

All The Other Spies

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Eleven

E.V. GREIG

All The Other Spies
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ALL THE OTHER SPIES

In the direct sequel to *Live, Die, Kill*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence is turning forty-one. Their nearest and dearest are determined to make up for having missed their milestone fortieth birthday last year. There might even be a second chance for love in the air.

Everything would be perfect, if only villainy would take a day off for once...

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Chapter One – Run Off

“Remind me why it was that I bothered to lobby Pembleton for your reinstatement to active field operative status again, Mr Dobos?” Nightingale Spence grimaced: the stones lurking amid the arid soil along the edge of the cliff pressing uncomfortably against their thin frame as they dragged the red-haired man in question back up to safety from the tiny ledge that had saved his life two days previously.

Oliver Dobos grunted. His left arm hung limply at his side; paralysed by the toxin contained in the shattered dart still buried deep in the muscle of his bicep. “Don’t blame me, Housekeeping! I wanted us to run off together to start our own mercenary outfit!”

It was now noon on the first day of August 2097, a Thursday, to be precise. Spence, who had been searching for Dobos since the alert for an operative missing and presumably in peril came through at first light on Monday, was in no mood to joke. "How on Earth did you manage to get caught up in all of this anyhow? Honestly, chased over the edge of an isolated Tuscan cliff by a trio of crazed would-be killers – do our operatives actively sit down and plan out ways in which to attain the most bizarre cause of death?"

"Nah, mate; it's all serendipitous chaos." Safely back on level ground, Dobos crawled a few feet further away from the edge, and collapsed at the foot of the gnarled trunk of an ancient olive tree. "Where's Quincy?"

"Back in London; Whitby's working on some sort of complicated improvements to his chassis." The pale haired non-gender dug through their aftercare kit for the rehydration capsules. "Here, take two of these before you die of heatstroke. There's water too, but only once I'm sure that you'll sip it slowly enough."

"Cheers, andro." Dobos cracked the capsules between his teeth and gulped down the resultant

tangy gel with a grimace. "Sorry to drag you all the way to fucking Tuscany, by the way. I'm sure you've better things to be doing at home, eh?"

"I rather like Tuscany, actually." Spence opened the medical kit and set to work checking Dobos' vitals. "I've often thought that it would be a nice place to retire to."

The injured operative chuckled. "Aside from all of the mad bastards using it as their private hunting reserve, you mean?"

"Again: how did you get involved? You weren't even sent to Europe, for pity's sake – Pembleton had you assigned to that nasty matter in Te Waipounamu!"

"Yeah, I know; the dodgy pipeline thing, with the bloke who wanted to blow up half the coastline. It's sorted, don't worry. No marine life was harmed." Dobos winced as the non-gender helped him back to a sitting position and peeled off the remains of his ruined shirt. "Can't we wait until we get to a hospital or something?"

"We can if you insist, but tetanus shan't."

"Okay, fine then." He closed his eyes as they picked up the scalpel. "Pretty fucking sure that my inoculations are up to date, though."

"Sepsis, then, or nerve damage from needlessly prolonged exposure to whatever was in this dart; take your pick." Spence narrowed their ice blue eyes at the fragment they had extracted. "Mr Moxton sends his regards. For some reason, our earpieces don't work at all in this area but phones do, so I rang him whilst I was rigging up the safety harness. He and Mr Jolley are on their way here now with the car."

"Why didn't they just come with you in the first fucking place?"

"My hover bike only seats one person. Besides, Mr Jolley wasn't fit to help search. He rather went to pieces once we thought that we were looking for your remains. I suspect that Miss Darnell shall want to discuss it with you."

Dobos' poppy petal blue eyes snapped open again in surprise. "What the fuck made everyone think I was dead?"

"We captured the three men who chased you over that cliff and wrung the details out of them. Well done on not blabbing to them about working for BIINT, by the way." Spence paused in their ministrations to hand Dobos the promised water bottle. "Remember – slow sips."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I take it Tanya's still back on the jet then?"

"Yes, she's been coordinating things via computer. In brief, your team tracked you as far as Orbetello, which is where I met up with them on Monday. By then, our scanners had lost your transponder chip signal entirely."

"It must have finally shorted out on Sunday night when they hit me again with that stun gun they're so fucking fond of." Dobos managed not to wince as Spence dug around with tweezers for the remaining bits of dart. "When they were transporting me from there to wherever the fuck here is; one of them said that they all preferred using longer range weapons for hunting."

"Such as whatever fired this dart; yes, I know *that* type of depraved insanity all too well. As to our current location, we're approximately halfway between Orbetello and Talamone." Spence nodded towards the garishly coloured fake tattoo still emblazoned across Dobos' chest. It was of a phoenix, drawn out in mildly radioactive ink, with a gold-based polymer undercoat to protect the wearer. "At least the dye used in your backup option worked."

"Yeah, Whitby definitely has some epic fucking ideas." Dobos grinned despite the pain and exhaustion.

"Clever of you to rub some of it off on the walls of the room you were held in. That's how we found your captors in the end. Tattoo or not, there's no way that we'd have known to search for you out here without having interrogated them." The non-gender dabbed a thick layer of regenerative salve onto Dobos' injured bicep. "I'll pop a bandage on this and then get your arm into a sling. Care to finish explaining how *exactly* it was that you got from New Zealand to Italy?"

He grunted as they tightened the bandage into place. "It all started last Friday night, at around ten o'clock, New Zealand time; so I suppose about eleven in the morning here, and earlier still in London. As I said, I'd wrapped up the pipeline situation, so I was driving to the Christchurch extraction point to meet up with Moxton and the others. About halfway there, this half-naked woman came stumbling out of the scrub alongside the road. I could see that she was in a bad way, so I stopped the car. I kept the engine running, of course, in case there was any bother. I'm not *that*

fucking stupid."

Spence wasn't impressed. "You stopped your car on an extremely isolated road, late at night, because you'd happened upon something worrying, and you *didn't* report it *immediately*."

"I fucking *tried* to, believe me! The only thing was that, as per the rules of fucking horror films, it turned out that there wasn't any signal along that bit of road." Dobos sighed. "Anyhow, I rolled down my window enough to call out to her, but *not* enough to let a zombie climb in or anything. I asked her what was going on, and if she needed any help."

"Because there are so very many people out there who enjoy naked late-night rambling, yes."

"Do you want to hear what happened or not?" The red-haired operative scowled at his companion. "For all I knew at the time, she could have been off her tits on fucking drugs!"

"Was she?"

Dobos shook his head. "Nah, she was sober. Scared halfway to death and bloody exhausted, though. She could just about string a sentence together. Started babbling; going on about having been snatched from a fucking car park while she was shopping for cereal. Hadn't a fucking clue

where we were either – thought it must be England at first, thanks to my accent. I told her no, it was New Zealand. Then I let her into the passenger seat, and she asked me what date it was. It turned out that a gang of six blokes had been holding her prisoner since fucking May! One or other of the bastards keeping her had finally gotten careless earlier that night, and she'd managed to get hold of his stun gun. Knocked the fucker out, smashed her way to freedom through a downstairs window, and made a run for it."

"This presumably brings us back to the point where you spotted her." Spence nodded in understanding as they fastened the sling into place. "So, what went wrong?"

"We got run off the fucking road less than ten miles on from where I picked her up." Dobos leaned gratefully on Spence's shoulder as they helped him to his feet. "It was the traffickers. I lost track of what happened to the woman in all the chaos, but I put three of the fuckers down permanently before they got the better of me. That was the first time that they used that fucking stun gun on me. I woke up a couple of times between there and Orbetello, and they kept on using it. It's bloody amazing that my

transponder lasted as long as it did."

"We'll need to contact the relevant authorities in New Zealand and see whether the woman you tried to help has been found or not. Given that the surviving traffickers relocated so very abruptly to Tuscany, I'd hazard that she must have escaped alive during the fight." Spence glanced back towards the cliff. "They deliberately chased you to what they thought was your death within days of abducting you. I take it that she'd been used for a less directly lethal form of entertainment?"

Dobos nodded grimly. "She didn't get a chance to say, but given the state she was in, it wasn't exactly hard to join up the fucking dots."

"Did you get her name?"

"Yeah, Karen Bell, from Miami."

"ANI shall need to be involved too then. Volker's in the loop already anyhow. She had ANI keep tabs for us on her side of the pond."

"Oh, fucking brilliant, another interagency cooperative venture!" Dobos scowled. "I'm *not* working with that bastard Greg Hull! Bad enough that we're stuck with his older self in BIINT."

"Chances are that we shan't have much involvement aside from reading the American lot in

on what we've uncovered." Spence had already finished texting BIINT headquarters with the details of the missing woman. Gathering up their kit, they led the way back towards the rarely used narrow road at the foot of the slope, where they had left their hover bike parked. "Bell's one of their citizens, not Britain's. We've done our part, especially you. On which note, I shall recommend that Pembleton grant you a few weeks' leave to recover from your ordeal."

"I'm *fine*, andro!"

"Do a handstand without collapsing and then tell me that." The non-gender handed Dobos their phone before he could retort. "Better yet, ring your all-too psychic son and let him know that you've turned up safe. I gather that he and his dog were already staying with your parents over the summer holidays whilst you were in New Zealand, what with his mother bogged down with work herself. Apparently, young Brett had some kind of a dream or a vision of you in danger – he went to his grandparents with it, and then *they* rang BIINT and kept on asking awkward questions. We held off on announcing your presumed death, but they do know for a fact that you'd gone missing."

"His talents are growing stronger then." Dobos keyed in his mother's number from memory while they walked, smiling tiredly when the woman answered almost immediately. "Hi, Mum; it's me, Oliver. I'm okay. How's everyone there doing?"

He was still talking to his relieved family on the phone when the BIINT hover car, driven by Daniel Moxton arrived. Blond haired, green-eyed Welsh sniper Darren Jolley scrambled out of the front passenger seat the moment the vehicle reached a stop. "Ollie! Ollie, mate, you're alive!"

Spence chose not to intercede in the operatives' subsequent reunion. Instead, the thin non-gender nodded to Moxton as the brown-eyed handler exited the car. "Any hope you might pop my bike up onto the rear rack of the car for me? The power cell's already halfway drained...!"

The tall, shaven headed man strode forwards: the crisp lines of his suit rumpling as he enveloped Spence in a bear hug. "This is for making those bastards talk. I don't care to know how you eventually managed it. I'm just glad it meant that we got him back *alive*."

"That last part was entirely coincidental." Spence wriggled free from the hug and shoved

their aftercare kit into Moxton's arms. "If you simply *must* hold something, take this."

He nodded briskly, his usual professionalism already overriding his relief. "Sorry about that. It's been a rough week. With hindsight, I probably could have done without looking at that footage of previous victims."

Spence nodded their understanding. "Someone had to go over it, and better you than Miss Darnell or Mr Jolley. They'd likely still be hugging me, for one thing."

Moxton smiled wryly at their joke as he opened the boot of the car. "I'll secure your bike next. Thanks for understanding, Housekeeping."

"I'm not entirely without feeling, regardless of what my file may indicate to the contrary." Spence opted to claim the front passenger seat for the drive back to Orbetello. They fastened their seatbelt as Moxton climbed back behind the steering wheel. "Aren't you going to hug Mr Dobos as well?"

"Nah, I've got it out of my system now." The handler gestured curtly through the windscreen to his operatives; signalling for them to hurry up and get into the car. "Besides, I wouldn't like to chance

him thinking that I'd gone soft."

"He seems to have done a fair job in New Zealand. I got the potted version whilst I was treating his injuries. There's an American woman who might owe him her life, too."

"I know; Whitby already sent word through to Tanya. She rang Darren while we were on the way here. ANI's been informed. Pembleton's sending Hull to the South Island to help with the investigation there; to try to make sure that none of Oliver's equipment ends up borrowed by our counterparts in New Zealand or America. She wants you to take care of wrapping things up here. The rest of us are going straight home."

Chapter Two – Mostly Well

The Thursday afternoon Under 12 Beginners' category ride at Battersea Park Equestrian Centre was due to start in fifteen minutes. In the main stable block, eleven-year-old Kathryn Lackey stared over a loosebox door at the eternally scruffy looking riding school animal occupying it. The shaggy cream coloured pony stared back, or at least he seemed to. It was always hard to be sure where exactly Shambles was looking at any given moment, due to how much hair hung between his pale blue eyes and the rest of the world. At any rate, his head was definitely facing towards her, and so she supposed that he might be paying attention. "Linda says that we're starting cantering off the lunge today, Shambles."

So far, much of 2097 hadn't gone anywhere near the way that Kathryn had hoped it might. First, there was Aunt Val and Craig insisting that they, Heidi, and the three babies all move away from London to Mummy's old house in Bournemouth, which she'd left to Kathryn and her twin brother Barnabas in her will. Then, Craig had gotten involved with that horrid florist, except that she'd not really been a florist at all, but rather a human trafficker specialising in children for use in combat. It hardly mattered: whoever she really was, Craig had still left Aunt Val for her until he found out the truth. Somehow, this had resulted in what felt like an endless stream of people coming and going, some of them staying as guests. Mummy's old house had been crammed full of visitors. *Aunt Val didn't like that any better than I did.*

Even the horrid not really a florist's younger pretend son Phil had come to stay. He was still living with them now, which Barnabas seemed happy about, for some reason. Craig however, hadn't come back in the end, despite what he'd promised Kathryn at the safe house. He'd gone to live aboard his yacht in Poole instead, at the same marina as his friend Zoe, and her toddler daughter

Primrose, who was the same age as Craig's son, Sam, whose mummy had been murdered by Craig's enemies in Ireland. The latter group had been why they'd all had to leave Mummy's old house and go into hiding. Not that it had worked. *Craig's enemies still found us at the safe house. He wasn't even there when Barnabas and I dealt with them! He was busy on his phone, instead.*

Thinking of phones, Craig hadn't so much as texted to say hello since they'd all left the safe house, not even to wish Phil a happy eleventh birthday! Kathryn, who had tried to phone to complain about how shabby that was of him, had gotten the automated message that told you someone had changed their number. She'd been worried at first, but then Zoe had sent a belated present for Phil along with a handmade card explaining about how Craig was very busy being an artist now, just like his mummy used to be. It was a pretty card, although Craig hadn't written anything on it; just signed his name next to Zoe's. Aunt Val said that that was because he was an inconsiderate badger. Actually, they'd used another word in front of the word badger, but it had been a rude one, and Kathryn didn't like to

repeat it, even in her head. Part of her couldn't help feeling that it had sounded exactly right for the situation though. *Stupid Craig and his stupid enemies – it's their fault that we had to leave Mummy's old house!*

To be fair, that would have happened eventually anyhow, she supposed. Aunt Val said that the wiring was all wrong. Whoever built it had cheated and used bad materials too. Cob said that it was something called a money pit, and that the builder had cheated poor Mummy horribly. He'd swapped deeds anyhow with Kathryn and Barnabas, so that they, and Phil, and Aunt Val, and Heidi, and Aunt Val's two little twins, could all come back to London and live in his old penthouse on Chelsea Bridge. Cob was still nice that way, despite having lost so much of his memory when he had to swap over to his new, much younger body. *It's just as well, too; we'd all have been homeless otherwise!*

The thrice-weekly riding lessons, which she, Barnabas, and Phil attended on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoons, had begun at Cob's suggestion too, after Dr Geddes had said that that all three of them needed hobbies. Heidi took them

to swimming classes on Saturday mornings, and dropped them off at the riding school afterwards. On weekdays, she was at college, so Aunty Val and Cob saw to everything. There was their weekly visit to the library in the morning on Tuesdays, whilst on Thursday mornings they all had their one-to-one sessions with Dr Geddes. Their counsellor helped with supervising the therapeutic arts and crafts group they attended on Monday mornings too.

Uncle Byron took them to Junior Mixed Martial Arts on Sunday mornings, since he coached it anyhow. He said it paid for his share of the delicious roast dinners that Heidi always made on Sundays. Barnabas said that it was probably more because Uncle Byron and Aunty Val were sort of going out together now. Phil said that he was halfway sure that they'd been going out already back in Bournemouth. Kathryn knew she would have noticed if either of them was right! *Honestly, boys are so silly sometimes!*

She'd said as much to Cob last night; while Barnabas and Phil were playing computer games in their room, and Heidi was checking on the younger twins. Cob, who'd temporarily moved in with them whilst Aunty Val was away with work, had chuckled

and agreed. He'd looked sort of sad too though; as if he didn't especially like talking about it. *Perhaps he feels a bit silly at having lost his memory.*

The thudding of two sets of booted feet abruptly interrupted her thoughts. Turning around, Kathryn saw Barnabas and Phil come pelting into the main stable block. She scowled. "You oughtn't run around the horses! Linda says they don't like it, and...!"

Barnabas waved his phone excitedly in front of her face. "Cob just texted to say Uncle Oliver's been found alive and mostly well!"

"Oh." Kathryn supposed that important news like *that* counted as being a reasonable excuse for breaking the yard rules. "So is Aunty Val coming home today then?"

Her twin shook his head. "No; they've still got stuff to sort out over in Tuscany. Cob thinks that they'll probably be back by Saturday though. Apparently, the others should all reach London by four o'clock or so today. Are you on Shambles again?"

"Yes." The pale haired girl opened the tack locker on the wall next to the loosebox. "Linda says that he goes very well for me."

Barnabas sneered a little at her echoing of their instructor's words, but caught himself before saying anything. "Eh, I suppose he does. I still like Bracken much better though." He glanced over at the finely limbed chestnut mare in question. "I'm on her today, actually. Hey, Phil; who have you got?"

The other boy pointed down the aisle to a bright bay mare with a white blaze and a thick, shaggy mane. "Comet for me – we should probably go tack up too, by the way."

Kathryn tugged sharply at her brother's sleeve as he walked away. "Remember to switch your phone off *before* our lesson starts this time, Barnabas."

He sighed. "Fine, but I still think it's a stupid rule to have! I expect *yours* is off already, since *Linda* says so?"

"I don't even bring it with me to the yard to begin with." Kathryn prided herself on her diligence. "It's at home, in my room. Phil always leaves his behind too, don't you, Phil?"

"Um, I'm not getting dragged into this, sorry. Let's just get on with tacking up the ponies." Phil hurried off to see to Comet.

Barnabas followed his example, leaving Kathryn free to concentrate on Shambles. The cream-

coloured gelding lowered his head obligingly as she opened the stable door and approached him with the bridle. Kathryn patted him on the side of his neck. "At least you appreciate my doing things properly! Why can't people be more like horses and ponies?"

Lottie Drake raised her eyebrows expectantly as she handed her partner at NIT his usual afternoon cup of tea. "Well, Byron? Are you ready to talk about it yet, or do I need to fetch the truth serum?"

Byron Caulfield leaned back in his office chair and sipped his tea. "I'm sure that I don't know what you mean, Lottie. Your hair looks especially lovely today, by the way. Have you done something different with it?"

She snorted and perched herself on the edge of his desk to drink her tea. "It's up in Bantu knots exactly the same as it always is for work, and well you know it!"

The older NIT agent sighed. "Ah well, so much for my cunning plan to distract you!"

"Sorry, Byron, but your mother has me under orders to get a straight answer out of you." Drake pulled an exaggeratedly sympathetic expression.

"What's going on with you and Spence, really? I thought that you'd decided to break things off, and just be friends. Has something changed?"

"No...well, yes, but not so very much as I suspect you to suppose. It's *complicated*, Lottie." Caulfield set down his tea and steeped his fingers in front of his chest. "I still like Spence, a lot, I really do, and they like me too, which helps, of course, but...!"

"The point, Byron; get to it?"

"Well, the point is, we've gotten comfortable with just being good friends. Neither of us really wants to take things further than that."

Drake nodded slowly. "So you definitely *aren't* going out together?"

He shrugged. "We go out together as friends, if that counts?"

"That's nice, but your mother only wants to know if you're going out in the way that might eventually give her grandchildren, Byron. On which note, I *think* she's taken up knitting."

Caulfield winced. "I suppose it's too late to beg you to tell her that I'm your gay best friend?"

"She already knows that I'm *your* gay best friend, Byron. John Mayfield in Accounting is mine. Although it's Mayfield-Kearns now, of course; they

decided to hyphenate. I went to the wedding last month; whilst you were dealing with that thing that officially never occurred."

"It's nice that he and Matthew have finally tied the knot. They're a lovely couple."

Drake hummed. "They've just adopted the most adorable little girl too. Gwendolyn, her name is. She's six and three quarters."

"Damn them for foiling my potential excuses to my mum with their beautiful family." Caulfield snapped his fingers suddenly, beaming. "Ah ha – that's it! Lottie, you're a genius."

"I knew that already, Byron." Drake took another sip of her tea. "Thanks all the same for acknowledging it."

"You're welcome. Just be sure to tell Mum that we're very busy investigating a mysterious outbreak of unnatural broodiness."

"Eh?" Drake blinked. "She shan't find that even remotely funny, you know!"

"Precisely, Lottie, and whilst she's busy being cross with you for that, she won't have time to nag me about settling down and adding to the next generation of Caulfields."

The augmetric glowered at him. "I could

probably think of another way to help you get out of that duty, you know!"

Caulfield shook his head. "Luckily for me, NIT has rules against murdering one's colleagues."

"Are there any in regards to stuffing them into packing crates alive and shipping them off to Mars for being overly annoying?"

"Hmm, good point, Lottie." Caulfield opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a small tin. "Care for a bribery biscuit?"

"Don't mind if I do." Drake selected a thin segment of shortbread from the contents of the tin. "I hear they found Dobos earlier today."

