

Proof Of Death

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Twelve

E.V. GREIG

Proof Of Death
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PROOF OF DEATH

In the direct sequel to *All The Other Spies*, socially non-gendered British Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence tentatively reclaims the family that they never knew existed. But when things go suddenly and horribly wrong for some of those closest to them, the non-gender finds that they must once again balance their personal wants with their professional role.

Meanwhile, the threat posed to all involved by the evils of C.A.K.E looms ever larger...

Contents

1	Ready To Fledge	Pg 1
2	Dry Your Eyes	Pg 11
3	Past Experience	Pg 23
4	Sharp Edges	Pg 35
5	Hard And Fast	Pg 46
6	Something Is Burning	Pg 57
7	Unicorns In Disguise	Pg 69
8	Makes Me Wonder	Pg 83
9	Do Anything	Pg 97
10	Not Like Her	Pg 112
11	Quietly Acquire	Pg 125
12	Such Sharp Things	Pg 138
13	So Do I	Pg 152
14	Sitting Drunk	Pg 165
15	Rest Your Head	Pg 178
	About the Author	Pg 193

Chapter One – Ready To Fledge

“Aunty Val doesn't actually *like* getting flowers, you know, Cob.”

Nightingale Spence paused in eating their breakfast and glared across the width of the dining room table at their eleven-year-old niece, Kathryn Lackey. “Stop trying to stir up trouble between Cob and I, Kathryn. It's not big, and it's not clever. Eat your food before it gets cold.”

The pale haired girl stabbed her fork into one of the three sausages on her plate, scowling mutinously at the thin non-gender as she did so. “But it's true, you *don't* like getting flowers! They remind you of funerals. I heard you say so to Aunty Tanya when she gave you some from her and Uncle Darren to celebrate us all moving in here.”

She looked pointedly at her twin brother, who was sitting on Spence's right. "You heard too, didn't you, Barnabas?" Then she turned her attention to the boy on Spence's left. "Phil, you were there as well!"

Eleven-year-old Philip, who was still coming to terms with not knowing what his real family name might be, didn't answer, primarily since he had just bitten into a hefty forkful of fried bacon and tomato, but Barnabas nodded guiltily. "Sorry, Auntie Val, she's right. You did say so, I remember, because Auntie Tanya..."

Two seats to Kathryn's left, at what was technically the head of the table, Maurice Jacob Leister cleared his throat politely, interrupting the boy's recollection. "That's quite enough on the subject, thank you both. Let's all try to remember what Dr Geddes says about valuing kindness over total honesty. Nightingale, I apologise for presuming to know your preferences. Please don't feel obligated to accept gifts from me if you don't want them, darling. I promise that I can cope with hearing the word *no*. Many people aren't keen on flowers, and often it's for similar reasons to you."

Spence shook their head. "I'll admit that I don't

generally like cut flowers, but I still appreciated the intention behind the ones that you gave me for my birthday, Cob."

"I never doubted it for a moment, darling." Leister quirked his eyebrows knowingly at Spence, and then schooled his features back into a much more serious expression. "Anyhow, children, your aunt and I need to speak to the three of you about something very important once breakfast is finished. Phil, it involves the truth of who you are, so we'd like to tell you privately first. Kathryn, Barnabas, it would be very helpful if the two of you would see to clearing away the breakfast things and making up your beds whilst we're talking to Phil."

Barnabas was quick to agree. "I'll make your bed up too, Phil, since you're getting important news. I don't mind; we share the room anyhow."

"Uh, thanks, Barnabas." Poor Phil's already naturally pale complexion was now ashen.

Spence could tell that the boy was feeling torn between clamouring for more information and fleeing from the conversation. Phil still wasn't used to having adults pay him much in the way of positive attention. A lifetime of deliberately calculated neglect at the hands of his erstwhile-

supposed mother had seen to *that*. The non-gender reflected that dead or not, Magdalena Vasnetsova had a lot to answer for. *For that matter so does Horowitz. What I wouldn't give to get my hands on that bastard! Not that that's likely to happen. I expect he's well away from the UK by now, and probably still running scared.*

The sixty-three-year-old man who for the past forty years had called himself Derek Gerard Horowitz smiled thinly to himself as he watched the live footage from the various covert surveillance cameras he had hidden throughout Spence and Leister's now shared home. "I wonder what the pair of you would think if you knew just how far my plans go."

