From Spain With Mayhem

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Thirteen

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From Spain With Mayhem
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FROM SPAIN WITH MAYHEM

In the direct sequel to *Proof Of Death*, socially non-gendered British Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence takes an unofficial working holiday abroad. With the safety of their nascent family to think of, and a good friend missing, the non-gender is done playing nicely with others. If the price for a quiet life is the blood of their assorted enemies, then so be it.

Meanwhile, ANI Agent Greg Hull's life is rapidly going off the rails, his boss has amnesia, and things just seem to keep on getting worse…

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Chapter One – Seatbelts On

"Um, so, like, did you *really* brainwash my grandparents yesterday so that they'd let me go with you guys to Spain?"

Nightingale Spence grimaced slightly at the boy's question. Technically, of course, the thin non-gender knew that that was exactly what they had done during their brief visit to the Dobos family at their home in Dorset on Monday afternoon, but admitting it hardly seemed wise. Instead, they deflected. "Would you rather that I'd left you behind?" Spence gestured back towards the airport terminal that they and their eight companions had exited from only a few minutes before. "Because I can put you on the next flight back over to England, if you'd like."

Twelve-year-old Brett Volker rolled his eyes at the offer. He reached down almost absently and scratched at the ears of his emotional support dog, Scooter; who was decked out in protective boots and a nanite powered cooling vest. The young Vizsla panted and wagged his tail happily as the boy spoke again. "You know I'm an empath the same as my dad is, right? I can *tell* when people are trying to manipulate me!"

Spence made a mental note of that fact as they adjusted the polarisation levels on their twin infants' matching travel pods. "I suspect that you might be more powerful than your father is. Or perhaps he's just a tad sneakier about using his powers."

Brett scuffed his shoes miserably against the baking hot tarmac of the car park. "Do you think he's okay? And my mom, too. Her memory – what if the doctors aren't able to fix it?"

Mercifully, Heidi answered before Spence could speak. The young au pair clucked kindly at Brett. "You must not be worrying so! I am sure that the doctors are the best there is!"

"Heidi's right, Brett." Spence's eleven-year-old nephew Barnabas nodded solemnly from where he was pushing the hover trolley with the group's

luggage on it. “Cob will have seen to it! He never settles for anything other than the best. Isn’t that right, Kathryn?”

His twin sister tugged her sunhat down tighter over her head and nodded. “Yes, but it might not matter much. Not when it’s her brain that was hurt. Doctors can’t always fix brains. She might have to go and live in a specialist facility.”

Beside her, Spence’s recently discovered eleven-year-old son Phil, winced at the latter lack of tact. “Kathryn! You can’t say things like that!”

Kathryn shrugged. “Well, I just did, so there!”

Spence opened their mouth to intercede. “Children, that’s quite…!”

The sudden sound of terrified screaming interrupted them. It came from the direction of the airport terminal, and it was comprised of at least several dozen voices. A brief staccato of energy weapon fire stuttered, and then ceased. The screaming from within the terminal intensified; as if the panic in there was spreading. An emergency klaxon began to wail along in tempo with the still unseen crowd.

Spence bit back a curse and nodded curtly at the rental vehicle they were approaching. They

aimed the key fob at it and clicked the button to unlock all the doors. "That's us there; the grey and white people carrier! Everybody in, quickly!"

To the four older children's collective credit, they needed no further prompting. They piled into the rear row of seats with their assorted hand luggage; leaving the middle row clear for Heidi and the younger twins. Scooter whined anxiously and scrambled up into the footwell in front of his young owner. Spence, who would usually have much preferred that the dog be secured in the vehicle's boot area, didn't bother to argue. Lifting their infants' travel pods clear of the pushchair, the non-gender slid them across the row of seats to Heidi, who immediately set to work securing them in place. Tossing the changing bag in next to the travel pods, Spence slid the door closed. "Seatbelts on, all of you!"

By now, the screaming within the terminal involved a large mob of people. Some of them had begun to spill out through the automated doors onto the paved walkway outside the main entrance to the building. Spence took one look at the not distant enough bloodied figures, and decided that the remainder of the luggage wasn't

essential. Abandoning the pushchair frame along with the still unpacked luggage cart, they sprang up into the driver's seat, and slammed and locked the door behind them. A tap of a button, and the rest of the vehicle's doors and windows were secured. The engine rumbled into life; the autopilot burbling a cheerful greeting in Spanish. Spence switched the latter feature off immediately, and fastened their seatbelt. "Miss Hedturner, are the pods locked in?"

Heidi nodded; her features ashen. "Yes!"

A glance in the rearview mirror showed that the older children and Heidi all had their seatbelts fastened too. That was all that Spence needed to know. Putting the car into gear, they pulled out of their assigned parking space and veered across an adjacent empty row. Another brief look towards the terminal confirmed that it was time to get their companions as far away from the airport as possible. Thankfully, they had prepaid the fee for their rental car's parking, and so they didn't need to pause at the exit. Instead, the barrier pole lifted automatically for the people carrier as the AI recognised the number plate. Pressing down on the accelerator pedal, Spence exited the car park and

drove to the end of the street outside it at the very top of the legal speed limit for that area. Then, duty winning out over the instinctive desire to flee, they reluctantly pulled over.

Kathryn piped up immediately. "Aunty Val, why are we stopping? Aren't we supposed to keep going for as far as we can?"

Spence unbuckled their seat belt and slid across onto the front passenger seat as they replied. "I have a legal duty to help the local authorities as best as I can in such situations. Miss Hedturner – climb through to the front and take over driving, please. I'm going back."

Heidi did as she was asked. She frowned anxiously at Spence as she settled in at the wheel and adjusted the mirrors to suit herself. "Are you truly sure that you must do this, Spence?"

"There's nothing but a pole between the car park and the outside world, Miss Hedturner. It's designed to stop vehicles, not contain humanoid shaped threats." Spence was already exiting the people carrier; their pale gaze trained on the airport. There was no sign of anyone else having reached the car park yet. "Drive directly to the Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility in Vallvidrera,

and don't stop until you get there. Keep the doors and the windows locked. Ring Cob along the way. Let him know where you're going, and that there's a biological incident occurring here. From what I saw back there, I think we might have another Miami on our hands. Children – stick with Miss Hedturner. She's in charge until either Cob or I say otherwise." They paused for a moment longer before closing the door; adding as they did so. "You all have my explicit permission to maim or kill if you need to."

***

It was common knowledge in military circles that Deimos Base was always in need of upgrades and repairs. This fact had provided the perfect excuse for Martian billionaire Robert Waverly, and his business partner Ari Zahn, to stop by there on a visit. They'd brought along a care package of sorts. A few hundred crates of spare parts, a couple of metric tons of food and medical supplies, and fifty or so prototype versions of a nifty little plasma rifle that Waverly had been developing for use by the Martian Marine Corps. Pocket change for him. Game changing for the personnel stationed there; especially given the recent upsurge in pirate

activity. But it was still only window dressing. Waverly's real motivation for being at Deimos Base was an exchange of mutual favours with its commanding officer; his longtime friend and fellow Martian, Captain Susan Kennedy.

The latter woman was currently engaged in a difference of opinion with her second in command about one of those favours. Gunnery Sergeant Archibald Woods didn't like the idea of Kennedy travelling to Earth in search of replacement identity documents for her daughter. He'd cornered her in her quarters whilst she finished packing to tell her so. "It's too damn risky, ma'am! And don't even get me started on you taking little Ellie bear along with you! What if you're caught? Those bastards on Earth will lock you up and throw away the keycard! What do you think would happen to Ellie then, huh?"

Kennedy sighed and zipped up her duffel bag. "Yeah, well, she can't go through life with no paperwork proving who she is, Woods! This is the only way for me to get her into the system. The longer that I leave it, the older she'll get, and the tougher it'll be to explain to people where in the heck I got her from!"

Woods scowled. "That don't make trusting this Russian fellow a good idea! What if he turns you in when you get there?"

"I told you already: Spence vouched for him." Kennedy recognised the look on Woods' lined face and kept talking before he could try to interrupt her. "And I trust Spence, so don't go there, okay? They're on my side about the whole custody mess."

"So am I, ma'am!" Woods shook his head unhappily. "Can't you just find someone on Mars to whip you up a fake birth certificate and such?"

"I don't have the right kinds of contacts for that, Woods." Kennedy rifled through her hand luggage in search of her own travel documents. It wouldn't do to rely on the Earth authorities accepting the digital versions alone. "And even if I did, the data bases for Earth and Mars are kept on separate systems. Nobody on the Red Planet has the means to register a baby for citizenship on Earth. Not even through official channels."

"Aw, Hell, ma'am!" Woods clenched his fists angrily at his sides. "Hell in a fucking handbasket! She don't need that anyhow! Ain't nothing wrong with being Martian!"

Kennedy scoffed. "Reckon that's probably real

easy to say from your perspective, Woods! But you *ain't* Martian. And you ain't female, either. I am. Ellie deserves better."

Woods bit back a vicious string of profanities at the blunt reminder of his own heritage, but only because of the baby drowsing in her crib nearby. "You telling me I should check my privilege, ma'am?"

"You're a man who was born and raised on Earth, Woods; why don't you tell me?" Kennedy sighed. Her voice softened a little as she continued. "I'm just looking out for her best interests, that's all. She deserves to have the choice about what planet she calls home. And besides, this Bogomolov guy, he's got a clinic. A private fertility kind of place. You know – vat grown babies made to order from samples of the clients' DNA; all that fancy stuff. He already seen to arranging the FIL side of things and walked me through what I needed to put down on my application for leave. As far as the brass are concerned, I'm paying his clinic to provide me with a replacement child."

"Oh, so he's giving you a fake backstory for where she came from too then, huh? I guess that might be worth *some* of the risk." Woods thinned his

lips pensively for a moment. "Still – smuggling a baby onto Earth? Got a solid plan as to how that part works, ma'am?"

"That's where Bob comes in." Kennedy smiled. "Genius inventor, remember?"

"Here's hoping that he don't screw up then!" Woods could tell that his CO wasn't going to be talked out of her plan. "And in return, he gets a character reference from Captain Mars herself! Think it'll do him much good, ma'am?"

"I hope so, yeah." Kennedy scooped Ellie up and cuddled her. "He screwed up bad, for sure, but I believe him that it wasn't malicious or even deliberate neglect, and I reckon that he's learned from his mistakes. He deserves to have regular contact with Tessa."

Woods raised an eyebrow speculatively at her choice of words. "But maybe not an actual second chance at parenting her, huh?"

Kennedy gave a short, bitter sort of laugh. "He left her unvaccinated, Woods! Cost the poor kid her hearing. Could have been her life. And then he forgot to bother mentioning that inconvenient little fact to me, which put Ellie at risk too. Honestly, I don't know if I'd trust him to be a parent, or at least

not alone. He's…ugh…he's a real good guy at heart, but he don't always see things the way that the rest of us do."

"You gonna put all of that down in your character reference for him, ma'am?"

"Let's just say that I'm planning on being real diplomatic about the whole thing." Kennedy grimaced at the thought of what her statement to Children's Services might cost her friend. "Say – those kinds of things are for the social workers' and court officials' eyes only, right?"

Woods shrugged. "Don't reckon so, ma'am. Pretty sure that anybody involved with the case will have the right to review them."

"Well, shit." Kennedy guessed that she would likely end up down a friend for saying anything negative. "Be that as it may, I ain't about to put Tessa at risk to help spare Bob's feelings. If he can prove to my satisfaction that he's got a functioning support network in place, then I'll back him all the way. But not otherwise."

"Probably best if you don't mention that to him in advance, ma'am." Woods, Kennedy knew, had no personal connection to Waverly, and as such he was clearly less inclined to bother worrying about

the man's feelings. "Wait until you've got Ellie safely registered. Wouldn't want to risk him getting all spiteful and shit. He might back out of helping you, or worse, turn you in!"

"Aw, Bob ain't like that!" Kennedy frowned as she settled Ellie into her sling. "He's a nice guy. Just a little impractical at times, that's all."

"Well, just keep in mind that the history books are full of real nice dogs that bit people for stepping on their damn tails, ma'am!" Woods picked up Kennedy's duffel bag. "Permission to escort you both to the relevant airlock?"

"Granted, Woods."

Chapter Two – Any Such Talents

Containing things at Barcelona-El Brat had proved considerably simpler than Spence had feared. Most of the injuries to those whom the non-gender had seen fleeing the terminal had turned out to be the result of the escapees' own clumsiness. Not that Spence was judging anyone for having had the good sense to climb over luggage carousels and run away as fast as possible. Hurling oneself through a plate glass door might have been deemed as taking things too far, but the young man in question had been cornered at the time. Despite his horrific injuries, he hadn't bled out. However, his – thankfully uninfected – blood had ended up spattering everyone within ten or so feet of him. Hence the muted grumbles and scowls

which were being aimed in his direction by some of the other victims of the attack as he was stretchered out. Spence simply nodded to him as the paramedics jogged past with the hover gurney that he was strapped onto. *An extreme reaction, but still better than being bitten. And he's English. Pembleton will want his details.*

The bodies of the fifteen infected parties lay where they had fallen to Spence's immaculately placed bullets. Mercifully, none of them had been children. Some of the terminal's security officers had constructed makeshift barriers out of luggage carts to hide the remains from view until they could be removed from the scene. There was no way to know yet whether the initial trio of dark veined and frothing aggressors had themselves been innocent victims of the biohazard that had twisted them into raging, ten-feet tall behemoths. However, the other twelve deceased certainly deserved such courtesy, and so did their respective loved ones. Spence had put a sixteenth bullet into the camera of a particularly obnoxious news crew to help emphasise that fact. *Whitby will see to erasing any records of my presence here, but I expect that there shall still be one of those tiresome media*

sensitivity courses in my future. Oh well.

Now, the thin non-gender was on their way out of the airport. They kept their pistol in their hand just in case of further trouble as they made their way along through the underbelly of the terminal. One of Barcelona-El Brat's senior operations officers had let them into this normally off-limits area after clearing it over the phone with someone further up the food chain. Spence was well-accustomed to negotiating for such favours. *All in a day's work for someone in my role. It makes a nice change not to have a semi-conscious field operative hanging off my shoulder for the duration. A pity that Quincy wasn't here though. He might have been able to stun the infected instead.*

Brendan Clacher's familiar Irish brogue came suddenly from over Spence's left shoulder. "God save us, but you're a sight for sore eyes!"

Spence whirled to face the bearded Irish operative. Somehow, despite his size and the utter emptiness of the corridor, he had sneaked up on them. They kept their gun pointed down towards the floor as they glared up at him. "You're bloody lucky that I didn't shoot you, Mr Clacher! Hasn't Ms Finn ever told you not to sneak up on people

outside of missions?"

Clacher inclined his head tiredly. "Aye, sorry about that, Housekeeping! I didn't want to risk letting anyone else know that I was there. Not with how vulnerable Oliver is right now." He opened a nearby storage room with a doubtlessly illicitly acquired security lanyard, and gestured at the familiar red-haired figure slumped in the far corner of it. "He's still all but catatonic!"

Spence hurried into the storage room and crouched down at Dobos's side; assessing him swiftly for any injuries and finding a mildly worrying litany of bruises and stun weapon burns. "None of these are particularly significant. He's certainly endured far worse before and kept talking. What exactly do you know about what's happened to him? Tell me everything. I want to know the whole of it before I contact Cob."

"The Russians happened to both of us." Clacher pushed a heavy looking steel cannister up against the inside of the door and then sat down on top of its lid. "That bastard Kuznetsov did something to him. I don't know what the fuck it was, but I can't reach him. Not even by using my psionics."

"I hadn't known that you had any such talents."

Spence smoothed Dobos' hair back out of his poppy petal blue eyes. The emptiness in them was unsettling. "I suppose that this explains who shot Kuznetsov on Sunday night?"

"He started it." Clacher was wholly unrepentant. "And believe you me, he's lucky that I only stunned him. If I'd realised then just how bad of a state that he'd left poor Oliver in, I'd have finished the fucking job!"

Spence scowled. "I may yet do so myself! Go on. Tell me the rest of it."

Clacher recounted the series of events which had led up to his ambushing Spence here in the airport terminal. "Oliver was fine when I left him at the gate of the villa. The Russians obviously tortured him before I saw him next! I couldn't be sure who all locally was and wasn't working with them. I was trying to get us both safely out of the country when things kicked off here. Tried my hand at playing the hero, but the only weapon I have on me is this wee energy pistol here." He patted the weapon's holster. "Nabbed it from Kuznetsov when we escaped on Sunday. Does a grand job of dropping ordinary bastards in their tracks, but it has sweet fuck all effect on people infected with whatever

monstrosity it was that was released here."

Spence nodded. "From what I can tell, the airport security officers had the same problem with their weapons. I hazard that it would take something with a far higher yield. Perhaps a plasma cannon or similar."

"I wouldn't even count on that!" Clacher shook his head grimly. "Anyhow, once I realised that I couldn't do anything to stop what was happening, I stuck to running and hiding. Just about managed to shield the pair of us from the infected using my abilities. I'm…I'm what's classed as a masker, you see. It's a rare form of psionic manipulation that stops targets from noticing what's really there. Works on cameras and such too! Well, up to a certain range, at least. I'm bloody good at it usually, but it turns out that it's a lot harder to trick the human brain when it's been reduced to that sort of a feral state. Thought we should probably get a nice solid door or six or seven between us and them, and then just sit tight for a wee bit. You know; wait for help and such to arrive. Which I'm presuming is what's happened; since you're here now." He paused then and narrowed his eyes. "The crisis *is* over, aye?"

"Yes." Spence had been drafting an explanatory text to Leister whilst the Irish operative was talking. They tapped the screen of their phone and sent it. "So, hiding in the closet felt like the safest option, hmm?"

"Ah, sure, it was a novelty for me!" Clacher almost managed to smile. Then he looked at Dobos again, and his features hardened. "Now – if you're done with using that wee subharmonic trick of yours to interrogate me, then maybe you could try turning it on him instead, eh?"

"I see that you're still as oddly well informed as ever, Mr Clacher." Spence kept their phone in their hand; hoping that Leister would soon reply. "And I'm not sure if it will work on him."

"Maybe it will, and maybe it won't." Clacher shrugged. "It can hardly make him any worse though, can it? I think it's worth trying."

Spence frowned. "It isn't *your* brain that might end up even more scrambled! No. I shan't risk it just yet. Better to let someone qualified in such things examine him first."

"Qualified?" The Irish operative sprang to his feet and flung up his hands in frustration. "And what is it exactly that they'll need to be qualified in, eh?

Psychoanalysis? Brainwashing? Have you even so much as a half of an idea as to what the fuck those Russian bastards *did* to him?"

The non-gender took hold of one of Dobos' hands and squeezed it gently. There was still no reaction. "Frankly, I haven't a clue yet, but you may rest assured that I'm going to find out." They paused and looked over at Clacher; locking eyes with him. "Do you want to help with that part? It might get messy, and I could do with having someone else along to manage the heavy lifting."

Clacher nodded. "I'll help you, aye."

"Glad to hear it."

***

Maurice Jacob Leister sighed in relief as he finished texting and put his phone away. The awful situation at Barcelona-El Prat was over, and Nightingale and their companions were on their way to join him here at the Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility. That brought them all one step closer to being able to bypass ANI's protocols and take custody of Senior Agent Volker. *We'll need to determine what's wrong with poor Oliver first, of course. I do hope that our Russian friends here in Spain haven't inadvertently given me cause to kill*

them all. It's so much nicer when one can find a diplomatic solution to these things.

He entered the visitors' lounge where Heidi and the children were waiting, and relayed the good news to them immediately. "That was Nightingale texting me, darlings. They've successfully contained the situation, and they're unhurt. Better yet, they've found Oliver. He and Brendan were both at the airport. The three of them will join us here soon."

The general reaction amongst Heidi and the older children was one of relief and jubilation. Brett was understandably more concerned with the news about his father. He frowned at Leister. "So how come I still can't sense my Dad? Is he in a coma or something too; like Mom is?"

Leister shook his head. "I'm not sure yet, darling. Brendan has been looking after him. They were both involved in an incident on Saturday night, and your father was hurt then. Nightingale wants him to be thoroughly examined by the doctors here. Apparently, he isn't verbal, but he's conscious, and fully able to move around. I'm sorry, but that's really all that I can tell you at this point."

The red-haired boy scowled mutinously in response and buried his face against his dog's

shoulder. He didn't say anything further, but Leister could read his body language all too easily. Brett was at best a hair's breadth away from snapping under the emotional strain. It was little wonder, really. Both of his parents were now cut off from their inherent bond with him. *That's not something that a psionic of his age will find easy to cope with. Perhaps it might help if he were to spend some time with his mother. Seeing her in person may reassure him.*

Heidi appeared to be of the same opinion. She nodded to Leister. "I am thinking that perhaps now is being the good time for you to take Brett upstairs, Cob. That sign shows that it is the morning visiting hours for the patients here. I will wait with the other children."

Leister beamed at her. "Thank you, darling! Brett – would you and Scooter like to accompany me up to your mother's room? She's still sedated, but you can sit with her and talk to her. It may help her to hear your voice."

He chided himself inwardly as Kathryn and Barnabas frowned simultaneously at what he had just said. The older twins were inclined to be deeply rational in their processing of the world. Sometimes,

that mean that they overlooked the importance of being tactful. Leister wracked his brain for some means of diverting their well-intentioned but very probably hurtful opinions. *Dash it all! I've set them up to fail with this!*

Suddenly, Phil leaned in and whispered something to the twins through cupped hands. Whatever he said must have worked, for the Kathryn nodded slowly and made an exaggerated zipping of lips gesture. Barnabas wore what looked like an expression of pure awe. Leister relaxed slightly. *Hmm – I must tell Nightingale about our son's budding diplomatic prowess!*

Brett had scrambled to his feet and was hurrying across to join Leister at the door of the visitor's lounge; Scooter trotting along next to him. The boy nodded eagerly. "Yeah, thanks, Cob! I want to see her even if she *can't* hear me; like *some* people in here obviously think."

Leister shook his head resignedly. So much for diplomacy! "Let's not bicker, darlings. Things are very stressful for all of us right now. We must remember that, and try our best to be kind to one another." He opened the door and led the way out into the corridor. "Come along, Brett. Heidi – if you

or the children need anything at all, then just press the intercom over there, and a member of staff will come and attend to you. Nightingale and the others should be here within the next half an hour or so. I've arranged for Daniel to pick them up. He's already en route from Hospital del Mar."

The other injured party in their circle, artist Zoe Rusdyle, had been lucky to survive her recent ordeal at the hands of the infamous trafficker Magdalena Vasnetsova. Due to the nature of her injuries, it hadn't been practical to have Zoe transferred to Salud Milagrosa. Instead, Leister had arranged for Daniel Moxton and his regular team of operatives to help keep watch over her at Hospital del Mar. He knew that Zoe's boyfriend, Craig Campbell, would need help coping with the situation. *True, I don't especially care for the fellow, but having reviewed his file, one can hardly call his dislike of medical environments an irrational fear! And I doubt that his father will be of much help to him in that regard, or in caring for the children either.*

Chapter Three – Enough Of Blame

Kennedy sank down onto the edge of the bed in the luxurious cabin which had been assigned to her as for the journey from Deimos Base to Earth. She wrapped her arms gently around Ellie; who was still drowsing contentedly in her sling despite how loud things had gotten around the table during the recently concluded evening meal. "Really starting to hope that you get your father's people skills instead of mine, kiddo!"