"Yes, thank goodness. I saw the interagency bulletin half an hour ago." Caulfield dunked a slightly stale caramel wafer in his tea. "Speaking of which, we can expect another visit from our friends over in Kildare. Those three terrorists from the incident at BLINT's dairy farm safe house are due for transfer back to Ireland on Tuesday."

"I can't believe we still haven't managed to track down the woman who was helping them." Drake frowned as she finished off her biscuit. "I don't like it when there are loose ends, Byron."

"None of us do, Lottie. Still, if she hasn't

resurfaced already by now, then there's a good chance that she isn't actually directly linked with Miller's old organisation after all. I know I'd much prefer it to turn out for her to have simply been a freelancer along for the money."

"Perhaps we ought to consult with Ms Aldermere about it. She's got connections in that area; people who'd never talk to us."

"That's a very good idea, Lottie."

"Well, as you mentioned earlier, I'm a genius. Although, getting back to that part of our conversation, I still can't quite fathom how your mother managed to find out about you and Spence having ever been involved with one another to begin with. I know I certainly hadn't mentioned it to her."

"I hadn't either." Caulfield smiled fondly as he glanced at the framed photograph of his parents that he kept on his desk. "She and Dad both worked in Intelligence though, so it's hardly surprising really. I'd wager that one or other of their old contacts must have let something slip in passing."

Maurice Jacob Leister smiled from his seat in the

indoor arena's observation gallery as he watched his three preteen charges lead their respective mounts off towards the main stable block. This afternoon's lesson had shown that the children were fast becoming capable young riders. In fact, their instructor, Linda Barr, had already recommended that they enrol in the Pony Club. Leister had been in the middle of reviewing the latter organisation's rules and fees on his phone when the text from Mortimer had arrived with a shrill beep. Little Jacamar and Honeyguide had slept through it, but several of the other adults present in the gallery had glared at him pointedly. Leister had opted to ignore their unspoken censor, but he understood where they were coming from. In future, he'd make certain to keep the device set on silent during the children's riding lessons. Horses could often be flighty creatures. *It's a good thing that there's a soundproof panel between here and the arena.*

The text was the latest in a chain begun back at the end of May. Leister was beginning to regret having quizzed his old friend about the still inconveniently blank thirty years in his own memory. The trouble with Mortimer Caulfield was that the

fellow had a sixth sense for what you didn't want him to know about. His wife, Emma, was even sharper. *I do hope that I haven't made things too awkward for young Byron!*

With hindsight, he knew that he ought to have allowed for the latter man having long since grown out of sharing every facet of his life with his parents. There was, after all, a vast difference between fourteen and forty-four. Mere common sense should have been enough to forestall Leister from enquiring with Mortimer and Emma about their son's social life. Then again, such were the perils of ringing from the pub! *I'm sure Byron would understand if I explained.*

Not that Leister intended on ever raising the subject with him. No: better to leave well alone. Mortimer and Emma would drop the matter eventually. That, or Byron would muster up the courage to explain to them why he and Nightingale were opting to remain as merely good friends. *Presumably, it's more complicated than just boys being silly, as Kathryn would say.*

Leister couldn't help but feel that, on his own part, disingenuous was a more apt descriptor than silly. Making his way with the sleeping infants in their

pram back out to the riding school's car park to wait for the older three children, he wondered yet again how and even *if* he ought to open up to Nightingale about his still unspoken feelings. *I'd best decide soon, either way. If I leave things as they stand for much longer, then it shall likely be too late for anything but awkwardness to come of the conversation.*

Chapter Three – Better Locks

ANI Agent Greg Hull smiled fondly as he gathered up the various kids' toys that had been left scattered around the den. He was really going to miss being off on parental leave. Sadly, from Monday morning onwards, he would be back at work fulltime in the Miami Field Office. He'd already made extra sure to book time off for his son's upcoming third birthday on the seventeenth of August. *After all, what kind of crappy parent would miss attending their kid's birthday party? Oh yeah – that would be both of my dads, every damn time that I can remember!*

Hull shrugged off that thought as he switched off the television. The Friday lunchtime news had just

finished broadcasting: the main story had been an update on Tokyo. On balance, the situation regarding Japan's former capital was better than one might have hoped. According to the experts, it would be only another four months before the environment in and around the devastated city was fit for human habitation again. Then the rebuilding work would start in earnest. The Japanese Prime Minister hoped to be able to mark the fifth anniversary of the tragedy by moving her Cabinet Office back from Kyoto to Tokyo, where its members could welcome in new citizens and returning survivors. *I really should see about taking Bryce and the rest of our family to Japan on vacation. I can probably sort something out in time for this winter.*

He was determined that both Fisher and baby Rayne would grow up understanding that side of their heritage. Hull himself had never managed to meet the surrogate who was his birth mother, but for all their other failings, his dads had at least been open with him about how he was genetically half-Japanese. Mostly whilst lecturing him on why he should reject that side of his identity and show gratitude for the white American half. The latter

influence hadn't taken. Instead, it had made for a great reason for Hull to go non-contact with both men the instant that he graduated from college. *You only reap what you plant, assholes.*

Well, one thing was for damn sure: none of Hull's kids would ever feel the need to escape from him, or from Bryce. That applied not only to Fisher and Rayne, but to their two older daughters as well. Even if eighteen-year-old Nadimiche was working her way through every possible option in boxed hair dyes, and no matter how many tantrums eleven-year-old Tessa threw over Hull and Bryce having legally changed her surname now that she was officially one of their family. Both girls were simply processing their individual trauma. *I do kind of wish that Tessa would pick colouring her hair over slamming doors and biting though. Maybe we should ask Dr Hunt to review her medication again.*

They'd risked taking her off one of the originally prescribed pills six weeks ago, since Bryce especially had worried that the girl was too lethargic on it. Since then, Tessa's violent tendencies had slowly crept back in. The most notable incident had been her reaction when Hull refused to have that damn APSU repaired. Clearly,

she still needed some form of chemical assistance with her temper, but Hull felt sure that there had to be a healthy middle ground between wholly zoned out and actively aggressive. Especially given how he and Bryce were planning to have another baby. *Yeah, I'll talk to Hunt about the options today while Tessa is having her nanocochlear implants fitted. That way, they can run any additional tests needed while she's already strapped down.*

Dr Hunt had advised that they opt for internal nanocochlear augmentation, to prevent Tessa from trying to remove them herself afterwards. The procedure, scheduled for three thirty this afternoon, usually required only local anaesthesia, but Tessa was a difficult patient. Hull and Bryce had already resigned themselves to her being bodily restrained for any medical treatments. Bryce really struggled emotionally with witnessing it, and so Hull had taken on sole responsibility for today's visit to the medical centre. *It's better all-round if Bryce stays here at home with our other kids anyhow. Nadimiche said that she'd babysit Fisher and Rayne, but I know she's worried about keeping up with her studies ahead of college starting up again.*

He was proud of the teenager. She'd

demonstrated some real maturity over the past couple of months. Despite all of the crap that life had thrown at her – losing her original adoptive family in the Miami tragedy, being unjustly arrested not once but twice, forced to work for that maniac Carson Howard, and then the continuing unhealthy interest shown in her by PID – Nadimiche remained well on track to becoming a valuable member of society. Not even having to take a break from attending college to avoid PID snatching her from campus had put a dent in her ambitions. *Her internship with ANI went great too. No doubt about it, she's a great role model for our younger three. I'm glad I was able to convince the authorities to approve an official adoption. It's not as if anyone can be sure of when her exact date of birth was anyhow; not given how she was found abandoned as a baby like that.*

The latter argument had won the application, and now all Nadimiche's documentation stated June 1ST instead of March 5TH. Those twelve and a half weeks of difference were enough to have had her count as being only seventeen again and therefore just about still within the legal age range for adoption. Hull and Bryce had even thrown her a

second eighteenth birthday party along with the adoption celebration. It had made the perfect opportunity for them to get to know all of her existing friends. Most of them were acceptable, and Hull contented himself with keeping a close eye on the rest of them for now. *We don't want to risk letting anyone lead Nadimiche astray, after all.*

Leon Henry Duke was an unremarkable looking man of average height. Once cleanly shaven and possessed of a thick head of glossy black hair, now at fifty-two years old, he was slowly balding, rough bearded, and not at all concerned about either situation. Originally hailing from Massachusetts, he had moved to Orbetello six years ago to open a small trattoria and write trashy romantic novels about a vivacious young werewolf detective with large breasts and an unlikely name. Perhaps incredibly, the latter venture proved the more lucrative. Author L.H. Duke rocketed to the top of the bestseller list with the release of his very first book and had remained there ever since.

He kept the trattoria anyhow. As he liked to put it, Hecuba Kaine's ever increasingly risqué antics paid his bills, but Del Duca fed his soul. It also

enabled his people-watching hobby. Duke's near eidetic level of attention to detail was a lifelong habit that served his writing career well. Thanks to Grosseto's thriving tourist industry, there was never any shortage of potential inspiration for side characters here in Orbetello. Take now for example. It was approaching five o'clock on Friday afternoon, and a thin, pale haired figure dressed in a dull grey cotton trouser suit and cream linen shirt had just entered Del Duca. Every nuance in the unobtrusive set of their shoulders commanded those around them to ignore them. Anyone not trained in the art of actively observing would likely do exactly that.

Fascinated by his latest customer's body language, not to mention the general ambiguity of their appearance, Duke picked up a menu and moved to greet them. "Welcome to Del Duca! Would you like a table for one this evening, or are you expecting company?"

English proved the correct choice of language. They replied in the dry, clipped tones of someone born and raised in South East England. "It's just me, thank you. I'll take the corner table."

Ah, so they were in *that* profession, or at least

they had been. "Of course, please, follow me." Duke still found it amusing how many spies and ex-spies were rattling around Tuscany. *It takes one to know one though, I guess.*

That had mercifully been another lifetime; one that Duke glossed over whenever necessary with anecdotes about his days as a pilot. It wasn't exactly lying. After all, he had flown regularly during his career with ANI. He'd learned to prefer taking corner tables himself along the way. Less risk of being snuck up on if you kept a nice solid wall or two behind you. *I seriously hope this doesn't turn out to be another lame attempt to invite me back to that tangled mess!*

In fact, dinner went by quietly, with his corner table guest ordering cibrèò. It wasn't until they finished eating and made their way to the register to pay for their meal that things kicked up an unwanted gear or three. A tall, middle-aged man, dressed immaculately in a sharp black suit and aviator style sunglasses, entered the trattoria and strode immediately to the register. The sunglasses hid most of the upper half of his face, but his cheekbones hinted at an East Asian heritage. The newcomer's accent, as he addressed the non-

gender, was rooted firmly in America's Pacific Northwest. "Long time and no see, Nightingale. I had all kinds of trouble finding you. How's the food here, anyhow?"

"I liked it well enough; especially without you looming over me, Mr Hull. And it's Spence, not Nightingale." The English diner slid their wallet back into the inside pocket of their jacket. "Aren't you supposed to be in Christchurch?"

Duke watched from behind the register as the pair made their way out of the trattoria. He frowned pensively. Something felt off with the situation. That old familiar nagging whisper had started up at the edges of his subconscious; twisting his gut and raising the hairs on his neck. *Just like in Belarus, with Jena, and look how badly things panned out there. Seventeen dead, maybe four times as many others injured...nope, no way am I risking a repeat of that incident!*

Nodding to his two serving staff, Duke hurried out onto the cobbled street. The latter was a turned ankle waiting to happen, and had him moving carefully. As a result, he found himself too far away to do anything other than witness Hull bundling an obviously handcuffed Spence into the rear seat of

a sleek grey hover car. Despite Duke's best attempt at sprinting the remaining distance, it was too little too late. The spy turned author stared helplessly as the car powered up and pulled away, leaving him in its dust. "Damn it!"

Suddenly, the vehicle veered to the right, and mounted the kerb, before lurching upwards and flipping upside down. The horn blared mournfully: a long, flat sort of wail, sucking all other sound out of the area around the crash. Duke hurried over to the upended car, shouting urgently in Italian for others to come and help. He dropped to a crouch beside the driver's door. "Hey – can anybody in there hear me?" Are you guys okay, or...!"

Spence, whose cuffed hands were by now somehow in front of them instead of behind, kicked out the left side rear window of the car and wriggled out of the wreck feet first. They rolled and scrambled upright, nodding curtly to Duke as they held up their official BIINT ID for inspection. "Nightingale Spence: I'm with British International Intelligence. In brief, the driver of this car was an imposter working for the criminal organisation known as C.A.K.E – he pretended to be one of my colleagues in order to attempt to abduct me."

Duke finally remembered to close his mouth. He nodded dumbly for a moment before his brain caught up fully with what had just happened. "Uh, I'm Leon Henry Duke; formerly of ANI. Do you uh, so do you need me to call someone, or like, do anything here...?"

The thin English operative shook their head. "No thank you; it's all under control now. Although I suppose that it couldn't hurt for you to clarify that for the rest of the locals."

Duke nodded again, turning and gesturing to the other bystanders. His thoughts whirled even while he passed on the truth of what had just happened. *Just what kind of a person is this Nightingale Spence anyhow? How is this situation such a small load of flat out nothing to them?*

He found himself left wondering. Spence had already vanished by the time that the local emergency services arrived on the scene. Try as he might, Duke couldn't seem to find anybody who had noticed them go. He sensed that if he were to try digging, there would be precisely zero official record of any person matching their description ever having entered Tuscany. Ditto the imposter. Duke would happily bet decent money that any

enquiries at the local mortuary would redirect immediately to the British Consulate General over in Florence. *Naturally, the good people there won't be talking either.*

If nothing else, the incident had inspired him. By nine, he was at his writing desk: recreating the attempted abduction on the page in painstaking detail. It was to be the basis for the opening chapter of a brand-new Hecuba Kaine adventure. Obviously, in the book, Hecuba was the one who came to the rescue! Duke smiled as he read back over his description of the buxom young werewolf detective peeling back the roof of the wrecked car; revealing a trapped spy with pale eyes and even paler hair. *Maybe I should have the two of them hook up together. My readers do like there to be plenty of sizzling romance, after all – ha, not that I'm complaining!*

A faint reflection on the screen of his computer alerted him to the presence of another person. Duke tensed and swivelled around to face the intruder now standing in the doorway of his study. He slammed his laptop shut as he recognised them. "Spence...? Geez, so uh, no offense, but what the actual fuck are you even doing in my house?"

Spence yawned as they set down their lone suitcase. The handcuffs were gone by now, but had left bruises on their pale wrists. "Apparently, your claim of having worked for ANI passes inspection, and so I'm to wait here for extraction. Headquarters has deemed it as being the safest option available given the circumstances. Personally, I think you need some better locks."

Chapter Four – Watch My Back

Tessa hadn't wanted internal nanocochlear augmentation, but nobody else here in Dr Hunt's clinic had seemed to care about that. Kicking and biting had only resulted in her being strapped down for the treatment. Agent Hull had held her hand during the procedure, acting as if he thought that would help somehow. It hadn't. The needles had stung, and then whatever had been inside the needles had started working. All of the feeling in and around her ears had gone away for a while. When it had come back, she could hear again, for the first time since before falling sick from the measles.

Now it was four thirty in the afternoon, and Agent Hull was leading her out of the clinic; his big

hand still wrapped gently around hers, as if Tessa was some stupid little kid or something! He was talking about going for kosher ice cream on the way home. Acting like that house was anything more than the place where Children's Services forced her to live, and as if food would make all of the rest of today okay. *Ugh, I hate him so much! He's the worst person ever!*

Dr Hunt's clinic had seemed loud enough to her newly restored sense of hearing. Stepping through the automated doors into the main reception area of the medical centre was overwhelming. Tessa flinched backwards, reeling a little at all the noise. She couldn't help but feel relieved when Agent Hull squeezed her hand in reassurance. Turning on the spot, he led her straight back into the brightly painted corridor that they had just exited. The steel framed reinforced glass doors slid shut behind them, cutting off the sounds from the reception. *Okay, so maybe he's not really the worst person ever, but it's still mostly his fault that I can hear again. He won't let me have Vinnie repaired either.*

With all of that in mind, she pointedly refused to acknowledge his attempts at talking to her. After a few minutes, her adoptive father crouched down in

front of her and switched to signing instead of verbal communication. "Tessa, I need you to cooperate with me here. Tell me what's wrong – is it just that you're not used to hearing, or is there something else?"

Tessa glowered mutinously at him. Then a scuffle between two men waiting out in the main reception area caught her attention. She stared past Agent Hull as one of the male nurses tried to separate the pair. Both combatants turned on him instead; snarling and drooling. The nurse stumbled backwards an instant too late, clutching at his right forearm. Blood leaked through his fingers; spattering vivid red against the pale green flooring. Suddenly frightened, the girl signed urgently. "Two of the men sitting out there just attacked a nurse! They're acting like the people in the news reports when they got sick from the biohazard – one of them even bit him on the arm!"

Agent Hull immediately sprang to his feet, and turned to look towards the chaos that was now breaking out in the reception area. Tessa heard him mutter something underneath his breath. Then he pulled out his cell phone, tapped the screen to unlock it, and handed it to her. "Tessa, honey, I love

you, but I don't have time to coddle you right now. I know that you can hear me just fine, so I need you to be a big girl. Take my phone, and use it to contact Senior Agent Volker. Her number is stored on there. Text instead of calling if that's easier for you, but either way, *tell* her what's happening here. I'm going to go and try to contain the situation."

He drew his gun and strode forwards towards the automated doors. Just before stepping through, he slammed the flat of his right palm against the button that activated the emergency quarantine systems for the medical centre. An alarm sounded as the glass doors closed behind him. A solid metal shutter dropped outside of them. There was a faint hiss and click as the pneumatic seals engaged.

A short, brown-skinned woman dressed in violet scrubs and with her black hair scraped back into a bun, emerged from a side room and hurried over to Tessa. "Hey, kid, did you see who hit the emergency button?"

Tessa gulped. Her voice, unused for more than half of her life, sounded and felt almost alien to her as she answered the nurse. "He...he works for ANI. He said to...to use his phone to tell his boss what's happening. She's called Senior Agent Volker."

The nurse frowned and held out her hand for the cell phone. "Okay, sweetie, just give it here and I'll make the call. Now, what exactly is happening? Is there an active shooter out there, or something?"

Tessa handed over the phone. She pointed shakily to a nearby holographic display that listed the symptoms for the Miami biohazard in a family friendly way. This was the Paediatric Department, after all. "No! People were biting and stuff, like in the news reports!" She swallowed hard. "They...they looked *really* sick."

The search for Karen Bell was already well underway by the time that Greg Hull Senior arrived in Christchurch on behalf of BIINT, on Saturday August 3RD, 2097. The local ANI field office was a cramped two-room affair, located on the top floor of the American Embassy. It had an impressive view over the city from its windows, but Hull had no time to appreciate that. In fact, he had barely even confirmed his ID before Evan Shelby, the grim-faced male agent in charge of the operation, herded him back downstairs and into a hover car. It was approaching ten in the morning as they set out for the isolated road where Oliver's vehicle had

crashed. Shelby was driving. Hull, who was still thoroughly jetlagged, sank back into the front passenger seat and resisted the urge to rest his eyes. *It's too bad that undergoing FBT doesn't make you immune to these kinds of problems.*

Not that he didn't appreciate his new body, of course. In fact, it was beyond liberating not to have to worry about his heart. Being free from the various forms of mental conditioning inflicted on him over the years was damn nice too, even if it had thrown up a bunch of difficult memories and feelings. *Hey, that's why we have therapists, and in my case, a shit hot legal team to help prove that I'm the one who Bryce and Fisher really belong with. I guess that Greg Junior can keep the other kids if he wants. Well, unless it turns out that Bryce or Fisher feel especially attached to them. Then all bets are off.*

In the meantime, he was making the most of Morgan Hoy's company. The young doctor was proving to be the best part of working for BIINT. They weren't officially living together as a couple or anything, just fooling around as and when they both had time to spare. Hull had made sure to clarify that boundary early on. Morgan was fun, but not to the point where the American man was

willing to commit to anything serious. *Although, I guess I could do worse for a backup option, if things don't pan out the way that I'd like. There's no use pretending that the other version of me won't fight to keep what he has.*

Shelby interrupted his musing then, having apparently decided to strike up a conversation. "I hear that you used to work for ANI too, huh?"

Hull nodded. He didn't really want to bother getting into the details of how his cloned self had somehow taken over a large part of his identity. "Yeah – I was one of their deep cover agents. They had me planted inside GETEC, gathering information, that kind of stuff. I transferred to BIINT earlier this year."

Beside him, the brown-haired ANI agent kept his eyes fixed on the road. "So what made you decide to jump ship?"

"Oh, just the usual stuff." Hull yawned. "Better healthcare options, based in a location with fewer Level 4 biohazards, that kind of thing. The pension plan is about the same for both agencies."

The car glided around a bend in the road. Shelby chuckled mirthlessly. "I guess there wasn't any reason for you to stay, especially given the shit

that happened in Miami. Is it true they're talking about funding a repopulation effort?"

Hull shrugged. "I don't really bother following the news there now that I've relocated, but it would seem practical, wouldn't it? Plenty of people out there want approval for starting or increasing their family. I'm sure that at least some of them would be willing to move to Miami in order to get their FIL. After all, it's not as if the biohazard is still ongoing."

His phone beeped at him as a text message came through. Hull pulled it out and unlocked it with a sweep of his left thumb. He scowled as he read the message. "My colleagues back at BIINT say that someone was impersonating me over in Tuscany. So far, all the evidence indicates that C.A.K.E was responsible." He slid his phone back into his pocket. "I guess I should watch my back!"

Shelby nodded. "Yeah, I guess you should."