It wasn't easy looking out for the future of BIINT. Field operatives didn't spring fully formed from the earth, and nor was the mindset required in them easily taught, or at least not past puberty. One couldn't just hang around waiting for the right person to randomly show up and apply for a job! No; the perfect spy was an almost eldritch thing; a near unquantifiable combination of natural ability and acquired trauma. Few people matched it by

PROOF OF DEATH

chance. The most efficient method would be to grow a selection of SCOs in vats and program in the proper mentality along the way. Doris Weaver was living proof of that. Craig Campbell was too, but of course, nobody could ever know the whole truth about *him*. Even just revealing that it had in fact been his late mother, Eunice Pembleton, who was sterile, and *not* his father, Thomas Campbell, would open up a veritable warren of hidden intrigue. Lady Edith had gone to extreme lengths to cover up her late sister's clandestine role in BIINT's operations. *Really, it's a wonder that no one has ever connected how Eunice eventually died with the Tripoli incident. Illness indeed – well, I suppose that radiation poisoning might count as illness.*

It was infuriating to have lost track of young Craig. To think, all the effort that dear, loyal little Vivienne Squire had put in, all wasted. She had been so very brave about it: putting on that stealth suit and breaking in whilst Campbell slept to tamper with his phone. They had kept him nicely isolated from then on until that prattling fool Whitby had had to go and meddle. Now thanks to Magdalena's betrayal on Sunday, poor Vivienne was in custody and young Craig had taken off to

God alone knew where on his blasted boat! *He'll be hard to find, that one. For all of his flamboyance, he knows how to keep out of sight when he chooses. It might even impact his son's eventual role in Project Bloodline. Ah well, that can be a problem for future me to resolve.*

He shifted his weight in his chair. His ageing joints creaked uncomfortably, reminding him that he really should get the cybernetics implanted in them recalibrated sooner rather than later. Of course, it would have to be by someone other than his usual doctor, what with the Horowitz identity being a wanted fugitive now. Perhaps it would be safer to wait until he had gotten his new cover up and running – well, hobbling, anyhow. *Damn this ruddy arthritis and damn Magdalena too, for that matter! Why couldn't she have waited another few weeks before dropping me in it with BLINT? I'd have wangled myself a nice new body by then.*

Technically, he still could, but only by burning through more of his emergency financials than was sensible for someone in his current situation. FBT was still too new a process to be readily affordable. If he hadn't been fervently keeping his head down, then he could have flipped a casino or similar to cover

PROOF OF DEATH

the expense. Now though, the risk of capture by those hunting him far outweighed the potential gains. *On which note, I'd best crack on with fixing my appearance to match my new cover identity's records. Dying one's hair and irises takes time.*

He would be Jonathon Terrance Lambert now. That wasn't his real name either, but at least this time around, he wouldn't have to feign being of Jewish descent. It hadn't occurred to him beforehand how much effort would be involved in maintaining the latter aspect of his deception. True, it was illegal to openly engage in religious activity, but that hadn't helped him with the aspects which weren't banned. *I certainly shan't miss keeping kosher. Why the real Horowitz ever bothered doing so is beyond me!*

Sometimes, in idle moments like this, he wondered whether the young man whose life he had taken along with his identity all those years ago might eventually have reached a similar conclusion himself. It wasn't as if the fellow had had any family or close friends to encourage him to do otherwise, hence why he had been so easy to supplant. *Ah well, it doesn't really matter either way. I doubt he's even dust by now. Forty years buried in quicklime*

will have seen to that.

He peered approvingly at his replacement documentation. All was in order. His new name had belonged to another loner: this time a widowed, childless secondary school teacher instead of a postgraduate student. He had chosen the man because of that career. It would be useful to him for the next phase in Project Bloodline. How better to monitor the boy than by becoming one of the authority figures in his life? Children of that age usually still thought of their teachers as infallible. The system drilled the latter convenient belief into the horrid little creatures from their very first day at school. It tended to stick until they hit their teens, at least. *Doubtless, young Philip will be only too glad of a mentor, after all that he's been through, especially recently. All I need to do is find out what school he'll be attending, and secure myself a position there.*

Phil swallowed nervously as he followed Spence and Leister out onto the balcony for privacy. He decided to get his most urgent question over and done with quickly. "Um, so my biological parents...are they alive?"

PROOF OF DEATH

Spence, who was now carrying their twin babies in front of them in a complicated looking sling, nodded. "Yes, they're both alive, but it's still a little complicated, I'm afraid. They didn't even know that you existed until very recently."

The boy frowned in consternation at this statement. "How come, though? I mean, surely my *mum* must have at least known!"

Leister smiled sadly at him. "You were created in a laboratory, darling. Long story short, a very bad man decided to try to make the perfect spy. He stole genetic material from your mother and father without their knowledge."

Phil felt sick. "I...you mean...you're saying that I'm some sort of a *clone*?"

Spence nodded again; their jaw tight. "More precisely speaking, you're a binary clone. Furthermore..." They hesitated, the expression on their face indecipherable to Phil, and then plunged on with the remainder of the explanation. "Right, there's no gentle way of putting this, so I'll just tell it to you flat. Cob and I are your biological parents."

"Oh." Phil glanced warily from Spence to Leister and then back again. "Does that mean you're going to let me keep on living with you?"

Leister nodded firmly. "Of course, darling! You're our son. You'll always have a home with us, isn't that right, Nightingale?"