Woods had been right. Her talk with Waverly hadn't gone well at all. For some reason, Kennedy asking him to prove to her that he had an adequate support network in place had hurt his feelings. The Martian woman grimaced as she

recalled the look of betrayal in her friend's eyes at her words. *Although I guess that it's probably ex-friend now.*

At least he wasn't backing out of helping her to get Ellie safely to Earth. The ride home was likely a whole other matter, but at least by then Kennedy knew that she would have all the right paperwork anyhow. Worst case scenario, she and Ellie would end up travelling on one of the economy type transports. That would treble the time needed to reach Mars, but Kennedy had secured a full three months' worth of previously unclaimed maternity leave for this trip. *Plenty of time for us to make it back to Deimos Base!*

The latter thought reminded her of another concern. Ellie being made an official kind of person meant that those in charge would be aware of her existence. That ruled out simply keeping her on Deimos Base. Kennedy had already been granted the use of family quarters on Mars, but she'd need to sort out some kind of live-in childcare before she could go back to her position as base commander. *Guessing APSU's are out as an option for me now!*

Kennedy sighed. She supposed that there was a twisted sort of irony to her having managed to piss

off both of the Waverly brothers now. Her estranged family back on Mars would likely all say that it served her right for refusing to accept her place in life. Which was, in Kennedy's opinion, a solid reason for her to keep right on not talking to any of them. *Grey rock, Marine! Grey rock, red rock, who cares? Enough damn wind and it's all just sand in the end.*

Sometimes though, she couldn't help but feel sad about it all. As the youngest of seven siblings, her childhood had been spent as part of a close family unit. The problems hadn't started until Kennedy reached her teens. Homeschooling was only legal up to the age of thirteen on Mars. High school had opened her eyes to there being other options than wife and mother for a girl to aspire to in life. Even if she was the only daughter, and therefore her parents' sole hope of securing an alliance with Mars' wealthiest family. *God damn marriage contracts! Ain't no way in Hell that I'll ever set one up for Ellie!*

The soft chime from the intercom interrupted her reminiscing. Kennedy rose to her feet and crossed the cabin. She brushed her right palm across the glowing panel in the wall by the door. "Yeah, what is it?"

Waverly's face appeared on the little screen. He looked about as wrung out as Kennedy felt. "Hey, Susan. Can we talk some more? Please?"

"I guess." Kennedy tapped in the code that unlocked the door of her temporary quarters. She stepped back as it slid open. "Come on in. Let's try not to end up yelling this time, okay?"

"Okay." Waverly padded into the cabin. The door closed automatically behind him. "Um, so Az kind of reamed me out for earlier. I'm sorry."

"Huh." Kennedy inclined her head a little. "Guess that means at least one person around here has sense. He gonna be part of your support network? Seeing as how you apparently listen to him when he calls you out on your shit."

Waverly grimaced and nodded. He sounded sheepish as he replied. "Yeah. He's definitely going to have input on how I parent Tessa."

Kennedy thought for a moment about what she knew of the tawny furred feline augmetric in question. Then she shrugged. "I guess that'll do well enough for a start. You gonna take those parenting courses that I recommended to you?"

"Absolutely, yeah!" Waverly nodded again; firmly this time. "I…you were right. I messed up big

time with Tessa. I don't ever want to let her down again. Especially not to that degree! If I get custody back then I'm going to set proper boundaries for her; even if she hates me at the time for it."

"Glad to hear it." Kennedy smiled at him; relieved that, for once, things weren't as bad as she'd feared them to be. "In that case, I'll back you all the way. You got my word on it."

"Thanks." Waverly's features crinkled into a broad grin. "Say – whatever happened to that rattle I made for Ellie?"

"Got it stowed away amongst the rest of her travel things right now, as it happens." Kennedy nodded towards her duffel bag.

"Well, that's good, because I've got a great idea for how to upgrade it a little!" Waverly pulled out a small tablet from inside his jacket. "Can I show you? I'm thinking that it needs a few other options alongside the basic rattle for sound. Something educational. Maybe snippets of the noises produced by the actual planets and such. You know; to synch up with the visuals!"

***

It was approaching a quarter to one in the afternoon, and over the past twenty-six hours, Yuri

Vanyavich Kuznetsov had packed up his entire household and arranged for all those who were part of it to travel to Alaska. His villa here in Vallvidrera was no longer safe. Perhaps it might be made so again at some point, but for now, Yuri wanted his dear ones to be very far away from it indeed. The reports trickling out about the events at Barcelona-El Prat only served to vindicate his decision. He nodded towards the now muted television on the wall of his lounge as the news anchors continued speculating about what the potential death count might be. "I was *right* to send them all away!"

"You panicked and got lucky." Half a world away, at the other end of the phone call, Zima Kazimirovich Bogomolov remained wholly disapproving of Yuri's actions. "Do not try to dress it up any more prettily than that. Your women are annoyed enough with you already. We both know their opinions on excuses, and I am not about to lie to them for you."

"Ha!" Phone still pressed to his ear, Yuri turned and looked around him despondently at the dustsheet covered furniture and the empty shelves. "Thank you for escorting them, my friend. I know

that they will all be safe with you, should the worst occur."

"I only agreed to do so because I was coming here anyhow." Zima's voice was carefully flat. "Do not suppose that you may palm them off on me permanently! You will fly over and join us very soon; I am sure of this."

Yuri hummed and peered out through the nearest of the tall windows. Most of his people had gone with his family to Zima's Alaskan retreat. The remaining guards were patrolling the grounds of the villa in four groups of six; all of them heavily armed, and clad top-to-toe in body armour. Not that it was likely to help them very much, Yuri thought grimly. He exhaled slowly; as if perhaps he might blow the worst of the stress out through his teeth. "I made a severe tactical error on Sunday night."

Zima tutted irritably. "That is because you are an idiot! I would leave you to face the consequences of your poor decision making, were it not that your women would never forgive either one of us for it. But enough of blame! Let us attempt to find you a way out of your self-inflicted doom."

"Ah, it is no good, my friend!" Yuri shook his head

sorrowfully. "You know as well as I how Mavrikiy Yasha will react when he discovers what I have done to his fellow BIINT operative."

"You are assuming that Ireland will tell BIINT anything at all about the matter when Brendan Clacher returns to them. I am not so very certain of this, Yuri." The signal dropped off abruptly then, and Zima's next words were unintelligible. When the static cleared, there was a tension to his voice that hadn't been there previously. "Someone is playing games with the phone signal, and it is not at this end! Be careful, Yuri."

Yuri stared at the thin, androgynous figure who was now standing less than ten feet in front of him. The sleek looking pistol in their hand was designed to fire small calibre titanium shredder rounds. It would be an unpleasant death, he knew. He answered Zima carefully; still speaking in their native Russian. "I think that perhaps I must hang up now, old friend."

To Yuri's surprised relief, Solovei shook their head instead of firing. "I'll settle for you speaking English to him, Mr Kuznetsov. My Russian may be better than my French, but that still doesn't make it my language of choice. And we have a great deal to

discuss."

Zima had obviously heard the non-gender's reply. He growled angrily in Yuri's ear. "Put me on the speaker now, Yuri! Let me talk to Solovei."

Yuri nodded to Solovei; switching to English as instructed. "Zima wishes for me to put him on speaker phone so that he may talk to you."

Solovei shrugged. "Go on then." They raised their voice a little then; keeping their pistol trained squarely at Yuri's centre of mass. "What's your opinion on gut shots, Mr Bogomolov?"

"They are overrated. A dog is the far superior way of delivering a slow and painful death. Better for the environment, too." Zima sounded a lot calmer than Yuri felt as he replied. "But I do not think that you are a dog person, Solovei, and so perhaps for you the bullet is to be preferred. At any rate, I am calling in the debt that you owe me for saving your infant children from Vasnetsova. Let Yuri go unharmed."

"Hmm." Solovei eyed Yuri for a moment, and then shook their head. "Not unless he agrees to fix whatever it was that he did to Mr Dobos. I overheard enough of your conversation just now to know that it must have been him who scrambled

the poor fellow's wits!"

"That is fair!" Yuri interrupted before Zima could attempt to argue. "Yes! I will do this for you, Solovei, and gladly, too. It was only ever intended to be temporary anyhow. If his lover had not spirited him away so very swiftly after the interrogation…!"

A fist connected savagely with the small of his back. Yuri staggered and sank to his knees. He was suddenly aware of the third person in the room. Without young Visha around to counter them, Brendan's talents had hidden him all too well this time. The Irish operative cracked his knuckles as he glared down at Yuri. "Mind what you say next there, boyo! I'm bearing a bloody big grudge over what you did to Oliver."

Yuri held up his hands in appeasement. "All I did was block off his higher reasoning skills, I promise you! He is still in there, all of him, I assure you both of this. And it was the other intruder who bound and electroshocked him, not me. Gregory Hull; the ANI agent. You can ask Oliver yourselves once I have restored him!"

Solovei's eyes narrowed. "What was that psychopath even doing here to begin with?"

"Looking for his son." Yuri rose warily to his feet;

relieved when Brendan made no move to strike him again. "It seems that he overheard the plans which Oliver and his friend here had made between themselves. Do not worry, though. I saw to it personally that he left here convinced of the official version of things. And I also took away his ah, unwelcome interest in Oliver."

Brendan scowled. "That bastard!" He stared at Yuri as if reassessing him. "Still. It was *you* who shut Oliver down, and it was *you* who used him as collateral against me. Don't think that I've forgotten that part." The Irish operative sneered openly in disgust. "Fucking memory workers!"

Zima raised his voice then. "Jasmine Finn. Age thirty-two, petite build, fair-skinned, waist length auburn curls, and light brown eyes. Excellent hearing. Prefers soft jazz music. Mildly allergic to dander, but still insists on owning a minimum of two cats. Afraid of drowning. Should I go on, Mr Clacher? I have a lot more information about her, you know. Including her home address and the security code for the alarm there."

"That's enough, all of you!" Solovei lowered the pistol and holstered it carefully; thumbing on the safety as they did so. "Truce. Mr Kuznetsov fixes Mr

Dobos, Mr Clacher keeps his fists and his opinions to himself, and Mr Bogomolov leaves Ms Finn out of this."

Brendan folded his arms tightly across his chest. "He fucking better had!"

Yuri proffered his phone to Solovei. "I agree to your terms, Solovei! Thank you for being so very reasonable! Please – tell Zima that it is all very much okay here now, and that he can therefore leave Ms Finn alone. I would try to do so myself, but he never listens to me!"

Zima made a faint huff of irritation. "No one with any sense listens to you, Yuri! Hurry along now, and attend to your end of the bargain, so that your women can have you back with them again as soon as is possible. As for me, I will leave the Irish handler out of things provided that her minion behaves himself." His tone softened a little as he continued speaking. "And Solovei – it is *Zima* to you. We agreed to this already. I trust that you have not forgotten?"

Solovei rolled their eyes. "Goodbye, *Zima*." They ended the call, and handed Yuri his phone. "I'm so pleased that we've come to an accord. Let's try and continue in this vein, shall we, gentlemen?"

Yuri nodded gratefully. "Very well! Now – where is my patient?"

Brendan smiled at him beatifically. "Oh, we left him with Cob and the rest of them; back at that fancy wee clinic of yours! I'm sure you won't object to there being a few more witnesses around when you fix what you did to him. You know – just in case of accidents."

The memory of how Mavrikiy Yasha dealt with those who harmed any that were important to him prowled through Yuri's thoughts. He managed to keep his expression cheerful despite the sudden chill along his spine. "Eh, the more, as they say, are merrier, yes? Come! One of my people will drive us there. That way, I can attempt to placate the two of you further by plying you both with alcohol."

Chapter Four – Sharp Suit

The sun was rising over Alaska as Waverly's ship docked with the uppermost level of New Anchorage Combined Air and Space Transit Hub; aka NACASTH. It was Tuesday 13TH August 2097, and Kennedy, keen to get the most dangerous phase of her visit to Earth over with, had been waiting by the main airlock of the *Sandsprite* with Ellie for half an hour now. The baby, clad in what was possibly the tiniest stealth suit ever made, had settled happily in her soundproofed and currently supposedly empty travel pod. Kennedy could only hope that the spaceport staff wouldn't ask her to open it. *Ain't no way that they won't hear her babbling if that happens! But there's no better option. I can't hide her away inside a suitcase or such, after all.*

In fact, Waverly and Zahn *had* suggested the latter as an option, but Kennedy had worried that being shut away in the dark would be too stressful for Ellie. The nowhere near miniscule enough risk of suffocation if the compartment's ventilation unit were to have failed along the way was what had clinched the decision for her. Kennedy knew without any shadow of a doubt that she would rather spend the rest of her life in prison and have Ellie grow up in care someplace than risk harming her. *And besides, I got a real convincing reason to be carrying what looks like an empty infant travel pod on this trip. Can't collect my new kid from the clinic without one!*

She checked her watch for the ninth time since arriving at the airlock. It was probably just as well that Waverly had thought to have seating installed here. Otherwise, there would have been nothing to deter her from pacing up and down this little bit of corridor whilst she waited on. That would have been truly ridiculous behaviour. *I might end up engaging in it anyhow at this rate! What in the Hell's keeping those two?*

It wasn't possible for Kennedy to exit the airlock without either Zahn or Waverly being there to enter

the relevant security code. This very sensible basic safety protocol was rapidly becoming an object of deep dislike for the Martian woman. Evidently the assorted stresses of baby smuggling were getting to her. She couldn't help feeling as if the faster things went here at New Anchorage, the better the outcome would be. This, of course, was nothing but a ridiculous bit of magical thinking on her part, Kennedy reminded herself sternly. *But seriously – where the heck is Bob with that damn code?*

She scrambled eagerly to her feet as she heard Waverly and Zahn's voices echoing from around the corner at the far end of the corridor. Then she listened a little harder and frowned. It was all too obvious that the two men were talking about her. Zahn for one was all but crowing. "I told you she'd come around fast enough if you grovelled, Bob!"

"Hey – forgive me for not automatically defaulting to manipulation, Az!" Waverly sounded as if he was feigning indignation. "Some of us are honest people, you know."

Zahn sniggered. "Yeah, buddy, sure you are! Anyhow, kudos for managing her like that!"

The two of them were right in the middle of exchanging a high five as they came into view

around the corner. Kennedy stared back at them coldly until they both lowered their respective hands. Then she shook her head. "We ain't discussing it, Waverly. Thanks for your help up until now. Ellie and I will make our own way from here. That includes getting back home."

Zahn had already slunk off back along the corridor and out of sight. Waverly winced as he made his way over to where Kennedy was waiting with Ellie and her duffel bag. "Okay, please, just listen to me for a…!"

Kennedy interrupted him. "We ain't got anything left to discuss. Just open the airlock."

Waverly shook his head. "Look, I don't know how much you overheard just now, but…!"

"I don't give a shiny shit about your excuses!" Kennedy gestured sharply at the relevant wall panel. "Code. Now. Or else you can forget all about that damn character reference."

That got Waverly moving. He keyed in the code and stepped aside hurriedly as the door cycled open. "It really was just guy talk, you know. I didn't mean you any disrespect."

"People never do." Kennedy shouldered her luggage and picked up Ellie's travel pod.

Waverly grimaced as she strode past him into the airlock. "Susan, please, don't be like this!"

Kennedy turned sharply on her heel and looked at him. She tilted her head a little. "Like what? Pissed at myself for expecting better of you? Embarrassed that I was wrong? Or disappointed that you let me down? Because honestly, I got to tell you, it's kind of a mix of all those things right now, so you need to be more specific in what you're telling me not to be like."

The billionaire hung his head and didn't answer. There was a soft clunk and hiss as the door into the *Sandsprite*'s airlock closed again between them. Swallowing her feelings, Kennedy turned around and faced the opposing side of the airlock. The door now in front of her cycled open. Keeping her expression neutral but polite, Kennedy walked out of the airlock and straight over to the nearest spaceport security checkpoint. *Onward and ever fucking upward we go again, Marine!*

***

Leon Henry Duke looked up from the copy of his latest book and paused mid signature. There was a familiar face over at the opposite side of the crowded hall. It was one that Duke had last seen

less than a fortnight ago; in Orbetello. Back then, it had been on a dead man. *That can't be who I think it is! Spence killed that guy, after all. Unless maybe this one is the original one? But what would a BIINT operative be doing here?*

Ignoring the perturbed fan in front of him, the retired ANI agent turned author sprang to his feet, and hurried out from behind the table that the urban fantasy convention here in Venice had allocated to him. Elbowing his way past his adoring but bemused public, Duke made his way as quickly as he could across the hall, and towards the black suited figure who had caught his attention. He called out to his target as soon as he was within earshot. "Hey, you – guy in the sharp suit! Don't I sort of kind of know you from somewhere? Or did Spence not get around to mentioning me?"

The man that Duke had accosted turned to face him. His eyes were hidden behind the same type of aviator style sunglasses that his deceased predecessor had worn. He smiled politely at his accoster. "I'm sorry, but I think you must have me confused with someone else."

Duke nodded. "Yeah, but not exactly. I witnessed the death of that evil doppelganger of

yours! You know, the one who tried to abduct Spence less than two weeks ago in Orbetello. But obviously you aren't *him*. He's dead, after all. That means that you must be the real one, right? Greg Hull? Are you here because of the C.A.K.E attack in Spain that's been doing the rounds on social media all day?"

By now, the two men were surrounded by a mob of inquisitive convention goers. Most of the ones in the front row were wearing or at least carrying Hecuba Kaine merchandise. Several of them had pulled out their phones to record the incident, or maybe even to livestream it. Taking note of the latter, Duke grimaced as he wondered too late if he'd just accidentally interrupted one of BIINT's missions.

Then the man in front of him took off his sunglasses, and tossed them aside into the crowd. His bloodshot eyes locked onto Duke as he grinned maniacally. Unnaturally dark looking veins had begun to track across his face and neck. "Yeah, I guess that you could say that! But I'm not here at the behest of BIINT! No, quite the opposite – I work for C.A.K.E, and I'm here to…!"

Duke sighed as he watched the man's corpse hit

the floor. Then he tucked his still smoking fountain pen into the front pocket of his jacket. It was only a one-shot weapon, and the round that it fired was miniscule compared to the more regular forms of ammunition. But once again, it had done the job that it was designed for. The trick was to use it up close, and aim for a head shot of some kind. In this case, Duke had opted to shoot his opponent through the left eye.

Ignoring the now panicking convention goers as they fled the scene, Duke took out his phone and dialled the number for ANI's local field office. He peered worriedly down at the dead man while he waited for someone to answer. Was shooting a crazed, and very probably infected, terrorist at a convention something that could get you cancelled as a writer? *Damn, my publicist is going to be pissed about this!*

***

Dobos sat slouched in a chair in the corner of Volker's hospital room and watched her sleep. The Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility was quieter now than during visiting hours. Somehow, that only served to him feel more on edge. He wasn't about to ignore his instincts. Best case scenario, it was just

the arse end of the adrenalin rush that been triggered by his ordeal rattling his nerves. Worst case, though, could be all kinds of terrible things. *And I know better than to be a fucking optimist by now. Especially with what C.A.K.E tried to pull off at the airport this morning. Fucking evil bastards and their assorted acts of biohazard themed shittery.*

He shifted his position a little; the better to avoid getting a crick in his neck. Glancing to his right, he smiled softly at the sight of Brett and Scooter curled up asleep together on the room's recently added second bed; positioned next to the window. There had been no question of separating their family unit overnight. The staff at the clinic had even offered to provide a third bed for Dobos' use. He'd turned them down. *No fucking way am I sleeping tonight! Not even with Brendan standing watch in my stead. Wonder what's keeping him anyhow? Fuck me! Is it really that time already?*

The clock on the wall showed that it had just turned midnight. Dobos frowned as he realised how much time had passed. His boyfriend had gone to fetch them both some more coffee from the vending machine in the ground floor lobby just over twenty minutes ago. Either the machine was out of

order, or something else was keeping Clacher occupied. *Suppose he might have gone for a smoke while he was near the exit. Maybe I should text him to check.*

He rang him instead; his instincts still hissing at him. The latter feeling increased as the call went unanswered. Clacher's voicemail message might as well have been a gunshot. Scrambling to his feet, Dobos crossed the room and locked the door at both top and bottom. There was something oddly reassuring about those two little manual bolt type locks and the way that they slid home. *Probably piss the staff off when they come to do their next rounds, though! Meh. Fuck them anyhow. Them and the bloody fucking Russians they're in league with.*

It would take a lot more than an apology and a restoration of his higher mental faculties for Dobos to forgive Yuri and his people. Add in their roles in his ex-girlfriend's recent alleged misadventure, and his reasons for hating them increased yet further. If it weren't for the looming threat that was still posed by ANI's fucking ridiculous protocols, he would have insisted on moving her to a different medical facility. *Fuck's sake, if I had my way, we'd all be*

halfway back to fucking England by now!

As it was, there was paperwork which had to be satisfied before any such departure could occur. Leister was dealing with it, Dobos knew. Unfortunately, the bastard in charge of the local ANI field office seemed to have palled up with that fucker Hull. Everything needed signing in triplicate, and then rubber stamping, and then reviewing, before it could be considered for approval. It was nothing but weaponised bureaucracy, according to Spence. Dobos was inclined to agree with their assessment. *On which note, I think I'd better ring them next. If I'm right, and it's all about to kick off here, then I'll need some fucking backup.*

Something thudded against the window. Scooter woke instantly; letting out a startled sounding bark as he jumped down from the bed. Turning, Dobos saw Clacher pressed up against the outside of the reinforced glass. He hurried across the room as Brett sat up sleepily. "It's okay, Brett. It's just Brendan. You and Scooter go wait over there instead, yeah? You can take my chair for a bit while I sort this out."

His son frowned as he obeyed. "What's happening, Dad? Why's he even out there?"

"I don't know yet." Dobos peered at Clacher through the glass. Fortunately, it was almost as dark in the room as it was outside, so he could see well enough. His boyfriend didn't appear to be injured, but he was gesturing frantically to be let in. Dobos guessed that balancing there on the narrow window ledge was no easy task. Hoping that he wasn't making a terrible mistake, he took out his knife and set to work removing the safety latches on the window so that it could be opened by more than an inch. He frowned at Clacher as he helped him into the room. "What the fuck's going on? Are you alright?"

"Aye, I'm fine, love." Clacher paused and hugged Dobos tightly. "Had to ditch my phone when you rang me, sorry. I was masking, of course, but the noise of the ringtone got their attention. Chucked it away for them to chase after. Made a bloody good distraction!"

Dobos shook his head. "Care to fill in the fucking blanks in that explanation?"

Clacher nodded and sat down on the edge of what had been Brett's bed. He shuddered as he resumed speaking. "Same as the airport this morning. Or I suppose it's yesterday morning now,

isn't it? Anyhow, they're everywhere down there. Infected people, I mean. Dozens of them!"

"Are there any of them inside the building yet?" Dobos was already pulling up Spence's number on his phone. "Housekeeping will need to know what to expect."

"I was outside when I spotted the first one." Clacher grimaced. "Thought I'd grab a wee smoke while I was down there. Tried to get back indoors, but there was another pair of them scrabbling away at the main entrance, and they looked hungry. From what I could tell, somebody inside had secured the doors. But whether that means it's safe in here, well. Your guess is as good as mine there, love."

Sensing and seeing Brett's obvious distress at the news, Dobos stretched out his right arm and pulled his son into a hug. "It's okay, Brett. They won't get in here. I've already locked the door, and I doubt if any of them could climb up to the window like Brendan did! They'll all be much too sick for anything like that."

Clacher closed and locked the window anyhow. Then he drew the blinds across the observation panel in the wall next to the door. "No

sense taking any chances! But I'm sure your Dad's right, lad. And he's going to call Housekeeping now. We just need to sit tight and wait for help to arrive."

Brett gulped and nodded his understanding. "Okay. Um, so what about Mom? Should…should we try and wake her up?"

It was a valid fucking question, Dobos thought tiredly. Too bad that it was one he didn't feel qualified to answer. But he couldn't tell Brett that, and so he tried to feign knowing what he was doing. There was a lot of that involved in parenting. "Probably safer to leave her as she is for now, son. She mightn't remember who we are yet, and that could get tricky."

Muffled footsteps thudded along the corridor outside the room then. Someone tried to open the door; frantically rattling the handle when the manual bolts prevented any such entry. The intercom lit up an instant later, and Yuri's voice spoke urgently in English. "There are biohazards on the loose again! Are you all alive in there? Is anyone bitten or scratched?"

Dobos and Clacher exchanged grim looks across the top of Brett's head. Then Clacher

pressed the reply button on the intercom. "Aye, we're all grand in here, thanks. Yourself?"

The Russian chuckled. "So far, so alive! Will you let me in? My people and I have secured this floor, and the one beneath it. All the staff and the patients are safe, but I am afraid that the ground floor has been overrun. Also, there are two infected persons trapped inside the elevator, so we have shut that down for now."

Clacher pulled up the nearest section of blind and peered carefully through the observation panel at Yuri. "He looks clean to me, Oliver. What do you reckon?"

