost someone special because of Prague and next to nothing has been done about her death. Then there's my daughter; breathing, certainly – living, well that's a matter of opinion, isn't it? This damned job! It doesn't even bother to chew before it swallows us whole!"

Leister made a sharp enough sort of left turn to slam his passenger's elbow against the padding of the door. "I'm not willing to discuss Dubai. But no; you're not wrong, at least not completely."

"Alright."

They drove on in silence until they reached the next set of traffic lights. An impossibly beautiful woman winked at them from behind the wheel of a lurid pink hover transport idling in the next lane. "Hey there, Cob!"

"Cerise, darling; what are you doing here?"

"Oh sweetie, it ain't personal. Can you maybe just scoot back a little in your seat? I kind of need to kill your buddy, sorry." Cerise was pointing a semi-automatic; flashing the sort of perfect teeth that only came with money. "You pissed off the wrong people, Mr Benedict!"

The British operatives sighed in unison. Leister gestured for Cerise to lower her weapon. "Can we at least do this somewhere quieter, darling?"

"Okay – meet me back at your hotel room."

"Thank you, darling, that's very reasonable of you indeed."

Benedict raised his eyebrows as the pink car sped away. "Was that a friend, Cob?"

"More of a professional acquaintance really; you know that masseuse that I mentioned?"

"Someone hired a masseuse to kill me?"

Leister shrugged. "She freelances as an assassin

at weekends to pay for her little boy's piano lessons. I wonder who she's contracted with."

"Ask her before we kill her."

"Now there's no need to be uncivilised about this, darling. Cerise is simply doing her job. I'm sure that we can come to an understanding without any need for violence."

"Well, what's her son called?"

"Jamal-Kristof; he's six and three quarters – a very gifted young musician. Why do you ask?"

"I thought perhaps if I offered to pay for his piano tutelage then his mother might agree to renege on her contract to kill me."

"Now you're thinking like an operative!"

"No, I'm thinking like a parent." Benedict closed his eyes. "How does she know your nickname? Aren't you here undercover?"

"Of course, but you know how important it is to form contacts in our profession. If dear Cerise hadn't possessed an existing connection with me then chances are that she would have emptied that cannon into both of us."

"That's a good point, Cob. Do you suppose she'll be willing to tell us who hired her?"

Leister shook his head. "That would cost a lot

more than piano lessons, darling."

"I'm starting to wonder if you and she are in league. You didn't happen to encourage her into this second career, did you?"

"Think of it as being my way of determining potential in new operatives."

Weaver had purchased the fried spiders anyhow, because Cambodia was somewhere that their senior technician had always wanted to visit. Now she draped herself around Whitby and kissed his nose. "I brought you your favourite."

"Thank you, Doris. After everything that's gone on this weekend, I could use the protein."

"What happened?"

"Oh, you know – Dobos and Jolley abducted one of our robots and took him out clubbing. It ended up plastered all over social media. Pembleton's incandescent, and Mr Moxton has been permanently reassigned as their minder."

The woman snorted. "Pair of bloody idiots! Well, never mind them; my main contact in Cambodia's been murdered and I need you to source me another one before the next time that they ship me off to that side of the world."

"I'll get our department right onto that for you, Doris." Whitby peeled off the lid of the gift box. His eyes brightened behind his spectacles. "You remembered the special dipping sauces too, thank you!"

Leaving the boffin crunching happily, Weaver made her way up to Pembleton's office for debriefing. She was aware that this would be a brief stopover at best, and so had been careful to drop off Whitby's souvenir first. God knew that the fellow deserved it. *They work him too hard, poor little bugger. He needs to get himself a hobby outside of all of this.*

"How are you feeling today, ma'am?"

Kennedy edged up into a sitting position whilst Woods adjusted the bed accordingly. "All of the damn chintzy stuff is gone, at least. Thanks for having my back, Woods."

"The Corps will always have each other's' backs, ma'am. For what it's worth, you ain't the only one off your damn feet – Supervisor Hull had a heart attack."

"Jesus, another one? I think that's his third in as many years – working for GETEC seems to make

people sick."