Spence shrugged. "I dare say that I shan't be the best of mothers, not given my own upbringing, but I shan't kick him out of the nest before he's ready to fledge. As for the rest, well, I expect that we'll muddle through somehow."

By now, Phil knew enough of Spence's mannerisms to parse them as having intended the latter statement kindly. He took a deep breath and somehow managed to smile at his newly discovered parents. "Thanks for that. Uh, so should I start calling you Mum and Dad now, or is that too much?"

Chapter Two – Dry Your Eyes

ANI Agent Greg Hull usually prided himself on not being an especially violent person. Sure, he did whatever he had to do when it came to his job, but that kind of stuff didn't count. Just because he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty when he had to didn't mean that he *enjoyed* inflicting physical harm on other people. Well, okay, maybe he did, but only ever in a fully consensual context – certainly not in the way of casual brutality! *I'm a better person than that.*

Now however, he wanted to hurt someone, anyone, really, but especially whoever it was that had assisted his by now very much ex-fiancée Bryce Lenard in leaving him and taking their almost three-year-old son Fisher along with her. *She's been kind*

of skittish ever since her trip to England, sure, but there's no way that she'd manage to cook all of this up on her own! Taking off to Canada would have been challenging enough for her and that's just a long bus ride away, not a transatlantic flight. No, someone else has to have been helping her, and now...now thanks to their meddling poor Fisher's dead...!

Hull didn't know what he would have done without the support of his boss, Senior Agent Laine Volker, who had mercifully stopped by to check on him this morning on her way to work. She had arrived two hours ago, at six twenty am, only ten minutes before the story broke on the news. An exhausted Hull had let her take charge of his household's morning routine while he freshened up. As such, he was upstairs in the shower when the first of the bulletins announcing the tragedy aired. Volker had immediately switched off the volume on the TV and set to work managing the situation. By seven fifteen, when Hull came back downstairs, ANI Miami had cordoned off his home and placed agents outside to prevent any intrusions by the press. They were also arranging a gagging order, but that would take some time.

PROOF OF DEATH

Volker had broken the news to Hull in his study, whilst his infant daughter Rayne drowsed in her sling against his chest. The older three girls had all been eating breakfast in the kitchen, still blissfully unaware of the tragedy. Volker had presumed it would be inappropriate to inform them before her agent had the chance to process the events himself. Hull hadn't had the faintest idea how she expected him to do that, but then what normal human being would? *Processing implies recovery. This isn't the kind of thing that you recover from. No, this is a horror story written especially for parents; one that's somehow come crawling right off the damn pages and into my life.*

His son was dead. The awful knowledge hit Hull again. Another wave of grief engulfed him and he sank onto the nearest of the den's armchairs. His heart ached and his gut roiled, but still no tears escaped him. Despite the agony of the situation, Hull had found that he couldn't cry. It was as if some key part of him had broken, rendering him trapped in a bubble of misery with no hope of release. Still, what place did hope have in his life now anyhow? At less than three years old, his son, his perfect little boy, had drowned in the sea half a

world away, and Bryce had either been completely brainwashed or else was having some kind of early midlife crisis. Either way, based on the note that she'd left in their bedroom for him, she hated Hull now. *Yeah, no, screw hope. Hope can just...it can just go die in a fire, metaphorical feathers, and all.*

It was too hot here in the Mediterranean, Zima Kazimirovich Bogomolov reflected as he reluctantly alighted from the temperature-controlled hover taxi that had carried him from Vallvidrera to Barceloneta's Passeig de Joan de Borbó. Also present was his loyal red and white Ovcharka dog, Grisha. The taxi driver had been considerably less happy about the latter of her two passengers. Despite receiving a generous tip for her trouble, she was still scowling as she drove away. Zima, who would have much preferred to walk the distance here, added the matter to his mental list of reasons why he disliked the local climate. "Come, Grisha. We have someone to find."

Man and dog made their way along the teeming boulevard. They drew less attention than they might usually have. To Zima's satisfaction, almost everyone else's focus was on the screens

and other such displays of their assorted devices. The recently announced missing child alert would have made for striking enough news even without the little boy in question presumed drowned. As it was, the more ghoulish members of the public remained congregated at the Port Vell Marina, watching the local police divers as they began their search.

Zima checked the screen of his own phone. Thanks to facial recognition technology, his people had easily combed through the past several days' worth of surveillance footage for this area. Most of the data had come from CCTV cameras belonging to local businesses; easy to hack into if you had enough skill. Zima's people were among the best in the world. He doubted that even the marina's security system had offered them any sort of challenge. At any rate, they had located his target: Bryce Lenard.