Then, switching on the car's self-driving option, he pulled out his sidearm and emptied the entire clip into the right-hand side of Hull's head at point blank range. Blood and brain matter splattered against the bullet resistant glass of the window. Hull was dead before he had time to have registered the sound of the first shot. Shelby holstered his

weapon, and retook control of the vehicle from the AI. "Probably should have been more fucking careful about whose daughter and niece you were messing with too, you creepy son of a bitch."

Three hours on from the initial outbreak at the medical centre, Senior Agent Laine Volker stared at her miraculously still alive agent as he and Tessa exited the building along with the rest of the survivors. "You have a concerning habit of self-endangerment, Agent Hull. I am beginning to suspect that it is not recently acquired."

He grinned at her. "Sorry, ma'am, but somebody needed to contain the outbreak to the main reception area. Given how I was the only ANI operative present, it felt like the most responsible course of action for me to take."

Volker glanced at Tessa, and then back at Hull. "You could also simply have activated the building's quarantine protocols and waited with your daughter. Why did you risk yourself?"

Hull nodded towards where some of the staff from the medical centre had set up a makeshift triage area. "One of the receptionists is *pregnant*, ma'am. With respect, I don't see how my leaving

her and all the other uninfected people there to die would have been the better choice. Anyway, it worked out okay: I managed to subdue and then contain both initial infected, and the nurse they attacked with zero fatalities. I guess that all those hours I logged on the firing range improving my marksmanship paid off."

"The latter is certainly fortunate for your assorted dependents, Agent Hull." Volker turned her attention to the rest of her agents; issuing them curtly worded but efficient instructions. Then she walked along with Hull and Tessa to where the former had parked his hover car. "On which subject, am I correct in understanding that Miss Meadows is scheduled to become your newest indentured companion on the morning of the upcoming Sunday?"

"Uh, yeah, why do you ask?" Hull made sure that Tessa had strapped herself into her car seat properly, before closing the rear left door of his vehicle. "Another attempt at making me examine my previous life choices, ma'am?"

"No." Volker tapped at the screen of the sleek tablet she habitually carried with her for work. "It would appear that not everyone in Miss Meadows'

extended family is of her parents' opinion on equality. Approximately two and a half hours ago in New Zealand, her maternal uncle Evan Shelby deliberately shot your older counterpart to death. He then returned to ANI's Christchurch field office and turned himself in for the murder."

Hull stared at her in shock. "I...he did *what?*"

"He killed him." Volker tapped again at the screen. "In brief, Agent Shelby claims that he committed the murder in order to protect his niece Callista Meadows, and his daughter Cassandra Shelby."

Her agent looked stunned. "Cassandra's father works for ANI? She never mentioned that! Wait, so why did he target the other Greg...oh. Ah. He mistook him for me, didn't he, ma'am?"

"That is the explanation that was provided by my counterpart in Christchurch, yes. I do not choose to speculate on how BIINT may have reacted to hearing it." Volker lowered her tablet. "Perhaps you should reflect on whether your previous interactions with Miss Shelby would be deemed as wholly appropriate. It is likely that there shall be an internal investigation into the matter as part of Agent Shelby's trial. Regardless of his intended target, he

has still committed murder."

"Thanks for the heads up, ma'am."

She gazed impassively at him. "I am merely advising you of the situation in accordance with my role as your superior, Agent Hull. There is no need to thank me."

Hull sighed tiredly as he opened the driver's door of his car. "It's called a *pleasantry*, ma'am. You know; one of those annoying little social norms that you keep insisting on ignoring."

Volker inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement. The sun was beginning to set; her red hair all but glowed in the changing light. "There is another, more troubling matter than Agent Shelby. Do you recall the data regarding C.A.K.E having made seventeen clones of you?"

"Yeah, of course I do." Hull nodded.

Volker raised her tablet again, and brought up another file. "There was an incident yesterday in the town of Orbetello, in Tuscany. A man who claimed to work for C.A.K.E attempted to abduct Nightingale Spence. He was almost certainly one of those clones. Therefore, it would seem that either Carson Howard did indeed find a means of resurrection following his encounter with the

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Szenoldyans, or that someone else has taken his place as the head of C.A.K.E."

Chapter Five – Hunting A Ghost

Not entirely retired freelancer Cerise Aldermere sat in her favourite armchair and stared at the visiting pair of NIT operatives in mildly amused disbelief. "Hold up – so the two of you are here taking up my Saturday morning asking me if I know anything about a freelancer with the right kinds of skills to pass as some random ass pilot?"

Caulfield nodded. "Yes: Warrant Officer Jenny Turner. Whoever took her place is clearly an expert in the art of disguise."

Cerise shrugged. "Well, I'll ask around, but I can't think of anyone who could have pulled off that stunt. Those kinds of planes need some pretty specialist training to fly. As for being an expert at disguises, I'm guessing that you ain't forgotten

about our run in with that face changing assassin back at the dairy farm?"

Drake shook her head. "That was one of our first lines of enquiry. Lionel Ashby is thoroughly dead, and the remainder of his family are all serving time. It can't be any of them."

"That doesn't mean that we aren't dealing with a person of similar capabilities." Caulfield sighed in frustration. "It's rotten luck that whoever it was managed to avoid leaving behind anything that might have proved forensically helpful! The only DNA found in and around the cockpit matches WO Turner herself, and the same goes for her locker area. One might almost think that we're hunting a ghost."

Craig Campbell paused in the charcoal sketch he was making of a pair of gulls, which were squabbling on the deck of his yacht over a discarded or more probably stolen sandwich. The black haired, blue-eyed man sat on a folding deckchair, just inside the open doorway of the vessel's wheelhouse. It was an excellent spot for an artist's needs; providing adequate shade for comfort, whilst not compromising on the light

required for sketching. With his immediate mooring neighbour, fellow artist Zoe Rusdyle, having kindly taken both of their toddlers to soft play, Campbell had spent the morning adding to his portfolio. Now something in the sharpness of the gulls' eyes had jogged his memory. *Christ on a unicycle, I almost didn't remember in time!*

Today marked the tenth week since he had ended things with Spence. Tomorrow, Sunday August 4TH, 2097, would be the thin non-gender's forty-first birthday. Campbell felt a sudden twinge of guilt at his having forgotten about that. He had previously planned to throw Spence a surprise party; something to help make up for how last year had seen them imprisoned on a remote island when they turned forty. That scheme had been long before everything fell apart in their relationship. *Still, broken up with each other or not, I can't believe that I almost let their birthday slip my mind!*

The gulls took flight abruptly, carrying off the remnants of the sandwich in opposite directions. Campbell stood up and stretched, resolving to see about decreasing the number of painkillers he took for his leg. The pills were affecting his memory. He

had all but completely forgotten about young Phil's birthday too, back at the end of May. Thankfully, Zoe had been on hand to help smooth things over there. It somehow didn't seem appropriate for him to ask her to help out again now. *She does quite enough little favours for me and Sam as it is. No – I'll sort something out for Spence by myself.*

Moxton, clearly unhappy over having left Spence behind in Tuscany on Thursday, was the first person to greet them when they arrived back at BIINT's London headquarters early on Saturday afternoon. He frowned at the sight of the bruising on their wrists. "Have you had that looked at yet, Housekeeping?"

Spence grimaced. "I put some arnica gel on it, of course, but I decided to wait until I was safely home for anything further. If you're hoping for a conversation, then you'll have to tag along with me to Medical."

"I can do that." He fell in alongside them as they walked. "Has Pembleton read you in on the Hull situation yet?"

The non-gender yawned. "Not yet, no, but I doubt that there's all that much to tell. The fellow

who tried abducting me was more than open about his allegiance to C.A.K.E, and since I know that the autopsy showed him to be a clone, I conjectured that he must have been some part of the cloning project that ANI uncovered evidence of on Ceres back in May."

Moxton nodded. "Yeah, that's the current thinking on that part, but I wasn't referring to him. I meant the Christchurch incident."

"What Christchurch incident?" Spence glanced curiously at their companion. "Wait, did our vaunted new colleague somehow manage to muck things up over there? All he had to do was collect Mr Dobos' vehicle! How on Earth does someone fail at that simple a task?"

The shaven headed handler shook his head. "He's *dead*. One of the ANI agents stationed there turned out to be Cassandra Shelby's father. He shot the bastard repeatedly in the side of the head, at point blank range."

Spence blinked for a moment, and then smiled. "Has anyone organised a whip around to pay for a thank you card yet?"

"That's more or less what the rest of us said too. Unfortunately, it's a temporary riddance." Moxton

leaned forwards and activated the retinal scanner outside of the entrance to Medical. "Medical only put a copy of his neural map into his new body. The original version is still in cryogenic storage along with the rest of him. I'm afraid he'll soon be back among the living."

Spence scowled mutinously as they took their place in front of the retinal scanner. "I suddenly share our field operatives' collective lack of trust in our doctors. Anyhow, aside from that, is there any word on the whereabouts of Karen Bell?"

Moxton nodded. "She got herself safely to Sefton. It's a small town, in the Waimakariri District. Ironically, she managed to raise the alarm over Oliver's hijacking *before* our report on the incident reached Christchurch. Half the people in Sefton were out looking for a kidnapped Englishman and a gang of traffickers! Still, it all worked out eventually. ANI is sorting out her return home...!"

He stopped mid-sentence, and Spence could immediately see why. The now open door revealed a far more chaotic scene than might have been anticipated. Dr Hoy's shell of choice for today, female with tightly braided bleached white blonde hair, dark hazel eyes, and perfectly applied bright

pink lip-gloss, was standing in the corridor, screaming furiously at Leister. "You stupid, thoughtless, idiot – why were you even down here in the first bloody place? What did you *think* would happen; mucking about with the thermostatic controls like that?"

Leister replied coolly, and in a deceptively calm sort of tone. "I *knew* exactly what would happen, doctor. By altering the temperature in the way that I did, I caused the conditions within the pod in question to become wholly inimical with human tissue."

Hoy spluttered tearfully. "But...but *why*...?"

"I decided to take a leaf out of Agent Shelby's book." Leister nodded politely then to Spence and Moxton. "More bluntly put, I made damned sure of *this* version of Gregory Yuuadai Hull never drawing breath again. BIINT can do without his particular brand of handling, wouldn't you agree, darlings?"

Not waiting to see how Moxton or Hoy might respond, Spence sprang forwards and engaged Leister in a fierce hug. "Thank you!"

If this sudden display of affection had surprised Leister, he didn't show it. Instead, he gently wrapped his arms around Spence; wordlessly

stroking their back as they buried their face in his chest. The non-gender shuddered as the overwhelming sense of stress caused by working alongside Hull finally began to dissipate. *It's over! It's actually finally bloody well over!*

They fought down the urge to kiss Leister. It wouldn't be remotely appropriate behaviour, even without Moxton and Hoy's presence. He was their mentor, or at least he *had* been. Because, really, precisely what was this fresh iteration of Leister to Spence? Perhaps even more keenly of note, what was it that the fellow *wanted* to be to them? *Is he honestly content to be my friend and nothing further than that? Doesn't he...don't I want something more?*

As usual, Spence quashed that line of thought almost as soon as it began. Wanting things that they couldn't have always had been one of their worse habits. It was a tad embarrassing really. Still, on the bright side, at least they'd gotten better at managing it over the years. *I only dread to think how much more of a horrid mess I might have made of things if I'd met Cob earlier on in my twenties than was the case!*

Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy sat behind her desk and scowled at the contents of the report displayed on her computer screen. Her tolerance for general stupidity was rapidly wearing thin. To be fair, she hadn't had much of it to begin with, but up until recently, this was something that she had always viewed as being a personal failing on her part. *Nowadays, I ain't so sure about that being the case.*

The human ambassadorial teams currently using Deimos Base as their shared embassy seemed determined to prove her default attitude correct. Not a day passed without at least one of the ambassadors demanding changes to their accommodation, or wanting the kind of meals that weren't available out here. More irritating still were the innumerable aides and assistants. If the latter weren't trying to access restricted areas out of curiosity, then they were ignoring basic safety protocols. Sometimes, they managed to do both at once, such as the young man in the report, who had thought that it would be a great idea to take an unapproved and unsupervised spacewalk. *Damn fool would have vented the atmosphere for that entire section! Everybody in there would have*

died. We were just lucky that all the base's exterior airlocks need access codes to open them.

Kennedy would more than happily have seen the back of all the visiting humans. She had voiced this opinion more than once by now; suggesting that the diplomats would be better off relocating their base of operations to Mars. Unfortunately, nobody with sufficient authority was willing to heed her concerns. The ambassadors and their staff looked set to remain on Deimos Base for at least the near future. All that Kennedy and her Marines could do was to try to make sure that they didn't cause too much havoc. *Heck, after this incident, I'll settle for just keeping the rest of us alive!*

There was also the challenge of keeping the smallest secret on base undiscovered: namely Kennedy's infant daughter, Ellie. The baby girl was supposed to be on Earth, in the custody of her so-called father, ANI Agent Greg Hull, but Kennedy had swapped her out with a clone back in May. So far, this deception had succeeded. Aside from the Marines here on Deimos Base, there was only one other human being who knew the truth. ANI Senior Agent Laine Volker was such a powerful psionic that she had immediately sensed what Kennedy

had done. Mercifully, deeming that the swap was in fact the most rational course of action available, Volker had remained silent. *Guess all I can do is keep hoping that she doesn't change her mind about that.*

The Szenoldyan ambassador knew the truth, which meant that so did the rest of his species. A large part of their hive consciousness seemed dedicated to hoarding gossip. In fact, Kennedy more than halfway suspected that the aliens regarded humanity in general as a source of casual entertainment – a sort of interactive soap opera, as it were. She was careful not to mention this trait to anyone on the ambassadorial teams. Something about their collective pomposity made her think that they would find it offensive. Besides which, the Szenoldyans enjoyed being mistaken for serious and aloof beings. *Far be it for me to spoil their fun!*

By now, the Marines stationed here on Deimos Base had grown accustomed to their alien neighbours. None of them so much as blinked when encountering the life-sized psionic projection of the Szenoldyan ambassador, who still tended to wander wherever he chose. It was surprisingly easy to accept the idea of a giant talking mantis that

could walk through solid objects. In fact, Kennedy's grizzled second in command Gunnery Sergeant Archibald Woods had even taken to including the entity in question in his regular security drills. The Szenoldyan appeared to find the concept of feigning combat scenarios amusing. *Can't say as I blame him. Used to him or not, he still manages to scare the crap out of people when he pops out of a random vent and tags them. It's pretty damn funny when it ain't happening to me.*

She looked down to her left-hand side then, at where Ellie was cooing contentedly in her bassinet. For a child who had been born fourteen weeks prematurely, and with so much wrong with her, she was doing well. The gene therapy needed to save her life had done its job. Yesterday had marked the thirty-second week since her birth. Eight months old, but count her as being only four and a half – that was the official advice. *Huh, now there's a thing. What date of birth should I put on her replacement paperwork? Maybe I ought to just use my original due date. Yeah, that makes sense.*

However, first, there was the issue of actually acquiring said paperwork. Kennedy still hadn't risked reaching out to any of the people known to

her who had the means to produce a fake identity. She knew, of course, that she couldn't put it off forever. Ellie would need some kind of proof of her existence. There was healthcare to think of, for one thing. Even if she somehow never needed to see a doctor, she'd still need to go to school. Then there would be whatever job she went into, and all of the associated financial stuff that went along with that. Kennedy sighed to herself. *Maybe it's time that I talked to Spence about doing me a couple of favours.*

Chapter Six – Letting People In

Leister had changed his mind about what would be the best sort of flowers to buy for Nightingale. Instead of black orchids, the bouquet in his hands boasted a single, pure white, thornless rose in full bloom as its centrepiece. There was still maidenhair fern as greenery, but he had forgone the gardenia foliage in favour of yellow freesia and a generous sprinkling of delicate little blue violets and forget-me-nots. The wide, dark grey ribbon around the bouquet was of a stiff, semi-transparent fabric, layered over with rainbow coloured glitter. According to the florist, it was a perfect romantic birthday selection for a non-binary person. *I shall simply have to hope that it's received in the manner that I intend it. Oh well, time for me to risk a*

little courage, I suppose!

He stepped out of the lift and walked over to the door of the New Chelsea Towers penthouse apartment. A sudden, ridiculous urge to adjust his tie gnawed at him as he announced his arrival via the intercom. Leister ignored it; smiling as the door opened to reveal a worried looking Heidi Hedturner. "Good afternoon, darling. I trust that I'm here in time for the surprise party?"

"Yes, of course you are! Spence is out with Byron and the children at the martial arts class, just as planned." Heidi beamed at him as she ushered him over the threshold. "It is good to be seeing you, Cob. You are *almost* the first who is arriving. We are having two of the unexpected guests too, however."

Leister grimaced as he followed her through to the living room and saw Campbell lounging comfortably on one of the sofas. Seamus – no, the last that he'd heard the boy's official name was *Sam* now – sat on the rug beside his father's feet, happily chewing on a teething rusk. "Hello Craig. I wasn't aware that you and Nightingale were back on speaking terms with one another."

Campbell waved off his concerns. "Oh, don't

worry, it's hardly as if we're mortal enemies, Spence isn't *that* petty! Anyhow, that's partly why I'm here. I wanted to do something nice for them on their birthday; take them out to dinner perhaps, or to the theatre. I thought that Heidi could babysit Sam easily enough. Honestly, I can't believe that nobody let me know about this party! I could have helped organise things."

"Yes, well, as you can see, everything is already well in hand, but thank you all the same." Leister glanced at Heidi. "I do so hate to be a bother, but could I possibly trouble you with finding a vase for these flowers, darling? I'll see to letting people in and such."

Heidi nodded and took the bouquet. "I will put them on the dining table with the food. The other guests should all be arriving very soon."

"Thank you, darling." Leister waited until the young woman had left the room. Then he gestured sharply for Campbell to stand up. "You can't stay, Craig. It isn't fair on Nightingale. If you're serious about mending your friendship with them, then good, but for pity's sake, do it *properly*, with plenty of advance notice, and *not* just out of the blue on their birthday!"

Campbell's face fell. For an instant, genuine sadness showed in his dark blue eyes. Then he scowled and got to his feet, scooping Sam up and settling the toddler on his hip. "Fine – never let it be said that I stay where I'm not wanted! Tell Spence that I'll ring them later."

"I'll be sure to let them know." Leister ushered Campbell and Sam out of the apartment, closing the front door behind the pair with no small degree of relief. He really would pass on the message, of course, but whether Nightingale would care to take anything to do with Campbell again was hardly any of his business either way. *Although I certainly shan't blame them if they don't.*

Kathryn took charge as she led Barnabas and Phil into what had very recently become her favourite of the bakeries in and around the Chelsea Bridge area. The little shop in question was roughly midway between home and the leisure centre where the children attended their weekly MMA class. "Remember what Uncle Byron said earlier: we need to buy something that Aunty Val likes eating, and not just something that we like instead!"

Her twin rolled his eyes impatiently. "We aren't

stupid, Kathryn! Phil – what do you think they might like as a birthday present?"

"Huh?" Phil blinked, startled. He was still adjusting to having a say in anything. "Um...I suppose we should just try to find something nice that Heidi can't make at home?"

Kathryn frowned. "Well, there are always lots of nice things for sale in here, but I expect that Heidi knows how to make all of them!"

Barnabas pointed to the top shelf in one of the bakery's glass-fronted counters. "What about those funny little rainbow-coloured biscuits? Macarons – is that sign spelled properly?"

The pale haired twins wandered over to peer at the display; calling out to one of the sales assistants as they did so. Phil hung back, not wanting to be underfoot. He didn't feel as if he knew anywhere nearly enough about Spence yet to help with the decision anyhow. *It's nice of Kathryn and Barnabas to include me, though.*

A familiar face amid the crowds walking past outside the front window of the bakery caught his attention. Blinking in stupefaction, Phil rushed out of the door and onto the street. Standing on tiptoe, he stared in the direction that he thought the smartly

dressed blonde woman must have gone in. It was no use. This part of London was far too crowded for such efforts, even on a Sunday. The woman had already vanished. *That's if she was really even there to begin with! No, I probably just imagined it or something.*

Barnabas tapped him on the shoulder then. "Are you okay, Phil? Why'd you run off like that? Aunty Val and Uncle Byron said we weren't to leave the shop until they came to fetch us."

"I know, sorry, Barnabas." Phil sighed and shook his head. "I just...ugh, okay, so it's really silly, but I honestly thought that I saw the woman who pretended to be my mum."

The other boy frowned. "I thought she died?"

Phil shrugged. "I think it was probably someone else who looks like her, that's all. Did you and Kathryn decide on what to buy yet?"

"Sort of – we're getting some of those macarons to start with. The lady helping us says that they're meringues, not biscuits. There are thirty different flavours!" Barnabas led the way back into the bakery. "Are you going to tell Aunty Val and Uncle Byron about the woman you saw?"

Kathryn, who had overheard the latter question,

looked round from where she was trying to decide between a dozen varieties of cantuccini and amaretti. "What woman?"

"Phil saw someone outside who looked like Miss Vasnetsova." Barnabas peered at the assorted free samples on the plate in front of his sister. "Wow, those all look nice! So, shall we just get one or two of each of them, like we are with the macarons?"

The sales assistant, whose staff nametag read Desiree, beamed at them encouragingly from behind the counter. "That would be a really lovely choice for a birthday! Would you like to add a box of our fudge? There are three flavours in stock today. Remember, with a big order like this, you get ten percent off the final price."

Phil pointed hesitantly at a different counter. "Um, should we get them some mini tray bakes too? Look – there are red velvet cookie bars, with white chocolate chips."

"There are chocolate fudge and salted caramel brownies too!" Barnabas gazed hungrily at the selection of bite-sized treats. There were eight options in all, each one a miniature work of culinary art. "Oh, and lemon and lime iced fondant fancies!"