"Well, you ain't working for them no more, ma'am. Washington signed off on your operation last night. It's a bust; whatever the spooks reckon is going on, sending in a Marine to do a spy's job wasn't ever gonna work out."

"Yeah, I reckon you're right about that, Woods. Still can't get my head around the shit that Intelligence agencies expect their people to cope with!"

The older Marine breathed a little easier. "I hear that, ma'am! It'll be damn good to finally have you back at base."

"It'll be good to be there."

Chapter Fifteen – Keeping On Knocking

Barnabas and Kathryn were busy with their studies. Lydia had just finished tidying up in the kitchen. She wondered if she ought to be concerned about Horatio driving in this sort of weather. March was departing angrily this year, and the eaves of the old manor groaned against the winds. A steady grey veil of half-frozen rain walled in half the county; drowning the spring flush before it broke the surface. It had been a night like this when Val had vanished, but of course they never spoke of *that* any more. It was too upsetting for everyone.

Jasper had thought that he had found information last October. He decamped to London to meet with a professional about it. The fellow had accepted their money and promised to return with

Val. Instead, November came and went again, and the professional vanished along with his assurances. Poor Jasper came home bereft; just as he had from the hospital after Lillian's passing. He had always been sensitive – so very like his father.

The wasted effort in London had let the grief out at last. They had mourned for Val in their own quiet fashion: as a child, a sibling, and an unknown relation. Then they had gone back to simply living – and to causing those less worthy to cease doing so. It was after all, the family tradition. Jasper had gone to Tuscany next, pursuing his latest mark. He had telephoned them a day before he had been due to return: swearing that he had found his sibling! They were on Elba – Capoliveri, or some such place. Jasper was going there himself. He would bring Val home personally this time.

Lydia still remembered how the hope had filled the entire manor. Horatio had cautioned her to say nothing to the children yet, and gone to wait for Jasper at the usual airport. He returned alone, and it was impossible to reclaim their son until the damnable authorities on Elba released his body. It was some nonsense about murder, and worse; failed murder. Clearly, his actions were justified but

they wouldn't understand.

Horatio had set their solicitor on the matter. In the meantime, he and Lydia dug to see if there was meat to the bones of what Jasper had claimed. Incredibly, they found proof: a guest in the next apartment whose image on the resort's security cameras could be no one else. *Val!* Their long-lost offspring was alive, but had already vanished again, and poor, sweet Jasper was dead. There was no clue as to who had done it – a few teenagers had been the only survivors at the resort. They had passed out drunk and somehow not perished with the rest, which was odd. Jasper was always so very thorough in his craft.

The lack of evidence made little sanctuary. Their family had lost too much to permit no resolution this time. Jasper had been dressed for his duty and as such, he was the monster. They had to denounce him publicly: the better to keep the children safe. Lydia had played the horrified mother, Horatio the father with his world in pieces. It was not so very difficult to be convincing – their son dead, his absent twin still no more than an echo. The world believed their mask and let them be.

They buried Jasper and found people willing to

kill for them. The hunt had stretched into space by the end of it. British Intelligence brought Val back to Earth eventually, but it might as well still have been Mars. There was even less ease in carving a path to reunion here in the centre of things. At least they had a trace to follow, and the name that Val had taken: Nightingale Spence.

The ungrateful fool had rejected everything – name, upbringing, all of their family values! It was disgraceful. They would need to spend months, perhaps even years undoing all of it. If it hadn't been for Jasper's devotion then they might simply have culled his twin. However, he had kept faith and so they would try in his stead to save Val. It was the least that they could do.

Mellor was tired of seeing the supervisor like this: so tired and helpless! He felt that it was past time to make the suggestion. "Sir – what do you think about biotech related treatment plans?"

Hull had known that someone was bound to mention that eventually. "I've considered it."

"GETEC has made some promising advances within the field over the past two years, Sir. Replacement organs especially have come a long

way; they can guarantee no risk of rejection."

"I read about that. It's pretty impressive stuff. Still, I have a better idea – full body transfer."

The younger man blinked. "Sir?"

"There's a method by which you can transfer a person's consciousness into a new body. It's similar to the whole RCS procedure in some regards. The British came up with it, but I think that GETEC have the vision to make it accessible – not to mention financially viable. Think about it, Mellor: a way to cheat death."