She was one of those painfully delicate looking blonde women, Zima observed as he scrolled through the information sent to him. Finely featured, and a little too thin faced at present for his taste, as if she subsisted primarily on a diet of fear and fresh air. Perhaps she did. It would make sense, given the

sort of man she had run away to here from. There was no question that Gregory Hull abused her in multiple ways, albeit under the guise of BDSM. Did he also harm their son, the missing toddler at the heart of the nearby search? *I do not think that he would do so physically. If he did, then Solovei would certainly have mentioned it when they were arranging false identities for both mother and son with me. Still, there are all too many other ways for a parent to harm their children.*

He turned left down a narrow alleyway that led to a private courtyard behind one of the tall hotels. It was a cleanly maintained but nonetheless dismal space, intended for deliveries, refuse collection, and other such essential services, most of which were performed by robots. If anyone challenged him, Zima would claim to be seeking a shaded area for the wellbeing of his dog. It was a useful excuse to have. The Russian had employed it several times previously when caught in places where he had less than legal cause to be present.

A tap of a button on Zima's wristwatch initiated an energy field that deactivated any security drones and surveillance equipment around him for fifteen minutes. The effect was active to a radius of

fifty feet in all directions. If discovered, it would look like a short caused by the temperature. There was still the problem of potential human intervention, but Zima doubted that any of the hotel staff would prove too difficult to deal with. Another glance at his phone confirmed that the police presence was concentrated in the main lobby, wrangling with the press. That just left the guests. *At least out of all of them, only Thomas Campbell is likely to be dangerous. How typical of fate's plan that he is also who the Lenard woman is staying with.*

He entered the hotel by the rear door, walking purposefully and ignoring anyone he passed. Grisha padded obediently at his heels, the leash loose. As Zima had anticipated, no one challenged them. Dressed as he was, in a smart dark grey suit and plain sunglasses, he might have been the hired minder for any number of wealthy guests; no doubt simply returning from walking his employer's dog. People very rarely thought to suspect a smartly dressed and clearly self-assured individual as being up to no good. It was a common flaw in human consciousness which spies were swift to exploit.

The room he sought was on the second floor. Zima took the stairs, the better to minimise the risk of

witnesses. Upon reaching the correct floor, he saw two blue uniformed Guardia Urbana officers escorting an angry looking Thomas Campbell into one of the three elevators at the opposite end of the corridor. The steel doors closed behind them, but not before Zima spotted the glint of handcuffs on the older man's wrists. "How convenient, Grisha. It appears Thomas Campbell's infamous temper has again gotten him into difficulty with the authorities."

Now the only question was whether there were any other police officers still inside the hotel room. There might well be, especially given that his target was an indentured companion travelling without her owner's permission. Add in the missing child, and one had copious reason to anticipate a police presence. Favouring caution, Zima twisted one of the buttons on his shirt. A holographic field activated, hiding both he and Grisha beneath the image of an elderly blind woman guided by an assistance Dalmatian. It was one of several pre-programmed disguises at his disposal. *Anyone who is sensible enough to mistrust such a harmless seeming creature as this deserves to have the full advantage of that wisdom.*

PROOF OF DEATH

The door of the hotel room swung open only a few seconds after Zima knocked. A haunted looking Bryce Lenard gasped as she took in his appearance. Then she blushed and shuffled backwards to grant him entrance. "You must be the Family Liaison Officer. Sorry; I wasn't expecting you to get here so soon. They never mentioned that you'd have an assistance dog."

The room behind her was conveniently empty of any other people. Zima strode into it, with Grisha still following along calmly. Nudging the door closed behind the three of them with one foot, the Russian switched off his disguise and spoke curtly. "Do not scream. Do not attempt to escape. Where are the replacement identity documents that Solovei acquired for you and your son?"

She flinched. "...I don't know anybody called that. You must have the wrong...!"

Zima cut across her stammering. "You know them as Nightingale Spence. Solovei is a Russian word for nightingale. Now, where are the documents?"

Bryce gulped, as if attempting to swallow down at least some of her evident terror. "I don't...sir, please, you've made a mistake. I don't have any

replacement documents."

Her loyalty to Solovei was admirable, Zima reflected grudgingly. Still, he would not risk the documents falling into the wrong hands. He softened his tone very slightly. "Perhaps you do not understand. I know you have the documents, and I have seen the news reports about your son. You gave the authorities here your original names, despite having travelled here under your replacement identities. I have already troubled myself to protect you by adjusting all the necessary records in line with that unfortunate decision. However, if the police find those documents, then you will have many unpleasant questions to answer, and I do not trust you to keep Solovei's name out of your explanation. Nor do I trust you not to tell the man they enabled you to run from. You have already reached out to him, begging him to come here. Why should I think you will not make more stupid choices?"

Bryce clutched the bag even more tightly, her eyes red rimmed from crying. "That...that was all Thomas' idea, not mine! He said...he told me that Greg would have resources to help find Fisher, but that I couldn't risk him knowing about our new

names, or...!"