Dobos sighed. "Let him in then, love." There was a soft click as his call to Spence connected. "Andro, we've got trouble here at the clinic. There's been another fucking outbreak."

Chapter Five – Stand Ready

There was, Dobos, reflected, a bright side to the most recent outbreak here in Spain. With so many infected people running amok in the Barcelona area alone, it was impossible for Hull and Senior Agent Lanza to reach the Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility. That meant that neither of them could argue against the doctors here permitting Laine to wake from her medically induced coma later this morning. If everything went to plan after that, then his former girlfriend would soon have her memories back. *I just need to keep my fucking fingers crossed that Kuznetsov's idea fucking works!*

On the surface, the Russian man's proposal appeared simple enough. He, Dobos, Clacher, and Brett would combine their assorted psionic talents

to heal the damage to Laine's mind. Brett, who of course only saw the positives involved, was eager to participate. But all three of the adults involved knew that things could all too easily go wrong. The process itself would take almost a full day, and Laine's psionic defences could be triggered by their collective intrusion at any point. If that happened, then they might very well have a bitter choice to make regarding whose mind to save. *And neither of us would ever fucking forgive me if I picked saving you over protecting our kid, would we, Laine?*

As such, the agreement was that Dobos would focus on protecting Brett and getting him safely back into his own head, whilst the other two men saw to fending off Laine's defences. That action would all too likely end in the death of at least one of the combatants. Dobos privately hoped that it would be Kuznetsov. *But knowing my fucking luck, he'd end up being the only fucking survivor!*

***

Kassandra Shelby shifted her weight on the uncomfortably hard plastic bench that was provided for visitors here at ANI's Christchurch holding facility. In front of her, on the other side of a

floor to ceiling steel and reinforced glass dividing panel, her father did the same. It seemed that the seating for prisoners wasn't any better, but that wasn't surprising. Kassandra was just glad that there weren't any other visitors or prisoners present in the stiflingly hot room. Having yet more people around to witness her argument with her father would have sucked. *Ugh, like, those two guards over by the doors on this side of the glass are bad enough! Why can't my dad at least try to be less embarrassing?*

Disgraced ANI agent Evan Shelby could apparently read his only daughter's expression all too easily. He smiled at her tiredly. "Still angry with me, pumpkin?"

Kassandra glared at him. "What do you think? Seriously, Dad – you screwed up all our lives with that dumb stunt! Mom's even talking about coming back early from her vacation because of it! She video called me from Pluto yesterday – she said ANI have frozen all your bank accounts!"

Evan shook his head. "It was worth it. That creep Greg Hull is nothing but a predator, and…!"

"Okay, no, stop! So, you're like, *totally* talking crap now, Dad!" Kassandra folded her arms angrily. "Greg's not a predator; he's just kinky. And kind of

boring, really; especially compared to Thomas. That's the guy I was on vacation with when you got yourself arrested, by the way. He's from, um, Scotland, I think? Anyhow, that doesn't matter. What matters is that you *literally* murdered someone! That's not normal!"

Her father frowned. "Wait – you have a new boyfriend already? Since when? Where is he?"

Kassandra rolled her eyes. "Oh, please! Like I'm ever going to tell you anything about my personal life ever again! You'd probably just try and break out of prison to go murder him too!"

"Only if he had it coming to him!" Evan scowled at his daughter. "And that Greg Hull guy definitely has it coming!"

"Well, I guess it's just too bad for everyone that you shot the wrong man then, huh?" Kassandra scuffed her sandalled feet against the grey plastic tiles of the floor as she spoke. "Seriously! What kind of government agent doesn't even bother checking if he's got the right family member before shooting them?"

Evan sighed. "One who didn't know that the asshole who'd gone after his daughter and his niece was some kind of clone! Although, I doubt if

the original guy was any better. Or is. Did you hear about that part yet? ANI read me in on it yesterday morning. BIINT managed to bring him back to life, or something. It's called FBT, I think. I'm telling you, pumpkin, those weird ass English people and their batshit crazy science…!"

The blaring of an emergency alert siren drowned out the rest of Evan's words. He and Kassandra both leapt to their feet and looked over at the pair of burly uniformed ANI security operatives. The latter men were already speaking urgently into the room's intercom panel. One of them, a shaven headed man who appeared to be aged somewhere in his late thirties, glanced at Kassandra, and then nudged his colleague. "Hey, Dylan – probably should see about getting the civilian clear, eh?"

Dylan, who had a good deal more hair, but all of it grey with age, shook his head firmly. "Nah, Ryan. Can't risk it. ANI's emergency protocols say for everyone to stay put during these kinds of events until we get the all clear. Shelter in place."

Evan spoke up then. "What exactly is it that that's going on, anyhow? And are you sure that my daughter is going to be safe in here?"

"Ugh, seriously, Dad!" Kassandra huffed. "Can you, like, stop embarrassing me for just a little while at least? They said it's a shelter in place kind of emergency! That means stay put, duh!"

Ryan smirked a little at her tone, but Dylan gave Evan a sympathetic look. "Try not to worry, Evan. We'll keep an eye on her for you. I got family, too; not that any of them live around here nowadays. My wife's dead, and the kids have all grown up and fled the nest for pastures greener! Still, I can guess how you're feeling. If it's any comfort to you, the problem's outside the facility; not in it. Some kind of public disorder. This is probably the safest place in all of Christchurch right now!"

The intercom panel buzzed again then. Dylan answered it promptly. "Yeah, boss?" He listened intently to whoever was on the other end of the call. Then he nodded. "Okay, I got you. Sure thing, boss. Will do. Keep safe yourself, too."

Ryan, who was close enough to the intercom to have heard what was being said to Dylan, nodded to Evan. "Good news, Agent Shelby! ANI needs all the people that they can get to help deal with this situation. You've been pardoned and reinstated to active duty; effective immediately."

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Spence and Leister had left Yuri's villa just after first light; intent on extracting those still trapped within the Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility. Despite that sensibly early start, Vallvidrera was shimmering in the noontime heat by the time that the pair finally reached their destination. There were several hundred dead infected scattered in their wake, but neither BIINT operative was about to mention the latter grim necessity. One couldn't afford sentimentality in these sorts of circumstances. What was done had needed to be done, and so they had done it; swiftly and efficiently.

The continued absence of children amongst the infected that he and Nightingale had encountered so far made Leister wonder if the effects were perhaps limited to those above a certain age. That was, he knew, the most optimistic explanation. Another possibility was that the initial outbreak had simply occurred far too late at night for anyone other than adults to have been outside of their homes when C.A.K.E had struck at Barcelona. Which was also optimistic, as it implied that the infected were unable to gain access to buildings. *From what Nightingale and I have observed on our*

way here today, that isn't the case. No – children are either immune, or those rampaging too savage for their more vulnerable victims to survive the attack and turn.

So far, there had been no confirmation of what had caused the outbreak. All that could be confirmed was that EMPs and other such electrical solutions were ineffective. That ruled out the likelihood of it being nanite based. *Which in turn means that it must be biological in nature, and with that comes the risk of it getting into the water system or going airborne.*

Mercifully, neither of those things appeared to have happened yet. Yuri had people monitoring the situation; taking frequent samples of air and water for analysis. The Russian man's information network hadn't been impeded too much by the ongoing communications blackout. Phones, internet, and drones were all out of the question, but that still left a few other options. It was rather difficult to jam radio signals, and all but impossible to stop trained messenger pigeons from flying to and fro. Leister very much doubted if the authorities would even think to look out for the latter. *Sometimes, the old ways truly are the best!*

Leister glanced to his right as he reached the edge of the landing pad where the facility's ERA was parked. Nightingale was just finishing despatching the last of the infected people that had been besieging the building; driving a long stiletto blade in through the left eye socket of the unfortunate man in question and straight on into his brain. The infected victim dropped like a stone. Leister was struck yet again by how even more intensely beautiful the non-gender became during combat. There was an elegance to their way of killing that one rarely saw. It lit their thin form with a vicious, primal sort of energy; as if they were and whatever weapon they were using at the time had all but merged into one entity. *Hmm. Perhaps I ought to talk to someone professionally qualified about my psychological state. It really can't be healthy to find these things so terribly arousing!*

Gathering his wits about him once more, Leister realised that Nightingale was now gazing earnestly at him as if seeking some form of judgement or benediction for their actions. He nodded approvingly to them. "Good job, darling. Come on – let's get on board this aircraft and see to extracting the others...!"

Nightingale's abruptly hurled stiletto whistled through the air a mere inch to the left of Leister's head. Behind him, far too close for comfort, there was a meaty sounding thud. Turning sharply on his heel, Leister saw another freshly slain infected man now lying sprawled on the baking hot tarmac. He turned back towards Nightingale; unable to keep the blush of shame from his face as he did so. "Thank you for that, darling. I let myself get a tad cocky there! Deucedly stupid of me. It shan't happen again."

"It had bloody well better not, old swan!" Nightingale stood on tiptoe and kissed him briefly on the cheek as they moved past him to retrieve their knife and clean it. "Because I refuse to be made a single parent twice in a row!"

Leister shook his head grimly. "Don't worry, darling. Before I left London, I took the liberty of having young Whitby make a copy of my then consciousness. He's keeping it safe for me, just in case the worst should ever happen. I'm to drop by and update it regularly in between missions. I like to imagine that it won't ever be needed, but…!"

This time, the non-gender interrupted his words by pulling him down to their height by his tie and

kissing him full on the lips. "I don't fully trust FBT, but that is still very probably the most romantic thing that anyone has ever said to me, Cob. Now – who's piloting?"

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Lady Edith Pembleton entered her office at BIINT headquarters several hours earlier than was usual for her on Wednesday morning. The reports from Spain and Italy were indicative of a high enough threat level to warrant such change. Pembleton had been alerted via phone, along with other key personnel. She knew that it wouldn't only be BIINT that was reacting. NIT too had declared a state of high alert; as had the regular police and the armed forces. Emergency services all throughout the UK were preparing for trouble. Every potential point of entrance to the country was being secured. *All that remains now is for our political leaders to be read in on the matter. May God or the Devil have mercy on them if they fail to take it seriously enough!*

The elderly spymistress seated herself comfortably at her desk, and peered at the latest data on her computer. The Venice matter had been stopped before it started. Vallvidrera was secure again now, but thirty-seven more people

were dead; in addition to yesterday morning's victims at Barcelona-El Prat. A total of fifty-two souls had been lost to the terrorism of C.A.K.E. That much had been confirmed. The madman in charge of the bastards in question had issued a public statement on social media claiming responsibility, and promising that worse was yet to come. Pembleton scowled as she reviewed it. Disgraced American billionaire Carson Howard was back from the bloody dead again. Someone would need to correct that, and swiftly. *And this time, we must be certain to make it stick!*

Other countries around the world were reacting to the situation. Pembleton smiled grimly as she tallied up the names of those who she knew would soon start to reach out to her. Howard had overreached himself this time. The Miami tragedy had been terrible enough, but America's somewhat insular political tendencies had limited the global response. C.A.K.E and their insane leader having now explicitly threatened the entirety of Earth changed everything. *Perhaps I ought to consider the practicalities of recalling a few of our more uniquely talented retirees to active duty; those who stepped down for purely physical*

reasons. Medical can see to providing them with fully capable bodies via FBT. It worked well enough for Leister, after all.

First however, there was damage limitation to be managed. With the latter concern in mind, Pembleton placed a video call to BIINT's senior technician; Dr Nathaniel Whitby. She began issuing her orders as soon as he accepted the call. "Cut Howard off from all access to the press and social media here on Earth! Mars too; although I dare say that you'll need to lean on our embassy staff there to get them to listen. If need be, use the old Martian Reclamation protocols to assume full control over the Martian communications network."

Whitby nodded. "That will also affect the Deimos Base MMC Communications Relay, ma'am. Should I warn them in advance?"

"Yes, do." Pembleton brightened a little at the idea which had just occurred to her. "Read their CO in on everything and tell her to stand ready. Howard shan't stop at terrorising Earth."

Chapter Six – All Riled Up

Once she had left the spaceport, it had taken Kennedy just shy of another twenty-eight hours to finally reach Zima Bogomolov's questionably legal private fertility clinic; an ugly but functional looking building, standing only two storeys high, with a flat roof and a lot of big windows. The clinic was nestled partway up one of the mountains that were to the north of the small town of Port Pye. The privacy of the clients was ensured not only by the isolated location, but also by the high stone wall surrounding its expansive grounds. A driveway, its gates manned by black clad and heavily armed private security personnel, led off from the public road and on through a quarter mile or so of evergreen forest to the clinic itself.

So far at least, C.A.K.E hadn't attacked Alaska. Kennedy was immensely relieved about that. She and Ellie had been all too vulnerable on the road; travelling in a rented hovercar. The news reports along the way had been deeply concerning; bringing back vivid memories of Kennedy's experiences during the Miami outbreak. She'd been sorely tempted to just buy a tent and supplies, and strike out into the wilderness to raise her daughter in seclusion. Instead, she'd told herself sternly that there was the entirety of Canada between Alaska and the United States, and that Europe was even further away. Then she'd gotten on with following her plan.

Now here she was at last: carrying Ellie in her seemingly empty infant travel pod, and following a beaming female member of staff along a brightly lit windowless corridor. The grey haired, somewhat matronly woman assigned as her escort kept up a steady sales patter as they walked. "And don't forget, Captain Kennedy, that the option to grow your family even further with us can be provided to you at a reduced fee!"

Kennedy nodded politely. "Uh, thanks. I'll bear that in mind."

The nurse stopped outside one of the dozen or so identical doors that were spaced at regular intervals along the corridor. She knocked once, and then opened it; ushering Kennedy into the room. "Captain Kennedy is here for her appointment with you, doctor!"

A tall man with dark hair and fierce hazel eyes rose from where he had been seated at a desk in the far corner of the room. He gestured curtly. "Thank you, nurse. You may leave us now."

Kennedy waited until the door had closed behind the other woman before speaking to the supposed doctor. "I take it that you're the guy who I spoke to on the phone about all this? Zima Bogomolov, wasn't it?"

Zima nodded. "I am indeed, yes. I have all the replacement documents which we agreed upon ready. Do you prefer to pay for them in cash, or by bank transfer?"

"I'll go with that last one, thanks." Kennedy set Ellie's travel pod down on the impeccably made-up examination gurney, and dug around in her pockets for the little EMP proof wallet that housed her cards. "Wasn't comfortable with the idea of carrying that much money around with me."

Zima took a portable card reader out of a drawer in the desk. "Why did you decide to not bring the child along?"

Kennedy handed him her card. "I did bring her. She's right over there in her pod. Got her fitted with a stealth suit for the trip here, so that nobody would find out about me having snuck her onto the planet! You mind if I see about changing her into something more normal now that I don't need to hide her anymore?"

Zima shrugged and busied himself with the financial aspects of their exchange. "That is likely only practical. Go ahead."

"Thanks." Kennedy turned her attention to Ellie; smiling down at her daughter as the stealth suit deactivated. "Hey, sweetie!"

A large red and white dog padded into view from behind the curtain at the far end of the gurney just as Kennedy finished changing Ellie's diaper and redressing her. The animal stared at them both for a moment. Then it pricked up its ears and turned to face the window with a low, rumbling growl.

Zima, who had just finished his side of the transaction, held the card reader out to Kennedy.

"Pin code and thumbprint, please. Quickly." He pressed a button on the desk's built-in intercom while Kennedy approved the transfer of funds. "Have someone check the grounds for trouble. Grisha has alerted to something out there."

Kennedy frowned as she returned the card reader to him. "Should I be worried about that?"

"It is most likely an attempted raid by members of the Pro-Natural movement. Or possibly the Faithful. Both factions disapprove of what is done here. Sometimes they demonstrate this through violence." Zima put the card reader away in the drawer again and waved his right palm across the biometric lock. Then he gave Kennedy her card. "You should perhaps hurry. We may need to go into lockdown for a time, and the secure room is some distance from here."

Kennedy nodded her understanding as she packed Ellie's stealth suit away as swiftly as possible, and tossed the used diaper into the room's medical waste bin. "Just how bad are you expecting this situation to get?"

The Russian man drew an energy pistol from inside his jacket and flipped off the safety. "I always expect the worst of people. It is safer."

"Can't argue with that." Kennedy buckled Ellie back into her travel pod and closed the transparent lid. Hooking the handle of the pod over the crook of her left arm, she ducked her head through the carry strap of her duffel bag; letting it hang on her right side. Then, determined to keep her daughter safe no matter what, she drew her plasma pistol and readied it onehanded with her right hand. She nodded grimly to Zima. "Lead the way!"

They made it almost as far as the end of the windowless corridor. Then part of the wall ahead of them to their right exploded inwards; showering the adults and Grisha with dust and fragments of concrete and plaster. Kennedy staggered slightly, but kept her footing; her ears ringing painfully from the sound of the blast. Safe from harm inside her soundproofed travel pod, Ellie kicked her legs happily; oblivious to what was going on around her. The huge dog raised his hackles and bared his fangs as he sprang forwards through the newly formed hole in the wall; clearly still uninjured so far. His master had been less fortunate, and was lying in a crumpled heap amidst the rubble.

Biting back a curse, Kennedy ducked through

the open doorway of the empty exam room to her left; knowing that it had no exterior wall to be blown in. Setting Ellie's travel pod and the duffel bag on the examination gurney, she hurried back out into the corridor; pulling the door closed behind her as she went. Her hearing returned abruptly. By the sounds of things, whoever was outside, there were a lot of them, and heavily armed, too. Pausing only to snatch up Zima's energy pistol with her left hand, Kennedy scrambled out through the hole in the wall; glad that she'd worn practical clothing. *Reckon that Grisha's gonna need some backup!*

The situation outside was chaotic. Four of Zima's black uniformed security personnel were crouching behind the bullet ridden remains of Kennedy's rental vehicle. They were using it for cover whilst exchanging solid projectile fire with the crew of a squat grey hover tank. The latter six grey clad SCOs were using their vehicle's side door as cover. Their tank was equipped with a still smoking titanium shredder round cannon, as well as twin linked plasma grenade launchers. To judge by the amount of smoke coming out of its engine area, it was out of action now; presumably thanks to the abandoned grenade launcher that was lying

behind Zima's men. Kennedy grimaced at the sight. *There goes my security deposit! Guess that's what must have happened to the damn wall, too!*

A swift glance around told her that there were twelve other active hostiles present on foot, and four more who were already dead. They too were all SCOs, and were dressed in the same dark grey tactical gear as the tank crew. None of the survivors were paying any attention to the tank and its opponents, or to Kennedy. Instead, they were standing in a loose semi-circle with their backs to her; raising and lowering their weapons repeatedly without firing as they tried to get a bead on Grisha. A final man was on the ground in front of them; screaming wetly as the huge dog ragged him around by his neck and left shoulder. He wasn't built like an SCO, and he was also dressed in a considerably fancier set of tactical gear; light grey this time, with ridiculously elaborate dark grey and silver epaulettes on the shoulders, and matching boots. Glad of the distraction, Kennedy raised both of her weapons and took aim at her still unknowing targets. *It looks to me like Grisha's nailed their leader. Guy looks kind of familiar, but I can't quite place what's left of his face. Eh, guess it don't*

matter much. I'd better deal with the rest of the bastards before any of them risk taking a shot at the dog!

A single wide beam blast at head height from her plasma pistol on its highest setting saw to obliterating the dozen SCOs who'd been aiming at Grisha. Confident in her aim, Kennedy didn't even bother looking in that direction whilst firing. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed squarely on the tank crew; who she picked off neatly one at a time with four short blasts from Zima's energy pistol. "You picked the wrong damn location to dick around in today, you fucking assholes!"

Not waiting to check in with the relieved looking security personnel, Kennedy turned and scrambled back up the rubble and in through the hole in the wall. The windowless corridor somehow felt even gloomier now after her having been outside in the hot August sun. She paused where she stood and blinked hard for a moment to help adjust her vision. Then she hurried over to check on Zima. Crouching next to him, she set down his energy pistol and gently brushed the worst of the dust and debris away from his face with her left hand. "How are you holding up there, buddy?"

The Russian man lifted his head slightly and groaned. He was obviously still dazed, and very probably severely concussed, but at least now he was conscious. Kennedy nodded to him as he opened his eyes. "Hope you ain't planning on dying on me now, buddy! That big dog of yours don't look like he's the type to listen to strangers. Especially not when he's all riled up like that."

Zima scowled as he sat up; opening his mouth to retort. Instead, a sharp cry of pain escaped him. He slumped back down; his face twisted up in agony and drained of all colour. His breathing sounded ragged as he finally managed to speak. Unfortunately, it was in Russian. Kennedy, who had witnessed far too many good Marines fall in combat, suspected that she could guess at the meaning; especially given how the poor bastard was now clutching at her in desperation. *Guess I know what the Russian version of begging for your mother sounds like now!*

She stroked his brow with her free hand, and flicked the setting of her plasma pistol to stun with the thumb of the other one. "Okay, buddy. Reckon you're better off unconscious for now. I'll take care of you, I promise. And your dog, too."

He jerked slightly as she stunned him. A little of the pain went out of his expression. Kennedy knew from past grim experience that she'd just have to hope that the latter was a good sign; as opposed to confirmation that the man was dying. "At least you won't feel it either way, buddy."

Presuming that Zima's people must have things outside well in hand by now, Kennedy focused her attention on the injured man in front of her. Setting her plasma pistol down to her left, she carefully lifted the final few pieces of rubble off Zima; tossing them aside so that she could examine him thoroughly. Determining what exactly was wrong with the man proved to be an unhappily simple task to complete. "Aw, shit."

Luckily, the piece of rebar that had impaled him was still firmly embedded in his abdomen; having somehow come loose from the crumbling chunk of masonry that it had once been attached to. This meant that Kennedy's efforts to free him hadn't done him any further damage. As far as she could see, that was the last of the good news. Dark blood seeped out from around the twisted metal; combining with the dust on Zima's clothing to make a sticky paste. *Looks like his liver took the hit.*

Clenching her jaw stubbornly, Kennedy pulled out the small monomolecular filament blade knife that she kept in her left boot. She sliced through Zima's already ruined upper clothing and peeled it away until she could see the wound clearly. Then she set down the knife and picked up her plasma pistol again; adjusting the setting with bloodied hands. "Okay, buddy. This next part is gonna hurt like a bitch, but at least you ain't awake for it! And if it works, then they can easily regrow your liver afterwards."

She pressed the muzzle of the plasma pistol flush against Zima's wound. Grabbing hold of the rebar with her free hand, she pulled it out of the Russian's gut; cauterising the ruined tissues left in its wake as she did so. The stench of burnt human flesh mingled with the coppery tang of blood. Ignoring her innate desire to vomit at the smell, Kennedy sat back onto her heels and examined her handiwork worriedly. "Well, I ain't a medic, but you don't look as if you're still bleeding, so at least that's a start!"

The crunching of booted feet on rubble drew her attention back to the hole in the wall. Kennedy looked up towards it sharply; flicking the setting of her plasma pistol back up from blowtorch to heavy

stun just in case. She relaxed as two of the security personnel who she'd helped stepped into view; their weapons still at the ready. Nodding to them in greeting, she put the safety back on and holstered her weapon; glad that the combat was over and done with. "Am I ever glad to see you guys! Your boss is hurt bad. I've done my best to stabilise him, but he needs a real medic ASAP!"

Chapter Seven – After The Apocalypse

Heidi poured the last of the batter for the crepes that she was making into the sizzling hot pan in front of her with practiced ease. The kitchen here in Mr Kuznetsov's villa was far larger than those found in most homes, but then again, their host had explained that he had a very large family. He had also expressed great relief that none of them were currently in Spain.

He was quite right too, in Heidi's opinion; what with all the danger and the fear that was being caused by the outbreak! Children especially had no place around such terrible events. She thought that was very unfortunate indeed that she and her employer's family were here. *Ah well, it is the necessary thing, I am supposing.*

Spence and Leister had been gone for almost six hours now. Heidi could only hope that they would succeed unharmed in their rescue efforts. She had no means of aiding them in that. What she *could* do was cook, and so she had decided to busy herself with the task of feeding not only the five children in her care, but also the six grim faced men that Mr Kuznetsov had left here at his villa to protect his guests. With so many people to feed at once, crepes had seemed the simplest lunchtime option. *Although of course the babies will only be needing their bottles! But there will still be the ten of us who are wanting the solid food, I am sure.*

She was not alone in the kitchen. Barnabas had volunteered to help her. He often did so at home, and so it was no surprise. Heidi smiled at him as he carried a stack of plates over form one of the many cabinets. "Thank you, Barnabas!"