Kathryn looked back at the sales assistant. "Can we get a box of fudge with all three flavours in it and then one of each sort of the mini tray bakes too, please, Desiree? That's all, thank you."

"Yes, that's no trouble at all, love! I'll go get one of our special gift hampers and put it all together for you now." Desiree nodded towards the till. "Just pop on over to Becky there, and she'll ring it up for you."

The three children did as instructed. Kathryn, who was in charge of the money, carefully pocketed the change along with the receipt whilst they waited for Desiree to finish packing up the hamper. Then she turned her attention to Phil. "So is it true? Did you really see someone out there who looked like Miss Vasnetsova?"

Phil sighed. "I thought I did, yes, but it doesn't matter. I mean it's not as if it could really have been her or anything. It's just one of those weird random coincidences, that's all."

Barnabas tilted his head, looking pensive. "What if it turns out that she secretly cloned herself? You know; like with FBT or something!"

His sister nodded sharply. "You ought to tell Aunty Val and Uncle Byron when they get here, just

in case it *wasn't* only a coincidence."

The front door of the bakery opened before Phil could reply to that. To all three of the children's surprise, Campbell entered, carrying Sam. He paused when he spotted them standing near the till, and then smiled. "Hello, you lot! I didn't expect us to bump into anyone we knew in here! How are all of you? I suppose you're here to buy something for Spence's surprise birthday party, eh?"

Kathryn scowled at him. "You left us again, Craig! You said at the farm that you'd move back in with Aunty Val, but you *didn't*."

Her brother joined in with her complaint. "You weren't even there for Phil's birthday! He thought you'd forgotten all about him, didn't you, Phil?"

Phil felt his ears start to redden with embarrassment. He edged backwards a little. "Leave me out of this!"

Campbell looked guilty. "Sorry about that, Phil. My medication does make me a bit forgetful sometimes. Things were rather hectic then too, what with me establishing my portfolio and such. At least I remembered eventually! Did you get the model kit Zoe and I sent?"

The boy nodded shyly. "Yes, thanks. Barnabas

helped me to build it."

"That's good." To Phil's relief, Campbell changed the subject. "Look kids, the situation with me and Spence is *complicated*. One thing that we both agree on is that we want what's best for all of you, including the younger three. We aren't together as a couple any longer, but that doesn't mean that I've left your lives! You can still contact me whenever you want; I'm only a phone call away. I'll always be glad to hear from you. I've missed you a lot lately, and so has Sam. Isn't that right, son?"

Sam was clearly far more interested in the various cakes displayed in the glass-fronted counter next to the till. "Hungry, Da!"

Kathryn frowned. "But I *tried* phoning you, when you weren't there for Phil's birthday, and it said that you'd changed your number! How are we supposed to contact you if we don't know what your phone number is?"

"Wait, what?" Campbell seemed to be startled now. "I haven't changed my number, Kathryn. Are you sure that you didn't misdial?"

The girl shook her head vehemently. "No, because I had you stored on my phone, so I just

clicked on your name."

Campbell took out his phone. "Right, well we need to get to the bottom of this! Ring me now, Kathryn. Let's see if it works properly."

"All right, Craig." Kathryn tapped at the screen of her phone. There was silence, and then the faint sound of the automated message from the speaker. "See? It did it again!"

Desiree arrived with their purchase then. "Here you go! One customised gift hamper, fully wrapped. Will there be anything else today?"

Campbell nodded and swiftly jotted down his phone number on the back of one of the bakery's complimentary business cards. "Actually, would you mind just dialling this number from your shop's landline, please? The children have been having trouble getting through to my phone, and I'd like to know whether or not it's just them."

The woman shrugged. "Well, as long as you buy something afterwards, sir."

She took the card and bustled off. A moment later, Campbell's phone rang. He answered it, thanked Desiree, and hung up. "Right, so other people can get through. Kathryn, just double check the number stored on your phone against the card I

gave to the sales assistant. Perhaps a random glitch has mixed up some of your stored contact numbers or something."

Kathryn did as he asked. "It's definitely the same number, Craig."

"Hmm, right, well I don't know what's going on, but I'm going to find out." Campbell smiled at Desiree. "Thanks for your help. I'll take an éclair for myself and one for each of the children too, please. Just a plain pancake for Sam here though – he's a bit young for all that cream and sugar."

They were all standing outside the bakery, finishing eating their snacks, when Spence and Caulfield arrived with the younger twins in their pram. Spence didn't quite glare at Campbell, but that was probably only out of concern for Sam's feelings. "I wasn't expecting to see you and your son here, Mr Campbell."

The former spy seemed unruffled. "Well, we drove up to London for your birthday, but Leister said that it wasn't appropriate for us to turn up unannounced. In hindsight, he had a point. Anyhow, Sam and I were just on our way back to the car when we stopped off at the bakery here to grab a bite to eat, and bumped into the children. I

must say that it's a good thing that we happened to meet up. There's something terribly strange going on with Kathryn's phone. It doesn't connect when she rings me."

Meanwhile, Barnabas was tugging impatiently at his aunt's sleeve. "There's another thing too, Aunt Val! Phil saw a woman go past the bakery earlier who looked like Miss Vasnetsova! We told him that he ought to tell you and Uncle Byron about her, but he must have forgotten."

Phil objected hurriedly to this suggestion; cringing inwardly at the horrified looking expressions that were now on Agent Caulfield and Campbell's faces. "Spence, I didn't *forget*! I...I just didn't want to interrupt Craig when he was talking, that's all. I was going to tell you, I swear!"

If Spence was cross with him for keeping quiet, then they didn't show it. Instead, the thin non-gender sighed quietly. "Don't panic, Phil. It's just one more thing for the list."

Kathryn grabbed hold of Campbell's free hand. "I think that Craig and Sam should both come home with us, Aunt Val! You know, in case it turns out that Phil's pretend mummy secretly has a clone or something."

Her aunt looked pained. "Please stop tempting fate, Kathryn. I...ugh...fine, Craig, you can come back to the apartment if you like. Just don't read anything more into the invitation."

Campbell nodded his understanding. "Don't worry, Spence. I think we both know exactly where we stand nowadays. I'm not here to stir up trouble, especially not today! Oh, and speaking of which, happy birthday."

Chapter Seven – Still Adapting

“Hold the lift please, Rosa!” Dr Nathaniel Whitby scrawled his signature onto the New Chelsea Towers' guest book and then sprinted over to the lifts. He called back to the third member of their group. “Come on, Quincy! We don't want to be late for Spence's party.”

His fellow BIINT technician, Dr Kellie Rosa smiled as he joined her inside the lift. “Don't worry, Nathaniel. The invitations said one o'clock – it's not even a quarter to yet. We're here in plenty of time.”

Whitby leaned back against the mirrored interior of the lift and tried to catch his breath. “Yes...well...you know how Housekeeping is always ahead of schedule...!”

Rosa patted his shoulder kindly. "Heidi said on the phone earlier that Byron would keep them out until one. The older three children have martial arts training on Sunday mornings, so he's using that as the excuse."

Quincy stepped into the lift then, gazing around him in wonder at how the various sensors in his seemingly wholly organic new form processed his surroundings. "Apology for delay in journey, Creator – this unit is still adapting to having a human passing chassis!"

"It's *fine*, Quincy!" Rosa shook her head as the lift doors closed. "Honestly, Nathaniel, it's three in the morning on a Saturday. No one will mind us being the last guests to arrive."

Both of her companions stared at her. Whitby was still wheezing slightly as he spoke. "Are you feeling quite alright today, Rosa?"

Quincy was blunter in his approach. "This unit suggests immediately adjusting calendar settings to correct day and time, female colleague unit."

Rosa blinked, thinking carefully about what she had just said. "Wait – this is Sunday afternoon! Why in the world was I wittering on about Saturday morning?"

By now, Whitby's brow had furrowed with concern. "I don't know, but I'd really prefer that you get it checked out as soon as possible. Your brain might be suffering from a malfunction."

Rosa grimaced, but nodded her agreement nonetheless. "You're right of course. Still, I'd like to try and keep it between the three of us for now. You'll be the one who runs the tests anyhow, Nathaniel. We can read Medical in as and when necessary."

The senior technician hummed worriedly. "I'm obliged to file a report on the matter regardless of what my findings might turn up. That will include the date and time of the inciting issue. Perhaps you ought to flag it with work yourself first. We don't want anyone accusing you of trying to hide what happened."

"Nothing happened, not really!" Rosa folded her arms petulantly. "I got confused, that's all! People make mistakes with what they say all the time. It doesn't have to mean that I'm *broken*."

"No one's saying that you're broken!" Whitby hastened to sooth his colleague's understandably hurt feelings. "It's just standard BIINT procedure; you know the rules as well as I do. They've gotten even

stricter since the WO Turner incident. Please, Rosa, just log it yourself for now. It's better than giving them any reason to start investigating you."

The lift halted then, and the doors opened, releasing the three of them onto the penthouse level of the building. Rosa took out her phone as she walked. "I'll email in about it now. Can we all agree not to mention it at the party? I don't feel like fielding random questions right now."

Whitby nodded his assent immediately. Quincy however, appeared conflicted at the request. "This unit is not in agreement on withholding data from male sibling unit."

Rosa blinked in confusion for a moment. "Oh – you mean Dobos, don't you? Fine, you can tell him, and the rest of our work friends too, but be careful about it, Quincy. Remember there will be people at the party who aren't from BIINT."

The newly forged android only just had time to agree to this, before the door of Spence's apartment opened. Leister smiled as he greeted the trio. "It's good to see you all, darlings. Do come in. Nightingale isn't here yet, but we're all set for their arrival. Quincy – how are you finding life in a humanoid chassis?"

"This unit appreciates the upgrade!"

Eighteen-year-old Callista Meadows shuffled forwards miserably into the mercifully well air-conditioned New Arrivals Lounge of Miami International Airport along with the rest of the early Sunday morning travellers. Seeing her recently updated passport again at the desk was a humiliating reminder of her recent change in social status. Hindsight, Callista reflected bitterly, was a bitch. Yeah, sure, she knew *now* that she hadn't fully appreciated the importance that her parents put on their beliefs, but what good did it do her? *It ain't as if I can just pack a bag and run away from the situation. Not now that they've outright sold me!*

She'd checked the fine print on the contract about a hundred times now. Her parents had arranged for her to serve five years of indentured companionship, including sexual relations. After that, presuming that she managed not to rack up any additional charges along the way, she could leave. *One thing's for sure, I ain't ever going back to my parents again!*

Agent Hull – ugh, no, the stupid contract stipulated that she call him Greg now, or else Sir –

was waiting to collect her. "Welcome back to Miami, Callista. Your luggage is in the car."

Callista couldn't even look at him, despite her parent's repeated warnings for her to behave like a good girl. Instead, she stared down at her sandaled feet. "Hi."

He put his left arm around her waist; pulling her in to walk beside him. "Let's go hit the road before the morning traffic picks up."

She spent the ride back to her new home sitting rigidly in the passenger seat of Greg's hover car. The house was quiet when they arrived. Greg closed the front door behind them. "I figured that it might be easier for you to settle in if we had the place to ourselves. Bryce and the kids will be back at four thirty this afternoon. They've all gone out to the zoo for the day."

Callista nodded her understanding: four thirty was eight hours away, and she was all too sure that she could guess what he wanted to do until then. Her stomach lurched. "Okay."

Greg carried her luggage upstairs, leading the way into a bright double bedroom with a queen-sized bed. "Okay, so this is going to be your room. It's fully en suite. You'll need to make up your bed

every morning, and keep things tidy enough that the household cleaning robots can function. The bathroom facilities are self-cleaning, but again, it's your responsibility to pick up after yourself in there. Bryce and I are next door on the left. The room to the right belongs to our eldest daughter Nadimiche. You'll meet her later – she's the same age as you. Tessa's room is just across the hall, as is the nursery for our youngest two. I'm sure that you remember all three of them from our last encounter."

"Yeah, I do thanks."

He left her alone for an hour to unpack and freshen up after her flight. When he came back into the room, he knocked first, and waited for her permission before he entered. "I called your parents and let them know that you've arrived with me safely. Do you want anything to eat or drink?"

She flinched. "You mean before we start...?"

Greg sighed. "Ah, I should have known that you'd be worried about *that* part of the contract. Well, if it helps you to feel any better, we're not going to start anything along those lines. You're obviously scared out of your mind right now."

Callista stared up at him; almost dumbfounded. "But...but the contract...and...and back in that

base during the outbreak, you...!"

"Okay, calm down. First, the contract is just a legal document confirming your role as my indentured companion, nothing more. No one is going to check up on whether we've made use of the damn sex clause. As for how I acted towards you back in New Tallahassee, well, what can I say? You're a very attractive young woman, and based on what I knew about your cousin, I thought you were looking for a good time. I hit on you, sure, but I meant what I told you then about consent. I'm not a *rapist*, sweetheart." He gestured towards the doorway. "So – you want to come downstairs and grab some lunch?"

She nodded shyly, still not quite daring to believe her luck. *Huh, okay, so maybe this won't be so bad after all.*

It had been a good birthday party, in Spence's opinion. Now, ninety minutes on from the initial surprise, the food, cake included, was mostly eaten, and the presents opened. All that remained was that comfortable sort of casual interaction that came with the territory for such well-established social connections. *When did I make this many*

friends? Even Doris Weaver sent me wine and a card, and she's in Patagonia!

Admittedly, there had been some awkwardness regarding Campbell attending. Still, a nice rule of birthday parties was that those organising things would make sure to keep the recipient well clear of any unpleasantness. As such, Spence had barely seen Campbell since arriving home, which suited them perfectly. They had almost asked for similar action regarding Ashley Jenkins, but thankfully, the young woman in question hadn't stayed past the first half an hour anyhow. The apartment held too many memories for her. *To be fair, I shouldn't hate her. She's Cob's ex, not mine, and he's clearly not holding a grudge about it.*

Jenkins' father, Paul Benedict, his partner Cerise Aldermere, and her seven-year-old son Jamal-Kristof, had all left along with Jenkins, making the excuse that the boy had homework needing finished. Spence wondered what it was like parenting a child who went along politely with such excuses. They couldn't imagine Kathryn or Barnabas ever being so agreeable, or Dobos' son Brett either, for that matter. *I suppose that Phil might be. He's terrified of annoying anybody. What did*

Magdalena Vasnetsova do to leave him so very cowed?

The subject of the supposedly deceased Russian trafficker was high in everyone's thoughts again now, thanks to Phil's revelation in the bakery. With current technology, it was all too possible to raise the dead. Who could say whether someone might have arranged it for Vasnetsova? If anything, it seemed far too likely. Her clientele was still out there: unidentified would-be purchasers of underage soldiers and assassins. The dozen stolen children rescued from her secret lair in Bournemouth were all still in the process of being deprogrammed. *Cryostasis pods with built-in brainwashing – that's not something that one picks up on the ordinary levels of the deep web. No, she must have had a contact in one of the bigger corporations. Perhaps GETEC before ANI shut them down, or even C.A.K.E. Hmm, or worse, some random corrupt military type. Christ, I hate those sorts of people.*

Thinking about the cryostasis pods raised another question for Spence. Why had Vasnetsova gone to the additional effort of raising Phil as if he were really her son? What was different about him that

spared him from the same treatment as her other projects? It didn't seem likely to have been due to sentiment, and she certainly hadn't needed him as cover. The existence of the ill-fated robot boy, John, proved the latter. Spence frowned as they thought about the matter. *Raising children is a full-time job. Why didn't she put him on ice with the others?*

"Can I offer a penny for your thoughts, darling?" Leister smiled as he handed Spence a bright blue coloured cocktail, garnished with a thin wedge of lime. "Or will a decent blue margarita suffice?"

Spence took a small sip from the salt-rimmed glass, savouring the drink's bitter flavour. "I was just wondering why Vasnetsova hadn't stuck Phil in a pod along with the rest of her victims."

"Ah, and I presume, weighing the likelihood of today's sighting having merely been a perfectly innocuous random lookalike?" Leister glanced across the room to where the four older children still present were surreptitiously helping themselves to more of the birthday cake. "There isn't much else that we can do about it for now, darling. Byron and Lottie have their people checking the CCTV records for that area. They'll let us know what turns up."

"So, in the meantime I should just forget about it?" Spence scoffed, and then immediately felt guilty. "Sorry, Cob – that was uncalled for. You're right. I ought to leave it be for now."

Leister nodded. "I expect that it's a good deal easier to give that sort of advice than it is to follow it, darling. After all, you're the one who's been left raising the boy. Doubtless, it's you that he'll turn to with any questions of his own."

"He's not the sort of child who pesters." Spence tried to focus on something other than the gorgeous blue steel of Leister's eyes, or the soft reddish-gold of his hair. "Oh, I meant to say it sooner, but thank you for the flowers. They're lovely; very tasteful."

He smiled at them. "Not too ambiguous, I trust, darling?"

Spence shook their head. "It's subtle, but I could see what you were going for immediately. The colours of the flowers mirror those of the non-binary flag."

"Ah, well, we can thank Alan for that." Leister pulled a laminated grey business card out of the left breast pocket of his cream linen blazer and handed it to Spence. "Alan Smith – he's a florist. He

has a shop on Old Brompton Road."

"I'll keep him in mind for the next time that I need to buy anyone else flowers." Spence tucked the card into the back right pocket of their black twill trousers. They weren't about to embarrass Leister over his having forgotten their quiet dislike of cut flowers. "Anyhow, I'd best check with Miss Hedturner before I drink too much more of this. It shan't do for me to get drunk if she's not available to mind the children."

Chapter Eight – Every Single Petal

Leister was standing just inside the sliding glass doors leading out onto the balcony, chatting with Caulfield and Drake, by the time that Spence had finished discussing childcare arrangements with Heidi. Always far more diligent than her wages deserved, the au pair had cheerfully volunteered to take all seven children, and Brett's seven-and-a-half-month-old Vizsla puppy Scooter, out to Battersea Park for a while; to let the rest of the adults present at the party enjoy themselves more freely. Making a mental note to find some way of repaying this immense favour, Spence sank down onto one of the sofas in the living room, intent on finishing their drink. *Hmm, peace perfect peace!*

Dobos, his left arm still in a sling, sat down on

their right, nodding at their glass as he did so. "Is that tequila I see you drinking, andro?"

"Cob was thoughtful enough to make me a blue margarita." Spence picked off the lime wedge and popped it into their mouth, peel and all. They hummed blissfully as they chewed.

Dobos took a sip from the bottle of craft beer in his hand. "Right – well, Sunday day drinking aside, do you mind if I ask you a nosy question?"

Spence shrugged as they swallowed the lime. "I reserve the right not to answer it."

"That's fair enough." The red-haired man paused, as if gathering his thoughts. "Okay, so you and Leister...!"

Whatever Dobos had been about to say, the sudden arrival of Campbell interrupted him. Campbell flourished his phone angrily at both of them as he sat down on Spence's left on the remaining free bit of the sofa. "You won't believe what Whitby found wrong with my phone!"

Spence took another sip of their drink. "Do we have to get it in three guesses or less?"

Dobos eyed them both warily. "Craig, mate, maybe now's not the best fucking time for this."

Ignoring the warning, Campbell turned his

phone around so that Spence and Dobos could see the screen. "Someone accessed it and blocked almost everyone I know from being able to contact me!"

"Well, it wasn't *me*, if that's what you were worried about." Spence gestured vaguely towards the rest of the people present at the party. "I don't think that it's likely to have been any of them either, but you might as well ask. You know – process of elimination, and so on."

Campbell frowned. "Spence, are you *drunk*?"

The non-gender bounced to their feet. "No, but I'm certainly *trying* to be! Do me a birthday favour please, Mr Dobos, and see if you can help him out with this phone mystery thing."

Spence stalked away from the conversation, glass in hand, and vanished into the kitchen. Campbell stared after them for a moment, and then looked at Dobos in bewilderment. "What's gotten into them?"

Dobos scowled at him. "That's what I was fucking trying to find out, before you interrupted! One thing's for bloody sure, they're wound too tightly to be safe right now. I could sense that fucking much from across the room."

"Oh." Campbell put his phone away.
"Um...should we...should I try to talk to them...?"

"No." Dobos scrambled up from the sofa.
"You've done enough fucking damage already."

Campbell stood too, glaring back at Dobos. "All I did was to tell them what had happened with my damned phone! They have a right to know that someone's been interfering with our lines of communication – what if they, or any of the rest of you, had needed my help with something but couldn't reach me?"

"What, you mean like the time when it looked as if Spence had been fucking murdered, and you pissed off to fuck knows where, while Cob and the rest of us pulled together to look after the kids?" Dobos was sneering angrily now. A roiling tide of contempt for the other man's actions filled him, but he kept his voice low. "So fucking what if your fucking phone got fucking hacked? We're fucking used to not being able to reach you! The only person here who even *tried* contacting you over the past ten weeks was Kathryn, and that was when you didn't fucking bother turning up for Phil's birthday. Are you going to try and argue now that your phone being mucked about with made you

magically fucking forget about him turning eleven?"

"Of course I'm bloody not!" Campbell all but hissed the words. He stepped forwards menacingly, letting his body language do the shouting as he deliberately encroached on Dobos' personal space. "I'm saying that Whitby reckons my phone was accessed *manually*, not remotely. Since the only time that it's not in my hand or in my pocket is when it's charging, that means that whoever tampered with it did so aboard my yacht, most likely while Sam and I were both asleep in our beds for the night!"

Dobos blinked as the weight of that statement sank in. "Shit, yeah, that does put a bit of a different fucking spin on it."

Moxton, who had been sitting elsewhere with Tanya and Jolley, calmly stepped in between the two of them then. "Is everything okay here?"