Zima suppressed the urge to sigh as Bryce dissolved into near hysterical sobbing. Things were rapidly falling into place in his mind. Clearly, the old man had thought to use Fisher's apparent death to inflict pain on his father. It was a crude, but effective move, and all too typical of what he knew of Thomas Campbell. *It is only surprising that he has not already killed this woman to silence her. I may yet need to do so myself, if she proves too troublesome.*

There was no gain for him in telling Bryce any of that, and so he did not bother. Instead, he took out his handkerchief and handed it to her. "Dry your eyes. Your misery helps no one. Why did the police arrest the old fool anyhow?"

It took Bryce a moment to compose her wits enough to answer. "They um, they said something about there being an outstanding warrant for him."

Zima knew that many others would have smiled openly at the irony. "So it is not connected to your personal situation then. That is all to the good. Do you at least still have the documents?"

She nodded, sniffing. "Yeah, they're right here in the diaper bag. You can have them if you want. I

don't want them anyhow, not after what's happened to my baby. I never should have brought him here! I should have just stayed in Miami and done as I was told!"

"And what good would that have been for either one of you?" Zima clicked his tongue irritably. "Solovei told me of your situation; about the actions of this Gregory Hull. Would you truly wish for your son to grow to adulthood beneath the influence of such a man?"

Bryce hurled the bag at him. "At least then he would have actually *gotten* to grow up!"

There was some fire to her after all then, Zima noted approvingly. He caught the bag and slung the strap of it over his right shoulder in one smooth movement, weighing the choices available to him before he spoke. "Your son did not drown, despite no one having noticed his wandering off. He is alive and well. I will take you to reunite with him now. Do not make me regret doing so."

Chapter Three – Past Experience

It was half past two in the afternoon before the Guardia Urbana finally permitted Thomas Campbell to contact anyone. Even then, he was restricted to a single twenty-minute conversation made via a monitored videophone terminal. Not caring to bother with the usual lines of legal assistance, he called his only known son; launching into an explanation of his situation the instant that the phone was answered. "Craig, it's me. I've been arrested in Barcelona over some nonsense to do with an old unpaid fine. Only a few thousand pounds once you allow for the conversion rate, hardly worth chasing me down, but the Guardia Urbana are being petty, as per bloody usual. They

want the money before they'll release me. Anyhow, don't bother with informing anyone at work. Just get me out of here."

Aboard his yacht, which was ironically not too far from the Barcelona coastline, Craig Campbell felt a headache begin to form as he replied. "Dad, what's going on? Why exactly have they arrested you?"

Thomas scoffed. "Oh, never mind about that! It's not important."

"You say that, Dad, but past experience..."

"Don't start going on! You're worse than your mother at times." Thomas glared at his son through the video feed. "And don't think that I hadn't noticed how you've blocked me from contacting you from any of my numbers! I suppose you only answered this time because they insisted I use one of their phones."

Campbell grimaced at the reminder. "That's actually the case where you're concerned, yes, but on that subject, someone got access to my phone and blocked most of my contact list. I only found out a few days ago. I think it might be something to do with Vasnetsova."

"That bitch again, ha! Still managing to trouble

you from beyond the grave then?" As usual, Thomas was openly unsympathetic to his son's troubles. "You brought it all on yourself. You should have kept your dick in your trousers until Spence came home to you. I'd thought that *they* meant something special to you."

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you, Dad!" Campbell was sorely tempted to end the call. "And in case no one else has read you in yet, Vasnetsova turned up alive in London on the Sunday just past. She tried to snatch Sam along with Spence's two little ones."

Thomas jolted slightly at his words. "Fuck, well that's news to me, lad! So where is she now? Are the bairns all safe?"

"They're fine. Some fellow Spence knows in London managed to intervene in time. BIINT had Vasnetsova in custody the last that I heard. Sam and I have been off the grid since Monday, so I haven't heard any updates about it." Campbell sighed. "I'm about an hour out from Barcelona. You say they want a few thousand as bail?"

"Five and a half should cover it, yes. It was only a bit of speeding, after all, nothing serious." Thomas ignored the pained expression on his son's face.

"We can have a bit of a catch up whilst you're here. You and your boy have been on my mind a lot today, after what happened with poor Fisher this morning."

Campbell blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about, Dad?"

"You know; Hull's son, Fisher; the wee lad who could block other psionics. His mother ran off to Spain with him. I bumped into them near the Port Vell Marina this morning, and she and I got to talking. Somehow, Fisher slipped away and...well. We found his hat in the water. They're still searching for his body, but you know how the tides can be around here."

"Wait, so Fisher's dead?" Campbell glanced immediately at where Sam sat safely confined in his playpen, positioned well away from the edge of the deck. "Christ, that's awful! How did it even happen? Why didn't either of you notice him wandering off? Weren't you watching him?"

"Don't blame me! I was busy trying to calm his mother down; she was having some sort of mental crisis over having finally left that bastard Hull. I'd naively assumed that the boy was on one of those wrist straps!"

Campbell shook his head. "So you're saying that it was all Bryce's fault. Of course you are. This is typical of you: blame the woman for everything! Come on, Dad, you've just admitted to me that you were there too. If Bryce was so upset that you needed to comfort her, then you must have realised that she wouldn't have her full attention on Fisher!"