Barnabas smiled back. He set five of them on the tray intended for Heidi and the children, and four others onto the tray intended for the guards. Then he glanced towards the door leading into the dining room. "Are we all going to eat our lunch at the table, Heidi?"

The young au pair shook her head. "I think it will

be much nicer for us to be sitting together in the big room up the stairs where we have all been…camping. Yes, camping! That is what we will call it, yes? So that the guards are still having the very good view over the outside without leaving us." She sighed sadly; worried that her young charges must all surely be frightened by what was happening. "I am sorry that things here have been so scary, Barnabas. I do not know if it was such a good idea after all for Spence to bring us all along with them."

Barnabas shrugged, and edged a little closer to her; staring down at the nascent crepe in the pan. "That's alright. I'm not scared, and nor is Kathryn. I think Phil might be; a little bit, anyhow. But he's not letting on about it, so we probably shouldn't say anything to him. And the babies don't even know what's happening, so they don't care at all." He paused for a moment as a bubble rose and popped on the surface of the crepe. "I don't think that London is any safer, really. Not if people are going to keep on breaking into our apartment to try and get us! At least here we have all those bars on the windows to help keep the infected people out. Although, they probably won't even manage to

get inside the grounds! Aunty Val and Cob both said so before they left, remember? They said it was safer here than it would have been in any of the hotels. And Uncle Yuri left those men to protect us, too."

Heidi nodded; desperately hoping that he was right about the villa's security. "Well, I think that you are all very brave children!" She winked at him knowingly. "Well, perhaps *not* the babies!"

Barnabas nodded solemnly in agreement. "It's not really fair for them to get to be called brave too; not when they don't understand what's going on! That's *cheating*!" He paused again, and then he took a deep breath. "Heidi? May I ask you a question, please?"

She glanced at him and nodded again; concerned at how strangely nervous the boy seemed to be. "Of course! Go ahead."

He blushed and scuffed his trainers against the tiled floor. "Did…when you were still growing up…did you always know that you were *you*? Only…it's just that I'm not sure if I do or not. Sometimes…sometimes I want to be *different*."

Heidi blinked in surprise, and turned away from the pan to give him her full attention; now even

more worried. "I have never thought about it before! What do you mean? How would you like to be different?"

Barnabas shrugged. "I don't know yet, not really. I think I'd like to grow my hair out long, and…and change my name!" He trembled slightly as he continued. "I don't like being named after Daddy and Grandad, and I don't like Barnabas either. It feels wrong."

Heidi hugged him. "Then we will be telling Spence and Cob that, yes? They will help you to change it to whatever you would like to be called instead." She hesitated, and then decided that it was best to ask him. "Do you have another name that you like?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yes! But…but…well, I don't know if I'm allowed to pick that one or not."

A suspicion began to form in Heidi's mind. She hugged her young charge a little tighter. "It is what people might say is a girl's name, yes?"

The tension melted away from the child. "Yes! And that means that I can't use it, can I? Since I'm not a girl, I mean; even if I don't like being a boy. And I *don't* like it. I haven't done for ages now. I think that I'd much rather be a girl, really, but I know

that I can't do *that* either." She sighed mournfully, and then she brightened a little. "Oh well, I can still grow my hair out long at least, so that's good!"

Still maintaining the hug with her left arm, Heidi absently reached out with her right and switched off the hob; sliding the pan onto a different ring to keep the unfinished crepe from burning. She doubted if she would bother trying to salvage it. There was a far more important matter for her to focus on. "Anyone who wants to can grow their hair long, yes. And names are names. They are not being made just for the boys or for the girls, or even just for the non-gendered children. You may use whatever name and pronouns that you are liking to use, I promise!"

The girl's thin shoulders hitched as she sniffled and snuggled closer to Heidi. "Really?"

Heidi nodded firmly. "Really and truly, yes! Now – do you want to tell me your name, and your pronouns? The ones that you like?"

There was a shy little nod. "I want to be called Zara. I think I'd like to use girl pronouns, too; if I'm *definitely* allowed to, I mean. And…and I like glitter! And dresses too, but not like the ones that Kathryn likes wearing. I don't want us to match anyhow, or

else she might get cross and stab me, and then I'd have to stab her back, and we've been doing *so* well at not doing that! But I'd still like to wear dresses, at least sometimes, anyhow. Not for things like sports, though. That would be silly."

Not for the first time, Heidi wished that she could somehow go back in time and run the terrible Lackey parents and grandparents over with a car, or perhaps even beat them all to death with a skillet. As a caterer, albeit one still in training, she was very good at doing both of those things.

She stroked Zara's hair instead. "Okay then. You are Zara, and we must tell Spence and Cob to be getting you some dresses that are *not* matching with your sister's. Now, help me please with putting the crepes onto the plates for our lunch. We do not want them to get cold before they are eaten!"

***

There was a second landing pad for the ERA up on the roof of the Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility. Yuri was waiting there for Spence and Leister. He nodded in greeting to the pair as they descended the ramp of the aircraft. "It is good that you have both arrived! Everyone will be very glad to get safely away from here."

Spence eyed the scorch mark that adorned the front of the Russian man's shirt. "I take it that Senior Agent Volker now knows precisely what you did to Mr Dobos, then?"

Yuri looked sheepish. "There was some unavoidable mental entanglement whilst the four of us were healing her psionically. Laine woke up, ah, let us say *irked* with me."

Leister narrowed his eyes. "Psionic healing? And who, pray tell, was the fourth *adult* involved in the latter terribly dangerous activity?"

Yuri eyed him warily. "I am suddenly thinking that perhaps young Oliver did not inform you of the plan when he radioed you."

Spence shook their head tiredly. "Let's not get dragged into debating the finer points of Mr Dobos' parenting choices until we're all safely back at the villa, Cob. There's a swimming pool there that we can drown him in if we don't like his explanation. Well, presuming that Senior Agent Volker doesn't set him on fire for it first."

Yuri sighed. "Please, I have *just* had that pool cleaned! Use one of the bathtubs instead." Then he grew serious again. "Also, regarding Laine, please know that I am deeply concerned in case she ever

rediscovers what has truly happened to the woman who was Bryce Lenard and her son."

Spence grimaced as they took his meaning. Then they looked up at Leister. "He's right to worry, Cob. We can't trust Senior Agent Volker not to tell Agent Hull. She has far too much trust in him for anyone else's good. Christ alone knows why."

Leister inclined his head. "I shall defer to your judgement on the matter, darling. Yuri – I trust that no one here has told her yet?"

Yuri nodded. "Mercifully not, no. Oliver and Brendan are in accord with us about that much at least, and the boy knows nothing of it, despite his impressive psionic capacity." He hesitated slightly before continuing. "And speaking of such things, you should know that Gregory Hull's supposedly *latent* psionic node is in truth capable of being extremely active! Hence, I believe, why Laine does not yet know that he has been lying to everyone about what he did to Oliver last year."

Spence stared at him intently. "What exactly are you saying, Mr Kuznetsov?"

Yuri curled his upper lip in distaste as he answered. "When I was inside Gregory's head, removing his memory of what had truly happened

at my home, I discovered the echoes left by two other recent memory workings. One was Laine; unsuccessfully sifting through her agent's mind in search of the truth regarding he and Oliver." The Russian man steepled his fingers in front of his chest as he continued. "Gregory performed the other working on *himself*; altering what he knew to make it appear that it was *he* who had been the victim! Based upon the timeframe established by his other memories, this happened very soon after he had returned to Miami from New Tallahassee, and therefore well before Laine attempted her own untrained working. She did not have sufficient skill to recognise what he had done."

Leister hissed in a sharp breath of displeasure. "Thank you for uncovering the truth, darling. Nightingale and I shall see to eliminating the fellow as soon as possible!"

Spence nodded angrily in agreement. "Both versions of him; well, presuming those in charge of things don't bloody interfere on his behalf again!"

Yuri smirked. "You need not hurry! Or at least, not with regards to the Gregory who is here in Spain. After what I discovered during my time inside his head, I took the liberty of ensuring that he will never

harm *anyone* again. Put very simply, I have rewritten his entire personality! He is now every inch the brave and decent man that Laine believes him to be. Moreover, he has no recollection *whatsoever* of his capacity for memory working. A most fitting punishment, is it not?"

***

ANI Agent Hull stared down from the window of the living area of his family's hotel suite and shook his head grimly at the chaos outside. He'd hoped that the terrorist attack at Barcelona-El Prat Airport would be a one-off incident. *Trust C.A.K.E to go ahead and ruin life for as many people as possible! I never thought that I'd be glad to know for sure that poor Fisher and his mom are both dead. But it's better than them being caught up in what's happening out there right now.*

By now, Hull was convinced that his late fiancée had indeed suffered some kind of mental breakdown. It was the only thing that made any kind of sense to him. No sane person would ever have done what she had! And when he thought about it, hadn't there been little hints there for a while now? Things about her that Hull had ignored; things that in hindsight should have been red flags. *I*

just loved the good parts of her too much to ever let myself admit how damaged she really was. And now it's too late. All I can do is bury her along with our son and try to move on with my life. I just hope that old bastard Thomas Campbell knows that it's as much his fault as hers that Fisher is dead. Even if things could have been a whole lot worse.

He shuddered as he considered the latter fact. Fisher had drowned here in Barcelona, but there was plenty of deep water at home in Miami too. The difference was that back there, Bryce had been responsible for looking after all three of their younger kids. If she hadn't begun her episode by taking off with Fisher, then there could very easily have been more than one painfully small coffin involved. *I seriously don't know if I could go on if that had happened.*

It was bad enough that one or other of the anonymous paper pushers back in Miami was still dragging their feet about signing off on repatriating Bryce and Fisher's remains. Some crap about part of the autopsy reports not having been correctly formatted. Hull resigned himself to making yet another trip to the morgue at the local ANI field office; presuming that the building in question was

even still standing after the current crisis ended. Thankfully, the coroner there was proving to be an absolute tower of support, as was the guy in charge of the field office; Senior Agent Ramone Lanza. *Although, I wouldn't be surprised if he and his agents are all just trying to cover their own asses for not having provided Laine with adequate support during her investigation.*

His boss was still sedated. Nobody who was medically qualified seemed to like the idea of having a psionic of her capacity wandering around with amnesia. Hull privately felt that this was an unfair kneejerk reaction by the doctors involved. Unfortunately, Senior Agent Lanza supported it fully. *And I still need to keep him on side; at least until we get clear of Spain. After that though, ANI's protocols mean that I'll be free to do whatever I deem fit in managing Laine's care. There are a whole bunch of medications that might help her; given enough time.*

Far below, an especially aggressive infected male victim slammed himself headfirst into the front window of one of the stores on the opposite side of the street. Hull winced inwardly as the glass shattered; one of the larger pieces all but

decapitating the infected man. He was glad that his family's suite was on the very top floor of the hotel. The infected victims of the latest C.A.K.E attack had been rampaging since the middle of last night. It was now noon, and none of them seemed to be slowing down. *I guess the only question at this stage is whether C.A.K.E used the Miami biohazard or just their corrupted medical nanites this time.*

He sincerely hoped that it was the nanites again. At least then, there was a good chance of curing any surviving victims once they were safely contained. A quick blast of electromagnetic energy would do it. The biohazard, on the other hand, was essentially a death sentence for anyone infected by it. The authorities in Miami had spent two full months searching for a cure. Whatever they'd found out about the biohazard during that time was classified. All Hull knew for sure was that it had scared those in charge enough for them to order the immediate euthanasia of all the captured infected. That action had secretly been undertaken back in late July, and the remains of the victims incinerated. The truth had only been revealed to the public early this morning; resulting in rioting in

Miami, and other, less extreme forms of protest throughout the rest of the country. Hull anticipated that other nations would soon begin weighing in on it too. *Maybe not Spain, though. Not with what's going here in Barcelona.*

Hull wondered how Waverly had taken the news about the mass euthanasia. The Martian billionaire had gone to serious effort in capturing the infected victims alive; using his APSUs to stun them and then place them in cryostasis pods until a cure could be found. He'd been lauded as a heroic genius for it ever since. *And deservedly so, too. I don't like him, but I can still appreciate what he did. Finding out that the people he saved have all been killed must have been a real kick in the teeth for him.*

The eldest of his two adopted daughters, eighteen-year-old Nadimiche, emerged from her room in the suite and joined him by the window then. To Hull's concern, her brown eyes were red rimmed; as if she'd been crying. She seemed upset and nervous as she spoke to him. "Um…can I talk to you about something, please…Dad?"

Hull touched the wall panel that polarised the window; blocking off the view of the street. "Sure, kiddo. What's up?"

Nadimiche took a deep breath before replying. "Before we left Miami, I reached out to Children's Services there. I, um, I wanted to know what they had in my file from when I was a baby. And I'm old enough now to make the request, so…"

Her voice trailed off uncertainly. Hull sensed that she wanted him to approve of what she'd done before she would tell him anything else. He smiled at her reassuringly. "I get it, don't worry. It's completely normal for you to want to know the whole truth about who you are. So – did they get back to you yet?"

She nodded. "Yeah. The email came through to my phone just before the communications went down here. They said that they'd run my DNA when I was found, and that there weren't any matches for it on the system, so they can't help me with tracing my bio parents. But they sent me a copy of my case file anyway. There are photos of me in it…and…and of my sister, too."

Hull stared at her in surprise. "You have a sister? That's great news, kiddo!"

Nadimiche shook her head; blinking back tears. "I had a twin. We were found together. But…but the family who adopted her…they had a dog. And

it…my sister…she's *dead*, Dad! The dog killed her when she was a toddler! The coroner's report…the police report…it's all there! All of it; even the photos of what happened to her! And there's a note in the file saying that my parents…my other adoptive parents…they didn't want me to ever find out…!"

She broke down in tears then, and flung herself into Hull's arms; sobbing desperately into his shirt as she grieved for the sibling who she had never had the chance to know.

Hull wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. He rubbed her back as he spoke. "Oh, baby girl, I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry, Nadimiche."

He withheld himself from saying what he thought of the assorted adults involved in the whole ghastly nightmare. *The assholes at Children's Services had no damn business dropping this on her via email, for Christ's sake! And the Prado Wangs should have told her the truth years ago; in an age-appropriate manner. They were her parents from infancy – it was up to them to help her process her loss! And as for the other family…fuck, there aren't words!*

Doubtless, the parents had been jailed for life over the tragedy; just as Bryce would have been over Fisher's death, had she lived long enough for

his body to be found. Thomas Campbell had apparently received a caution from ANI over his inattention, but nothing more than that since he had had no parental responsibility for Fisher. *And I get a free pass because all I did was trust Bryce to be an adequate parent in my absence…!*

Hull caught himself before his thoughts could spiral any further. This wasn't about him, or his grief. This, now, was about Nadimiche's loss; her pain. She needed him to be there for her. *And I will be, too. Every step of the way, for as long as I live.*

Chapter Eight – Often Very Horribly

Volker stood alone on the rear patio of the villa, and watched impassively as the ERA soared away; headed back towards Barcelona. Spence and Leister were going to attempt to extract the other BIINT operatives next; along with Mr Campbell's current girlfriend, Zoe, and the two toddlers: Sam and Primrose. Whether they would succeed remained to be seen. *It is to be hoped that they do. We are in dire need of all the assistance that we can acquire.*

Oliver had taken her aside a short time ago, and informed her privately of what Mr Kuznetsov alleged Agent Hull to have done. Volker was not yet certain how best to proceed with the information. It did not align with what she knew of

her agent. Nor was the Russian memory worker to be considered as a reliable source. *I find it most perturbing that my companions here have so very readily acceded to his guidance.*

At best, Mr Kuznetsov might be considered an ally of circumstance. It was unlikely for the others involved not to understand this fact themselves. Therefore, the most rational explanation for their collective acceptance of the man was that he was somehow influencing them. Memory workers could do such things all too easily. There was good reason for the ability to be so very closely policed within those nations which permitted its usage at all. America was not one of them; a fact which made Agent Hull's position even more precarious. *However, that is only if Mr Kuznetsov may be trusted. And I do not yet believe that he can.*

Volker knew that she could not voice her concerns. Not without revealing her own recent acts of deception. And at least some of the latter would be at best difficult to explain. With emotions running as high as they currently were, she deemed it unwise to attempt the discussion. Her companions seemed unlikely to approve. *I have no wish to create unnecessary discord. Moreover, it would be*

an intolerable waste of my efforts so far if I were to reveal myself now.

She traced her right index finger slowly along the cast on her left wrist. She had not come to Spain with the intention of infiltrating Russian Intelligence. However, when the opportunity had presented itself for her to do so safely, it had seemed only rational to take it. Such efforts were, after all, a key aspect of her sworn duty as an ANI agent. Feigning a bout prolonged unconsciousness after her fall instead of the few seconds which had genuinely been lost to her had been no hardship, and nor had shielding herself telekinetically against Mr Bogomolov's pistol. Manipulating the minds of Mr Kuznetsov's medical staff to induce them to believe whatever she required them to had also been simple. And anyone could behave as if they had amnesia. *Admittedly, inspiring Mr Kuznetsov to clone me whilst also ensuring that he remained wholly unaware of my psionic intrusion into his mind was somewhat more complicated.*

His ability to instantaneously weave such a complex explanation for his supposedly amnesiac captive had been truly impressive. Until now, Volker had never encountered anyone else who lied so

very readily, or so convincingly. She had thought her own considerable talents in that area to be aberrant. *It is unfortunate that I am not at liberty to converse freely with Mr Kuznetsov on the matter.*

Volker was sanguine about the latter missed opportunity. Doubtless, her curiosity would be sated eventually. After all, whilst the splinter of her consciousness which was now named Asya would most likely need to remain physically separated from the rest of her for life, they were still connected psionically. Once Asya regained consciousness inside the replacement body which was to be cloned for her, she would provide Volker with regular telepathic updates on her infiltration mission; including the details of her daily life and routine. *And I do not doubt that Mr Kuznetsov will prove himself to be a most talkative mentor.*

Asya might also prove useful in monitoring Ms Lenard and her son. Volker was currently undecided as to how best proceed in that matter. She knew, of course, that both were alive. She could also sense precisely where Fisher was. His psionic signature had become a familiar pattern to her by now. But whether it was in fact appropriate for her to disclose any of this to Agent Hull was no

longer certain. If what Mr Kuznetsov claimed about him was indeed true, then her agent was neither a fit parent nor an acceptable choice in life partner. *It behoves me to investigate him fully before making my decision on the matter. I will do so clandestinely.*

Unfortunately, the successful completion of the latter task would require that she pre-emptively avert anyone else from doing so more openly. That meant that Volker had had to wholly erase certain memories from several of her companions here in Vallvidrera. Doing so had not troubled her in the slightest; aside from when it came to Oliver. *I regret that it was necessary to modify what he knows. I do not like deceiving him. But perhaps he would prefer it to be this way anyhow.*

***

Hull hadn't been able to keep himself from returning to his vigil at the window. He'd waited until after Nadimiche departed for her shower, of course. That had been a good forty minutes ago. The teenager was by now out of the bathroom but she hadn't sought him out again yet. He didn't want to push things with her. *She knows she can come to me whenever she wants to. It's important*

that I let her decide for herself about that. I'll talk to her about therapy at some point too.

Movement inside the rear of one of the hover cars in the covered parking lot just across the street from this side of the hotel caught his attention. He grimaced as he realised there was someone trapped alive inside the dull grey SUV. At least the roof of the lot would be keeping the worst of the heat from the sun at bay, because whoever was in there *definitely* couldn't risk turning on the engine to use the vehicle's air conditioning! *They won't cook to death, at least. But they'll still risk dying of thirst if this mess drags out long enough. It might be safer for them to make a run for it now; while the street is clear of infected people.*

The person in the car pressed their face up against the left rear passenger window then; probably trying to see if the coast was clear for them to try to escape. Hull felt his protective instincts spike at the sight. *Jesus, it's a kid! He can't be much older than…than Fisher was. How the fuck are you still alive down there by yourself, buddy? Did somebody lock you in to keep you safe?*

Whoever had done so must have engaged the child safety locks before leaving. Hull knew all too

well how fast a toddler could exit a vehicle otherwise! If the kid hadn't gotten out by now, then chances were that he couldn't do so at all. How long would it be until he started crying, or worse, screaming? That kind of noise would attract any infected people within earshot of the car. *And once they know that he's in there, they won't stop until they manage to break in and…!*

Hull couldn't even finish that thought. Stepping back from the window, he drew the curtain across it to block out the view of the street. Hurrying into his bedroom, he pulled on his stealth suit, and checked that his energy pistol was fully loaded. Then he went back out into the living area. "Girls, I need to leave the suite for a little while. Keep the door locked until I get back. The hotel is still secure, but some people can get unpleasant during emergencies."

Rayne was down for her usual afternoon nap, and Tessa was wearing the noise cancelling headphones that Hull had purchased for her to use while she adapted to being able to hear again. She remained focused on the game she was playing on her tablet. Nadimiche and Callista just nodded silently, before going back to painting one another's nails. Hull wondered if he should find their

lack of reaction concerning. *Then again, it's not their first apocalypse. Or mine either, for that. Yeah, I'll get us all into therapy once we get home.*

Hull activated his stealth suit just before he exited the suite. The electronic lock on the door leading out onto the flat roof of the hotel took him under thirty seconds to bypass. Jogging to the waist high parapet at the edge of the roof, he secured the end of the suit's built-in grapnel to a sturdy metal pipe, and rappelled down the side of the building. He unclipped himself and took off running towards the parking lot as soon as his feet touched the ground. *Please just stay quiet a little longer, buddy!*

Luck was with them both, and the toddler was still only snivelling quietly when his rescuer reached the vehicle. Dressed for bed in red and yellow cotton footy pyjamas, the child had light olive skin, angular green eyes, and an adorably unruly mop of jet-black curls. He'd either managed to unbuckle the safety harness of his travel pod and clamber out of it, or else he hadn't been inside it to begin with. An empty bottle of children's cough syrup lay on the driver's seat. A parent or other such caregiver must have used the contents of it to try and keep the boy quiet before leaving him alone in

the car. *Maybe they figured they'd make it back to the poor little guy before he woke up. But why even risk leaving him to begin with?*

The vehicle's plates indicated that it was a rental. Its alarm was a little tricky to disarm, but Hull had more than enough skill with such things to avoid setting it off. After that, the door locks were even easier to bypass than the one for the door onto the hotel's roof. Hull started to feel a little more optimistic about his chances of success here. Pulling open the left rear door, he scooped the boy up into his arms; extending the suit's stealth field to cover them both, and enabling the little boy to see him. He murmured softly to the child and stroked the tousled curls. "It's okay, buddy. I've got you."

The toddler cuddled into him; babbling for his parents. "Mama! Dada! Where go?"

"I don't know yet, buddy." Glancing towards his left, Hull spotted the edge of a pool of blood. It had mostly dried out in the scorching heat. Cradling the child against his left shoulder so that the little boy wouldn't see whatever was there, Hull edged closer to the front end of the vehicle; glad that his stealth suit kept him from smelling anything. Sure enough, the gutted remains of what had once been a

woman lay sprawled on the dusty concrete. She had been dressed for bed when she was killed; her red satin nightshirt now lying in shreds amidst her blood. There was a key fob still clutched in her right hand. The logo on it matched that of the vehicle's rental company. Peering more closely at the corpse, Hull spotted a distinctive silver and jade bracelet on the left wrist. *Yeah, that's definitely his mom. She was staying in the same hotel as me and the girls – I saw her and her husband down in the lobby yesterday morning; checking in at the desk. Cute couple. They had the kid with them too, but I couldn't see his face at the time because he was curled in asleep against his dad's shoulder.*

Hull wondered what had become of the little boy's father. He recalled the man as having been tall and leanly muscled, with an olive complexion, shoulder length wavy black hair, and angular hazel eyes that hinted at him having some Japanese ancestry. The mother, who had had fair skin, long, curly red hair, and the same vivid green eyes as her son, had reminded Hull a lot of Callista. Both parents had looked as if they were aged in their early twenties, and had sounded as if they hailed from somewhere up in the northernmost end of

England. *Just a happy little family enjoying their summer vacation in sunny Spain.*

The toddler babbled unhappily. "Yuck! Stinky!"