"Yeah, it's fine." Dobos nodded curtly. "Craig was just explaining about someone having gotten hold of his phone and blocked everyone. They'd have had to have been onboard his boat when he and Sam were both there to do it."

Moxton frowned. "That's not good."

Campbell shrugged. "Well, on the bright side, at least it makes for a shorter list of suspects! There aren't many people stealthy enough to pull something like this off."

"To be honest, I'm not convinced that that makes it any better." Moxton looked thoughtful for a moment. "What about Hull? The younger version of him has access to stealth technology, and both versions are bastards enough to want to mess with you like that."

"I'd say that it's a good enough place to start digging, anyhow." Campbell stepped back slightly. "Is the older one still working for BIINT, or has Pembleton finally seen through him?"

Dobos grinned viciously. "He pissed off the wrong person and got his fucking head blown off in New Zealand! It gets better though. He'd already gone through FBT, so in theory he had his old body and such still there as a back-up copy, right? Well, Dr Hoy was all set to defrost him, or else just clone him a new body, when Cob stepped in and literally pulled the fucking plug. See, back when he initially founded Housekeeping, he had it written into BIINT's rules that anyone working in that role would have the right to use whatever means they deemed as

necessary to eliminate rogue operatives."

By now, Campbell was smiling too. "He declared Hull a rogue operative?"

Moxton nodded. "It turns out that Housekeeping can do that without needing to clear it with anyone else. There's a clause in the very small print; the stuff that nobody pays much attention to most of the time. Chances are that Pembleton wasn't even aware of it. After all, it was her predecessor who signed off on Leister establishing the role."

Campbell shook his head. "No, she *definitely* would have known about the clause. Trust me; she doesn't let things like that slip past her notice. I'd hazard that she shan't be happy about Leister applying it to Hull though; not after all of the effort that went into recruiting the bastard. He was one of her special projects, if you ask me. She would have had *plans* for him."

"Cob can take care of himself." Dobos glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "It's Spence who I'm worried about. Something had them right fucking riled up there, and it wasn't Craig."

"Hmm, well, since you're sure that it wasn't me, then you shan't mind if I try talking to them about it." Campbell began limping away even as he

spoke. "Let's face facts: I know Spence better than anyone else here does. The mystery of my phone will just have to wait for a while."

He found Spence sitting alone with their drink in the kitchen, on one of the breakfast bar's tall stools. Campbell smiled ruefully as he sat down next to them. "Sorry for going on about my phone earlier. It wasn't particularly considerate of me. So – things are getting serious between you and Caulfield, eh?"

Spence shook their head. "He helps me out a bit on Sundays with the older children, but we're just friends."

"Are you sure that *he* knows that?" Campbell frowned. "I'm not trying to start an argument, Spence. It's just that I saw the flowers he bought for your birthday; the ones on the dining table."

The non-gender blinked. "What are you on about? Byron gave me a book on traditional Italian cooking that I'd been thinking of buying for a while. The flowers are from Cob."

Campbell couldn't help but raise both of his eyebrows at the latter bit of information. "Leister bought you *that* combination of flowers?"

"Yes, actually, he did!" Spence scowled at their

interrogator. "Friends do occasionally give one another such things as gifts, you know."

"Well, yes, of course they do, but that's not...!" Campbell paused and shook his head, stunned at what he was realising. "Spence, do you not know *anything* about the floral code?"

Spence knocked back the remains of their drink before replying. "Hmm...floral code...isn't that one of those funny little Victorian things?"

"Yes, but it's still relevant today." Campbell sighed. "Look, in the floral code, different flowers have meanings assigned to them. People use it to send coded messages to one another."

"Are we going to get to the point soon?" Spence set the now empty cocktail glass down on the counter in front of them.

"My point is that that's really *not* the sort of bouquet that one gives to someone who's just a friend, or even an apprentice. Especially not that rose." Campbell risked leaning in conspiratorially. "A single, pure white, thornless rose in full bloom symbolises love at first sight, combined with purity, worthiness, enduring love, secrecy, and silence. As for the maidenhair fern...!"

The remainder of his explanation went unheard.

Spence scrambled off the stool and bolted from the kitchen. They spotted Leister out on the balcony almost immediately. He was standing alone by the railing, gazing out over the city. The breeze caught at his hair, lifting the ends of it to dance beneath the hot August sunshine. Taking a deep breath, Spence joined him at the railing: a matched pair of killers simmering with equally unspoken feelings for one another. "Cob...can we talk? The flowers...Craig translated them for me...were you...are you serious...?"

Leister smiled ruefully, carding the fingers of his right hand through his strawberry blond hair as he replied. "I meant and I still mean every single petal of it, darling."

The two of them stood together in absolute silence for another dozen heartbeats, until Spence finally broke the tension. "I don't understand why you never told me about how you felt before. Back then, I mean; before you left for Dubai, or at the very least sometime in between your coming back from there and when you went off that bloody bridge!"

Leister edged a half a step closer to them. "Well, as I understand it, you were in hospital when I left

for the Emirates, and then of course I ended up in prison there for a decade. I can't think of why I stayed away for the two years after my release, but at any rate you were already at the start of that thing with Craig when I did come back, weren't you? Presumably, that seemed solid enough for me to keep my silence. I can't imagine my ever trying to split up a happy couple. I won't even do *that* on missions. And then I met Ashley, and obviously I don't cheat, so that would have been that."

Spence spluttered. "Sorry, but what was that bit about *prison*?"

"You didn't know?" Leister frowned. "It's in my file. Some sort of silly heroics on my part, apparently. I managed to get myself caught and tried as a spy. Honestly, it's a miracle that they didn't execute me."

"Pembleton!" Spence all but snarled the name. "She left you over there to rot! All these years, and I never knew until now that you'd even been arrested, never mind jailed! I thought that you'd retired there off your own bat after the mission; that perhaps you'd met someone. And Pembleton *knew* that I thought that, and what had really happened, and she just...she...that *bitch*!"

"I suppose one could choose to believe that she feared for the fate of Dubai had you been apprised of the truth, darling."

"Don't make light of this, Cob!" There were far too many small instances adding up for Spence by now. "She's always been set on my remaining unattached. There was stuff with Mr Campbell too; for all he eventually proved her concerns as accurate. This though – her burning you, I mean, rather than chance such a *terrible* thing as the possibility of our being happy together. I know she does everything with the job in mind before the people involved, but it's just too bloody far!"

Leister felt the hope brighten in him. "Are you saying that you think that otherwise we *might* just have done it, darling? Been happy together, I mean; if only Edith hadn't meddled. Because we still *could*, presuming that you're of a mind to consider making a go of things with such a ridiculous romantic as...!"

Spence lunged forwards: scrabbling their way inelegantly up into Leister's arms, and hooking their legs around his waist. They paused just short of kissing him. "When the first version of you and I first met, I told myself that it was just a silly crush; that

someone like you would never want someone like me in that way. I told myself that too many times as even to *try* to count them all up. When you took me on as a casual sub, I thought that that was the most that I could expect. Then you died, and when you came back, you were just so *different*! I wasn't sure if I knew who you were anymore; if I'd ever really known. It threw me somewhat. By the time that I felt comfortable around you again, you'd backed off. I thought I'd missed my chance; that you'd lost interest in pursuing me that way."

Leister waited patiently for Spence to finish speaking. Then he gently stroked their face, and nodded towards the party still going on inside the apartment. "I'd dearly like to start making up for all of those wasted moments right now, darling, but we don't want to be rude to the rest of your guests. Besides, we've both been drinking, and I don't want my first intimate memory of you to be dulled by alcohol."

Spence smiled and snuggled closer to him. "Hmm, that rather sounds as if you plan on there being more than one such memory, Cob."

"Oh yes – *many* more." He kissed the side of their neck tenderly. "In fact, if it's up to me, darling, then

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there shan't be another memory of my life from
here on in where you don't feature."

Chapter Nine – Far Too Nice A Day

Heidi beamed encouragingly at her four eldest charges and the ever-exuberant Scooter as they raced past where she sat. They had arrived at the adventure playground fifteen minutes ago, just after three o'clock, and so far, everything was exactly as it should be. "Okay, everyone – we are going to stay at the swings and the climbing sets for another half an hour, and then I am taking you all to get snacks and drinks from the little food van by the fountain! If you need me, I will be here at the seats beside the sandpit with the three little ones and the pram. Remember the rules for playing nicely, and do not be leaving without me."

By Heidi's reckoning, half an hour was just enough time for her to feed Jacamar and

Honeyguide their afternoon bottles, and for Sam to lose interest in making sandcastles. She knew that the sugary food consumed at the party would only sustain him and the older children for so long, especially given that they had walked all the way here. Her plan was to coax them into having something more nutritious than cake and ice cream. *The little van is having the salad bowls on the menu along with the hamburgers and the chips. That will do well enough.*

As was usual for Sunday afternoons at this time of year, Battersea Park was full of families enjoying the hot, dry weather. Finding a reasonably quiet area was tricky enough, never mind one with unoccupied play equipment. Heidi prided herself on her ability to do both such things. It was far from mere good luck. In fact, the young au pair had made a point of joining several of the local online chat groups for parents and childminders, purely to gain insight into other people's daily routines. She had then collated all the information gathered, and used it to plan excursions. *After all, there is no use in my bringing the children out to the park if there is nothing for them to do here!*

It was nice seeing little Sam again. At nineteen

months old, he was by now toddling properly, and had developed a surprising turn of speed since the last time that she had seen him. Heidi wondered sadly if his father was still able to keep up with him. Perhaps she should suggest some safety reins for when the two were outside. *Craig is doing his best, I am hoping, but he still has the bad leg to manage. I think that this is why he is carrying Sam around so much.*

A blonde woman in a pale blue sundress and wide brimmed navy straw hat sat down on the left-hand side of the bench, pulling out an energy pistol and jamming it into Heidi's ribs before the young au pair could react. "Don't make me shoot you in front of the children, Miss Hedturner." At first, her voice was all too familiar. Then it shifted, revealing a Russian accent. "It's far too nice a day for murder, don't you agree?"

Heidi gasped as she recognised Vasnetsova. "Phil was not wrong at all! He did see you earlier! How can you be here when you are supposed to be dead? What do you want?"

The trafficker chuckled. "My method of survival is a secret I'm not prepared to share with you. As to what I want...?" She pressed the gun harder

against Heidi's side, smiling cruelly as the younger woman winced. "NIT's raid on my cold storage facility cost me a great deal of money. I came to London to meet with one of my clients – a Mr Derek Horowitz. The agreement beforehand was for us to discuss like civilised people how best I might recoup my losses."

Anger won out over fear for Heidi. "You mean that you came here to arrange to steal more children! You're a hideous human being!"

Vasnetsova scoffed. "Blame the market if you disapprove! I simply supply a much-demanded product. It's hardly my fault that people will pay more for child soldiers than they will for pet kittens. Now – do you want to hear the rest of my answer or not?"

Heidi scowled as she made her reply. "What else could there be to tell? You are up to your usual evil tricks, I am sure!"

The Russian woman sighed. "Ha, if only things were so very simple! As I said, the agreement was for a civilised discussion. My client, however, turned out to have other ideas. He tried to have me eliminated, right in the middle of our meeting! Obviously, I escaped the attempt. Now, I have

decided to take my revenge on him. That is where you come in, Miss Hedturner."

"I do not understand." Heidi frowned. "What do I have to do with any of it?"

"I want you to take a message for me. Tell BIINT that Derek Horowitz knows *exactly* how good a pilot I am, but that this was not the only reason he had to employ my services. That should get them on the right track." Vasnetsova squeezed the trigger, rising calmly to her feet even as Heidi slumped back where she sat. "Enjoy your nap, my dear. I'm afraid that you'll have a most terrible headache when you wake up. Perhaps I should see about lightening your workload a little to allow for it. Yes, that seems like the least that I can do, all things considered."

She walked swiftly away from the scene, pushing the pram one handed, and scooping up Sam as she went. A single tap of a button on her chunky wristwatch and the sound dampeners and holographic emitters built into her clothing activated. The trafficker and her latest trio of victims vanished underneath the field generated. Instead, all that anyone would see was the illusion of an elderly woman pushing a shopping trolley. This particular subterfuge had served Vasnetsova well

over the years. She saw no reason not to continue with it. *Let my opponents scour their precious satellite feeds and CCTV records! It will do them little good.*

Russian born nightclub owner Zima Kazimirovich Bogomolov had a personal rule where Sundays were concerned. It was his day for doing nothing, a well-earned rest day at the tail end of each week. He allowed for two acts of exertion only. The first occurred well before breakfast, when the dark-haired man saw to ousting whomever he might have brought home to his bed on the preceding night. The second was taking his red and white Ovcharka, Grisha, for his daily walk through Battersea Park. Since May of this year, the regular presence of one Miss Heidi Hedturner had added a new level of enjoyment to the latter duty. Zima liked to look at the young blonde woman. In fact, he would have liked to do a great deal more than merely look, but he suspected that such attentions would end poorly for him as and when her employer found out. *Doubtless, Solovei would not appreciate my seducing their nyanya. They already disapprove of my merely saying good day to her*

and the children in passing. Not that it is even possible to ignore young Katenka and her brother when they wish to speak. One could as easily ignore the avalanche whilst being buried!

Halfway through their walk, Grisha stopped in his tracks and stared balefully ahead of them, towards a bend in the tree-lined path. Frowning, Zima called the dog in close to heel, and clipped on his leash just in case whatever it was proved too tempting. "What has caught your attention?"

The dog was silent, of course, but still clearly tense. Zima kept his eyes peeled for trouble as they continued along their usual route past one of the adventure playground areas. He spotted a by now familiar trio of fair-haired children crowding around the bench next to the sandpit: Solovei's niece and nephew, and Phil, who was the unfortunate orphan boy rescued from Magdalena Vasnetsova. There was also a red-haired boy of about the same age, with a young male Hungarian Vizsla. Zima tightened his grip on Grisha's leash, and peered more closely at the children. *Wait – is that Heidi who is slumped there on the bench?*

Scowling fiercely at this unavoidable interruption to his nice quiet Sunday, Zima stalked over to the

bench. To his surprise, he found that he was more relieved than he was prepared to admit to see that Heidi was still breathing. "What has happened here, Katenka? Why is your nyanya unconscious?"

Kathryn tucked herself in next to him as she answered, pointing at a telltale burn mark on Heidi's blouse. "We think someone must have got her with a stun weapon, Zima. None of us saw who did it, but Craig's son Sam and Aunty Val's babies are all missing!"

Her twin brother nodded anxiously. "The pram was right here only a few minutes ago, next to Heidi, and Sam was playing in the sand. You'll help us find them, won't you? You're Kathryn and Aunty Val's friend, so it's safe to ask you."

Zima looked around them for any sign of other people. There was only an old woman, making her way slowly along the path with her shopping trolley. He pointed at her. "Very well – Katenka, stay with Heidi. Telephone your aunt about what has happened. Boys, run and ask that old woman if she has seen anyone go by her with a toddler and twin babies in a pram. I will see if Grisha can pick up Campbell's son's scent from where he was playing."

He crouched down beside the sandpit, muttering to his dog in Russian. Grisha snuffled obediently at the mounded-up sand and the toddler sized green plastic bucket and spade. A low growl rumbled from him. Zima felt the hairs rise on the back of his own neck. His dog would not make such a sound unless he had caught scent of someone known to be an enemy. *There is some other trouble for us lurking here then!*

The other dog suddenly began barking. Zima got to his feet and turned to look at what was happening between the boys and the old woman. Unsurprisingly, she was backing away from the apparently out of control Vizsla. He barked and strained at the end of his leash; the red-haired boy seeming dazed for some reason. Zima grimaced and hastened over to intervene, Grisha trotting obediently at his side. The big dog had stopped growling, but Zima could still feel the tension emanating up the leash. *It is unfortunate that dogs cannot speak, for I suspect that Grisha has much to tell us at this time.*

He grabbed the Vizsla's leash in his free hand as soon as he was within reach, yanking the startled dog back into a sit and rounding angrily on his

young handler. "What is wrong with you? Why do you not control this sobaka?"

The red-haired boy stood his ground and shouted back. A hint of silver showed in his eyes, revealing him as having psionic capability. "There's something weird about this old lady! I can *feel* it, and I think Scooter smells it too!"

Zima narrowed his bright hazel eyes suspiciously. He looked again at the old woman, who was already hobbling away with her trolley. Both dogs had reacted based on scent. Indeed, although Scooter was wholly cowed, Grisha was staring fixedly at the departing crone. She hadn't uttered a word, not even when the younger dog had been leaping up at her. Add to that the fact that the red-haired boy was a psionic, and it was simply one too many degrees of strangeness to be ignored. *They say that Baba Yaga is an old woman too, after all.*

Barnabas and Phil must both have thought something similar, for they lunged at the old woman then, and grabbed hold of her wrinkled arms as if to stop her. For an instant, Zima thought that perhaps his eyes were failing him. The elderly figure seemed to flicker, along with her trolley. Then she was gone, and in her place was an enemy supposed dead

and buried: none other than Magdalena Vasnetsova!

The trafficker twisted away from the boys, abandoning the stolen pram and its twin occupants. Campbell's young son wailed against her left shoulder as the movement jostled him. Vasnetsova snarled impatiently at the child. "Shut up you little brat! As for the rest of you, I advise that you back away!"

There was an energy pistol in her right hand. Zima glanced warily at it. He thought of poor Heidi, and of how much worse damage the weapon might yet cause if Vasnetsova opened fire on the rest of them. No – he would not risk any such harm befalling the children. He nodded curtly. "Boys, come back over here now. Do not argue with this woman. She is not joking around; of that much at least, I am sure."

Vasnetsova smirked as the boys retreated, pulling the pram along with them. She kept her weapon trained on Zima. "For once, you have made the correct choice, Bogomolov! Now – all of you will lie down on the ground, and not move. I am leaving, and this one goes with me. Be thankful that I cannot be bothered keeping the youngest

two as well."

Zima made as if to obey, and then flung himself abruptly to the right instead, dropping both leashes as he did so, and snapping his fingers once at Grisha. "Do not watch, children!"

Whether or not they listened to this advice, he had no time to tell. All his focus was now on Sam, just as all of Grisha's was on the pistol. Man and dog acted as one. The Ovcharka sprang at Vasnetsova, sinking his teeth into her right wrist with enough force to crush bone. Meanwhile Zima rolled to his feet and bull rushed the by now shrieking woman from the left, knocking her over and snatching Sam away from her as she fell. The energy pistol clattered against the stones of the path as it landed. Taking no chances, Zima kicked it a good deal further away and jogged after it, stroking Sam's hair gently as he went. "Never risk your opponent dragging you down with them, little one."

The child calmed somewhat at this kinder treatment, but remained understandably tearful. Ignoring the subsequent mumblings from him about wanting home and Da, Zima picked up the pistol and reset it to its maximum power level, whistling for

Grisha to come back to heel. He fired at Vasnetsova the instant that his dog was safely out of the way. The beam from the pistol struck her square in the chest as she tried to stand, flipping her backwards into a limp heap. Zima shot her twice more: once for safety, and once because he detested everything about her. Then he tucked the weapon away inside his jacket and turned to attend to the older children. "She shall cause us no more trouble. Varnava – run and tell your sister to let your Aunt Solovei know that we have rescued the three little ones. Be sure to mention that we also require medical attention for your nyanya."

"All right, Zima!" The boy raced off back to the bench.

There would be nothing but fussing and concern for the next several hours at least, Zima knew. He sighed resignedly, and made a mental note to quit the country for a holiday as soon as possible, the better to avoid playing any part in the inevitable official investigation. Even if he could somehow pretend to be merely a witness, NIT had a habit of asking awkward questions. *Perhaps it is a good time for me to visit Yuri.*

Picking up the end of Grisha's leash, he offered

Sam to Phil. "Take him; he will perhaps be happier with you than with a stranger."

Phil sat down abruptly on the path, trembling as if in shock. "I *did* see her! I...I thought I must have imagined it earlier."

Zima decided not to ask what the boy meant by that statement. It sounded like something that would have a complicated story attached to it. Instead, he looked at the young psionic, who was kneeling on the grass at the side of the path, soothing Scooter. "It appears that I owe your pet an apology. I am unused to such sensitive breeds."

The red-haired boy scowled at him. "Yeah, no shit! You shouldn't handle dogs like that anyway, no matter what breed they are."

Zima shrugged. "And you should not use such language, yet here we are. Your dog will forgive me, I am sure, even if you do not." He pulled out a strip of beef jerky from another of his pockets and tore it in half, feeding one part to Grisha and the other to the suddenly attentive Vizsla. A better man, he reflected, would not have smirked as the animal wagged its tail joyously. "Scooter is a *terrible* name, by the way."

Chapter Ten – Adequate Exit Strategy

Spence sprinted down the sixth-floor corridor of BIINT Headquarters, straight to the office of sixty-three-year-old Derek Horowitz. It was now three o'clock on Monday afternoon. Vasnetsova, who was under armed guard in BIINT's medical wing, was still unconscious, but Heidi, rushed via ambulance to New Battersea General Medical Centre yesterday afternoon, had woken up a little under an hour ago. She had relayed her assailant's cryptic message as soon as she was able to speak. Tanya, sitting vigil with her that morning, had contacted everyone else. Spence had left Leister watching the children. *So much for us both having booked today off – hmm, on second thoughts, perhaps that jinxed things.*

Horowitz's office was full of people who weren't him. Dobos was still on medical leave because of his arm, but Moxton and Jolley were searching every inch of the room, whilst Quincy sat at the man's computer terminal; scanning through data a thousand times faster than any human could. Spence scowled as they spotted the absent traitor's secretary standing by the window in handcuffs. "I take it that Miss Squire here is accountable for something?"