So angry that he forgot where he was, Thomas slammed his right fist into the table housing the videophone terminal. "That's *enough*, Craig! It was a tragic, horrible accident, and nothing more. You can judge Bryce for being a neglectful mother, and you can judge the marina owners too for not putting up any sort of fucking wall or fence by the water, but I won't stand for you castigating *me* about it. Now, hurry up and bail me out."

He cut the call. Campbell stared at the now blank screen of his phone for a moment, before sliding it back into his pocket. His mind whirled. An unpleasant possibility reared its head. Was his father telling the truth, or had he deliberately ignored Fisher wandering away, hoping to use any resultant tragedy as a means of hurting Hull?

The sudden clatter of footsteps distracted him.

Turning around, Campbell smiled as he watched his lover, Zoe Rusdyle, step down onto the deck of his yacht from the steel framed passerelle joining their vessels. She was carrying her toddler daughter, Primrose, in a sling on her back. "Welcome aboard again, ladies!"

Zoe caught his hands in hers and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "Did you miss us?"

"Oh, you know, not really; only for every second that you were gone." Campbell pulled her in close for a deeper kiss. "How was this morning's sculpting anyhow?"

Zoe snuggled closer to him. "Primrose made her first statue. I think it's supposed to be a dog. What about you and Sam?"

Campbell sighed. "Sam's fine, but I'm not. My dad rang me from out of the blue ten minutes ago. He's in Barcelona. Apparently, the Guardia Urbana arrested him for an old unpaid speeding ticket from when he was on some mission or other, back in the day. He wants me to go and bail him out."

"Oh gosh, that's random!" Zoe rubbed gently at Campbell's back. "Does this mean that you're going to introduce us after all?"

"I'm honestly not sure if that's a good idea."

Campbell stepped back, holding Zoe at arm's length as he explained further. "He isn't the easiest person at the best of times, I've told you that already. On the phone today though, something he said, well, it got me wondering."

"Wondering about what?" Zoe stared quizzically up at him. "Craig, sweetie, what's wrong? You look really worried."

Campbell nodded to where Sam was waving eagerly at them from inside his playpen. "Let's get the kids settled first. I don't want them hearing. It's not a pleasant subject."

Zoe frowned but nodded. "Why don't we move the playpen down into the galley and get them their lunch? We can grab a quick bite for ourselves too."

Lunch was the remains of last night's spaghetti and meatballs, reheated and served with red wine for the adults and freshly squeezed orange juice for the toddlers. With Sam and Primrose fed and settled safely in the playpen, Zoe switched on the galley's small television and found an obnoxiously loud cartoon series to entertain them. Then she and Campbell withdrew to the built-in table and bench seats at the far side of the room to discuss Thomas'

request while they ate.

It had just turned three o'clock in the afternoon. Campbell grimaced as he realised the time. "Damn! I'm running late. Dad's going to be furious when I see him. He's expecting me to be halfway there by now."

Zoe took a sip of her wine. "He's hardly in any position to complain, Craig! You're doing him a massive favour."

"You don't know him like I do." Campbell chuckled mirthlessly. "Mind you, that's probably a good thing, really; especially if my suspicions turn out to be correct."

"Okay, you're actually starting to worry me a bit now." Zoe set down her fork and stared at Campbell. "What is it exactly that you suspect?"

"He told me that he'd bumped into a woman we both sort of know at Port Vell. She was there with her son, and he isn't – ugh, well, he wasn't very much older than Sam and Primrose." Campbell paused and drew in a deep breath before he continued. "Dad said that the woman was distressed. He tried to comfort her, but her son wandered off while they were both distracted. It seems as if he fell into the water. The authorities

were still looking for the body when Dad rang me."

Zoe clasped her hands to her mouth, her face paling beneath her freckles. "Jesus, Craig, that's awful! Oh, that poor little boy and his mother too, she must be in absolute bits! I don't know what I'd do if it were me."

Campbell nodded grimly. "It's every parent's nightmare. Now, here's the thing of it: I can't help wondering if perhaps my father saw the child wandering off, and just let him go."

"What? Why would he do that?" Zoe looked ill at the thought. "Why would *anyone* do that? It's an utterly monstrous notion!"

"The boy's father has caused a lot of trouble for us over the past couple of years. He's a truly terrible human being, and he keeps on getting away with it." Campbell closed his eyes sadly. "You met him very briefly at the safe house – well, one version of him, anyhow. He had himself cloned a while back. Greg Hull, slippery bastard extraordinaire."

For a few seconds, the only sounds were the waves lapping against the hull, and the contented grizzling of the toddlers. Then Zoe found her voice again. "Okay. Let me try and get this straight in my head. You're saying that you think your dad might

have let that poor little boy drown just to get back at his father?"

Campbell nodded. "I'm afraid so, yes."