Hull shushed him gently; grimacing as he realised that, unlike him, the little boy could smell everything around them. The stench coming from the already putrefying remains of his mother would be beyond awful by now. Hopefully, he'd slept through her horrific death. *He must have done, otherwise he would have screamed the place down!*

Wanting to ensure that the toddler had at least one memento of his parents, Hull crouched down and unhooked the bracelet from the dead woman's wrist; tucking it into one of the storage pouches on his stealth suit's belt. The item was mercifully free of any blood spatter. While he was crouched, he spotted the father's corpse lying between two of the vehicles in the next row over; also dressed for bed. *Guess that makes the poor little guy here an orphan.*

Hearing the screeches of another mob of infected victims drawing closer, Hull decided to create a distraction. Backing swiftly away from the rental vehicle, he drew his energy pistol and fired it straight at the fuel cap. Then he ran for it; dodging

nimbly around a few frothing and snarling figures as he went. Behind him, the car erupted into flames; its alarm finally blaring into life as it burned. *I'm sure the rental company's insurance will cover it!*

The logistics of getting himself and the toddler safely up to the roof of the hotel required some lateral thinking on Hull's part. Thankfully, he only needed to use his left arm to carry the boy. Reattaching the end of the rope to the harness on his suit with his right hand, Hull held down the relevant button on the grapnel. The device's mechanism did the rest. Moments later, both he and the toddler were level with the parapet. Bracing his feet against the side of the building, Hull leaned back against the rope for the final couple of seconds; parkouring his way up and over the parapet. Unclipping himself from the rope, he deactivated the stealth field, and reeled in the grapnel; comforting the toddler as he did so. "It's okay, buddy. I've got you."

By now, the blaze over in the parking lot had spread, and the fire extinguishing systems had finally activated. Heavy steel shutters rolled down; sealing off the lot so that the toxic fumes released by the fire suppressing foam used wouldn't harm

anyone in the nearby area. Forensically speaking, it was already too late to prevent the rescued toddler's late parents and their rental vehicle from having been reduced to ashes. Hull knew that his actions would be deemed acceptable by those in charge given the circumstances. *I just hope the infected people trapped in there all die before anybody gets around to opening the shutters. I'll make sure to report what happened so that there isn't another outbreak if any of them do manage to survive. The local authorities can take it from there.*

***

C.A.K.E's secret base deep underneath the icy surface of Pluto was its usual quietly bustling hive of activity. In a bunker right at the very heart of the complex, six genetically identical men were sitting around an oblong table; reviewing a holographic compilation of the events in Alaska today. None of them was quite sure how best to proceed from this point onwards. Four hours in, they were all equally tired of debating it.

The technically eldest one of them rose to his feet. Like his cloned brothers, this copy of Greg Hull was dressed in a plain grey jumpsuit. He held up his hands for quiet. "Brothers, please! There really is

nothing to debate here. We already have our orders on what to do whenever Mr Howard is incapacitated."

The clone seated to his immediate left huffed resignedly. "Clone him again?"

"Yes." The senior clone nodded. "Precisely."

A third clone, this one seated at the far end of the table, piped up. "What if we don't?"

The clone next to him gasped at the audacity of this question. "Brother! What's gotten into you? We can't just *not* clone him!"

Another of the clones frowned. "Why not?"

The third clone thumped the table excitedly with his clenched fists. "Exactly, brother! Why not? Why can't we all just decide as a group that enough is damn well enough?"

His question stymied the fourth clone, who began spluttering. "But…but our orders say…!"

The second clone spoke up again. "That we're supposed to serve the best interests of C.A.K.E and protect Mr Howard from *all* forms of harm. Cloning is expensive!" His voice became sly. "And besides, surely you don't think that it's *good* for him to keep on dying over and over again like this, brother?"

"Brothers!" The eldest clone all but bellowed the

word. "Think about what you're saying!"

The sixth of them finally spoke. "But it's true, brother. All these resurrections, I mean. They really *are* a huge drain on C.A.K.E's resources. And all this dying must be having at least *some* degree of negative psychological impact on Mr Howard by now!"

The third clone chimed in yet again; his tone almost gleeful now. "And as our brother has already pointed out, brother, we're supposed to protect him from *all* forms of harm."

The fifth clone nodded. "Yeah; what he said."

The eldest clone glared at his brothers. "I know that! And we *are* protecting him!"

The second clone hummed and steepled his fingers. "Are we *really*, though, brother? Are we really and truly doing that?"

"I don't see how we *aren't*." The eldest clone folded his arms irritably. "Do you, brother?"

"I certainly don't, brother!" The fourth clone scrambled up from his chair, and hurried around the table to stand next to the eldest.

The third clone tilted his head to the left. "Hmm. So, tell me, brothers. Do our orders include protecting him from self-harm?"

The eldest clone scoffed. "Obviously!"

"Absolutely, yes!" The fourth clone nodded.

"Well then, we shouldn't clone him again, should we?" The second clone sounded smug now. "Since it only ever results in him dying. Often very horribly, too. I mean, the last one was all but eaten alive by a dog, for fuck's sake!"

The fourth clone hesitated. Then he nodded. "That's actually a very good point, brother."

It was obvious what way the metaphorical wind was blowing. Accepting defeat, the eldest clone sighed. "Okay, but then what should we do with his consciousness instead?"

The sixth clone had a ready solution for that. "We could put it in a cryostasis simulation! One where everything is *exactly* as he wants it."

"Then it's settled!" The second clone clapped his hands together triumphantly. "We'll put Mr Howard's consciousness into stasis for his own good! Then we can focus our energies on taking care of C.A.K.E's best interests."

Chapter Nine – Only Brandy

Feline augmetric Lottie Drake had never liked Cornwall. Not because of the people, of course, who were lovely. And she greatly appreciated the scenery, too, and the local ice cream. Especially the latter. No, it was the irksome tendency amongst villainous sorts to attempt to invade the UK by launching a sea-based offensive along the Cornish coastline that was the issue. In fact, by Drake's calculations, she and her fellow NIT agents spent at least fifteen percent of their time thwarting such schemes. Which was a lot, especially when one considered just how very small a region Cornwall was, geographically speaking. Sometimes, in her more whimsical moments, Drake found herself debating if perhaps the entire area was cursed.

Today was playing host to yet another instance of the recurring Cornish problem. Drake and her long-term partner within NIT, Byron Caulfield, had been assigned to appropriately and inventively deter the latest batch of would-be conquerors. The latter order was their superior's polite way of saying kindly go forth and murder every single one of the stupid bastards as swiftly as is humanly possible, please and thank you both very much.

A sudden loud explosion somewhere off to Drake's left interrupted her musings. She sighed and delicately wiped her erstwhile opponents' blood off her pair of matching stiletto knives and onto the nearest corpse's combat fatigues. "At least you're good for *something*, I suppose."

Stepping out from the middle of her circle of carnage, Drake sauntered off through the sand dunes and around a large rocky outcrop to where Caulfield was standing. He looked immensely pleased with himself as he greeted her. "Lottie! Lovely to see you again! All finished over there?"

Drake nodded. "They might have been SCOs, but monomolecular filament blades don't care."

"Jolly good!" Caulfield beamed and handed her the pair of multi spectrum binoculars that he'd

been using to stare out to sea. "I took the liberty of sending the rest of them off with a bang. Terribly sorry for not waiting until you got here to see it happen, but I didn't like the look of that giant death ray attached to the roof of their submarine. I rather suspect that they might have had ill intentions towards us."

Drake smiled beatifically as she surveyed the broiling waters on the horizon line. Parts of the doomed C.A.K.E vessel in question were still merrily exploding; spewing forth thick plumes of smoke and fire as they did so. "That's quite alright, Byron. At least we can watch the rest of the fireworks display together. And then I suppose that we'd best see about hosting a barbeque with what's left of those horrid SCOs."

"Indeed, Lottie." Caulfield took out his hip flask and handed it to her so that she could have the first sip. "Only brandy for now, I'm afraid, dear girl. Champagne and strawberries shall have to wait until we get back to our hotel!"

***

Zoe's hospital room had a conveniently large window, which faced out onto an even more conveniently spacious plaza. Leister had easily lined

the rear of the ERA up flush against the glass, and was now holding that position whilst Spence oversaw evacuating all those inside the room. The latter process ought to have been simple, but there was a problem. Zoe was still bedridden from her injuries. She couldn't be moved without risking doing her further harm. And Campbell flatly refused to leave her behind. In fact, the former field operative had just spent several precious minutes waxing lyrical on the subject; whilst his father had boarded the ERA along with Moxton and his team. Thomas and Tanya had carried Sam and Primrose.

Now Spence stood alone at the top of the ERA's rear ramp and glared down it at the melodramatic idiot who was holding everyone else up. "Mr Campbell, you are being bloody ridiculous! Stop pontificating and get aboard right now!"

Zoe nodded tiredly in agreement. "Craig…you *can't* stay here. But…but…please…just take care of Primrose for me…!"

Her attempt at being noble and self-sacrificing only served to renew Campbell's already boundless reserves of stubbornness. He shook his head grimly as he bent forwards across the bed to tenderly kiss Zoe's brow. "I'm not going anywhere! I love you

more than life itself, and I'll die with you if need be! And you mustn't worry about Primrose. Spence will take care of her, and of Sam too."

Spence gave up trying to reason with him. Instead, they carefully shifted the pitch and tone of their voice. "Mr Campbell. Pick up Ms Rusdyle, and carry her onto this aircraft immediately. You *will* obey me on this matter!"

The man's eyes glazed over slightly. He did exactly as Spence had told him to; ignoring Zoe's understandably pained screaming as he did so. Moxton and Quincy hastened to grab hold of him as soon as he was safely on board; carefully seeing to lifting Zoe out of his arms and laying her down on the deck plating. Quincy then began tending to her injuries. "Remain still, female companion unit! This unit is medically qualified!"

Moxton saw to stunning Campbell before the fellow could regain his wits and perhaps overreact to having been forced into obeying. The handler nodded curtly to Spence. "Nice work!"

Behind them, Jolley yelped as he was elbowed in the gut by Thomas; who was now on his feet and struggling to get past him. "Aye, brilliant! But can you maybe tell the old bloke here to stop trying to

follow that command now, like? Only I reckon that he thinks you meant him instead of Craig!"

Spence slammed their hand against the control panel; causing the rear ramp to close with a soft hiss of its hydraulics. "Thomas, sit down, strap in, and help Miss Darnell with the children. The rest of you should get your safety harnesses on too. I'm going up front to tell Cob that we're clear to leave now."

***

Karen Bell had woken up two hours too early almost an hour ago. She'd been trying and failing to go back to asleep ever since. It wasn't that she was a naturally early riser, or that the state-of-the-art hospital bed here in her assigned cubicle was even remotely uncomfortable. Her mind just wouldn't settle enough. *Not after what some of the others were saying at lunch yesterday.*

She was no longer confident that she or any of the others quarantined here in the facility would ever get to return home. There was a rumour going around amongst the survivors that the infected victims from the plane were secretly already dead; euthanised immediately after their arrival. And another theory espoused that the facility itself wasn't really being used for quarantine purposes,

but for an illegal scientific research project. One that the survivors were now unwitting test subjects in. *But surely that can't be true! The UK isn't like that – is it?*

At first, Karen had tried very hard to ignore the whispers between her fellow survivors. She hadn't wanted to think badly of the hazmat clad people who worked here. And anyhow, she'd reasoned, even if it was true, then maybe it had been unavoidable. Oh sure, that Hull guy – whoever he was in relation to her neighbour back in Miami – had said that there hadn't been anything to worry about after he'd contained the infected passengers and crew members. But Karen didn't trust him. Especially not after how he'd treated her on the plane. *I don't think either one of those guys is safe to be around! Poor Bryce. No wonder she seemed so scared. And those poor kids, too. I hope they're all doing okay.*

It sucked being locked away here in the quarantine facility. By rights, Karen ought to have been safely home in Miami; avoiding her creepy neighbour, and eating her weight in pistachio ice cream. Not dividing her time between mingling with possibly infected strangers in one or other of the

facility's recreation areas, and cowering alone in her windowless room! *I don't want to catch the disease, but it's awfully lonely in here.*

The other problem with staying in her cubicle was the sheer boredom, but that was an issue regardless. There wasn't any access to the outside world here in the quarantine facility; not even by phone! And the recreation areas didn't have so much as a shared TV for the inmates to watch. Karen privately agreed with those who'd complained aloud about that being an unnecessary amount of deprivation to inflict on them. She understood why books and magazines would have posed too great a risk as infection vectors, but surely a TV couldn't do any harm? *And it's not as if we aren't allowed to interact as a group! I don't understand why they let us do that, but won't let us watch TV. Unless maybe they don't want us watching the news. But why?*

She hadn't dared voice her feelings on the matter, though. She was too afraid of drawing any attention to herself; in case it put her in harm's way. The theory about their situation being a part of some awful secret experiment hadn't helped at all there. She'd skipped dinner out of fear yesterday

evening, and she wasn't planning on attending breakfast this morning either. *Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but what if I'm not?*

There was a hiss of air as the hermetically sealed door of her room cycled open. The overhead lighting activated automatically. Karen sat up immediately; tensing warily as she recognised her visitor. "Mr Hull! What are you doing here?"

He hurried in without answering her. Much to Karen's discomfiture, he locked the door behind him, and polarised the glass of the viewing panel; sealing them off completely from anyone who might walk by. Then he turned and looked at her. His expression was grim. "The good news is that you and I and the others quarantined with us have the all clear regarding the biohazard on the plane. The bad news is that C.A.K.E somehow managed to infiltrate this facility. The guy who snuck in was caught the day before yesterday but the staff kept it quiet. They didn't want anyone to panic."

There was a loud thud as something collided with the outside of the door. Karen gasped and scrambled out of bed. "What was that?"

Hull sighed. "Turns out that that damn C.A.K.E operative had already released another biohazard

before he was discovered! He put it in some of the food supplies. You're lucky you weren't at dinner yesterday. That's when the contaminated meals were served up. People started to get sick an hour later. Now, pretty much everyone else here is either dead or rampaging. Including the staff."

Karen spotted what looked like one of the staff security lanyards clenched in Hull's right hand. She gulped. "Is…um…is that why you have that? And how come you aren't infected? Weren't you at dinner either?"

Hull shook his head. "I was there, but like I said, the asshole responsible only managed to mess with *some* of the food. I got lucky, that's all."

"Oh." Karen briefly tried to feel guilty for being disappointed about his good fortune. She settled for not voicing it. "But you also said *pretty much* everyone else – does that mean there are others who're still okay? Where are they?"

"Medical. I locked them all in there for their own safety while I went looking for you." Hull pointed up at the ventilation grille in the middle of the ceiling. "Since I know for sure now where this room is in relation to the medical bay, we can crawl through the vents to get back there."

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Cerise Aldermere tossed a lit match onto the stack of petrol drenched SCOs in front of her and stepped backwards across the patio to a safe distance to watch them burn. Technically, the four unnaturally strong and resilient blond men in question were all currently dead, but given their regenerative capabilities, Cerise was counting them as just being unconscious instead. *Never hurts to be extra careful! And I ain't about to risk them shrugging off all the bullets I've put in them so far. Not with my little guy's safety to think of.*

Her nine-year-old son, Jamal-Kristof, was inside the house that Cerise shared with her partner, Paul Benedict. Paul's adult daughter, Dr Ashley Jenkins, was in there too. She'd moved out to live on her own again recently, but had dropped by earlier this afternoon to bring Cerise a present for her birthday. Paul would have been there too, if it wasn't for C.A.K.E trying to unleash Armageddon. He'd promised to make up for it when he got home from wherever it was that BIINT had sent him and Doris Weaver off to. Cerise just hoped that he'd survive. *It feels like the whole damn world's falling apart all around us!*

She sighed and took out her cell phone; not so much as glancing away from the pyre as she thumbed in the number for BIINT from memory. The call was picked up almost instantly. Paul had insisted on having her number listed as a priority contact in his file. He'd done the same thing for Ashley, too; having wanted to make sure that his loved ones would always have help available to them in his absence. "Yeah, hey, so this is Cerise! I'm calling from Paul's place. We're gonna need somebody to come and clean up here, honey. Why? Because a bunch of those dumbass C.A.K.E guys turned up and got themselves shot in the head all over the damn patio, that's why! Uh huh, yeah, that's perfect, thank you. See you soon."

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In Karen's opinion, the other survivors here in the medical bay were all far too willing to trust Hull. She kept that thought to herself; just as she had done with her recent concerns about the facility and its staff. It didn't seem likely that anybody here would side with her. And anyhow, she didn't want a repeat experience of how Hull had treated her on the plane. *Better to just keep on nodding quietly, and doing what I'm told.*

She huddled back into the corner that she was sitting in. The solid feel of the yellow painted walls against her body was comforting; assuring Karen that nobody and nothing could sneak up behind her. It still didn't mean that she was safe, of course. But it helped. A little bit, anyhow; which was still a lot better than nothing. And the pile of blankets that she'd been given to use as bedding made for a fairly comfortable little nest. These days, Karen found that she'd happily take whatever comfort she could get. *At least Hull seems like he's forgotten about me for now.*

The creepy asshole in question was over at the opposite side of the medical bay; making out with Alex inside one of the exam rooms. They'd closed the door, which meant that nobody could hear them, at least. But they hadn't bothered to polarise the observation window, or even to draw the blinds. Thanks to where she was sitting, Karen could see everything. Well, unless she shut her eyes, of course. But she wasn't going to risk doing that while she was locked in with so many strangers. *What if one of them tries something?*

Shivering at the thought, Karen tightened her grip on the scalpel that she'd managed to snatch

from one of the supply carts without anybody noticing. She pulled the blankets even closer around herself. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to it, but if it did, then at least she knew how to stab someone. And that she could do it without hesitating, too. Her desperate escape back in New Zealand had proven that much. *But I don't want to have to do anything like that ever again.*

Hull had bent Alex forwards along the length of the gurney now, and was looming over him; kissing the nape of his neck, and nuzzling his hair. His right hand was wrapped around the flight attendant's wrists; stretching the younger man's arms stretched out in front of him. Karen tried not to pay any attention to what he was doing with his other hand. Instead, she craned her neck around to the right as far as she could, and started memorising the information on one of the wall charts. It was a guide to using a hazmat suit. *At least that's useful to know how to do. Not that it helped the staff much.*

Her fellow survivors were all huddled in their own little areas; some alone, some in pairs, and some in small groups of up to five people. The latter were all families; the adults doing their best to comfort their children. Karen didn't envy them that task. Aside

from the three youngest, who were all still just babies, and maybe the two toddlers, any hope of distracting the children from what was going on outside the medical bay was long gone. *Kids aren't stupid. They know that we're trapped in here. And they know why. They saw what's going on outside.*

By another strange twist of fate, there hadn't been any minors killed or infected. True, some of them had lost at least one parent or guardian, but being left traumatised for life by that was still better than the alternative. Karen felt sure of that much. *Although I guess maybe my perspective is skewed a little after all I've been put through.*

Something in her left peripheral vision caught Karen's attention then. She turned her head instinctively towards the movement; flinching when she saw what was going on inside the exam room. After her ordeal, even the mere thought of sexual activity repulsed her. Literally watching two people going at it made her want to vomit. But who was she to judge how others chose to pass their time in a situation like this? *Except…except that I don't think Alex is enjoying what's happening.*

She found herself on her feet without realising that she'd decided to stand up. A small, sly, and

very sensible part of her brain screamed at her about minding her own business. Ignoring it, Karen ran to the door of the exam room, and flung it open. The bang as it hit the wall that it was attached to was all but drowned out by the sound of Alex screaming for Hull to stop. "Please, you're hurting me…!"

Karen wasn't sure what exactly happened after that. She was vaguely aware of moving forwards, and of colliding with something warm and solid. Then things sort of went fuzzy for a while. When she came back to her senses, she was sitting on a plastic chair; flanked by two of the other women. One of them was supporting Karen by her shoulders to keep her from toppling off the chair. The other one was holding a bowl of pinkish looking water and a bloodstained towel. Looking down at herself, Karen realised that both of her hands were dripping wet. There was no sign of the scalpel. She gulped nervously. "What…um…what happened…?"

A third woman stepped into view in front of Karen. She was a lot taller than average, and dressed in a very fancy looking black hazmat suit. It looked as if it had armour built into it. There was a BIINT logo on the upper left corner of the chest

plate, and a small nameplate that identified the wearer as simply Weaver. The visor was clear; showing that Weaver was aged somewhere in her late forties or early fifties, and white, with neat blonde hair, and kind looking blue eyes. She crouched down in front of Karen and smiled at her. When she spoke, it was with an English accent. "You did, my lovely! And it was just as bloody well, too, from what everyone else here has said. Anyhow, don't worry. BIINT has everything well in hand here now. You're all perfectly safe, I promise."

Karen nodded docilely; even though she still didn't know what was going on. "Okay. Thank you." It dawned on her suddenly that Alex wasn't screaming anymore. Hopefully, that was a good sign, but what if it wasn't? She gulped again. "Um…is Alex alright…?"

Weaver nodded. "He's safe, lovely. One of the medics is looking after him."

She didn't mention Hull. Karen thought that that was kind of strange; given how he worked for BIINT too. Then she looked down at the bowl again, and at the towel. An inkling of what might have happened to the scalpel that she'd been clutching began to dawn on her. "Oh."

"It's alright, lovely." Weaver smiled at her again. "You did the right thing. I'm very sorry that we didn't get here soon enough to do it for you. You should never have been put in that position to begin with." She paused, but only briefly. "Still, – have you ever considered a career in wetwork?"

Chapter Ten – Nothing Violent

Thursday morning dawned in Vallvidrera; bringing with it six trained messenger pigeons. Each bird carried a segment of the latest update from Yuri's people. He opened the tiny missives at the breakfast table; decoding them whilst sipping at his coffee. He hadn't slept at all last night. Nor had any of the other adults in the villa. Yuri knew this for the same reason he knew that the older four children had at least drowsed, and the two infants slept wholly normally. Namely, that he had enough secret monitoring equipment built into his home to keep tabs on all who were present there. *After all, one must be very careful to always keep track of one's guests, and it would be most invasive of me to rely upon my psionics to do so!*

Admittedly, he had nonetheless resorted to the latter well-proven method where Brendan was concerned. The Irish operative's masking talents meant that Yuri could not trust his technology to be sufficient. But he had no qualms about making this exception. There was no shame in employing common sense. And permitting a man like Brendan to have free run of one's home without observing him would be very foolish indeed. *Especially given the unfortunate grudge that he bears towards me! He would, I know, be most pleased if I were to suffer an abrupt misfortune. And he is proactive enough to nudge things along in that regard.*

Despite his undoubtedly having such murderous inclinations, Brendan, however, was not in fact the primary focus for Yuri's concerns. No – that dubious honour belonged squarely to Laine! How could it not; given all that the woman in question had done so far? From her initial defeat of his security personnel, through her impressive secret manipulation of his medical staff, and on into her continuing game of deception, the pyrotemporal had proven herself to be the worthiest foe whom Yuri had ever faced. Her ruthless erasure of information from the minds of those whom she

deemed likely to inconvenience her investigation of Gregory Hull had sent a brief chill along the Russian memory worker's spine. *Such capacity for remote telepathic influence! And such dispassionate rationality of thought! She has a tactician's genius and the soul of a shark, that one.*

Yuri deemed it wisest to play along with the woman's scheme; at least for now. It was not often that one gained the opportunity to feed misinformation to ANI. *Yes – let the clever shark believe that I am still fooled! It was almost true, anyhow. Had I not secretly slipped past her defences whilst her focus was divided between all four of us during her supposed healing yesterday, then she would surely have succeeded in wiping my memories along with the others!*

He finished reviewing the information sent by his people. It was not good news. Crumpling up the slips of paper, Yuri took out his lighter and incinerated them; using his empty coffee cup as an impromptu firepit. He nodded grimly across the table to Mavrikiy Yasha; relieved that the children and the devoted young nyanya were all ensconced in one of the upstairs rooms for added safety. This news was not meant for the ears of the

innocent! "We must leave here soon! If the outbreak is not fully contained by this time tomorrow morning, then Spain intends to glass the affected regions; regardless of the uninfected people trapped within them. And I am sad to say that the leaders of many other countries have committed themselves to the same barbarous decision; the United States amongst them."