Moxton nodded grimly. "We caught her trying to wipe the computer. Horowitz didn't show up for work today, and his bank account has already been emptied. NIT found his hover car parked at Heathrow Airport. The ticket indicates that he left it there at seven fifteen yesterday evening, but there's no news yet as to where he went from there. It's hardly surprising. With his clearance level, he'd have known about Vasnetsova's capture within minutes of us bringing her in. I doubt that anyone with his experience would risk turning traitor without putting an adequate exit strategy in place."

Jolley grunted as he pulled open yet another drawer on the filing cabinet he was searching. "It's too bad for Squire that he didn't bother taking her

along with him, eh?"

The young woman in question sniffled. Vivienne Squire was thin, almost boyish looking, with short, dark brown hair, pale skin, and dark circles underneath her tired grey eyes. Spence recalled having signed a twenty-fifth birthday card for her sometime in July. They walked over to her, folding their arms to keep from slapping the stupid little cow. Physical violence would come later in the interrogation process, as and when Squire proved to lack enough self-preservation to render such acts necessary. For now, at least, Spence would stick to talking. "You're in a rather tricky spot right now, Miss Squire. I suggest that you cooperate fully."

At this, Squire lifted her elfin chin defiantly, and spat in Spence's face. She glared at the non-gender. "Go fuck yourself, Housekeeping; we all know that nobody else shall! Derek did *nothing* wrong. I shan't tell you a damned thing."

Spence pulled out their handkerchief and calmly wiped away the spit. The memory of how Leister had kissed them goodbye today smothered the insult. "Magdalena Vasnetsova named him as one of her clients, right before she hospitalised an au pair and attempted to abduct three young

children." They wouldn't chance giving Squire too much information. It was better to see how well she managed to fill in the blanks for herself; that would help with determining her role in all of this. "If your dear Mr Horowitz is so bloody innocent, then where is he and why were you trying to wipe that computer?"

The secretary shook her head stubbornly. "I'm not cleared to discuss any of that. You'll have to ask Derek."

Quincy held up his right hand. "Advisory – this unit has successfully accessed the relevant data. Operation Name: Project Bloodline; Operative In Charge: Senior Administrative Operative Derek Gerard Horowitz; Operation Clearance Level: Approved Eyes Only; Operation Start Date: 17/07/2085; Operation Status: Ongoing."

Moxton and Jolley joined Quincy at the computer terminal. The blond sniper whistled softly as he peered down at the screen. "Ah, for flip's sake, the bugger only and went and made a clone of Cob, didn't he? Why though, and what's it got to do with Vasnetsova?"

"I'd guess nothing good, Darren." Moxton leaned in closer then, pointing at something. "Wait,

what's that bit – binary clone – those need genetic material from *two* people, don't they?"

Spence turned their back on Squire, intending on joining the others at the computer. A soft gasp came from behind them, followed by a thud as the young secretary collapsed. The non-gender spun back around, kneeling next to the convulsing Squire, and opening their emergency kit. They hissed as they recognised the telltale cherry red flush to her skin and the agonised grimace on her face. "Mr Moxton, tell Medical that Miss Squire's taken cyanide! I'm giving her a loading dose of maxadrenohydroxocobalamin now, but she'll need starting on the usual additional treatment plan as soon as possible."

The injection, given straight into the heart as was standard, kicked in faster than the poison could complete its intended task. Jolley took charge of carrying the by now mercifully unconscious Squire down to Medical. Moxton, having informed the relevant people there to expect his operative and his burden, joined Quincy at Horowitz's desk, as did Spence. The robot had pulled up all the files relating to Project Bloodline, and fed them into the terminal's holographic projector. Another few

keystrokes and suddenly just over a dozen years' worth of information shimmered into view.

Spence stared around them at the semi-translucent truths hanging in the air. Pictures of familiar faces peppered the display. There was Leister, of course, shown at various points in his life, in both official BIINT file photographs and other more candid footage. Then there was the unwitting BIINT operative whose stolen genetic matrix had provided the maternal DNA. Spence choked back a bitter sort of utterance at the latter set of images. Next, Vasnetsova sneered at the camera from what looked like a stolen Russian police report. Finally, a male infant floated in the confines of his cloning pod; evidently the subject of the project. A string of time stamped and dated images catalogued his subsequent infancy and childhood, culminating with a primary school photograph taken in March 2097. The young clone smiled at the camera, and Spence wondered how nobody, them included, had spotted the resemblance to his genetic donors. It seemed so obvious now. They swallowed hard before speaking. "Phil is our son, then – mine and Cob's."

Moxton squeezed the nape of their neck

soothingly as he replied. "According to this, then genetically speaking at least, yeah, he is, although I somehow doubt that Horowitz ever planned on the three of you meeting."

Quincy offered hesitant thumbs up. "Query – do we buy gifts for the latest familial addition?"

Hull settled back in his chair and let the familiar bustle of ANI's bullpen wash over him. Two hours in, he was feeling damn good about his first day back in the office. It didn't hurt that he was being openly lauded for his actions at the hospital on Friday afternoon. Medical reports on the infected parties had come back negative for any actual biohazard. Instead, the people that he had stunned and then restrained had all turned out to be victims of corrupted nanotechnology. C.A.K.E, it seemed had decided to add a particularly nasty bit of code to a batch of medical nanites; the kind used in treating cancerous cells. Due to their original intended task, the nanites spread readily via fluids, making bites a valid method of passing them on. Fortunately, a quick blast of electromagnetic energy and the hosts awoke from their living nightmare. The doctors expected all three men to make a full recovery. /

guess it's a good thing that I'm not as quick to take the kill option as some of my other colleagues are.

He glanced to his right, where Mike Cully was finishing some paperwork. The other agent glared back at him. "Quit smirking, Greg. We all know that you're not really the saint they're trying to paint you as!"

"What's your problem, Mike?" Hull frowned at the man. "Seriously – it's like you're actively looking for things to hate about me!"

Cully scoffed. "Don't pretend that I have to look hard either! You literally own three people. Legal or not, that's immoral."

Hull scowled. "Okay, first of all, I'll thank you to get off that high horse of yours. Nobody likes a sanctimonious prick, and you're skirting being exactly that guy right now. Secondly, Bryce and I are very much in love! And we adopted Nadimiche, so you can't count her either."

"Oh yeah, is that so, huh?" Cully sat back, folding his arms across his chest defensively. "Fine – let's talk about the other one. What's your excuse for Callista Meadows?"

"Did you not already hear that her parents tried to force her into an arranged marriage with me?"

Hull threw up his hands in frustration. "I took her on as an indentured companion because it let me get her away from them! You can go and ask Senior Agent Volker for the details if you don't believe me. It was her idea."

Cully remained unimpressed. "And just when exactly do you plan on letting the poor kid go? Or does she have to earn her freedom back with sexual favours?"

"It isn't like that!" Hull resisted the urge to throw his stapler at Cully's smug face. "She doesn't have any means of supporting herself. What am I supposed to do – just turn her out on the street and hope she figures things out? MDPD would pick her up for vagrancy and have her bail contract up for sale in less than four hours, and that's the best-case scenario!"

His colleague shrugged. "So if I get her a job and a place to live, you'll sign off on letting her go? Is that what you're saying, Greg?"

Hull nodded. "Yeah, you know what, Mike? That's exactly what I'm saying. Go ahead. Help her out. Be the hero of the hour for once, instead of leaving it all to me."

"Fine, I will! Give me twenty-four hours, and I'll

have housing and appropriate employment organised for her." Cully went back to his paperwork, apparently satisfied.

"I'll hold you to it." Hull opened his emails, hoping for something to distract him from Cully. *Some people just can't let you have a nice day and leave well alone!*

Campbell was packing tinned food into the larder of his yacht when Zoe popped in to visit. She set Primrose down beside Sam in the playpen, and frowned at the bags of groceries. "Gosh, Craig, that's a lot of stuff – are you planning an extra-long trip to somewhere?"

He shook his head grimly. "Someone who was supposed to already be well and truly dead tried to snatch Sam yesterday, whilst we were in London for Spence's birthday. I'm going off the grid for a bit; taking him as far away from everyone who knows us as is humanly possible without actually leaving the planet."

Zoe put a hand to her mouth in horror at the idea. "Oh my God, is he okay? Are you okay? Did the police catch them, or...?"

Campbell waved off her questions. "It's in hand.

Look, I'm sorry, but I really don't have time to chat. I want to be at sea before dark. I already had to spend the better side of an hour squaring things at the gallery with Devon. He's agreed to accept my work by post for the foreseeable future. It worked for Mum, after all."

His fellow artist bit her lip. "Oh. Right, so, um, Devon warrants a proper explanation, but Primrose and I don't?" Her voice cracked slightly. "Okay, well that's good to know, I suppose! We'll um; we'll just get out of your way then."

Campbell growled and caught her round the waist before she could pick Primrose up. He spun the startled woman around to face him, his left hand pressing against the base of her spine whilst his right cupped her face. "What exactly is it that you want from me, Zoe? Do you expect me to stay here, and risk that Vasnetsova might have others helping her, others who know where to find Sam and me? Or are you annoyed because I haven't asked you and Primrose to come along with us?"

She trembled in his grasp, gripping the front of his shirt with both hands. "I...I just thought that we were friends enough that I'd qualify for as much notice as flipping Devon Kirby!"

"Is that really all that's troubling you?" Campbell stared deep into her eyes. "Are you sure it's not more?"

Zoe's eyes widened as he closed the distance between their lips. She tensed for a moment as he kissed her, but didn't try to pull away. The former spy tightened his embrace and dipped her backwards slightly, dragging his fingers through her light brown curls. He moved his mouth to her neck, and felt her soft gasp of pleasure as much as he heard it. "Craig...this is...oh...!"

Campbell kissed her again on the mouth, and then straightened up, still holding her close. "Come along with us, Zoe, please. I know you have half a hundred reasons to say no, and I know that those reasons are all perfectly sensible things to worry about, but please, just ignore them all. Take the chance on us working out. Let me love you."

Zoe stared up at him. The moment stretched into agony. Then, just as Campbell was about to let her go, she nodded slowly. "I'll need time to stock up my supplies too. That, and arrange parking for my van. I can't just abandon it...!"

He silenced her with another kiss. "I'll have it put with my car. Leave Primrose with Sam and me for

now. You go shop. I'll show you our intended route once you get back."

Chapter Eleven – Skin Me Alive

Dobos leaned back moodily against the back of the park bench he was sitting on whilst his son and Scooter queued for their turn at the nearby dog agility equipment. He tried to keep the look on his face reasonably cheerful. Brett needed something to take his mind off yesterday afternoon, and his dog needed the exercise. If that meant that Dobos had to do some fucking proper adulting and tolerate spending ninety minutes on Monday evenings around the other members of the local canine fitness club, then so be it. *At least half of them are utter twats, though, including the dogs! I think those three pensioners with the ratting terriers are the only ones not doing my fucking head in.*

At least the weather was nice at this time of year. Apparently, the club met indoors at one of the local community centres when it rained. Dobos suppressed a shudder as he imagined what that would be like. The clamouring of the assorted dogs and their handlers was bad enough out here in the fresh air. He dreaded to think how much worse it would be indoors. *Never mind the noise, given all the puppies, and how often that big poodle cocks his leg, the bloody place must stink of piss and disinfectant by the end of the evening!*

A familiar soft Irish brogue interrupted his line of thought as Brendan Clacher sat down to the left of him on the bench. "You're a surprisingly hard man to track down, Oliver."

Dobos blinked. "I wasn't aware that you'd any fucking reason to want to find me. What – has Irish Intelligence taken out a kill order on me?"

Clacher chuckled. "No, no! This is purely a social visit. Sure, I even gave Jasmine the slip for it. She'll be after me to skin me alive once she finds out that I'm not in our hotel."

"That's a lot of trouble to stir up just for a social visit, mate." Dobos had little doubt that Jasmine Finn, Clacher's long-suffering colleague, would

indeed have some very sharp things to say to the bearded man if he really had pulled a vanishing act. "What are the two of you doing in London anyhow?"

The older man shrugged. "Ah, you know. Somebody had to help oversee the transfer for those three bastards we caught at the dairy farm. I figured that it might as well be Jasmine and me as anybody else, so I volunteered us. We take custody of them tomorrow afternoon."

"What did Jasmine think of you randomly volunteering her?" Dobos gave Brett and encouraging smile as the boy glanced over at them. "I'd imagine that she had better things to do with her time than prisoner escort duty."

Clacher nodded affably. "Oh, she did, yes, but I managed to bribe her with a ticket to that new musical that's running over in the West End. You know; that one about the asteroid miners and the robot unicorn."

"Yeah, I've heard of it. It sounded shit to me."

"Aye, me too, but sure Jasmine loves anything that has anybody wearing glittery eye shadow and singing in it, so she'll be grand! I promised her that I'd stay put in our hotel for the evening. Obviously, I

was lying through my teeth for that last part.” Clacher stretched then, and draped his right arm across Dobos’ shoulders. “Fair warning – I might also have had a wee bit of an ulterior motive for volunteering us.”

Dobos looked down at the hand that was now squeezing his right bicep. Then he peered sideways at Clacher. “Are you...are you actually fucking hitting on me right now, mate?”

The Irish operative grinned at him. “I am indeed, lad. Are you not up for it?”

A snort of bitter laughter escaped Dobos. He shook his head. “Nah, it’s just that I fucking *can’t* at the moment.”

Clacher looked quizzically at the sling on Dobos’ left arm. “Is it because of your injury?”

By now, Dobos could feel himself blushing. He nodded curtly towards his son. “I’m a psionic, and so is my ex and our kid. He’s started sensing stuff to do with me and his mum. So far, it’s only been when one or other of us has been in fucking danger, but...well. You know.”

“Ah, I see.” Clacher sounded sympathetic. He didn’t stop caressing Dobos’ shoulder. “Still, aside from that very reasonable concern, would you be

up for it?"

It suddenly dawned on Dobos that he wasn't sensing anything from the other man. In fact, now that he thought about it, he never had. He stared at Clacher, peering into his dark blue eyes until he spotted the familiar glint of silver. "Are you fucking *dampening* me?"

"No, not dampening, although I can do that too." Clacher smiled at him. "I'm *masking*, Oliver. Maybe you've heard of it?"

"It's supposed to be a fucking myth!" Dobos almost scrambled up from the bench in surprise. The attempted movement revealed just how firmly Clacher was holding him. A thrill of interest ran down his spine and settled in his groin. "Huh. I guess I'm not going anywhere, am I?"

"Not as long as you're happy to stay put." Clacher pulled Dobos in a little closer, careful not to jostle his injured arm. "So, is it okay if I snog the face off of you now? Only you're gorgeous."

Dobos hesitated. He glanced once again at where Brett was by now encouraging Scooter through a plastic tunnel. "Uh, okay, but you *can* mask for both of us, right? Wait, does it even fucking work like that, or...?"

Clacher kissed him full on the mouth, tangling his left hand in Dobos' hair as he did so. It was a savage, possessive sort of a kiss, with a lot of tongue, and it went on just long enough that it left Dobos breathless by the finish. The Irish operative smiled fondly at him, still gripping his shoulder and his hair. "Relax, love. I have this. Nobody's paying us a blind bit of attention, and nor will they either, I promise you. We're currently the most boring seeming things in this half of London. We might as well be invisible."

Dobos gasped helplessly as Clacher began sucking a deliberate ring of bruises around his neck. "Fuck...!"

"Not on a park bench, love." Clacher paused in his ministrations and grinned wickedly at Dobos. "But I'll happily go home with you, if that's what you want?"

"...please...?"

"Okay, gorgeous." Clacher settled back on his bit of the bench, letting go of Dobos' hair, but keeping his other arm wrapped snugly around his shoulders. "And don't worry: I'll be the perfect gentleman in front of your son. Once he's tucked up asleep in his bed for the night, then all bets are

off, mind. Anyhow – what's the story with this arm of yours?"

Dobos grimaced, and flexed his left hand. "I got hit with a fucking poisoned dart. There's no permanent damage, but the doctors reckon that it'll be another couple of days before I can use it normally again. They've put me on leave until this Friday coming."

Clacher hummed thoughtfully. "So it's not painful for you, at least?"

"Nah, it's just muscle weakness. It makes opening lids a bit tricky, but that's all, really."

"Oh, well that's grand then!" Clacher leaned in closer and whispered his next sentence into Dobos' ear. "I'll just have to be the one who's in charge of opening the lube, won't I?"

Dobos spluttered, which was apparently all the invitation Clacher needed to go back to sucking bruises onto his neck. This time, however, the bearded man upped the ante by slipping his left hand down between Dobos' thighs and fondling him. The faded denim of his jeans offered no sanctuary. Dobos groaned and clutched desperately at the edge of the bench with his right hand, only for Clacher to stop well before he could

climax. "Ah, fuck, Brendan...!"

"Hold that thought for me, love." The Irish operative nodded in the direction of the dogs and their handlers. "It looks as if your son's club is finishing up. I need to let us be noticeable again, or he might think you've left without him."

Dobos gulped in a breath and stood up. To his surprise, Clacher moved with him, lowering his right arm to wrap around his waist instead of his shoulders. "Uh...he might ask about that."

Clacher kissed him gently on the cheek. "Aye, he will. Still, it's an easy enough question to answer. His dad has a boyfriend, simple as that. There's no sense in lying to him, Oliver."

Brett did indeed ask. Dobos somehow managed to answer him coherently, despite the rising urge to die of embarrassment. Clacher, who was unrepentantly open about their new relationship, introduced himself with a broad smile, and a dozen questions about Scooter. The dog seemed to fall instantly in love with the Irish operative, which of course settled things as far as Brett was concerned. Dobos made a mental note to talk to his son at some point about not letting Scooter pick all of his friends for him. *Not tonight though – some other*

time when I'm not letting random blokes seduce me in fucking public.

They picked up a takeaway for dinner from a Chinese restaurant on the way back to Dobos' flat. Clacher paid for the food, and chatted amiably to both of them about football. He kept up this line of conversation all the way home, and right through dinner, as if it were the only subject currently on his mind. Then he cheerfully busied himself with the washing up, whilst Dobos sat in the living room and fielded Brett's questions about where the two of them had met, and how long they'd been seeing one another. Part of him wondered if Laine had ever needed to have this sort of conversation with the boy. *No fucking way am I risking asking him that!*

Clacher joined them on the sofa a little after eight o'clock, and suggested watching something on one of the streaming services. The two adults let Brett choose the film. He opted for an old action adventure: almost two hours of people running away from an invisible space monster. Dobos felt halfway sure that he had seen at least three other films with the same plot, but different actors. He tried not to think what Laine would say about the violent content. *Eh, he's old enough. None of it*

looks real anyhow.

It was nearing half past ten by the time that Brett finally went to bed, Scooter curled up on top of the quilt at his feet as always. Despite having spent the preceding several hours eagerly anticipating being alone with Clacher, Dobos was now nervous. The memory that he had accidentally absorbed from Hull clawed its way to the front of his thoughts. Knowing that it hadn't really happened to him didn't help at all. In fact, if anything, Dobos felt worse in some ways. *Why can't I just fucking get over it? I'm not even the one who was the real fucking victim!*

Clacher, sitting on the left-hand side of the sofa, patted the middle cushion encouragingly. "Come on, love. Slide yourself over next to me. Well, unless maybe you've changed your mind?"

"It's not that." Dobos moved over onto the middle cushion as requested, desperately trying to ignore the roiling sense of panic and revulsion that was threatening to overwhelm him. "It's...I was tortured, back at the beginning of May of last year. That fucker, Greg Hull – he still worked for GETEC then – he was my interrogator. He used one of those bloody shock frames, and a stun rod.

You...you know how electricity can mess with psionics?"

The Irish operative nodded. "Aye, I know."

Dobos sniffled slightly, despite his best efforts. "Sorry. Anyway, I accidentally absorbed one of his memories. It felt as if it was mine. I spent the better part of a fucking year thinking that Hull had sexually assaulted me, when all along *he* was the one who'd been the victim! I even tried to report him for it, for fucks sake. And of course, since I absorbed the entire fucking memory, the bastard doesn't even remember it ever having happened to him!"

Clacher put his right arm around Dobos' shoulders again, just as he had back at the park. "I hear tell that there's two versions of the bastard in question?"

Dobos nodded. "Yeah, well, there was. FBT cloning shit – the original one had his consciousness copied over into a younger body. They put the old one on ice. It was the younger version who interrogated me. He works for ANI Miami now. My ex-girlfriend is his boss. Turns out he was one of their fucking deep cover sleeper agents the entire time that he was with GETEC."

"And then somehow the older one ended up

working alongside you for BIINT, eh?" Clacher pulled Dobos in snug against his side. "Jesus, I'm sure that last bit must have done your head in."

"It did, yeah, but he's dead now, thank fuck." Dobos shuddered as a little of the tension left him. "BIINT cloned him another new body, and then when that one got shot, Cob vetoed him ever coming back to life and pulled the fucking plug on the cryostasis pod housing his original body. That was on Saturday just gone. It's been a fucking busy weekend, all things considered."

Clacher smiled. "So, somebody else put the fucker down before I ended up needing to? Well, that's handy!" He shifted around a little where he sat, angling himself towards Dobos, and pulling the younger man in for a kiss. "There now, that's my lad. Don't worry about needing to be understood, love. You see, I can be a terrifyingly patient sort of a bastard when it suits me. And believe you me, winning you over and into bed with me more than qualifies for use of that particular brand of patience."

Dobos exhaled happily and relaxed into the embrace. He tilted his head back so that Clacher could resume tormenting his neck. "Thanks for

understanding, Brendan. I fucking *want* this to work between us, really, I do."