"Right then, so, basically, you're telling me that your dad is a complete psychopath." Zoe took a large gulp of her wine. "Why would you even consider bailing him out if that's the case?"

"He's family. Besides which, I could be wrong about him having noticed. It might all have been a complete accident." The former spy stabbed half-heartedly at his food. "I *hope* it was."

Zoe shook her head, her light brown curls bouncing beneath her headscarf. "I think that's something that you should let the police decide! Seriously, Craig, you need to inform them about your concerns. If your dad's innocent, then they'll clear him, and we can all move on from there."

Campbell scoffed. "Ah yes, because he'll be so very quick to forgive me for that betrayal!"

"It isn't a betrayal if it turns out that you're right, though, is it?" Zoe reached across the table and closed her right hand over Campbell's left. "That's what's got you worried the most, isn't it? The thought that your dad might be the sort of person who'd let a child die in order to get revenge on

their parent."

He caught her hand between both of his own and squeezed it. "I'm not talking to the police about it, Zoe. Like I said, I could be wrong. I promise you that I'll flag it up with BIINT later, but off the books. I owe him that much."

"Craig, you don't owe him *anything*!"

Campbell sighed. "I keep on forgetting that you aren't a spy. You don't understand."

She glared at him, but there was more fear in her eyes than anger. "I don't think I want to understand! I know he's your dad, and you love him, but I just can't help worrying about what you told me! If you're right, and he really did let that little boy drown, then who's to say that he wouldn't do similar again? I mean, okay, Sam is family to him, so surely he wouldn't hurt *him*, but what about Primrose, and what about me; what if he blames us for you being late today?"

Campbell was aghast. "Zoe, he wouldn't ever hurt either of you! He isn't that bad, and even if he was, I'd protect you!"

"Craig, that's my point! You shouldn't *have* to protect us from him! It's not normal. I don't care if you're all spies; it's *not* okay to have to live in fear of

how a family member will react! You deserve better. We all do."

Campbell frowned as he reflected on Zoe's perspective. "You have a point there. It's time I did more than just block his phone number. I shan't go in person to bail him out. I'll pay using the online system instead, and if that's not good enough for his liking, then hard luck for him!"

Zoe beamed at him. "That's the spirit! Good on you for drawing a line with him! Now – what are our plans for the rest of today?"

Chapter Four – Sharp Edges

Senior Agent Laine Volker stood alone in her office at ANI Miami, perusing the latest update provided by the Guardia Urbana. It was now nine fifteen am here in Miami, but Spain was of course six hours ahead. The search for Fisher's remains had gone on all day so far. There was still no sign of him, in the water or out of it. Volker had begun to find that curious. *Given the amount of CCTV in and around the area where Fisher disappeared, they ought to have surveillance footage of him entering the water, or at the very least approaching that part of the marina. The challenging tidal patterns do not explain his absence from all such records. I believe that something else is going on here.*

She did not think it prudent or indeed fair to

inform Agent Hull of her nascent suspicions. His son could very well still be dead. Someone might simply have attempted to cover up the means of his passing by tampering with the local CCTV. Such things did occur. Certainly, this was the shared opinion of her counterparts at ANI's Barcelona field office and the Guardia Urbana. Volker did not intend to tell Agent Hull otherwise until she had solid proof of life. *My theory makes sense based on what I know of the boy, but that does not mean that it is correct.*

She reactivated the holographic emitter on her desk and pulled up the video footage from the promenade again. There was Ms Lenard, and there was her son. Then Thomas Campbell joined them, and the three repaired to one of the benches together. It was all exactly as described in the reports, and none of it explained what happened next. Fisher, unmistakable next to the two adults, simply ceased to be present in the recording. *He does not walk away, and nor does anyone approach him. The time stamps linked to this footage remain consistent throughout. Our technicians confirm that they have detected no sign of digital manipulation.*

PROOF OF DEATH

Volker returned her attention to the latest update. There had been another curious event, this time involving the hotel where Ms Lenard and Thomas Campbell had been staying. Three hours ago, the security drones and other such surveillance systems had suffered an unexplained fifteen-minute blackout. According to the Guardia Urbana, it was a technical issue caused by the heat. The latter explanation was believable, until one considered what else had happened during those fifteen minutes. *By my calculations, this was when Ms Lenard disappeared from the hotel. I find it somewhat too convenient that she chose to make her exit during the same window of time as the blackout.*

There was no possibility of Ms Lenard herself having caused the event. She did not possess any of the required technical skills. Nor did she have any inherent biological means of doing so. Unlike her son, Ms Lenard was not a psionic. The missing boy had inherited those genes from his father. *That means that even if my suspicions about Fisher's disappearance prove to be correct, they still do not explain this later blackout. He is certainly psionically powerful enough to have somehow hidden himself*

from notice on the promenade, but he was not present at the hotel. Someone else either assisted his mother in leaving, or forcibly removed her.