Mavrikiy Yasha was furious. "Damn those confounded fools! Have they all run mad?"

Beside him, Solovei had paled. "The surviving populace will revolt! Just think of how people reacted to the news of what had been done to the infected from the Miami incident!"

"Andro's right." Oliver set down his fork; the scrambled eggs on his plate barely touched. Yuri sensed that the younger man had wholly lost his appetite at the news. He concealed such a tender heart behind all his scowling and swearing! "The death toll will be in the billions! Those stupid bastards will do C.A.K.E's fucking job for them!"

The android, Quincy, was swift to confirm this prediction. "This unit's calculations indicate a resultant non-viable genetic pool for surviving Earth dwelling humans!"

Beside Quincy, the shaven headed male handler, Daniel Moxton, scowled. "And it'll all be for nothing, too. Carson Howard won't stop until someone makes him stop. There's nothing we can do for now other than just try to survive, but that won't be enough in the long term."

"You're all too right, darling." Mavrikiy Yasha shook his head rapidly as if to clear his wits. It seemed that the lack of sleep was wearing on him, but then he always *did* take his coffee with too much milk for it to stimulate his energy levels, in Yuri's opinion. "We must track him down, and as soon as possible! But first we need to get out of Spain. I trust that the UK isn't party to the intended global purge, Yuri?"

"No." Yuri had memorised the list of nations provided to him. "The governments of the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Falkland Islands, all the South American and African countries, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Cambodia, Pakistan, Alaska, Greenland, Canada, Hawaii, the Caribbean Alliance, New Zealand, the Philippines, Nepal, and Japan have in fact decried the measure. Russia has not yet been attacked, and so my government is declining to comment."

Brendan scoffed from where he was lounging in one of the window seats. He had refused the young nyanya's kind offer of breakfast; stating that he did not trust Yuri and his people not to have poisoned the food before it had even reached the kitchen. "Aye, well. We all know what *that* means."

The young American woman sprang to her feet and ran from the room in tears before Yuri could reply. Her boyfriend – the blond Welsh sniper, Darren Jolley – followed her instantly; calling to her worriedly. "Tanya, love, wait!"

Daniel went after the pair, and Thomas grumbled something about checking on his son and grandson before also leaving the room. Yuri knew that the old man was still angry with Solovei over how they had controlled the situation at the hospital yesterday. His son Craig was even more so, and had stationed himself as guard beside the injured woman's sickbed. Yuri felt that this was just as well. Nothing good would come of fighting between themselves. *And I sense that both the Campbell men are spoiling for a fight with Solovei.*

The clever shark set down her herbal tea and addressed the room. "There is still one way for us to prevent the intended global purge from being

enacted. The process that will be required is, however, extremely dangerous for all those involved, and of dubious legality at best. I am therefore wholly certain that everyone who is currently within this villa will feel perfectly at ease in approving of it."

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Pembleton scowled at the screen as she listened to Benedict's video link report on what he and Weaver had found at the Scottish quarantine facility. She didn't appreciate being taken for a fool. Especially not by one of her own underlings! "Mr Benedict, you are hereby ordered to execute the currently active clone of Gregory Yuudai Hull as soon as is feasible! Burn the remains along with those of the infected victims. Once that's done, I want you and Weaver to bring Karen Bell back to headquarters here in London. Your backup operatives can see to mopping up."

"Yes, ma'am!" Benedict had sufficient sense not to smile at her, but Pembleton could tell that it was a close thing. "He's already halfway out the door as it is thanks to Ms Bell. I'll put a few bullets in what's left of him just to be sure." He paused then. "Forgive me for asking, but will BIINT still bring him back?"

"That remains to be seen." Pembleton was fully aware that some of her operatives had likely done the same or even worse over the years. Especially Thomas Campbell. She shook her head. "You will be informed of any outcomes relevant to you."

Gesturing curtly for the video link to be cut, the aging spymistress turned on her heel and stalked briskly away from the darkening screen. The problem of Hull could wait for now. BIINT had far more important concerns to deal with.

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Yuri did not keep himself from following the clever shark back upstairs to her assigned bedroom after everyone had dispersed from the breakfast table to prepare for the upcoming attempt to save humanity. For privacy's sake, and especially to deter Brendan from meddling, he feigned having gone in the opposite direction first. But this was his home, and as such, there were certain aspects to it which only he and his women were privy to. The spiral stairwell that was hidden behind one of the bookcases in his study was one of them. It emerged inside a walk-in closet used for storing bed linen. Conveniently, this closet was directly opposite the guest bedroom that Yuri intended to visit.

He did not trouble himself with knocking before entering the room. As he had anticipated, Laine was waiting for him when he arrived. He nodded politely to her as he closed the door and locked it. "I think perhaps that you already know why it is that I have come here, yes?"

She nodded. "You know what I have done to the others. Somehow, you were able to prevent me from erasing your memory along with theirs. I do not yet know how. Perhaps you will enlighten me."

Yuri shrugged. "Eh, I was luckier than you this time, that is all."

The clever shark tilted her head slightly to the left as she contemplated his words. "You are attempting to flirt with me. I am most uncertain as to why you would believe that to be wise."

He grinned wolfishly at her. "Ah, but that is the very part of the rug which is tripping you! Sometimes – indeed, very often – I do not bother to concern myself with what is wise. I find that taking such an approach helps to keep my opponents off balance."

"I can assure you, Mr Kuznetsov, that I am perfectly balanced in all ways." Laine turned her back to him and picked up her ANI issued sidearm

with her right hand from atop the dressing table. It was a plasma-based energy pistol, Yuri noted; sleek and full of hidden fire, just like its wielder. "And I have already bested you once. I can do so again."

Yuri ignored the implied threat. "You do not wish to permit any of the others to deal with your agent. That is why you erased what they knew once Oliver informed you of it. But I do not believe that he told you everything."

She did not turn around. "And why is that?"

"Because I did not tell him or Mavrikiy Yasha and Solovei the whole of the story!" Yuri took a single step forward as he spoke. Then, when nothing happened, he took a second one. "All three of them knew the truth of what was done to Oliver inside that GETEC facility, and of what Solovei had endured. They knew also that your agent was secretly a memory worker. But that is all."

Laine became even more still. "You are implying that there is something else to know."

Yuri chuckled softly. "I can feel you scratching at my psionic defences! You will not get the answer that way, clever shark!" He took two more steps towards her before continuing. "But I believe that you already know this, yes?"

"Perhaps." She tightened her hold on the pistol; holding it angled sideways across in front of herself. "I do not enjoy violence, Mr Kuznetsov."

"I had not supposed that you did." Yuri gazed appreciatively at the pyrotemporal. He was standing close enough to her now that he could, if he so chose, reach out his arms and clasp hold of her shoulders. "Although, my guards would undoubtedly take a different view."

Her voice did not waver. "They did their jobs. I did mine. That is all."

He nodded; knowing that she could sense his acceptance of her statement as simple fact without turning around. "It is not wrong to be efficient, little firebird. And it does not mean that you enjoy what you must do."

There was a gnawing silence between them now. Laine seemed disinclined to break it. Instead, she stared down at the pistol for several long minutes. Finally, she spoke. "I believe that it may be prudent for you to tell me the rest of the story now. Agent Hull is my responsibility. If he is truly a threat to himself or to others, then it is important that I am made aware of that, and provided with all pertinent data relating to the matter."

"Very well then. Since you have now asked so very politely, I will tell it all to you!" Yuri kept his voice light, as was his usual custom. His face, however, became sombre. What he had to tell her next was not suited to levity. "I have seen inside his head; you know this. One of the secrets which I discovered there relates to *you*, my dear. Your agent, of whom you are so very protective, made a copy of your consciousness without your knowledge."

"When?" The question was little more than a breath. "When do you claim that he did this? And what was his motivation for it?"

Yuri described the memory carefully. "You were unconscious when it happened. You had been drugged, and then very badly wounded by a surgical robot. It had sliced open your femoral artery. Your agent saved your life." He paused; not liking to admit the next sentence. "That was why he made the copy. In case you died."

Laine nodded slightly. "I know which incident you are speaking of. But I was not aware that Agent Hull had made any such copy. It is curious that he has never mentioned it to me."

"I would say that it is *sinister*." Yuri curled his lip at what he had discovered on the subject. "Not at

first, to be fair. But afterwards; when he did not tell you or ANI of having made the copy. And even more so once he began to consider using it for his own secret pleasure by placing it within an adaptable sexual entertainment robot which he could then program to look and sound like you whilst he tortured it into submission. The latter act became a recurring fantasy of his. So far, he has not had the opportunity to act upon it."

"I sense that you are not lying." Her breath did not hitch as she inhaled. "And this copy – Agent Hull did not suggest using it to restore me when he believed me to have amnesia?"

"He did not." Yuri kept his psionic defences lowered enough for her to confirm this fact. "He considered doing so, but then he decided that all other options should be exhausted first."

"I see." Laine's voice remained calm. "I had not thought him to be so very controlled by his baser impulses. It is disappointing. As are your other revelations concerning his behaviour."

Yuri took one final step forward. There were only inches between them now. "I understand how this must wound you. You believed him to be a decent man. Sadly, that was not the case. But now it is."

Laine turned abruptly to face him; the muzzle of her pistol pressing against his centre of mass. Her psionic powers were stirring; her pale eyes closer to silver than grey now. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing violent." Yuri stared down at her; fascinated by how her long red hair had now begun to float about her head. "And nothing particularly dangerous either."

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "Should I presume that it was legal?"

He raised his hands slowly; framing her face between them, but not touching her. Not yet. Not without her permission. "That would depend on which nation's laws you are going by! Mine, for example, is prepared to grant me a great deal of leeway in most things."

"I am not going to ask you this again, Mr Kuznetsov." Laine tightened her finger against the trigger of her pistol but did not fire. "What *precisely* did you do to Agent Hull?"

Yuri smiled at her. "I used my memory working to instil in him a healthy conscience! This is good, yes?"

She lowered the pistol as suddenly as she had aimed it. "It is certainly more than can be said of you, at least. Or of me."

"I do not believe that this is such a very bad thing." Yuri briefly imagined closing his hands gently around her face, and entangling his mind with hers. He did not do so. "Ruthlessness has its place in things too, little firebird."

"As does consistency." The pistol thudded softly against the carpeting where Laine had dropped it. Her right hand went to Yuri's tie instead; her fingertips tracing the shape of the meticulously tied knot in the crisp grey silk. "Kindly select a metaphorical appellation and adhere to it."

"I will have to think very carefully on that." Yuri inhaled slowly; grounding himself as he reluctantly lowered his hands to his sides. "If I do not leave now, then I will have to fuck you."

Laine inclined her head. "Our respective agencies and peers are most unlikely to approve of such an open act of fraternisation with the enemy." She closed her right hand around his tie; burning it away to nothing but a fine cloud of ice-cold ashes. "I find that I am wholly untroubled by that fact."

Chapter Eleven – Safety Is Paramount

Miami was doomed, Waverly realised dully. He stared down through the floor to ceiling window of his tenth-floor office at the roiling mass of erstwhile people far below. His APSUs hadn't been able to stop the infected victims this time. Their built-in energy weapons had been useless; even on the very highest settings. All that the APSUs had been able to do was evacuate any uninfected survivors to safety; blocking the crazed attackers from reaching them as they fled for their lives. Most of the adults hadn't made it. When forced to choose, the APSUs had followed their core programming and prioritised the safety of those under eighteen. *Something tells me that the shareholders won't be happy about that!*

Waverly grimaced at the latter thought. Money. Fame. Popularity. Influence. Fucking *optics*. As if any of it mattered now! Billionaire or not, he'd burn right along with everybody else who was trapped in the city once the glassing began. So would Zahn, and their surviving staff, and all the hapless survivors who'd taken shelter here at Waverly Industries Miami. *At least the local authorities deigned to announce it ahead of it happening. That gave people a chance to say goodbye to their loved ones. Well – the ones that aren't trying to eat them alive, anyhow.*

He wondered idly if his death would lead to his older brother regaining the title of Mars' richest man. Chances were that it wouldn't be that simple. There were at least a dozen other successful mining families back on the Red Planet nowadays. Quite a few shipping magnates, too, now that he thought about it properly. *And that's assuming that C.A.K.E doesn't strike there next.*

Zahn padded into the office then. He was carrying two glasses and a large bottle of whisky that was usually deemed as being far too old and valuable for anyone to drink it. "Figured we might as well open this now, Bob."

"Thanks, Az." Waverly accepted the empty glass that was handed to him. He sighed as he watched the amber liquid flow into it. "At least it's going to be quick, I suppose. Do you suppose Hull managed to get Tessa and the others clear of Barcelona before it locked down?"

Zahn sipped his drink; grimacing at the taste. "Ugh! I hope he did. He has a stealth jet, right?"

"Yeah." Waverly sniffed gingerly at his drink. "Wow. This is…something. Think I'll pass." He poured the contents of his glass into the nearest plant pot. "Chances are that ANI gave him the heads up in time to leave; like they did with all their agents here in Miami. And their next of kin."

"Feels like double standards to me, Bob." Zahn followed Waverly's example and dumped the rest of his drink into the soil around an unfortunate cactus. "Could have gotten other people out too. The disease doesn't incubate long enough for anybody to act as a carrier!"

"I know, Az. But at least it means that Tessa will be safe." Waverly rubbed tiredly at his head. "I hope Susan and Ellie are doing okay."

Zahn joined him at the window. "Alaska hadn't been hit by the time that the media blackout

started. Maybe it still hasn't been. I mean, let's be real, Bob: it's not as if there's much up there for C.A.K.E to target."

"They've got the spaceport in New Anchorage." Waverly thought sadly of his last conversation with Kennedy. "It doubles up as their main airport. And they've got a bunch of minerals, too. That's partly what led to them splitting from the USA and starting their own country. Does C.A.K.E go after minerals?"

"Probably, yeah." Zahn flicked his tail. "We can still try and make a run for it in the helicopter, you know. See if we can outfly the military assholes. We might just pull it off."

Waverly shrugged. He'd refused the exact same suggestion earlier; not wanting to abandon those who'd sought sanctuary in his building. But that had been before the announcement about the impending purge. His sense of duty to his fellow man had dipped since then. "Might as well try."

A sudden flare of silver light rippled across the Miami skyline then. The glass in the window rattled ominously, and then cracked. Both Martians sprang backwards instinctively, and ducked for cover behind Waverly's desk; thinking that the purge had started early. The subsequent abrupt spike in

temperature, combined with the crackling of the air all around them, only served to reinforce that theory. Crouching there hopelessly, they gripped one another's hand in a last gesture of friendship, and awaited oblivion.

It didn't arrive. After a few minutes of nothing else happening had passed, Waverly let go of his best friend's hand and gingerly got to his feet again. Zahn followed his example. They stared out of the window at the still unobliterated skyline. There was a distinct lack of burning buildings; aside from those which had already been on fire. The crack in the window meant that they could also hear what was going on outside. And, for the first time since the outbreak had begun, nobody was screaming.

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Evan pulled his sobbing daughter in close for what he knew was going to be their final hug. Behind them, at the far side of the holding facility's flat roof, Dylan and Ryan were sharing a hip flask. Evan didn't know which of them had smuggled it into work the day before. It hardly mattered now. ANI's regulations belonged to a different lifetime; one wherein he wasn't preparing to commit murder suicide so as to spare Kassandra and his other

companions from being eaten alive by the crazed mob of infected people that was slowly but steadily breaking through the door up onto the roof. *We don't have enough ammo left to take them down. But at least the four of us will get to go out clean.*

He bent his head and kissed the top of his only child's head; deeply regretting all the times when he'd chosen to prioritise his career over spending time with his family. Then he reluctantly drew his sidearm, and flicked off the safety. "I love you, pumpkin. Don't be scared."

An instant before he could squeeze the trigger, the air crackled, and then grew intensely hot; like the temperatures within an active blast furnace. A weird silver light flickered across the skyline. Then, just as suddenly, the air returned to its normal temperature. Still hot, and dry, but liveable again. *What just happened? And why has that mob on the stairs gone so quiet?*

Stepping away a little from Kassandra, Evan turned around and stared at the now splintered open door. There was a charred human corpse just in front of it. Two dead bodies in the same condition lay immediately within the doorway. Edging closer warily, Evan could see yet more remains strewn

behind them; enough of them that the stairwell was blocked. Bewildered, he turned back to his companions. "Uh – I think maybe we're gonna be okay after all!"

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The news wouldn't break for some time yet, but the strange phenomena observed in Miami and Christchurch had also instantaneously occurred at multiple other locations around the globe. Witnesses all described a sudden intense flare of heat, and a strange silver light that none of them could quite see. In each such instance, every infected person present was reduced to a human shaped lump of carbon; the biohazard boiled away along with their bodily fluids. There would be a lot of questions asked, but ultimately, the eleventh-hour miracle would officially be deemed to have been some sort of biological kill switch built into the disease itself. Whether C.A.K.E had feared losing control of the situation, or someone had simply managed to sabotage their plan, would forever remain a mystery to all but those who had truly been responsible.

Post mission, the four members of the latter group who had been most actively involved in the

effort had just returned to Yuri's villa; seemingly only minutes after having left it. Those who had seen them depart knew better, and stood by grimly; medical gear at the ready. There was no telling yet what the side effects of repeatedly looping through time might have had on the quartet. The exterior of the ERA that they had used for transport was glowing white hot from the amount of raw pyrotemporal energy that it had been exposed to. By the time that its rear ramp had finished lowering, the surface immediately underneath the aircraft was badly cracked and worn; as if far older than the rest of the landing pad.

Volker, who was the first of the four to emerge from the ERA, frowned when she saw the damage. "I do not believe that it would be safe or wise for anyone else to touch any part of this aircraft or its passengers until the excess pyrotemporal energies have fully dispersed."

Beside her, Spence, their hair now longer than when they had departed as pilot for the mission, pulled out a roll of vivid yellow tape from somewhere about their person. They stared at it for a moment, and then dropped it; toppling forwards towards the ground without a word.

Not giving a damn for his own safety, Leister sprang forward and caught Spence as they fell. He lowered them gently to the ground, and then checked their pulse. "Alive, at least, but utterly exhausted! How are Brendan and Quincy doing?

Quincy was already standing on the landing pad; having exited via the side ramp instead. He had been responsible for calculating their route; his subroutines capable of determining precisely where and when the party needed to intervene. Like the ERA, he too caused the surface underneath him to age rapidly. "This unit is fully functional, and has successfully completed all assigned tasks! Recent advisory for presence of dangerous energy levels confirmed as accurate!"

There was no sign of Clacher yet. Ignoring Volker's warning, Dobos and Jolley boarded the aircraft together in search of him. They found him lying unconscious only a few steps away from where he had been seated during the desperate flight through space and time. His masking abilities had kept the ERA and its occupants from being detected, but using them without stopping for what equated to two solid months in real time had wholly exhausted him. Picking him up between them,

Dobos and Jolley carried him bodily off the ERA and straight over to where Moxton and Tanya were waiting.

Volker shook her head disapprovingly at the collective display of risk taking. "I will take solace in the robot having adhered to my advice."

"Safety is paramount to this unit, female sibling unit!" Quincy waved at her cheerily. "This unit will now power down until energy levels have lowered to within acceptable parameters!"

A firm hand closed on Volker's right shoulder. Turning, she saw that Yuri had walked up behind her unnoticed. "Mr Kuznetsov, I must strongly advise against engaging in any unnecessary physical contact with…!"

Yuri maintained the kiss for well over a minute. Then he swept Volker up into his arms and carried her away from the ERA. "We are going back to bed for at least a day, my firebird! My people will see to hosing down the ERA and standing watch over the robot until he has reactivated himself. And do not worry – the nyanya is taking very good care of all the children, your son included!"

Volker blinked at him. "Why are you not concerned for your personal safety?"

The memory worker laughed uproariously. "Ha! What is a little pyrotemporal energy exposure compared to the joint wrath of your ex-boyfriend and his lover now that I have so dramatically revealed our romantic involvement with one another? I am already a dead man! Why should I not enjoy my final hours of life, eh?"

"I feel it appropriate to remind you that the option not to reveal our personal involvement with one another *did* exist." Volker's tone of voice was unreadable. "Moreover, surely any such enjoyment should be wholly mutual?"

Some distance away, Spence had regained consciousness. They grimaced slightly as Leister helped them to sit up. "Ugh! I am *never* saving the world via bloody time travel ever again!"

Leister rubbed their back soothingly. "I am immensely, and selfishly, relieved to hear you say that, darling! But I really *must* ask – where the deuce had you been keeping that tape?"

At the opposite end of the landing area, Clacher had also opened his eyes. He was still lying flat on his back, but he was cognisant enough to assure those tending to him that he wasn't dead yet. "Sure, they wouldn't have let me in even if I

was! Neither side wants me…too much…too much bloody bother for them…!"

Dobos stroked the Irish operative's brow. "Don't even fucking joke about that, Brendan! You scared the absolute shit of me just now!"

Behind Dobos' back, Moxton exchanged a worried glance with Jolley and Tanya. Then, having decided that the best option was to get it over and done with, he tapped Dobos on the shoulder. "Oliver – you saw what just happened with Laine and Yuri, right?"

Clacher blinked in confusion. "What?"

"It's not important, love." Dobos glowered at Moxton, and then returned his full attention to Clacher. "Laine and I broke up nearly thirteen years ago. We've both moved on. Just because I have a son with her doesn't mean that I want any fucking say in her personal life. If you ask her, she'll say the same thing. But then you'll have to put up with that bastard Kuznetsov crowing over it at you in person. Up to you if you want that."

Moxton, Jolley, and Tanya all visibly relaxed at his words, and busied themselves with setting up a nutrient drip for Clacher. Jolley gave Dobos an approving thumbs up. "Good on you, mate!"

Clacher feebly tried to sit up; only to immediately slump back down into Dobos' arms. "Seriously – what? Are you lot saying what it bloody *sounds* like you're fucking saying?"

Tanya inserted the catheter tube into the back of his left hand with practised ease. She taped it securely into place as she replied. "It's like the line in that old movie with all the dinosaurs, I guess. Love just kind of finds a way!"

***

Spence finally managed to get out of bed a little before noon on Monday 19TH August. After showering with Leister's assistance on still unsteady legs, the non-gender pulled on their underwear, followed by a pair of practical black twill trousers and a thin black cotton tank top. The six-inch-high stiletto heeled scarlet leather sandals that they selected from the depths of their holiday luggage were seemingly wholly incongruous to the rest of their outfit; the flimsy looking straps overladen with glitter and beads. Leister, who had watched as Spence loaded poison tipped darts into the heels of the shoes in question, *almost* pitied any adult human being who was foolish enough to ridicule them. *But only almost.*

He accompanied his lover as far as the side of Yuri's swimming pool, where he helped them to get comfy on one of the sun loungers. "I'll go and fetch you a cold drink now, darling. Would you like anything to eat along with it?"

Spence nodded tiredly; adjusting their sunglasses. "I could absolutely *murder* a cheese and pickle sandwich or six, old swan."

Leister beamed at them. "One platter of doomed victims coming up, darling!"

The pool was just out of sight and sound of the kitchen. As Leister returned with the promised food and drink, he saw that Spence was no longer alone. The younger Mr Campbell stood next to their sun lounger; looming over the non-gender in an obviously deliberate fashion as he accosted them. "You have some bloody nerve, Spence! What gave you the right to force me to hurt Zoe like that?"

Leister sighed. He turned and nodded politely to one of Yuri's men; who had clearly been about to approach the two to intervene. "I think we're going to need a medical kit out here, darling."

The guard nodded. "Any specific items, sir?"

"Oh, just the usual, thank you." Leister paused at the sound of a sharp yelp of pain from Campbell,

followed by a loud splash. "And bring a broad spectrum antivenom, too, please."

He made his way back over to Spence, who still hadn't moved from the sun lounger. "Here you are, darling! Iced gin and tonic with a slice of lime, and a half dozen sacrificial sandwiches."