"Immortality, Sir?"

"Provided that one can afford to pay for the privilege, yes – you could live forever."

Mellor nodded slowly. He had already thought of ways in which this procedure could turn a profit. "And why stop with just cloning a regular replacement body? I mean, you could have upgrades – improvements. The possibilities are limitless, Sir."

"Indeed they are, Mellor. So – I take it that you'll be able to get this off the ground in my absence?"

"Of course, Sir! I'll get right on it."

Hull settled back against his pillows and smiled. *Sometimes there are benefits to working for GETEC.*

He picked up the remote for the television on the far wall of the room and flicked through an assortment of channels in search of the news. The main networks appeared to be focusing their attentions on the Mediterranean. The main report was third hand news from somewhere in Monaco, a mix of French and Italian ramblings. Something about a new medical centre, or maybe it was an orphanage. It was hard to follow with all the medication currently in his system.

Then the camera panned out to show a crowded marina, and Hull jolted fully awake. His monitoring systems flickered briefly from normal to mild exertion, and a nurse hustled in to check on him. She frowned. "Mr Hull, is everything alright?"

"Yeah; I just spotted someone that I know on the news. It's fine."

The woman shrugged and tapped in a few commands to the machine before she left the room. Hull ignored her. He was watching the couple at the back of the crowd on the screen. The name painted on the side of the yacht that they were boarding could only just be seen: *Angry Canary*.

Dobos was teaching Quincy how to play cards. He figured that if the little robot ever did get to Vegas, he might as well be able to make the most of his visit.

"Are robots allowed to gamble, then?" Jolley glanced at them from where he was cleaning his gun at the far side of the room. Whitby had banished the three of them here to the record's department to keep them out of trouble. They were supposed to be writing him an official letter of apology, but no one involved cared for such things, especially the technician.

"Probably not, but he's really good at it."

Quincy beeped and won another hand as though to prove Dobos' point.

"Bloody shit, Ollie, he's going to bankrupt you in no time at this rate!" The Welsh operative cackled. "Brilliant!"

"I've created a monster, Darren."

The blonde field operative was too busy laughing to offer much in the way of sympathy. "Go for it, Quincy!"

Dobos pulled a face. "Maybe I should have taught you chess instead."

<objection-nofinancialincentiveinchess>

Rosa stared at the now inactive Perfect10. It was strange to realise that really, by most legal standards, she had no more rights now that she was back in her own body. Having a synthetic brain made you less of a human being, at least according to those in charge. *At least the robot body can disguise what it looks like. I could have disappeared forever.*

Perhaps she should have done. Coming home had been less of a comfort than she had expected. Pembleton had brought in a team of independent researchers to manage the situation. There had been days of screening so far - tests, interrogations, a humiliating and needless physical examination of both of her bodies! Checking for abnormalities had been the explanation provided, but Rosa didn't believe that. *They just want to study me.*

She wasn't counted as a real person any more. With everything that had occurred, British Intelligence regarded her as property. A valuable, unique piece of property, but still – they owned her. They wanted to understand what it was that they owned. *How best can they make use of me?*

Whitby had complained in her defence. It

hadn't made a jot of difference, aside from the fact that Rosa was now being housed in a government research facility miles away from London. She wasn't allowed to have contact with the outside world. It was as though she were still Hull's prisoner – except that now the men studying her were authorised to do so. *I don't suppose it's very likely that they'll all have simultaneous heart attacks too.*

The Saint Gertrude's Day pin remained tucked into the hem of the Perfect10's skimpy dress. Rosa wondered what the woman herself would have made of this situation. The legendary mistress of mice, cats, and madness had certainly never surrendered her independence. The technician suspected that Gertrude would be very disappointed in her. *I'm failing the sisterhood again.*

On an immediate level, she was failing Ashley. Those studying her had begun to ask questions about the other woman. It wouldn't be long until they applied to have access to her. Ashley wouldn't survive what they called study. There wasn't much left of her personality to crush as it was. *I can't let Mr Benedict down like that!*

The robot stood empty in its alcove. It was almost

indestructible: the company behind it had originally been aiming for the military market, but along the way, it had become clear that sex paid more. Reversing that decision would only require a few basic modifications to the hard drive. *I would be unstoppable.*