"That's good enough for me, love." Clacher sucked fresh agony into one of the existing bruises. Then he scrambled to his feet, dragging Dobos along with him, out of the living room and into the flat's master bedroom. Closing the door behind them, Clacher guided Dobos backwards, slowly, carefully, but nonetheless firmly, to lie pinned beneath him on the bed. "We'll just go nice and slowly now, my gorgeous lad. I'll stop whenever you want me to, I promise."

Chapter Twelve – No Harm Done

Bryce Lenard leaned back against the tiled wall of her home's main en suite bathroom and stared at the reading on the digital ovulation test she was holding. Her hands kept shaking, but the message on the tiny screen didn't change. Today, Tuesday August 6TH, was officially the start of her most fertile window for the month. This evening, when Greg got home from his second day back at work, he would ask her about the test, and she would tell him the result. Then, tonight, he and she would start trying to conceive another baby together, just as he had planned for them to do. *Well unless I lie to him about it, or something.*

The rebellious thought startled her. She jolted,

accidentally dropping the test. It clattered across the rougher tiles of the floor and came to rest next to the bathtub. Bryce eyed it warily; as if it might leap at her, like some kind of monster from a horror movie. This was stupid, she knew, because the little test was nothing more than plastic and wires, housing a strip of litmus paper. The blonde woman scoffed at herself for being so ridiculous. There weren't any monsters in the bathroom, or anywhere else in the house for that matter. *No, of course not – Greg's at work.*

Part of Bryce wished that she couldn't agree with that assessment. Life had been so much simpler back when she still accepted her lot in life! There could be no denying that her time in England had done something permanent to her. She just wasn't sure if it counted as a good change or a bad one. *Maybe it even ought to be both. Maybe I should forget about just lying to Greg, and start thinking about what the or something option might work out as.*

It wasn't only due to England, this strange mood of hers, not really. Callista's arrival had triggered old memories. Try as she might, Bryce found that she couldn't keep from observing how Greg treated

the girl, and then comparing it with how he'd treated *her*. There were enough similarities that she pitied Callista's naivety. The girl was already beginning to relax around Greg. *Which is exactly what he wants her to do, because that's how he gets into your head and makes you think that you secretly want what you end up getting.*

Thinking back, there hadn't ever been any doubt that Bryce would have sex with Greg. The best that one could argue was that at least he had gone to the trouble of gradually seducing her into it. She'd known right from the start that he only bought out her bail contract because he wanted her in his bed, and that the best she could hope for was that he'd be gentle. Why should he treat Callista any differently? The girl had her own bedroom for now, but in the beginning, so had Bryce. *Oh yeah, and just look how that ended up! The difference is, that this time around, he'll want...he'll want me to help. I...I don't want to do that. I'm not that person. It was bad enough that I tried to seduce Kellie for him – at least she was able to refuse!*

Sucking in a deep breath of air between her teeth, Bryce walked over to the bathtub. She bent

and picked up the test, dropping it into the bathroom's built-in waste recycling unit as she straightened up. One thing was certain: she *couldn't* leave without her son. No, if she ran away, then she was taking Fisher with her. *At least I already have fake IDs for both of us, thanks to Nightingale. I wouldn't have those for the next baby. Which means that I can't risk Greg getting me pregnant again. I have to act now, before he ties me even tighter to him.*

Sunlight bathed the master bedroom as Bryce exited the en suite. She glanced at the alarm clock: ten fifteen in the morning. This August was shaping up as one of the hottest in the last ten years. In another couple of hours from now, the heat outside would reach dangerous levels for travelling with a young child. She and Fisher needed to be safely inside the airport by then, or better yet, already on board a plane, any plane, really. The destination didn't matter. Fake identities or not, there was no way that Greg wouldn't find them if they stayed in North America. *We need to go far, far away, and then I can start planning from wherever we end up.*

She scribbled a note for Greg: lying to him that she planned on heading to Canada. Folding it in

half and leaving it on his pillow, she then packed up as many of Fisher's clothes and smaller toys as would fit into his changing bag, glad that he still needed pull-ups. It gave her a good excuse for taking the bag along. There was no way that she could have hidden so much stuff in just her purse! The latter was where she put their toothbrushes, and the passports and other such paperwork for their new identities, which until now she had kept hidden at the very bottom of the changing bag. *I don't want airport security to see me digging it out from way in there. It might make them suspicious.*

There was just enough cash in her purse for groceries to cover cab fare to the airport. They wouldn't make it any further than there without an alternate means of finance. The trust fund made over to her for Fisher by British Intelligence was still untouched, but Greg had long since locked the card for it away in the safe in his study, saying that they'd keep it safe for when Fisher grew up. Try as she might, Bryce couldn't remember the account number. *It's a good thing that Nightingale insisted on giving me a credit card as part of my replacement paperwork.*

Bryce knew that she had many reasons to thank

the non-gender. Maybe she'd see them again someday in person and get the chance. Maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she'd just send them a postcard from wherever she and Fisher wound up living. Would that be safe? Could people on the run risk doing those kinds of things? Would Nightingale even want her to bother? *Hmm, probably not, I guess. I'll tell Fisher all about how they helped us though, once he's old enough to understand.*

She forced herself to smile as she told the older two girls that she was taking Fisher to the local grocery store, and that she planned to stop off at the pool for a couple of hours on their way back. The act got even harder to keep up as she buckled a grumbling Fisher into his travel pod and signed goodbye to Tessa, who still flatly ignored any attempts at verbal communication. Little Rayne was already down for her mid-morning nap, which gave Bryce an excuse not to cuddle her. *I don't know if I could really go through with leaving her if I had her in my arms.*

The store in question was only a couple of blocks beyond the gates of Turtle Grove. It was walking distance, something that Greg liked to emphasise whenever Bryce mentioned wanting access to a

car again. She missed the freedom of driving. Her old vehicle, destroyed when Carson Howard blew up their house in Coconut Grove, hadn't been anything fancy, but at least it had let her get out and about with the kids. Greg hadn't seemed to like the idea of replacing it after her return from England. *Maybe he already guessed on some level that something like this was coming. That might even be the real reason for him taking so much parental leave. He didn't trust leaving me on my own.*

She flagged down a cab on the street behind the store, lifting Fisher's travel pod off the rest of his stroller and abandoning the GPS enabled frame in a nearby dumpster, along with her cell phone and the tracker tag from the changing bag. The driver blinked once at the sight, and then shrugged. He asked for a destination while she positioned Fisher's travel pod beside her on the back seat and fastened her seatbelt. "Where're you headed, lady?"

Bryce tried to ignore how hard her heart was pounding. She gulped as she tugged Fisher's sunhat down a little more snugly over his ears. "Take us to Miami International, please."

"You got it."

Hoy, who was using a pale haired and dark eyed male RCS today, pointed at the stream of holographic data he was showing to Whitby. "As you can see, the medical nanites we've found in Dr Rosa's body during today's tests match the scans provided to us by ANI of the ones used in the most recent C.A.K.E attack. In fact, I'd say that the only thing keeping them from driving her to attack people is the fact that she has a synthetic brain."

Whitby nodded angrily. "Even so, they've begun to affect her cognitive functions." He tapped at the screen of his tablet, and brought up another holographic scan. This one focused on Rosa's brain. "Rosa and I ran this yesterday morning, up in our branch of the building. As you can see, the nanites infesting her have built up around some of the brain's more delicate structures, causing intermittent deficits in power and interrupting the flow of data. And of course, the downside of her having a synthetic brain is that we can't use electromagnetism to get rid of them."

Hoy frowned. He turned to look at Rosa as the technician stepped out of the neurosurgical bay's

changing cubicle, having finished dressing. "How exactly were you exposed to them in the first place?"

Rosa grimaced. "My guess is that it has something to do with how Carson bloody Howard tried to have me made into an indestructible sex doll! It was while C.A.K.E was holding me prisoner off planet, back in March of this year. He had his people implant me with a layer of sub dermal nanomolecular body armour. Thankfully, the process was interrupted before it even reached twenty percent completion."

"Well, there's no doubt that such a process would have been the perfect opportunity to add these killer nanites to your system too." Hoy shook his head worriedly. "Obviously, we can't just leave them in there. By the looks of our scans, they're self-replicating at a rate that will soon see them causing irreparable damage to your brain. Think of it as the cybernetic equivalent of suffering a stroke."

The technician shuddered. "I'd rather not think about it at all, thanks! Let's just focus on figuring out how to get rid of the horrible little buggers before it gets to that stagecoach – ugh, I mean *stage*! Sorry, that keeps happening."

Whitby gave her a rare hug. "Don't worry, Rosa. We'll find some way to fix this."

"He's right, doctor." Hoy gestured at his current RCS form. "If all else fails, we can just grow you a new body, complete with brain!"

Both technicians stared at him. Whitby was the first to speak. "Oh my God, of course we can do that! Why didn't I think of it myself?"

Rosa let out a literal squeak of joy. "I can be fully human again! Just think – no more weekly Turing tests! When can we start?"

Hoy shrugged. "Um, well, anytime you'd like, really. All I need is a clean copy of your neural map, and a nanite free sample of your DNA. We can make sure of that last one by drawing blood and blasting it with electromagnetism before harvesting the bits we need. It's just about to turn six in the evening, so if we start now, you could in theory walk out of here in your new body by ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Always assuming, that is, that nobody decides to try and sabotage the process."

Whitby adjusted his glasses uncomfortably. "Ah, yes. The incident on Saturday with Hull Senior – that was unfortunate."

"Oh, it was outright murder, in my opinion!" Hoy

seemed remarkably cheerful about this statement. "Still, never mind! I managed to fix him up with another cloned body the next day anyhow, so no harm done. He's back over in New Zealand now, sorting out finding our missing vehicle and *hopefully* not being killed again! Pembleton wasn't at all happy about the near miss, you know, not that I blame her. I mean, can you imagine how hard it would be for her to find someone else to replace him? It's a good thing that Greg had me keep a separate backup copy of his neural map in case of power failures."

Rosa shook her head silently in response, not trusting herself to say what she thought about any iteration of Greg Hull. By now, everyone who worked for BIINT knew what Hoy's feelings for the man were. *I'm not about to risk annoying someone who's involved in cloning me a new body! Besides, Pembleton outranks Leister.*

To her relief, Whitby appeared to be on much the same page. He smiled politely at Hoy's unexpected revelation. "Oh, so it all worked out then, that's nice! Well, let's get on with helping Rosa, shall we?"

Cully smiled triumphantly as he set down a manila file folder and a set of keys on Hull's desk. "There you go – housing, employment, all of it! Ready to sign off on freeing the girl, or are you going to make an excuse to break our deal?"

Hull looked pointedly at his watch. "We agreed that you had twenty-four hours, Mike. It's been closer to *twenty-six*."

On the wall of the bullpen, the main office clock confirmed his statement, the numbers on its digital display now showing it to be twelve noon exactly. Cully glowered at him. "Come on, don't be a dick about this, Greg!"

"Oh no, I'm being perfectly reasonable. I told you yesterday that I'd hold you to the terms we agreed." Hull smiled benignly at his colleague and handed him back the folder and the keys. "It's not my fault if you weren't able to stick to them. Don't worry, though – I didn't really think that you'd manage it, so I haven't mentioned anything to Callista. At least she won't be disappointed by your inability to keep to a schedule."

For a moment, it looked as if Cully might just snap and attack him physically. To Hull's disappointment, the other man managed to

contain his reaction. He stepped backwards, with his fingers clenched tightly around the folder. His voice low with anger. "I'm not going to forget this, you asshole. You'd better watch your step from here on in."

Hull chuckled as Cully stalked away. Honestly, by this point, he'd be happy to see the back of Callista. Sure, she was cute, but her assorted family members were clearly nothing but various kinds of all messed up. Still, the other agent was just too damn easy to rile! Hull couldn't resist toying with the man for a while longer. *I wonder what he'll try next.*

Chapter Thirteen – Nice Work

Leister lay silently awake in the bed that he and Nightingale now shared. The non-gender lay curled up to his left beneath the crimson sheets. Heidi's assault and the attempted abduction of the three younger children had put paid to whatever might have transpired on Sunday night. Not that Leister would have defaulted on his promise to wait until both of them were fully sober before becoming intimate, but it would have been nice not to have spent all afternoon and half of the evening too in a hospital waiting room. That was before one spared a thought for how upset the poor children had been, especially the older four. *Some of the adults weren't much calmer. Goodness only knows where Craig took flight to after he left us, but I very much*

doubt that it's on many maps! I hope he bothers to keep in touch, for Kathryn's sake, at least.

Monday had been equally chaotic. In truth, Leister had been glad when Nightingale won their coin toss for which of them would go into work to help monitor the investigation into Horowitz. Ferreting out the truth of Vasnetsova's claim to a connection within BIINT ought to have provided them with a refreshing break from the stress of parenting. *Except, of course, that it didn't unfold like that at all. It got worse instead, and I wasn't there to support them.*

He hadn't quite known how to breathe, let alone react, when Nightingale had brought the news home with them yesterday evening. Project Bloodline – a deucedly stupid name for a hideous abuse of power – stepped up behind what he'd thought he'd known about his life and slit its metaphorical throat. It was abhorrent! *An off the official books plan to breed and raise the perfect operative: a child made using stolen DNA and mothered by an utter psychopath.*

How the bastard responsible had ever thought that he would get away with the scheme would once have baffled Leister. Now however, it felt all

too believable. Horowitz had found a simple but effective solution to the question of how to hide the truth of Phil's parentage. *A sleeper program planted deep within BIINT's computer systems, tasked with making sure that any genetic scans relating to the boy went unmatched to our records.*

Neither Leister nor Nightingale had gone into work today. There had been Heidi's release from hospital to manage, for a start. Nightingale had seen to that, whilst Leister had taken all the children on their usual family trip to the library, and then later to the riding school. With his nerves well and truly rattled by all that had happened, he had been on high alert the entire time. A doubtlessly harmless woman who had tried to coo at the younger twins had lived to regret the attempt. *Oh well, it was better that I snapped at her than that either Kathryn or Barnabas had enough time to react!*

The events in the park had clearly affected the older three children, especially the twins. They had tried to smuggle steak knives out in their clothing once already. That had been on Monday morning, whilst headed to their therapeutic arts and crafts club. Fortunately, Leister had caught them before leaving the apartment. He'd cancelled that

evening's archery class as a consequence for them, largely due to his concern over what they might get up to there. He had also told Nightingale immediately, because by now it was abundantly clear that Kathryn especially was inclined to store such matters up for future use as weapons of emotional and mental mass destruction if one allowed them to go by unreported. Her brother was only a very little better. Dr Geddes had mentioned the possibility of attachment disorder. *I can't help suspecting that she's right.*

The alarm clock to his right showed the time as a quarter to midnight. Wednesday morning, he realised, was steadily approaching. Somehow, the entirety of Tuesday had slipped past without either of them managing to tell their son the truth of his parentage. Leister sighed and pulled Nightingale in more snugly to his side. "We'll need to talk to our son about who he is, darling."

Nightingale grumbled, burying their face into the black silk of his pyjama top. "How do you suggest that we broach the subject?"

Leister ran his fingers gently along the non-gender's back, tracing the shape of their spine through the thin vest top that they wore as summer

sleepwear. "Honestly, I haven't the faintest notion! Still, we can't put it off forever."

Nightingale yawned. "Tomorrow isn't forever. We'll figure out what to say to Phil then, and to Kathryn and Barnabas as well, for that matter."

Vasnetsova opened her eyes reluctantly. She would have much preferred to cast her captured RCS body aside just as she had the one in Bournemouth. If only Bogomolov had shot to kill instead of to stun! Then the most that BIINT would have done was to dispose of her supposed corpse, leaving the real Vasnetsova free and clear. Instead, her RCS was strapped down to a gurney, with too many tubes running in and out of her to leave any space for dignity. *Eventually, the idiot doctors here will surely think to run more detailed testing; revealing that this is not a real human body at all.*

She had no wish to risk them discovering the wireless uplink port embedded deep in the RCS's brain matter. If they found that, then BIINT's technicians would trace the feed from it to her real base of operations. She couldn't simply block the feed from there, because the damnable RCS was still active. It would keep on sending, albeit little

more than empty static, until shut down fully. BIINT and every other agency associated with them would descend on her lair like locusts. *Relocating is not an option – it would cost far too much. No, I either escape in this body, or see to its destruction.*

The simplest option would be to lie here quietly and chew through the RCS's tongue. Even if the monitors alerted the doctors, there would be little that they could do to stem the bleeding in time to save her. It would appear as suicide. Vasnetsova liked the idea of bleeding her cloned body out right under the noses of her captors. *If I can only manage to swallow the blood long enough that they do not see what I am doing until it is already too late.*

She peered left and then right out of the corners of her eyes, being careful not to move her head. As she had anticipated, there was an armed guard in the room. He was a big man, of middle years, white skinned with short black hair, and a poorly fitting suit. He was also asleep at his post, dozing in a plastic chair against the wall to the right of her gurney. A surge of fury rose within Vasnetsova at the sight. *How dare this fool sleep whilst guarding me?*

Her temper got the better of her. Abandoning the simple option, she popped her left thumb out of its socket and slid that hand free of its restraint. Popping the thumb back in, she reached across and freed her injured right arm. Then she unbuckled the strap across her torso. Sitting up silently, she freed her legs. All the while, she kept her heartbeat steady: not wanting to trigger any of the monitors. It remained so even whilst she strangled the guard one-handed with the tubing from her catheter. He woke up choking, and died before he had enough time to understand his situation. *It is a fitting end for one so inept.*

His suit had been tight on him, but was still loose on Vasnetsova. The jacket and tie were unnecessary anyhow. She rolled up the sleeves of the shirt to her elbows, tightened the belt enough to hold the trousers up, and tore three inches of length from each of the trouser legs. There was no using the shoes, or the socks, and so she switched off the monitors before they could start beeping and padded barefoot from the room. *Perhaps I will burn down some part of this building as I exit it.*

The dead guard's energy pistol was a comforting weight in her left hand as she stalked

along the dimly lit corridor. There were no windows, but a clock on the wall showed that it was five minutes to one in the morning here in what was presumably London. Vasnetsova couldn't be sure of the latter. Still, it seemed unlikely that BIINT would have taken her supposedly comatose body to anywhere other than their main headquarters. *They would not wish to risk my awakening during the journey, and then escaping.*

A man in his mid to late thirties, wearing green medical scrubs underneath a white lab coat, emerged from a doorway just in front of her then. He looked very pretty with his large dark hazel eyes, and sweeping, bleached white blond hair. Vasnetsova grinned as she pressed the muzzle of the pistol against his forehead. "Do not make a sound, unless you wish to die."

He dropped without any warning. The Russian woman blinked down at his unmoving form. She had not fired, but the man was not breathing, and his still fully open eyes were vacant. Had he literally died from fright? She had not believed that such things happened outside of fiction! *Perhaps the British need stronger operatives.*

She knelt and scooped out both beautiful hazel

eyes, tucking them into the pockets of her stolen trousers. There might yet be biometric security in her way out of here. She took the identity lanyard from around the corpse's neck too: Dr Morgan Hoy. He had nothing else on him aside from his clothing. *Car keys would have been nice to find.*

The alarm that suddenly began blaring alerted Vasnetsova to the possibility that someone had spotted her on CCTV. That, or they had discovered the dead guard and the empty bed in what had been her room. She chuckled mirthlessly as she began running for the exit at the far end of the corridor. *If they manage to trap me in here, then I will make them kill me, which will solve my RCS problem nicely.*

She was perhaps twenty more paces away from the heavy double doors when they slid open. A thin blonde-haired woman dressed in mud spattered black tactical garb strode through them, the semi-automatic rifle in her hands already firing. Vasnetsova snarled, bracing herself for what was coming. "Death to all of...!"

One of the rounds must have caught her RCS somewhere vital. There was the familiar sensation of a violent cessation of life, and then she lurched

upright on the padded bench of her control pod. "Finally, those fools produced someone capable of actually killing me!"

Doris Weaver kicked the bullet-ridden remains of the dead woman over onto her front, and then back onto her back, just to make sure that she wasn't faking. The resultant trail of assorted viscera satisfied her. "It's fine, everyone, the bitch is definitely dead! Who was she, anyhow, and why does it look as if these aren't really her clothes?"

Whitby was the first one to approach her. He sighed as he stared down at the body. "Magdalena Vasnetsova – she's that Russian trafficker who seduced Campbell."

Weaver snorted. "Oh, is *that* what we're calling him cheating on poor Spence now? Silly bugger didn't know how good he had it if you ask me. So how come I had to kill her again?"

The senior technician looked tired. "She turned up alive on Sunday, and tried to abduct Campbell's son and Spence's two babies. Thankfully, she failed, but it was a close thing. As I understand it, she's been unconscious and under armed guard here in Medical ever since."

Weaver nodded towards the energy pistol. "That's one of ours, isn't it? And I suppose the clothes belong to whoever she took it from – her guard must have gotten careless." The blonde SCO turned and looked at the other corpse. "I hope that's only an RCS, Nathaniel?"

He grimaced. "Yes, thank God. It's one of Dr Hoy's work shells. He's feeling male today. I'd hazard that he ditched it when he encountered Vasnetsova; hopefully *before* she gouged out its eyes as opposed to after!"

Rosa joined them then, her mobile phone still in her hands. "Dr Hoy wants to know whether it's safe for him to hop into another RCS and come back yet or not. He hit the alarm as soon as he was clear of his control pod."

Weaver slung her rifle over her left shoulder. "It's a good job that he did, too. I'd have gone on to the armoury with this otherwise, instead of stopping off in here. Goodness only knows how far our escapee might have gotten then."

"Yes, nice work, Doris." Whitby patted her right forearm awkwardly. "How was Patagonia?"