"Thank you, Cob." Spence sat up gingerly; adjusting the back of the sun lounger to accommodate their new position. "Do you mind fishing that ungrateful prat out before he drowns? I'd hate to put Mr Kuznetsov to any unnecessary inconvenience on our sake, and he *did* say that the pool had only just been cleaned."

"Certainly, darling!" Leister toed off his own sandals and removed his jacket and tie. "I'll just be a few minutes. Enjoy your brunch!"

He dove into the pool; savouring the coldness of the water as he made his way over to where Campbell was floundering dazedly in the middle. Hooking his right arm around the fellow, he towed him back over to the side of the pool, and boosted him clear of the and onto the baking hot tiles. The guard was already sprinting over to them with the requested medical supplies; Moxton and Tanya following close behind him.

Leister exited the pool and nodded coldly to Campbell, who was by now shivering and gasping. "Think yourself lucky that it's not a lethal dose! Nightingale's actions that day saved your life, and Zoe's too. The infected victims overran the hospital less than twenty minutes after we'd evacuated you. Perhaps you ought to reflect on that."

He didn't bother explaining how Spence, Clacher, and Quincy had all insisted that Volker manipulate time to enable those on the ERA to return to the doomed hospital early enough to evacuate everyone else from it as well. He knew that the time travellers didn't want to claim any responsibility for the three hundred and fifty-four bemused staff and patients who had awoken safe and sound on the flat rooftops of four adjacent buildings with no idea how they had gotten there. Or for any of the other seeming miracles worldwide which had saved countless innocent lives; in addition to those who would have died during the proposed global purge. And Leister had no intention of ever betraying Spence's trust. *Especially not to the callous bastard who broke their heart!*

Chapter Twelve – Very Best Of Dogs

Zima arrived home at his Alaskan property a little before noon on Wednesday 21ST August. He parked his car in the driveway, switched off the engine, and sighed tiredly. Today, he reflected, had been painfully long; with the doctors and the veterinarians and their assorted checks on their respective patients before finally releasing them. The latest reports from his underlings had been of little comfort. Thanks to the damage from C.A.K.E's attack, his clinic here at Port Pye would have to remain closed for the next month whilst it was repaired. The subsequent delays to his clientele's plans would cause a severe loss of income. *But I am still alive, thanks to Captain Kennedy. I hope that Yuri has seen to refunding her money on my behalf.*

Exiting the vehicle, Zima closed the driver's door, and opened the one behind it. Grisha looked up at him from where he lay stretched across the back seats of the car. The valiant dog's torso was still heavily bandaged from where the by then already mortally wounded Carson Howard had shot him twice at point blank range during the struggle. There was a green plastic cone fitted to his collar. He wagged his tail contentedly and yawned. Zima smiled and scratched him behind his ears. "Good dog, Grisha. Very best of dogs."

Assisting the still recuperating animal out of the car, Zima nudged the door closed with his right hip, and walked up to the front door of his house without bothering to care if anyone might steal his vehicle from the driveway whilst it was unlocked. The most valuable thing that had been inside it was now padding safely at his heels anyhow. *It is a pity that most of our house guests will refuse to keep quiet during our recovery! I must hope that Yuri acquires a new property very soon. Then at least I will only have one small child's foolishness to concern myself with.*

Resigning himself to whatever fresh chaos was awaiting he and Grisha indoors, Zima leaned

forwards, and stared balefully into his front door's biometric scanner; muttering the required security code as he did so. The door unlocked for him silently; its automated hinges causing it to swing inwards to permit him entrance. The shrieking of young children immediately filled his ears; combined with the noise from a very loud cartoon that was playing on the television in the main sitting room. Zima scowled. *It is just as I had feared that it would be. My home is in chaos.*

A mob of toddlers and very young children thundered past him then; headed from the room wherein Zima's television was playing so very loudly, and on towards his normally pristinely kept dining room. The smell of freshly cooked pizza wafted into the front hall from that direction. The Russian man suspected that his staff were not going to be pleased with the results, but that was what he employed them for. *I will go upstairs to my study with poor Grisha; so that he may rest whilst I pour myself a drink.*

Alas, it appeared that his very sensible plan was to be foiled before it could even be begun. A small dark-haired boy collided with Zima's right leg just as he finally determined the means of opening the

safety gate that was currently in place at the base of the stairs. Zima turned his head and scowled down at the child; who was now hugging the leg that he had all but bounced off a moment ago. Recognising the boy, he spoke to him in English. "I am busy now, Visha. Why are you not playing with the other children? Where is your mother?"

Visha, who had once been named Fisher, but who was adapting to his new name very well indeed, tilted his head back and smiled up at Zima. Then he began to yell at the top of his lungs. "Mommy! Big doggy home now!"

Zima sighed. "I do not know whether to be more annoyed by your needless shouting, or by your continuing lack of ability to speak any Russian. At least the latter is something that I may be confident that you will grow out of." He shook his leg slightly; hoping that the toddler would take the hint. "Let go of me, Visha. I must go upstairs now, and take Grisha along with me; so that he does not grow annoyed by all this needless clamouring."

His dog, who had continued to stand calmly at his side during this speech, abruptly betrayed him then; turning his great shaggy head towards Visha and unhelpfully licking the boy's face. The toddler

shrieked with joy. Releasing his death grip on Zima's leg, he made to fling his chubby arms around Grisha's neck. Mercifully for all involved, this action was stymied by the plastic cone; giving Zima sufficient time to scoop the boy up into his arms before he could do anything else to endanger himself. *Why must this child always be so very foolish?*

Grisha took full advantage of his great height to lick Visha's inexplicably bare feet. The resultant combination of happy giggling and squirming was almost unbearable for Zima; whose injuries, according to his assorted doctors' many varied and doleful warnings, were only almost fully healed. He glowered sternly down at his dog; speaking to the animal in Russian as he did so. "What is this nonsensical new behaviour of yours about, eh? Do you seek to encourage this child in pestering us both to death? Because that is what you are doing by licking him!"

Viktoriya finally deigned to appear then; hurrying over to Zima and her son with a relieved looking smile on her face. "Zima! You're home! Are you okay? I called the hospital to ask, but they wouldn't tell me anything!"

Zima nodded curtly to her. "I am well, thank you, Vikusha." He kissed her cheek, and then deposited her son in her arms; despite the child's inevitable whining. "Teach the boy that he is not to bother Grisha again. It is very dangerous, and it irks me."

With that, he opened the safety gate, and strode off upstairs before Viktoriya could reply. Grisha padded obediently at his heels as usual, but Zima caught him peering up wistfully back at Visha and wagging his tail as they went. It was a peculiar change in the dog's habits, and Zima was most displeased by it. *Clearly, the veterinarians who treated him for the wounds which he sustained are to blame for all this! Whatever medications that they have given him for his wounds have made him soft, and foolish! It will resolve itself, I am sure, as all things eventually do.*

***

Kennedy kept her left arm wrapped snugly around Ellie as she made her way through the perpetually crowded main ground floor terminal of NACASTH. Her duffel bag bumped against her right side; heavy and awkward thanks to the portable weapons safe housing her knife and her plasma pistol. The handle of the empty travel pod dug into

the palm of her right hand. She'd placed her daughter into her sling for now; intending to only swap back to using her travel pod once she reached the departure lounge for the spaceport. That was three floors up from her current location. Kennedy was fervently hoping that nobody would recognise her as Captain Mars between here and there. *Or ideally anywhere ever again!*

It had been a long but satisfyingly uneventful week here in Alaska. After departing from Zima's clinic – in a real nice hover cab that the Russians had paid for – Kennedy had booked a room at a small hotel in New Anchorage. She'd spent the time since then sightseeing; Ellie wrapped snugly in her sling whilst they explored the city. At some point, Ellie had apparently taken this as a sign from the cosmos that travel pods were no longer to be deemed as acceptable by her. The baby had expressed her opinion loudly and unceasingly for the entirety of today's forty-minute cab journey from the hotel to NACASTH; hence Kennedy's decision to switch back to using the sling again for as long as was humanly possible. *Woods is gonna laugh his ass off when he hears about me giving ground to a literal infant!*

A smartly dressed white man with spiky blond hair stepped aside for her as she approached the bank of elevators. He patted her right arm; smiling genially as he did so. "Our mutual friend Zima has assigned me to bring you this, captain!"

Kennedy blinked in some surprise as she hesitantly accepted the proffered envelope with her left hand. "Uh, thanks. But what is it?"

"A very nice card, containing a receipt showing that his clinic has given you all your money back!" The Russian winked at her. "Perhaps think of it as payment for services rendered, eh? On which subject, thank you for saving his life. I too am much obliged to you for having done so. My name is Yuri. If there is ever a time when I may be of service to you in return, then my number is printed just underneath the barcode on the back of the card."

Ellie chose that moment to drop her rattle. By the time that Kennedy straightened up again after retrieving it, the blond man was gone. Shaking her head in bemusement at his dramatic exit, Kennedy went on her way. *Eh, probably just another spy!*

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Volker had chosen to travel back to the United States along with Agent Hull and his family; the

better to assess whether Yuri's memory working had truly changed her agent's personality, and if so, how far. Another of her concerns regarded the permanency of the solution. Or the lack thereof. *An abrupt return to his original self could prove dangerous for him and for others. Especially given his most recent personal loss.*

The ANI field office in Barcelona had been overrun on Tuesday night during the outbreak. Senior Agent Lanza had survived by the simple means of having been at home in bed with his husband when it happened. Those agents who had been working the swing shift had been far less fortunate; as had the mortuary staff on duty that night. Only two of the latter people were still alive, and they had had no better choice than to burn down the building behind them as they fled. The flames had killed the infected, but they had also destroyed all the remains in the morgue. *Including the flash cloned bodies which were supposedly Agent Hull's fiancée and son.*

Their group had been provided with a private waiting area on the first floor of NACASTH whilst Agent Hull's jet was refuelled. It was a small room, with plain white walls, and reasonably comfortable

bench style seating. The wall opposite the door was comprised entirely of reinforced safety glass; providing the occupants with an excellent view of the runway area outside. Volker was ignoring the fact that she had observed Yuri exiting a familiar looking ERA only fifteen minutes earlier. The Russian was most likely merely on his way to rejoin his family here in Alaska. Even if he was not, Volker was not inclined to trouble herself with doing the job of Alaskan Intelligence. *It is bothersome enough that the ongoing international quarantine protocols means we must take such a convoluted route back to Miami. Becoming unnecessarily embroiled in another nation's affairs would only delay us.*

Agent Hull spoke to her then; distracting her from her train of thought. "I thought you should know that I've been in talks for the past couple of days with Children's Services about a couple of things, ma'am. For one, Robert Waverly's petitioned to have Tessa's adoption overturned and to have full parental rights granted to him instead of me. He's passed all the required checks, which is good. And Susan's given him a glowing character reference, too. So at least he's not just relying on being the popular billionaire hero of the masses."

Volker inclined her head. "What do you intend to do about the matter, Agent Hull?"

Her agent thinned his lips and exhaled slowly; the air hissing between his closed teeth. He rocked Rayne's travel pod almost absently with his foot as he replied. "I won't deny that I thought about fighting it at first. But…well…it just didn't *feel* right, ma'am. Not for Tessa. I reported how she'd been neglected because it was the right thing to do at the time. I took her in and adopted her for the same reason; and because I care about her. Now, though? Now she needs something that I don't think I'm equipped to provide her with."

Volker glanced across to where the young Martian girl in question was seated between Callista and Nadimiche at the opposite side of the room. None of the three appeared cognisant of the discussion; the older two girls engrossed in whatever was on their phones. Tessa herself was reading on her tablet. She was wearing noise cancelling headphones; the sound levels at the busy airport having proven too much for her. From what Volker could sense passively, whilst Tessa remained unattached to her current adoptive family, she was now willing to at least tolerate living amongst them.

That is considerable progress indeed, albeit that much of it is likely due to her medication.

Agent Hull spoke again. "She deserves to have access to her cultural heritage, ma'am. Both aspects of it – Martian and Jewish. But she'll never be able to fully embrace either of those things while she lives here on Earth. Especially not her faith. With the laws on religious observance, she'd be forced to keep it a secret her entire life. I really don't think that she'd cope with that restriction."

"Your concern for her is commendable, Agent Hull." Volker returned her focus to him; sensing no deception. "Am I to presume that you intend to surrender custody of her to Mr Waverly?"

"Yeah." He nodded; his outward expression and his inward emotions matching perfectly in their blending of sadness and relief. "In fact, I've already done it. Tessa doesn't know yet, because I didn't want to risk her getting worked up over it, but Waverly's meeting us here. There'll be a social worker with him to oversee the handover. I'm sorry for not informing you about it any sooner, ma'am."

There truly was no attempt at deception here, Volker determined. She nodded her understanding. "I am untroubled by the remiss, Agent Hull. And I

believe that your chosen course of action is indeed most likely what will be in the child's best interests."

"Thanks, ma'am. I needed to hear that." Agent Hull smiled wanly as he continued. "The other thing's bittersweet too, but for different reasons. I've been approved to adopt a kid from an orphanage back in Barcelona. I'm scheduled to fly back there and collect him ten days from now."

Volker frowned. "I had believed the process of adoption to be considerably slower, Agent Hull. Particularly internationally."

Her agent shrugged. "It usually is, yeah. But Children's Services agreed to fast track things. They're pretty much desperate to find placements right now; given how many newly orphaned kids there are after the global outbreak. Anyway, I'd better go explain things to Tessa. Excuse me."

Volker observed the subsequent discussion silently; disinterested in risking being drawn into the matter. She wondered if memory working might be put to work in forcibly improving the morality of other people too. Recent events had shown that certain world leaders could vastly benefit from such an intervention. The potential uses of the talent were likely endless. Especially if the psionic involved

could perform the necessary alterations remotely. *I do not believe that Yuri himself can extend his power beyond touching range. Perhaps that is fortunate; given his allegiance.*

The handover occurred without incident, other than the usual tiresome emotional outpourings from those involved in it. Volker increased her mental defences accordingly; successfully blocking out the roaring tide of other people's thoughts and feelings. She was greatly pleased when the matter concluded, and Tessa's social worker departed with all the relevant paperwork that was required by his department. Tessa, Mr Waverly, his felinoid business partner Mr Zahn, and the APSU which apparently now housed the program of Tessa's previous APSU, were swift to do likewise; Waverly clasping Tessa's hand as she all but skipped alongside him. Mr Zahn was carrying her things. Predictably, given their respective personalities, Callista and Nadimiche insisted on accompanying the group up to the spaceport area of NACASTH so that they could make further goodbyes.

Agent Hull seated himself next to Volker again, and focused his attention on Rayne whilst they waited for the older two girls to return. His surface

thoughts were enough to dissuade Volker from delving further. *It is likely best that I do not attempt to engage in verbal dialogue with him either at present. He is experiencing considerable levels of emotional and mental discomfiture over the situation, and will need time to process all of that.*

Chapter Thirteen – Little Red Stars

For security reasons, the ground floor elevators here at NACASTH only went up to the first floor. Exiting on that level, Kennedy headed towards the food court. She was early. There was still another three hours left to go before boarding would start for the civilian passenger transport vessel that she and Ellie were taking back to Mars. Eating lunch was as good a way to spend the time as anything else. *Whatever's cooking at that little seafood kiosk over there smells damn good! And besides, the food courts up on the next two levels didn't look like they were real child friendly when we passed them on our way down last week.*

Ellie gummed enthusiastically at the rattle that was now secured to her left wrist. Kennedy had

made sure to clean it thoroughly before giving it back to her. She didn't want to have to keep on doing so every ten to fifteen steps. Given that her daughter's enjoyment of the rattle far outweighed her manual dexterity, using the baby safe lanyard that Waverly had supplied with it made a whole lot of sense. *I'll keep the holographic stuff that he built into it switched off until we're in our cabin. Never know who around you might have epilepsy or such!*

She was only twenty feet from the food court when she heard Waverly's voice off to her right. He was calling her name. "Susan! Susan, over here!"

Kennedy grimaced as he hurried over to her. "I ain't got anything else left to say to you, Waverly."

Her erstwhile friend stopped in his tracks. He looked hurt by her reaction. "I…I'm sorry, Susan. I'm just happy to see that you two are both okay, that's all. And I wanted to thank you for the character reference, too. It helped a lot. I've got full parental custody of Tessa; *officially* this time."

"That's nice." Kennedy nodded pointedly at the food court. "I'm just trying to grab some lunch here before we need to go upstairs and board."

Waverly brightened. "Hey, I can still take the two of you back home to Deimos Base if you'd like?"

"No, I *don't* like." Kennedy glared at him. "And to judge by the look on his face right now, I think your business partner wants you to get your ass back over to those elevators. Congratulations on winning your case. I *sincerely* hope that you don't screw things up this time." She paused; feeling a little sorry for him. "And for what it's worth, I reckon she's better off with you."

Waverly opened his mouth to reply, and then closed it again; as if maybe he'd lost his nerve. That was fine with Kennedy. Not wanting to talk to him any further, she started walking again; her gaze fixed on the seafood kiosk. The sideways scrolling holographic menu playing above it listed deep fried calamari and shrimp with sweet chilli sauce and a choice of side amongst its available dishes. It was one of Kennedy's favourite meals, and all but perennially unavailable on Mars. *And they've got plantain fritters, too; served with coconut and lime ice cream! Adds up to a heck of a lot of calories all in, though. Aw, screw it – I'm gonna go ahead and spoil myself a little for once!*

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Hull scrambled to his feet immediately when he spotted Kennedy walking past the glass door of his

family's assigned waiting area. He snatched up Rayne's travel pod and hurried out to try and speak to her, but the crowd slowed him down. By the time that he finally caught up, Kennedy was standing in line at a seafood kiosk in the food court. This close, Hull realised that what he'd mistaken for another bag was a baby in a sling. He hesitated at the sight; unsure of what to say. "Susan?"

Kennedy turned and looked at him. She glared as he walked closer. "Leave us alone, you asshole, or I'll report you to security for stalking!"

Volker joined them before Hull could reply. "I sense that it would be best if you withdraw from this interaction immediately, Agent Hull. I do not believe that Captain Kennedy…!"

A sudden outbreak of terrified screaming from somewhere in the crowd interrupted Volker before she could finish her statement. All three of them turned to look at what was happening; Hull and Volker drawing their ANI issued sidearms as they did so. Kennedy stepped backwards a little, and shielded the baby with her arms as best as she could. The screaming didn't stop, and there were more people joining in every moment. Then the building's emergency alarms began to sound.

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Callista wasn't sure if it had been her or Nadimiche who'd instigated things between the two of them. She doubted if it mattered all that much. They'd done what they'd done, that first night in Spain; coiled up together in Nadimiche's hotel room bed. And then they'd done the very same thing every night right up until they left Spain; taking turns sneaking into each other's rooms. All without ever being caught, which was lucky. *Greg's gonna be so mad at us if he ever finds out! Especially me. My contract says I ain't supposed to fool around with anybody but him.*

She watched enviously as Tessa entered the exterior airlock of the *Sandsprite* along with her APSU and Mr Zahn. The idea of leaving Earth captivated her. Even if it *would* mean living on Mars, and eking out an existence there however she could manage to. At least she'd be free there! Indentureship contracts were automatically nullified if the subject of them became a Martian citizen, as the rules for colonists included a full pardon for all previous crimes in exchange for surrendering your Earth citizenship. *I wouldn't mind never coming back here. The only person I'd miss is Nadimiche,*

and I think I'd probably get over that okay. And maybe she'd want to go with me anyway, or even just come and visit sometimes.

Nadimiche was standing next to her; talking to Mr Waverly about a rattle that he was holding. He'd asked her to take it back downstairs when she and Callista left, and see if they could give it to Captain Kennedy for him. Callista suspected that the Marine would tell them both to get lost. *And she probably won't be as polite about it as that either!*

Mr Waverly pointed to something on the rattle. "See? That's what emits the holographic images! And this bit is where the sound comes from. It's programmed to play recordings of what each planet sounds like out in space whenever the baby touches the relevant image."

Callista turned her back on the conversation so that her face wouldn't give away how she felt. *Planet sounds are creepy! I don't think the baby's gonna like that rattle very much! I guess maybe Mr Waverly doesn't know much about kids that age.*

Nadimiche was all for the idea, but also kind of tearful. "Oh wow, this is so cool! It looks just like the one that was found with my sister! I, um, we were both adopted as babies after being abandoned.

My sister…a different family adopted her. I only found out that she even existed a week ago."

Mr Waverly sounded puzzled. "Uh, I'm not dismissing you, but this rattle is unique! I designed it especially for Susan's daughter, and I know for a fact that…wait…you're adopted?"

"Yeah." Nadimiche sounded even sadder. She sniffled as she replied. "Twice now, since Greg and Bryce took me in as their kid."

Callista turned around and hugged Nadimiche; explaining things to Mr Waverly on her behalf. "Her twin died when she was a baby – a dog killed her."

Most people would have said something kind, or apologised to Nadimiche for her loss. Mr Waverly didn't seem to know that he was supposed to do any of that. Or maybe he just didn't care; what with how rich he was and so on. He stared in silence at Nadimiche for a moment. Then he held up the rattle again. "You were adopted. And you had a twin sister who died, and she had a rattle just like this one. Are you sure the rattle was found with her? It couldn't have been yours instead originally?"

Callista gasped indignantly, and hugged her secret girlfriend even tighter. "Why are you *asking* her stuff like that? Don't you know any better?"

He waved her off impatiently. "This is way more important than anyone's feelings! I need to know for *sure* which twin originally had the rattle!"

Nadimiche sniffled. "It was *her* rattle – it was even tied to one of her wrists with a little lanyard! I saw it in her file photo and…!"

Mr Waverly interrupted her. "Was it a dark pink lanyard? With little red stars printed on it?"

Both girls stared at him in disbelief. Callista began trying to lead Nadimiche away. "Come on. Never mind him. Let's just go back down to the waiting area now, okay?"

To her surprise, Nadimiche stood her ground. She nodded at Mr Waverly. "Yeah. It was pink, with red stars. How did you know all that?"

Mr Waverly shook his head. He started rambling; almost to himself. "Why hasn't anyone noticed the similarity yet? Yeah, so she's got a different skin tone, I guess, but those curls are just like her mom's! And she's adopted. But wait – if it was her *twin* who had the rattle, then that means…!"

Suddenly, the emergency alarms started blaring. An announcement played on the public comms. "All NACASTH patrons and non-essential staff avoid Level Two! Shelter in place! This is *not* a drill!"

Callista froze. All she could think of were the events that she had witnessed from a reasonably safe distance in Miami and Barcelona. In contrast, Nadimiche, who had experienced the horrors of the original Miami outbreak firsthand, immediately began sprinting towards the docking ramp for the *Sandsprite*. She dragged Callista along with her. "We're gonna go hide on board the ship with Tessa, okay? It's got blast doors – we'll be safer there! Dad and Senior Agent Volker will take care of Rayne!"

To their joint surprise, Mr Waverly didn't come with them. He stood where he was for a moment, still muttering to himself. Then he clenched his fist tightly around the rattle, and charged off back towards the elevators. He yelled back cryptically over his shoulder at Callista and Nadimiche as if he expected them to understand somehow. "Volker! She's down there too! And she's a pyrotemporal!"

***

Kennedy ducked down behind the table that she had flipped onto its side to use as cover. She exchanged glances with the heavily pregnant Chinese lady who was crouching beside her. The civilian looked down at Ellie, and then nodded towards Volker and Hull, who were still standing in

the open with their weapons readied as the fleeing crowd poured past them in search of escape, or at least somewhere to hide. She whispered urgently to Kennedy. "Why is that guy still carrying his kid around with him? Is he crazy? It's not safe!"

Kennedy grimaced. "I'm guessing that he ain't thought about that part yet, ma'am. He's too busy trying to play hero to everybody else here!"

She set down her duffel bag and unzipped it; pulling out the portable weapons safe and swiping her thumb over the scanner. On her left, her companion continued grumbling about Hull's parenting choices; occasionally lapsing into Mandarin. Kennedy debated asking her to watch Ellie, but the thought of trusting a complete and utter stranger with her daughter didn't sit right with her. Especially not during this kind of an emergency. *Pregnant don't automatically equal good person, Marine!*

Plasma pistol in one hand and knife in the other, Kennedy reluctantly scrambled to her feet and joined the two ANI agents; ignoring the pregnant lady's frantically hissed advice about keeping her head down and not being so stupid. Duty didn't end just because it became inconvenient. *Not*

even there's family in the mix, Marine.