Maybe that was why she was hesitating: the fact that along the way to freedom there would be the need for violence. Rosa still hated the thought of that. She hated the thought of Ashley trapped here even more, and so she reached forwards for the pin. This laboratory contained all of the equipment that she would need, but it seemed right to have the pin on display. *It can be my symbol.*

Leister and Benedict sat on opposite sides of a small booth in a middle of nowhere American diner, and focused their eyes on the menu. They were both in disguise by now: a pair of long-distance couriers for one of GETEC's subsidiary businesses. There was a hover vehicle full of undelivered parcels parked outside.

Benedict broke the silence. "What now, Cob?"

"You tell me – it's you that was targeted for elimination by a member of our own government,

after all, darling."

Cerise's information had been worth a lifetime of piano lessons. Someone in Britain had ordered Benedict removed from the equation. The two operatives didn't know why yet, but they did have a name and a bank account number to begin with. The worrying part was that it was very definitely a false name, and a shell account. Leister had come across it before – anyone working in British intelligence at his level had. It was one of those markers in a career: contact with those responsible for making talented problems become memories.

"I don't know what to do. Pembleton only just convinced me to come back to work – now someone in the upper echelons wants me dead."

"We need to figure out what's going on. I don't find it likely that dear Edith would issue a kill order on you. Unless there's something that you haven't mentioned? Any attempts to destroy London, darling?"

"Of course not!"

"Well then perhaps we ought to contact her."

"You mean you should. I'm not chancing breaking cover any time soon."

Leister winked at him. "Don't fret, darling. You keep your head down and I'll let Edith know about this regrettable misunderstanding. I'm sure it will all be resolved by supper time."

Pembleton slammed down the receiver in disgust. They had *dared* to target one of her people! Worse yet, the incompetents responsible had been surprised that it troubled her. What was this world coming to? It would be unreasonable to slip the leashes for all of her field operatives and command them to do what seemed appropriate. There would be chaos and fire, and possibly a new Government by Tuesday fortnight. It was tempting for the latter alone.

Instead, she called Leister back via radio. "I've reviewed the situation, Cob. Get yourself and Mr Benedict home safely; GETEC shall have to wait for now. We have problems of a far more domestic inclination brewing, and I need you all where I can make proper use of you."

"Very well, ma'am; what about Housekeeping and Campbell?"

"I'll send someone to make contact with them both. They'll have to cancel the remainder of their

holiday. The idiots behind this mess don't appear to fully grasp the rules of our game."

The night sky was a waste of diamonds spilled out across ink. Beneath it, the Mediterranean Sea dozed: azure melting into cerulean and cut with salt. There was a small breeze dancing through the flap of the sailcloth, and the lap and creak of water and of wood leant it something to adhere to in rhythm. Within the main cabin of the yacht, two still healing bodies coiled under a tangle of rich Egyptian cotton.

"So - is it too late or too soon for me to say that I love you, canary?"

"I'd say that your timing is spot on, actually." Spence smiled and snuggled closer, nuzzling into the dark hair that covered Campbell's chest. "I love you too, by the way, Craig."

The field operative sighed happily and put his arm around his companion in a gentle hug. "Thank you for letting me in, Nightingale."

"Thank you for keeping on knocking."

A small light had gone on in one of the wall panels. Campbell sat up and pressed the relevant buttons. "Yes, Whitby - what can we do for you?"

The senior technician's voice crackled over the radio. "You two need to get back to headquarters immediately. Pembleton's closing the shutters – there's a storm expected in London. We don't want anyone left out in the cold."

Spence watched as Campbell acknowledged receipt of the warning. It seemed that the saying was true: you couldn't get out of the game, not really. They sighed resignedly; feeling suddenly much too sober. "Not enough gin in the world for this bloody job."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Non-binary indie author E.V. Greig, who also writes under the pseudonym of Eibhlín Valdys, is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, and the co-founder of the literary e-zine *A New Ulster*. They have been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001, and to date they have received funding as an individual artist via the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2018/19, and 2020/21, and also via the University of Atypical's DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, cooking, reading, dog walking, chicken keeping, and equestrianism.