"Surprisingly muddy, actually." Weaver gestured to her clothing. "I got the bastard they sent me

after, of course. Sorry to have missed Spence's birthday party – was it fun? Did this Vasnetsova hag at least wait until after the cake to try snatching the three little ones? Who nabbed her for us anyhow?"

Rosa was busy talking to Hoy on the phone, so Whitby took charge of answering Weaver's barrage of questions. He was glad she was home safely. *I know I oughtn't have favourites amongst the field operatives, but I can't help reckoning that Doris is the best out of the lot of them!*

Chapter Fourteen – Going In

Hull slumped back into his armchair, cradling Rayne against his chest while she drank her first bottle of the day. He tried and failed to pay at least a modicum of attention to the early Wednesday morning news broadcast playing on the TV in the background. His entire world felt upended. Bryce had run away from him, and she'd taken their son along with her. He was in two minds right now about which of them he missed more. On balance, it was probably Fisher. *After all, he wasn't the one who packed a bag and left me with just a damn note on my pillow about going home to Canada!*

He still couldn't believe how devious Bryce had been about the whole thing. Since they'd thought that she was taking Fisher to the pool, Nadimiche

and Callista hadn't expected her back until around three or so in the afternoon. When there had been no sign of her returning by half past, Nadimiche had tried calling her cell phone. No one picked up, and so the teenager had immediately done the smart thing, and contacted Hull at work. By then, however, it was already too late. Bryce had chosen her exit route well: the street behind the grocery store had a distinct lack of any kind of CCTV, and formed part of more than a dozen different bus routes out of Miami. *She could have gotten on board any of them. Hell, for all I know, she took a cab out of the city! Either way, she still has a long way to go before she reaches the border.*

At least he knew that she'd gone of her own accord, and not been snatched from the street like their neighbour. Karen Bell's horrific experience had been at the front of Hull's mind right up until he found the note, a little before five that afternoon; when Senior Agent Volker had driven him home to grab a few items of clothing for ANI's sniffer drones. He'd gone a little crazy once he finished reading it, and had smashed the bedside lamp. *Thank crap that Volker was still waiting downstairs.*

His boss had taken charge of the situation,

calmly instructing Nadimiche to fetch the first aid supplies, and making Hull sit down on the edge of the bed. He'd ranted at her while she picked all of the glass out of his hands and treated the tiny cuts. Then he'd simply broken down and flat out cried into her shoulder for the better part of half an hour. *Not the most professional thing I've ever done, that's for sure.*

Volker had been her usual stoic self all the way throughout, and had even stayed for dinner. She hadn't eaten, but she had helped with making sure that Tessa did, and also that Rayne was fed and her diaper changed. Meanwhile, Nadimiche and Callista had taken care of all the cooking, and seen to the dishes afterwards. Hull, having picked at his food, had wanted to go back to the office to collect his car. To his chagrin, Volker had vetoed it before she left. One of the other ANI agents would drop the vehicle off later this morning. Until then, Hull was under orders to remain at home and rest. *With hindsight, she may have had a valid point about not letting me drive.*

By now, Rayne's soft breathing and contented suckling had taken the worst of the edges off his feelings. The other three girls were still asleep

upstairs in their respective bedrooms. Hull could only hope that they hadn't suffered any nightmares from witnessing him breaking down yesterday. He sighed as the news broadcast finished up, and the five am weather report began. *Okay, so Bryce ran away and took Fisher along with her, because she's an ungrateful bitch. It's almost two days travel by bus from here to Canada. ANI will pick them both up at the border and bring them home, just the way Volker said. Then I can decide on whether I even want to keep someone around who'd inflict this much stress on me and the kids.*

He stood up carefully and clicked the remote, switching the TV off. It was well past time that he pulled himself together. Not only for the sake of the girls, but also for Fisher, as and when the poor kid finally arrived home again. Bryce was a different matter entirely, Hull resolved angrily, but he'd deal with her when he saw her. *Until then, I need to make sure that the girls aren't affected more than they've been already.*

Thomas Campbell hadn't come to Barcelona with revenge in mind. In fact, the elderly ex-spy was only in the city by chance. His intended destination

had been the resort city of Palma, but there was a problem with the damned airline. His supposedly direct flight to the Spanish island of Mallorca from Milan had ended up not merely diverted, but delayed. *Two days and three nights stranded in bloody Barcelona – what am I supposed to do for entertainment here?*

In truth, of course, there was plenty to see and do in his current location. The main problem was that Thomas was a petty man at heart. He had also found himself deprived of his most recent sexual conquest. His erstwhile travelling companion, twenty-one-year-old Cassandra Shelby, had abandoned their hedonistic tour of Europe in favour of visiting her father in New Zealand, where he was apparently in custody for murder. *Lord alone knows why she thinks that her being there will help matters! After all, he claims to have shot the bastard for her and her cousin's sakes. Who's to say that ANI shan't suspect her of conspiracy?*

The latter possibility was what had prompted Thomas to head for somewhere with plenty of potential replacement fucks. He had never lost his taste for young women. Regrettably, these days he all too often found himself reduced to seducing

thirty-something sorts instead. It just wasn't the same, in his opinion. *Older women are far too bloody canny to make for enjoyable company if you ask me!*

On the bright side, he had secured a room in a hotel on the Passeig de Joan de Borbó, which was the main boulevard in the Barceloneta neighbourhood. This kept him within easy walking distance of the Port Vell Marina, one of his preferred haunts whenever he was in Barcelona. Decades ago, he had even kept a yacht here, before concluding that there were better ways to burn through one's money. *Although, in hindsight, I never would have met dear Eunice if I hadn't owned that boat.*

All thoughts of the long since deceased mother of his son fell by the wayside then, as Thomas spotted a familiar face ahead of him on the promenade. He smiled covetously as he stalked over to the blonde woman in question. She hadn't noticed him approach: too busy trying to daub sunscreen on her toddler's face. "Why, hello there, Bryce! Oh, and young Fisher too – my, how he's grown! I suppose that you're both here on holiday with Greg, eh? Is he somewhere nearby with the

other children, or...?"

Bryce, having pushed her young son to stand behind her as she spun round to face Thomas, flinched at the latter query. "I...as a matter of fact, no, we're not. We um...that is...I left him."

Thomas didn't even attempt to hide his delight. "Well, in that case, let me be the first one to congratulate you!" He cupped her upper arms and pulled her to him, kissing her on both cheeks and then full on the lips. "Do you need anything; money, perhaps, or a place to stay?"

She gulped back a sob, her hands clenching on the front of his shirt. "Um, actually, yeah, that would kind of help us out a lot, right now...!"

He held her close, stroking her hair and murmuring vague kindnesses as she tearfully explained how they had travelled there on a gifted credit card, and using fake identities, all provided months ago by Spence. "But...but the card must have run out, because...um...back at the hotel over there, I mean; they declined it when I tried to check us in last night, and...!"

"Hush, now, it's alright, my dear." Thomas glanced towards the hotel in question. "So where did you sleep, if I may ask?"

Bryce looked utterly broken with shame. "It...it was a real nice mild kind of a night, anyhow. Fisher...he had his travel pod, and it's designed for using as a temporary bed, so he was okay. We just made do, you know...?"

He pursed his lips solemnly. "You slept rough then, with the bairn in tow?"

She sniffled. "I had to! I even ended up taking the travel pod to a pawn shop this morning so that I could buy us food."

Thomas guided her gently to a nearby bench. "Here, sit down for a bit. You look shattered, and really, who could blame you, after all that you've been through? Don't worry – I'll see to it that you have whatever you need from now on."

"Thanks, Thomas." Bryce huddled even closer to him as they sat down together. "I guess I should have budgeted better, but I was just so desperate to get us far away from him that...!"

He hummed softly to her as she began sobbing in earnest. It was usually best if one just let people cry these sorts of feelings out before trying to talk to them any further. As he had anticipated, Bryce eventually calmed down. She took the handkerchief he offered to her, and wiped her

face clean. "So, um, I'm sorry for all of that just now. I didn't mean to make a scene. Um...Fisher's not too scared or anything is he?"

The reminder of the boy's existence sent a jolting surge of adrenaline through Thomas' veins. He sprang to his feet and stared about the bustling promenade for any sign of the toddler. A deep sense of dread rose in his gut as he remembered just how close they were to the marina. "Oh, fuck – the water!"

Both he and Bryce bolted across the flat expanse of tarmac, elbowing past pedestrians, and causing several hover vehicles to swerve or else come to an emergency stop. A litany of blaring horns and angry shouts echoed behind them as they reached the edge of the marina. There was no barricade to keep anyone from falling in, and indeed Thomas only just managed to grab hold of Bryce in time. "Be careful, damn it all!"

Below them, the beautiful, but nonetheless potentially deadly blue waters of the Mediterranean lapped enticingly. A few meters out, a small white canvas hat bobbed along with the push and pull of the current. Bryce screamed; an incoherent, agonised sound. Thomas all but hurled

her back from the edge, before stripping off his jacket and his shoes. "Call for the bloody lifeguards! I'm going in to look for him!"

Fisher had begun to miss his hat. It had been okay while he was on the bus, but walking along here was different, even with all the pretty trees. Mommy had been right about Mr Sun burning his head! He wished that he hadn't tried to make it a sail boat now. It had floated away from the edge of the marina super-fast, and then it had been too far for him to get it back. Okay, maybe he *could* have gotten it if he'd tried, but Daddy always said at the pool not to go into the water on his own. *I do what Mommy and Daddy say – I'm a good boy!*

The newly arrived holidaying families and other such tourists who'd gotten off the bus when he did were all gone by now; having turned off the road onto the driveways of their assorted rental properties here in peaceful Vallvidrera. They hadn't paid Fisher any attention, but not because they had each presumed that such a perfectly calm toddler must surely belong to someone else nearby. Instead, keen to be let alone to explore, the young psionic had inadvertently tapped into another of his

burgeoning powers: the rare talent known as masking. Even the most sophisticated of security systems could not have detected him, let alone human senses. Oblivious to the wrongness of his current situation, Fisher wandered on alone, whenever possible keeping to the shade provided by the ancient pine trees lining the road. *Nice trees keep away mean old Mr Sun!*

Thanks to the nap that he had taken on the bus, he wasn't at all tired. He was starting to feel terribly lonely right now, though, and a little bit scared too. Somehow, Mommy had just disappeared while he was exploring! She'd been talking to Santa, outside the bus that he'd climbed on board of, and then suddenly the bus had started moving. Fisher had gotten distracted looking out the window. Then he'd gotten sleepy. When he opened his eyes again, Mommy wasn't there. He'd left her behind with Santa, oops! Oh well, at least this meant that all that Fisher needed to do was find the magic sleigh. He was sure that that would be where Mommy and Santa both were now. *I look for the magic reindeer footsteps, just like in my cartoons!*

Suddenly, the ground beneath his feet felt different. Looking down, Fisher saw polished white

gravel. It was pretty, and it crunched when he stepped on it, and so he turned to his right and followed it. If he had been older, he would have realised that the tall metal gates whose bars he squeezed through without even a second thought were supposed to keep people out, as was the hard-faced security guard who sat in the little hut at the side of the driveway. The latter man's observation window was set too high up for him to see Fisher as the boy toddled past him, still fascinated by the stones beneath his feet. He beamed down at them, no longer masking, not that he knew the difference. *Special snow so as it not melting in the sun! This must be where Santa lives! I find Mommy again soon!*

Chapter Fifteen – A Worse Guest

Zima stepped out onto the rear patio area of the luxurious fifteen-bedroom Spanish villa that he was staying in and blinked in stupefaction at the sight before him. He had only gone indoors for a few minutes, to fetch his sunglasses, and already chaos had attempted to descend! He glared down at the blond-haired toddler who was currently hugging Grisha tightly around the neck. The child did not appear to notice. His dog, tethered safely in the shade underneath the patio table now that noon was approaching, peered up at him in obedient resignation. *Many such animals would not have been so patient!*

Muttering to himself about terminally stupid children interrupting other people's holidays with

their errant behaviour, the Russian picked the little boy up one handed by the scruff of his dungarees. He dangled the now giggling child at arm's length, and bellowed for his host. "Yuri – come attend to your offspring! One of them is trying to feed himself to Grisha!"

Forty-three-year-old Yuri Vanyavich Kuznetsov, who was not merely Zima's lifelong best friend but also his closest colleague within Russian Intelligence, emerged from the nearby swimming pool and padded across the baking hot flagstones to the patio seating. He shook the water from his spiky blond hair and frowned at the sight of the toddler. "Is that one of mine?"

Zima scoffed. "Of course he is one of yours – to whom else could he belong? This is your house, and all that you and your women do these days is laze around in the sun and make adorable little babies. Some of them even look like you."

Yuri rewarded him with an obscene gesture. "You are a horrible best friend, and a worse guest! Why do I love you so?" He laughed then, and scooped up the child. "Come along, little one – let your poor Uncle Zima rest here in peace for a while. He is old and grumpy; like a bear!"

"Your papa forgets how many times this bear saved his behind." Zima sat down on one of the dozen folding chairs that surrounded the family sized patio table, and poured a tall glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, with a lot of crushed ice in it. "That is because *he* is older yet."

His host laughed at him. "Only by six minutes, dear one!" He tickled the toddler's chin and kissed his hair fondly. "Now, my son, we must do a headcount of all of your siblings just to be sure that I have not misplaced anyone else! And we will not mention it to *any* of your mamas when they get back from the salon, eh?"

The boy didn't answer the question. Instead, he pointed down at Grisha, and began babbling excitedly in American accented English instead of Russian. "Santa has fluffy doggy!"

Zima almost choked on his drink. "That is *not* one of your sons!"

His fellow deep cover operative nodded, and carefully stood the boy on top of the mosaic-topped table where they could both get a better look at his face. He spoke to the mysterious child in English this time. "Boy – who *are* you? Where did you come from?"

The difficulty in interrogating such small humans was of course their tendency to make absolutely no sense. All that the toddler would talk about was how he was looking for Santa, and his mother. After several minutes of this exercise in futility, Yuri shook his head. He picked the child up once more, handing him a banana from the fruit bowl. "Here, little one. Eat this. It will keep you quiet while we solve who you are."

Zima certainly hoped that it would. He took out his phone, switching back to speaking in Russian now that they were not including the boy in their conversation. "I will put his picture into our database. Perhaps the computers can find some record of who he is. Surely there must be someone looking for him?"

"You would hope so, old friend, but people can be terribly disappointing." Yuri cradled the toddler with just one arm, already busy texting with his free hand. "Still, I will check the local news, in case he is merely lost."

The database flung back its answers first: not one, but two passport photos matched the boy perfectly. Zima muttered an oath as he finally realised why the child seemed familiar. "Fisher

Lenard-Hull, also known as Matthew Smith. I had the latter identity made for him earlier this year, and one for his mother too! It was requested by none other than Housekeeping."

"Did they approach you officially, or was it off the books?" Yuri was still scrolling. "He is a little young to be a spy, don't you think?"

Zima grunted as he peered at the activity on the credit card linked to the mother's new name. "I believe it was an attempt at kindness to one in need of help, and nothing else. This boy's father is a very bad man. Solovei hoped that the mother would have the sense to leave him if she had the means. To judge by what I can see here, that is exactly what has happened."

Yuri hissed suddenly. "Oh no, this is not good! According to the news, everyone believes that the boy drowned today! He wandered off, and all that was found was his hat, floating in the water near to where he disappeared."

"Please tell me that his mother has not spoken to the press in person?" Zima peered at Yuri's phone, grimacing as he saw the video of the interview. "Ah, but of course she has, and look – she used her original name too, despite having travelled here

under her new one!"

"Well, that was stupid of her." Yuri clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Now her husband will know exactly where she is!"

"He is not her husband. He owns her." Zima sighed and tucked his own phone away. "Solovei explained it all when they asked for my help."

Yuri looked unimpressed. "Perhaps you should have refused. Do not forget that Solovei is also the one who let a man beat them halfway to death because they felt guilty for secretly preferring someone else."

"They were younger then." Zima gestured dismissively. "They have learned better since. Don't be so judgemental."

The other man scoffed. "They were twenty-seven years old *and* already employed by BIINT at the time, so I will judge them all that I like, thank you very much! I earned that right when I helped you and old Mavrikiy Yasha to bury the body. Now – what shall we do about *this* mess?"

Zima glanced at the child and weighed up the possible solutions in his head. "You stay here and hide the boy amidst your own little ones. Have your people deal with the local CCTV, in case he

appears on it. I will go and make sure that no one can trace any of this back to us, or to Solovei. At the very least, the names that he and his mother used for the flight here from Miami must be digitally altered to their original ones, and the documents for their new identities retrieved."

"That is all sensible." Yuri nodded his approval of the plan. "I think that I will see about darkening his hair for a few months too, just to be safe. It looks as if it will eventually go that way when he is older anyhow. What about his mother, though? Will you risk approaching her, now that she has drawn so much attention?"

"No. She appealed for the boy's father to come to Barcelona and help search for his remains when she spoke to the press. I will not connect myself to someone who runs back to her abuser at the first instance of trouble in her new life." Zima untied Grisha's leash from the table leg. "If anyone asks, I have simply taken my dog out for a very long walk. We will be back in time for dinner."

Yuri clapped his hands sharply. "Very good, my friend, we will see you then!" He turned and scooped up the now identified toddler, not bothering to switch back to using English.

"Welcome to the family, my son! Ah, but you will need a proper name now too, won't you? Hey, Zima, before you leave, what do you think that I should name him?"

"His old name was terrible, and the new one that I provided for him will soon cease to exist." Zima began walking towards the driveway. "Call him whatever you wish! Just don't name him after me or my dog."

Leister kissed Spence on the nape of their neck as he reached past them in search of a mug for his coffee. It was nine o'clock on Wednesday morning, and they were both at home in the New Chelsea Towers apartment; having decided to take the remainder of this week off work to concentrate on personal matters. Unsurprisingly, given the circumstances, no one at BIINT had argued. "Has there been any more news from work, darling?"

Spence nodded. "I just finished going through all of the messages on my phone. NIT still can't find Zima, which is driving poor Byron up the wall with curiosity. Rosa's in the middle of having FBT, so she and Whitby need to push the older three children's computing and coding tutorial back until after

dinner today. Goodness only knows how Kathryn and Barnabas shall react to *that* change in their routine."

"Don't worry; I've already fitted new locks to both the knife drawer and the cupboard where we keep all of the household cleaning materials, darling." Leister nodded towards the kitchen cabinets in question. "They're thumbprint coded to you, me, and Heidi."

"Thanks for doing that, Cob." Spence passed him the milk before continuing. "Vasnetsova's dead again, thanks to Weaver, but not before she wrought havoc down in Medical. She managed to kill her guard; Bill Tompkins, he was a new hire. Hoy's male RCS met a nasty end too. Of course, I'd be more sympathetic about *that* if the silly little goose in question hadn't found a way to preserve Mr Hull's neural map! Apparently, he's back in New Zealand already."

Leister hugged them. "Hmm, I thought Edith had been rather calm about my neutralising him! Never mind, I'll put the horrid fellow back on my to do list. Now, is there any good news, darling?"

"Well, Squire woke up an hour ago. They're planning on interrogating her further sometime

today. It seems that she's feeling a tad less loyal to Horowitz now that she's experienced taking cyanide. Oh, and keeping on with that subject, Miss Darnell and Quincy rechecked all the call logs for WO Turner's sick day. It turns out that Squire was the one who supposedly registered her request for time off."

"The question now is why. What did Horowitz and Squire stand to gain from enabling the attack on the safe house?" Leister frowned as he mused aloud. "Surely they weren't in league with Craig's old enemies?"

"Perhaps they owed it to Vasnetsova. She certainly seemed the type to be found running with failed arms dealers and would-be child molesters." Spence set a frying pan on the hob. "Anyhow, let's forget about what all the other spies are up to for now! Miss Hedturner left us a note on the fridge. She took a taxi to college whilst the rest of us were indulging in our collective lie in. I'm going to make a fry up for breakfast. The older three are still in bed, but I've fed the smalls, and changed them, so they should be content for a bit, and...!"

Leister shook his head firmly and herded them away from the cooker, peppering their neck with

kisses all the way to the kitchen door. "I'll see to breakfast, thank you, darling. You've done more than is fair already. Go sit down and let me pamper you until the children decide that we aren't busy enough and gang up on us."

Smiling, Spence did precisely that. They opted to sit at the breakfast bar, the better to spend time with Leister whilst he cooked. "So, how do we break the truth to Phil?"

"I don't think there's any easy way, darling. We shall just have to sit him down, and explain the whole thing factually, in age-appropriate terms, of course. In addition, if possible, then I'd honestly much rather do it without Kathryn and Barnabas being present. It's such a horribly *personal* thing to spring on the poor boy."

Spence nodded as Leister handed them a steaming mug of coffee. "I agree. We'll need to tell them that it's something one talks about in private first, before sharing it with siblings or friends. They'll accept that."

"Good, then we'll do it straight after breakfast!" Leister cracked an egg into the by now hot pan. "There's nothing to gain by dragging things out any further."

A sudden thought struck Spence. "Oh, good grief, Cob, do you know what I've just realised? This means that they're all actually *cousins*!"

Leister chuckled as he cracked open a second egg with practised ease. "I hadn't thought about it that way, darling! Barnabas shall be thrilled."

"Hmm, that's a good point." Spence took a sip of their coffee. "One can only hope that both Kathryn and Phil share his enthusiasm."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Non-binary indie author E.V. Greig, who also writes under the pseudonym of Eibhlín Valdys, is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, and the co-founder of the literary e-zine *A New Ulster*. They have been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001, and to date they have received funding as an individual artist via the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2018/19, and 2020/21, and also via the University of Atypical's DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, cooking, reading, dog walking, chicken keeping, and equestrianism.