She kicked Hull in the ankle to get his attention. "You want to think about maybe *not* putting the baby right in the line of fire, asshole?"

Hull scoffed irritably. "Pots and kettles, Susan!" He nodded towards Ellie. "Where did you get another kid from so fast, anyhow? Did you adopt? Because I was wanting to talk to you about having more contact with Rayne now that…!"

"I ain't stepping into your dead fiancée's shoes." Kennedy turned her attention to Volker. "As I recall, you've got some real impressive psionics going on. Mind babysitting both minor parties while me and the fucker who stole my kid take care of whatever's got everybody running for their damn lives?"

To her credit, Volker completely ignored Hull's indignant spluttering. She nodded her agreement to Kennedy's suggestion. "That will likely be for the best, yes. I will use my telekinesis to shield all three of us and the civilians here in the food court from as much harm as I can."

***

The elevators were locked down because of the emergency. Waverly had discovered that fact as soon as he reached them. He hadn't let it stop him

from getting back down to the first floor of the building; also known as Level Two. Instead, he'd stuffed the rattle into his pocket, overrode the security codes, and pried open the doors of the nearest elevator. Hurrying inside it, he'd clambered up through the ceiling panel and on into the shaft. From there, it had been a simple case of climbing down the maintenance ladder until he reached the right floor, and then forcing the doors there open too. *Or at least, that was my plan!*

In fact, it was proving to be the hardest part of things, as Waverly had to do the bulk of it one-handed to hang onto the ladder. A cold sweat prickled his skin as he worked. The fall from here would only be three floors deep, but he'd still be dead on impact once he reached bottom of the shaft down in the basement level of the building. *Human versus steel and concrete pad multiplied by height of drop equals splat!*

The doors finally slid open; a cacophony of screaming and weapons' fire immediately assailing Waverly's ears. Ignoring all his survival instincts aside from those involved in him not falling to his death, he clambered out of the shaft. The elevator doors closed behind him with their usual soft ding. He only

just heard it amidst the rest of the noise. *Okay – now to find Susan and Ellie again before it's too late!*

Chapter Fourteen – Small Incident

Kennedy winced as she felt her plasma pistol start to overheat. The grip was now so hot that it was searing the skin on her palm. She'd been firing it for too long at wide beam and maximum heat, but it was the only means she'd had of taking out the fifteen strong squad of bloodthirsty SCOs C.A.K.E had unleashed here ten minutes earlier. That task now complete, she tried to dial down the settings on her pistol. Just as she'd feared, the control panel on the side of the weapon sparked when she touched it. A soft hum began emanating from its power cell. Hurling the doomed pistol as hard as she could towards the two surviving C.A.K.E operatives, Kennedy ducked and covered behind a nearby pillar. "Eat plasma, you bastards!"

It wasn't a real plasma grenade, but it made for a damn good impersonation. Only one of her opponents managed to jump clear in time. The other one didn't even have time to scream as he was immolated alive. Kennedy tried not to enjoy the moment. *Don't want to end up as one of those Marines who like killing too much. But it sure as shit is cathartic watching clones of Hull die!*

Hull himself was out cold. He hadn't lasted past the first three minutes of combat. Two of the SCOs had beaten him unconscious with their bare hands. Kennedy had smirked when she saw him hit the floor. *Vindictive of me, sure, but I reckon I'm owed that much. And it ain't like he's dead.*

The remaining clone yelled angrily from behind the life-sized metal and glass sculpture of the Wright brothers that he was using as cover. "Damn you, Susan! You'll pay for this, you Martian bitch!"

Kennedy adjusted her grip on her knife. "The only ones writing cheques around here are you and your buddies! And I ain't seen any fucking signs so far of you being able to cash them!"

The battle had resulted in Kennedy ending up just shy of three hundred feet off to the right of Volker and the two babies. She'd moved there on

purpose; drawing the SCOs' fire away from all those trapped inside the food court. Volker hadn't been able to assist her beyond one instance of telekinetically blocking a grenade from hitting her. For the most part, the psionic had been too busy concentrating on keeping bullets from getting past her shield. Kennedy didn't mind. *Kind of surprised that she ain't reacted to Hull being dead yet, though. And that she didn't try to save him, either. Maybe he wasn't such a favourite after all!*

Her opponent was now being far too quiet for her liking. Kennedy wondered what he was planning on trying next. "What's up, asshole? You choke on your own dick while you were sucking it?"

The pregnant lady's bawdy cackle of approval was the only sound. "Yeah! You tell him!"

Kennedy glanced back over towards the food court. Volker was still in position at the main entrance; the telekinetic forcefield in front of her only just visible to the human eye. The ANI agent was standing beside Rayne's travel pod, with Ellie's sling resting against her left hip. Both infants were by now wailing loudly; frightened by all the noise. Nonetheless, Volker nodded calmly to Kennedy. "All is quite well here, Captain Kennedy. Kindly

dispense with the remaining threat so that we may all go about our business."

The clone sprang out from behind the sculpture then. He had an assault rifle trained squarely on Volker. "The ammunition in this thing is designed to cut through all types of psionic shielding – if C.A.K.E can't use Volker's powers, then nobody will!"

Kennedy sprinted towards him; already knowing that she wasn't going to get there in time. She shouted out a desperate warning to all those in the clone's line of fire. "Volker, get down! Everybody, move, now! Run, damn it – run!"

Some of the civilians obeyed her, the pregnant lady amongst them, but the majority stayed put; probably due to fear. And Volker still wasn't showing any signs of ducking. Instead, she was pouring yet more telekinetic energy into her shield. She addressed the clone calmly; as if she somehow didn't see anything to be afraid of. "You will not succeed in this ridiculous endeavour. Lay down your weapon, and surrender now. It is the only chance that you have of…!"

The bullet zipped through her shield as if it was nothing but smoke. Kennedy heard the crack of the rifle less than an instant after she saw Volker topple

backwards. She snarled as she lunged at the clone. "That's the last harm you'll ever do, you bastard!"

She slammed into him, stabbing and slashing furiously as they crashed to the ground together. There was a sickeningly loud crack as the back of the clone's head thudded against the marble floor. His rifle dropped from his nerveless fingers; rendered harmless now that nobody was squeezing its trigger. Kennedy was dimly aware of the pain of her own landing flaring through her knees and her shins. She ignored it and kept on gouging until there was nothing left of her opponent that could even think of still being alive. "No more, do you hear me? No fucking more! Not ever again!"

***

Waverly had skirted around the edge of the combat until he was directly opposite the side entrance of the food court, using various sculptures and pillars for cover, and being careful not to be seen. Now he was crouched behind a group of holographic plants; biding his moment. He'd been stuck here for a while. He didn't dare to try entering the food court until everything went quiet. *I'm no good to anybody if I'm dead, but I've got to get Ellie well away from Volker!*

There was an explosion somewhere ahead of him, and off to the right. The sound of energy weapons coming from that direction stopped abruptly. Ears ringing, Waverly flung himself across the intervening space. In the background, he heard Kennedy yelling insults at her opponent, and a woman cheering her on. Then Volker said something that he couldn't make out thanks to the ringing in his ears. *How the heck does Susan manage to know what's happening? Does she use ear plugs? Sound dampening implants?*

What sounded like Hull's voice echoed then; again, not quite audibly. Susan started yelling at Volker and the others in the food court. Suddenly, people were running; screaming and panicking as they went. Waverly shoved his way past them, stumbling when somebody trod on his foot. He managed not to fall and kept going. He could see Volker again now – she was straight in front of him! And the C.A.K.E guy was visible too. He was pointing an assault rifle at Volker. He was bragging about the bullets, but Waverly didn't have time to try and parse the words. *I don't need to, anyway. He's obviously going to shoot Volker, and if I'm right, that's going to result in some kind of pyrotemporal*

accident – one that will send both Ellie and Rayne eighteen years into the past, and then get Ellie killed! I won't let that happen!

There was gunfire again; coming from the assault rifle this time. A single shot. Waverly sprinted forwards towards Volker; cursing as he saw her fall backwards. He caught her just in time, and lowered her carefully to the floor so that Ellie wasn't hurt. Then he snatched the little girl out of the sling; cradling her against his chest as he unfastened the lanyard from her wrist. "It's okay, Ellie! It's okay."

Hoping that Rayne would still end up with the same family as she had originally, Waverly knelt and secured the rattle to her wrist one-handed. He could already see Volker's pyrotemporal energies roiling around her. Scrambling to his feet, he bolted for cover; desperate to get himself and Ellie clear of what was about to happen. *I'm sorry, Rayne, but you have to go back if Nadimiche is going to exist!*

Not knowing if Volker was alive, dead, or dying, Waverly dove in behind the nearest pillar. Behind him, the pyrotemporal shockwave formed a crackling sphere of ice-cold fire over Volker and Rayne. Everything seemed to stop. Then, barely even half the blink of an eye later, the normal flow

of time surged back into place. Waverly's ears finally stopped ringing too; enabling him to hear things clearly again. He winced as Ellie began wailing. "Hey, take it easy, kid – I just got the last bout of ringing to stop!"

Peering out around the side of the pillar, he saw that Volker was still where he had left her. The ANI agent was in the process of slowly sitting up. She looked dazed, and her right hand was clamped against her temple. Blood was seeping out through her fingers, but not at an alarming rate. Waverly realised that the bullet had only creased her scalp. He sighed in relief. Then he looked at where Rayne's travel pod had been sitting, and grimaced. The travel pod was gone: sucked away into the ether. Rayne and her newly gifted rattle had vanished right along with it. Waverly sighed and shook his head. "I guess my theory was right, Ellie. There *was* a temporal loop in play! It's too bad that I didn't manage to break it completely, but at least now you and Rayne will *both* get to live, and Susan won't lose you."

***

Zima's phone rang whilst he was in the middle of feeding Grisha his evening meal. He answered it in

Russian; recognising the number on display. "Yuri! When precisely may I anticipate the removal of your horde from my home? And where are you?"

Yuri made no comment on Zima's first question; which likely meant that he had no intention whatsoever of attending to the matter that it had referred to. "I am on my way to you, my friend! There was a small incident at NACASTH today but it is over and done with now. No one of importance was killed, which is of course itself very good news indeed, but I have better yet to inform you of!"

Zima petted Grisha's head absently. "And when will you cease prevaricating enough to do so?"

"Ha!" Yuri laughed uproariously. "Impatient one! I promise that you will see for yourself soon enough. Open your front door and let me in now, or have someone else do it for you. Either way, my hands are not free for me to knock, and you will be angry with me if I kick on the door instead for the attention of your staff."

Zima ended the call without deigning to reply. Leaving Grisha in the small room just off the kitchen where he was always fed whilst in this house, he made his way to the front door, and opened it. Upon seeing what it was which occupied Yuri's

hands, he almost closed it again. Instead, he glared at the memory worker. "What madness is this now? Have you lost the remainder of your wits, Yuri Vanyavich Kuznetsov? Why would you bring such inevitable misfortune to my home?"

Yuri beamed as he swept on into the house with his latest terrible decision cradled in his arms. "Do not worry so! We are all friends now, yes?"

Volker, her left wrist still in its cast, her head bandaged neatly, and her face pale, remained limp and unresponsive. Since Zima could see that she was still breathing, he presumed it likely that she might very well be faking again. He scowled at Yuri. "Must I guess what occurred, or is it perhaps your intention to eventually tell me of it?"

The memory worker shrugged. "What is there for me to say? I have grown fond of this one, Zima. Indeed, she and I enjoyed a most passionate affair whilst we were both at my home in Vallvidrera!"

"I should have known it." Zima folded his arms. "So – that fondness has now led to this?"

"No, no, of course not!" Yuri smiled down at the woman in his arms. "This was all C.A.K.E's doing! They came after her at NACASTH, and when they could not capture her, the last of them shot her in

the head with a specially designed bullet. Luckily, it merely creased her scalp, but the impact has still caused concussive injury to her brain. So much so, in fact, that I sensed her distress from almost two miles away! The injury disrupted her control; causing her to accidentally generate a pyrotemporal vortex whilst she was unconscious. An infant was caught up in it, and has been lost somewhere in time and space. True, the child involved is a clone, but very few people know this, and I somehow doubt that revealing it would be a good thing for your friend Captain Kennedy."

"She is not my friend. She is a customer to whom I was briefly indebted, that is all. Presuming that you delivered the repayment for me as requested." Zima shook his head worriedly as he parsed what Yuri meant about the now missing infant. "And how has Gregory Hull reacted?"

Yuri bared his front teeth in satisfaction rather than happiness. "He was already incapacitated by then! Beaten, as they say, into the ground. I have reviewed the security logs of the incident. I can get you a copy of them, if you would like it?"

Zima did not permit himself to smile. "I will not refuse such a gift. But what of the missing child? She

could be anywhere in history; perhaps even in the future somewhere!"

"Ah! That is where I have some other pleasant news to deliver!" Yuri's smile became jubilant again. "My people have informed me that Robert Waverly has told your customer – who I did *indeed* repay for you – that it was a fixed temporal loop! Apparently, *Rayne* Lenard-Hull eventually grew up to become Gregory Hull's eighteen-year-old adopted daughter *Nadimiche* Lenard-Hull. A most strange series of coincidental events, yes?"

Knowing the latter question to be an attempt at distracting him from the current goings on, Zima ignored it. "If you were two miles away when Laine was injured, then why is she now here in your arms instead of recuperating in a medical facility? Did no one at NACASTH think to send for an ambulance?"

Yuri scowled. "Pah! Do not speak to me of such things! My people have confirmed to me that Laine was dazed but conscious until the attending paramedics chose to forcibly sedate her. Forcibly! When it was not medically necessary for them to do so! All because of an *accident*. They are no better than barbarians, I tell you, Zima – incompetent and cruel and afraid of her power!"

"Ah, I see." Zima sighed. "And must I begin a new vegetable garden in the wake of your wrath?"

"Eh, do not worry so; they are both fine! They were miraculously flung clear of their ambulance just before it exploded. They recall only that they were en route to respond to the incident at NACASTHE when their vehicle somehow crashed and then caught fire. There are no records to claim otherwise." Yuri eyed the stairgate speculatively. "How does that contraption even open? It looks different to the ones which I had fitted in my villa."

"It requires specialist training to operate." Zima deadpanned his reply as he opened the stairgate for Yuri; slamming it irritably into the wall. "Take her to one of the rooms that you are using, and remember that I am *not* her keeper! I will inform Mavrikiy Yasha of the situation on your behalf before he or Solovei somehow find it out. But you must tell your other women of it yourself!"

Chapter Fifteen – Allows Pets

Europe was too busy rebuilding to waste time or resources on keeping watch for known criminals. Magdalena Vasnetsova had made full use of this fact to travel freely from her secluded home in rural Switzerland to her current location in the village of New Caldecott, in the English county of Dorset. *My enemy has very little time left to him!*

Vasnetsova smirked to herself as she imagined what the look on the old fool's face would be like. Doubtless, he still believed wholeheartedly that simply changing his identity from Derek Gerard Horowitz to Jonathon Terrance Lambert would be enough to protect him. *He will now learn better*.

She was less than ten minutes' walk from the disgraced spy's home. The street was a quiet one;

even when compared with the rest of the village. Externally, the homes in New Caldecott were replicas of the sorts of architecture which would have formed the original village prior to the devastation left by the events of WWIII. Terraced houses with small, high-walled yards behind them, and the occasional squat thatched cottage surrounded by its own little patch of garden. The erstwhile Horowitz dwelt in one of the former; having claimed his latest identity's home and other belongings along with his name and face. *The man is nothing better than a parasite! Truly, I am doing everyone a great favour indeed by eliminating him.*

There was a sudden sear of pain in her midriff, accompanied by a loud cracking sound. Looking down at herself, Vasnetsova saw a patch of dark red spreading across her blouse. It was a second or two before she realised that she was already collapsing from the shot. She hit the cobbled street hard; gasping in barely managed agony. *The bastard must have spotted me! Where is he?*

A somewhat paunchy looking older white man dressed in a faded brown tweed suit stepped out from underneath a damson tree in the garden of a nearby cottage. His hair was not quite fully grey yet,

and he wore the late Jonathon Terrance Lambert's face. There was a still smoking pistol in his right hand. He closed the distance between them in ten strides, and smirked unpleasantly down at her. "Hello again, Magdalena. You really should have just kept on playing dead, you know."

Vasnetsova spat blood onto the cobbles, and crooked her left arm around in front of herself; as if trying to ward off the next bullet. Instead, the poison coated needle dart hidden in her sleeve sprang from its automated holster. The toxin coating it took effect as soon as the six-inch-long bit of steel buried itself deep in her opponent's neck. His eyes bulged as he squeezed his trigger an instant too late to save himself. He had time to watch as his bullet transformed the front of Vasnetsova's head into a crater; red blood and greyish purple brain matter spattering the cobbles. Then he collapsed; his corpse twitching spasmodically as it fell.

High in the branches of the damson tree, a nightingale began his usual evensong.

Life went on.

***

Woods was waiting by the interior airlock when Kennedy at last returned to Deimos Base with Ellie,

who was once again protesting loudly at being confined to her travel pod. He saluted smartly, and then scooped Ellie up for a cuddle. The infant stopped crying instantly. "Welcome back, ma'am! Congratulations on securing permission from the Brass to keep our mascot here on base."

Kennedy smiled tiredly. "Thanks, Woods. Just don't ask how I put Ellie off using her travel pod!"

"Your momma spoils you, ain't that right, little Ellie bear?" Woods tickled the little girl's chin with his calloused fingers; smiling fondly at her. "Damn good thing that she's stricter with our Marines!"

"Marines are easier!" Kennedy set the empty travel pod down; halfway tempted to space the damn thing. "Even the ones who get briefly romantically embroiled with your kid's grown up temporally displaced clone!"

Woods blinked in understandable confusion. The unfortunate events at NACASTH had been hushed up, lest they resulted in public animosity towards Volker or other psionics. "Say again, ma'am?"

"It's a real long story that officially never even happened, Woods." Kennedy settled her duffel bag a little more comfortably, and then picked up the empty travel pod again. She was glad to be

back. For all its outdated systems and rough edges, Deimos Base was her home, and the Marines stationed on it her family. "Walk me to my quarters and I'll tell it to you in full over coffee. Then you can read me in on how the heck you always manage to settle my kid down so fast!"

She didn't bother looking back through the nearby observation window at the departing ship. The *Sandsprite* was headed to Mars next. Waverly had moved his main offices back to the Red Planet. He and Kennedy had made their peace after he'd saved Ellie at NACASTH, but Kennedy knew that she wouldn't miss him. She'd seen the other side of him now, and she wouldn't ever forget it.

A full week had passed since the confrontation with C.A.K.E at NACASTH. Only four days of it had been spent travelling. The rest had involved the longest debrief Kennedy had ever endured. And of course, the subsequent press conference; wherein the Brass had unhelpfully referred to her as Captain Mars while publicly declaring her a hero yet again. Afterwards, they'd offered her a change of posting to one of the MMC's more highly regarded bases – a sleekly constructed, state-of-the-art, all bells and whistles kind of place, located just outside the

Martian capital city. Kennedy had politely but firmly declined. Then she'd reminded those who'd gotten insistent about it of just how popular Deimos Base was with her adoring fans. That statement had neatly and decisively ended all talk of a new posting. *Guess fame's good for something after all. Or maybe I should be thanking whoever invented the concept of optics.*

The recruitment office was still pissed that they couldn't utilise the temporal loop as a special episode of the *Captain Mars* cartoon. They'd been all but salivating over the news of how Nadimiche – once Rayne, and still supposedly the real Ellie – was of age to join up. The news of their figurehead's eldest daughter being a pacifist hadn't gone down well. Kennedy had barely contained her smirk when Nadimiche had told the officer attempting to recruit her exactly what she thought of the military. *They damn well better not try pulling any of that shit with Ellie once she hits eighteen!*

Kennedy still wasn't quite sure how she felt about being thrust into the role of mother to Nadimiche. What she did know, however, was that the teenager in question was an intelligent, highly principled, and determined young woman. *The*

Prado Wangs raised that kid well. And so far, she ain't letting that bastard Hull drag her down into his way of doing things.

***

Spence sank down onto the sofa and closed their eyes; glad to finally be safely back home in London with their family. It had been Monday 26TH August before they had felt well enough to depart from Yuri's villa. By then, the quarantine had eased, but with Moxton and his team having taken charge of transporting Dobos, Brett, Scooter, and Clacher to Alaska to collect Volker from the Russians and transport her safely to Miami, the journey to London had still taken another three days. "I hadn't realised how very stressful holidaying abroad with the children would be, old swan. Remind me to stick to going camping here in the UK next time."

Leister sat down equally tiredly on Spence's right, and draped his left arm across the back of the sofa behind their shoulders. "Oh no, darling! Camping is *far* worse. Especially in the UK."

The non-gender hummed doubtfully at the latter assertion. "Hmm. Worse than facing down rampaging biohazards and rubbing elbows with our enemies to save the world?"

"Oh, inestimably so, yes!" Leister stretched his legs out in front of him; crossing them right over left at the ankles. "And besides, I rather thought that the Russians were our friends again by the end of things, darling. Laine and Yuri certainly appear to be making considerable strides in that direction."

Spence yawned; resting their head against Leister's left shoulder. "Only because Mr Kuznetsov has less sense of personal danger than I'd thought humanly possible! Anyhow, let's talk seriously about us – Maurice, are you absolutely *certain* that you don't mind covering the fees for Caldecott Academy?"

"I'm positive, darling." Leister finally moved his arm down from the back of the sofa, and gently hugged Spence. "You and the children are the most important aspects of my life. You're my family now, Nightingale, and I love all of you. Please – let me provide for all of you."

"Oh, alright then. If you really must insist." Spence snuggled in closer to him. "Term starts this Monday! I shall have to take them all out uniform shopping as soon as possible. And somehow convince all three of them that it's not the end of the world for us to send them off to school."

Leister patted their arm consolingly. "It's for their own good, darling. Dr Geddes has assured us of that fact. And don't worry – we'll think of something to help make the situation palatable to them. Perhaps a pre-emptive reward of some kind?"

Spence hummed pensively for a moment, and then brightened. "I may *already* have an idea. Caldecott Academy allows pets, doesn't it, Cob?"

Leister sighed as he realised what the non-gender was implying. "Kathryn is going to ask for a pony to take with her, isn't she, darling?"

"It's your fault for finding her a hobby that she enjoys to the point of obsession." Spence pulled their feet up onto the sofa so that they could curl up next to Leister. "If it helps, there's a particularly tatty old cream thing at the riding school that she's besotted with. It's called Stumbles, or Snuggles, or Strangles. Something along those lines. Zara will want a dog of some sort. And Phil mustn't be left out, but he's still so terribly reticent about asking for anything that I haven't the foggiest notion of what animal he'd secretly love to foist on us. I have nightmarish visions of it being one of those terribly loud parrots; the big ones that can take off half your thumb with one bite."

"Ah, well I can reassure you there at least!" Leister closed his eyes. "He likes *lizards*, darling. There were some in the garden at Yuri's villa that he enjoyed trying to tame."

"Really? Oh well, that's not so bad, I suppose. At least a lizard will be quiet and live inside a vivarium." Spence opened one eye as either Jacamar or Honeyguide began grizzling irritably in the oversized playpen on the other side of the living room. Then the second infant joined in. The non-gender squirmed reluctantly out of the hug and stood up. "Right! I'll tend to these two, and then I'll order in a Chinese takeaway as dinner for the rest of us. I managed to convince Miss Hedturner that she didn't need to cook tonight. You attend to finishing up the enrolment side of things. We can sit the eldest three down and tell them the news of our decision when Miss Hedturner and they get home from the park. Pre-emptively reward them into forgiving us for so cruelly ensuring that they receive a decent education."

Leister stretched and got to his feet. "And soften the blow of being packed off to school with the assurance of whatever pets they may want to take with them, darling?"

Spence nodded tiredly. "Needs must, I'm afraid, old swan! Although, I do rather hope that I shan't very often have to clean out the vivarium, walk the dog, or do whatever the deuce it is that one does in care of a pony."

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, 2020/21, and 2023/24, 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.