The Guardia Urbana subscribed to neither of these theories. They insisted that the timing of Ms Lenard's departure from the hotel was simply an unfortunate coincidence. One of Barcelona's top forensic psychologists had stated that her continuing absence from all surveillance footage in Barcelona was most likely due to her having committed suicide over the loss of her son. As such, the dive teams searching the waters in and around the marina at Port Vell were now under orders to look for two bodies instead of one. Volker found the speed at which the Guardia Urbana had reached this conclusion to be disturbing. *It seems that there is no possibility of them assisting me any further in my investigation at this time. I suspect that I will have to go to ANI's Barcelona field office in person if I am to find my answers.*

Leister glanced up from the pan of soup that he was stirring and smiled at Spence as they joined him in the kitchen. Several hours had now passed since their conversation with their newly discovered son.

"I take it that Jacamar and Honeyguide have deigned to accept their lunchtime nap graciously, darling?"

Spence nodded. "They're in a fairly solid routine now. It makes things a lot easier. What are the older three up to?"

"They're in the living room. I promised them lemon meringue pie after lunch today if they sat quietly and did some maths whilst I made this. Heidi made it this morning, before she left to collect her end of year exam results from the catering college." Leister reached for the pepper. "I must say, darling, the children do seem to be taking the news awfully well, especially Phil."

"Hmm, so far, yes." Spence sat down at the breakfast bar. "I can't help feeling that there's another shoe still waiting to drop."

"We'll deal with whatever happens when it actually happens, darling." Leister remained sanguine on the topic. "That's what families do. I'm sure Dr Geddes will advise us on the details."

"I hope you're right, Cob." Spence sighed. "It's just all so terribly convenient though, don't you think? Our finding out about Phil being our son, I mean, and for that matter, the chances of he and

Vasnetsova ever even having crossed paths with us at all. If Craig hadn't taken up with her, then I wouldn't have had any cause to visit her room at the hospital that night. That in turn would mean that Zima wouldn't have spotted her there, and so her cover wouldn't have been blown. She could have stayed put there in Latimer Hill and kept right on pretending to be a florist and brainwashing children to be killers in that secret underground bunker of hers. For that matter, she and Phil might have both *died* at the hands of those bloody cultists! I don't know how long the life support systems on those pods of hers would have lasted, but it hardly matters, does it? It's not as if anyone would have had reason to go digging around looking for secret rooms or...!"

Leister stepped away from his cooking and enveloped Spence in a gentle hug, being careful not to overwhelm them. "You found her captives, Nightingale. You saved them. Don't torment yourself by dwelling on thoughts of the horrible alternate endings, darling."

Spence shivered. "Yes, but what if I *hadn't* found them, though, or what if Craig and I hadn't moved to Bournemouth in the first place? We only ever

ended up living there because of Kathryn and Barnabas having inherited that house from their mother. The authorities could just as easily have seized it along with the rest of the Lackey and Ashby estates."

"Well, on the bright side, at least the latter proves that everything that's happened really was just down to chance, darling." Leister rubbed their back soothingly as he spoke. "I dare say that Horowitz and Vasnetsova only conspired to try and let her gain access to Craig's DNA once he was living within easy reach. Doubtless, they would have thought it an excellent second phase for that ghastly Project Bloodline. However, there was no way for them to have known in advance of Vasnetsova's move to Latimer Hill that the two of you would end up living there too. Nor could they have controlled the outcome of the Lackey and Ashby trials. Neither of them had *that* much influence."

Spence pulled back suddenly and stared at Leister, frowning as they took in what he had just said. "I hadn't thought of it that way – Craig's seemingly random decision to cheat on me with her, I mean. How can we be sure that it didn't

secretly connect to Horowitz's scheme? What if...what if Craig didn't have full control over his actions? So many drugs out there can affect people's libido to the point of taking away their free will! How do I know that Vasnetsova didn't use at least one of them to control him? It's not as if she'd have had any moral objections!"

Leister grimaced. "I hadn't considered that, darling. I suppose that the only way to be certain would be to run a full panel of biometric tests on him to search for any traces of such things that might remain in his system. Bear in mind that it's been months now, of course. Even if he were drugged, by now there's no guarantee that anything would show up."

"So we *can't* be sure." Spence's voice was now flat with pain. "She may have forced him, no, actually, let's call it what it really is regardless of what the law thinks to biology: she may have bloody well *raped* him! And we can't be sure, because I didn't think to even consider it as a possibility in time!"

There was a soft hiss of steam as the soup boiled over onto the hot surface of the hob. Leister snatched up a dishcloth and hastened to clear up

the mess, moving the saucepan clear of the heat and switching off the offending ring. "I presume no one else has mentioned it occurring to them before now either, darling?"

"Well, no, but that's not the point!" Spence stood up and began pacing up and down the length of the kitchen. "It's *me* who ought to have thought of it. I'm Housekeeping, for pity's sake! It's my job to notice if there's anything that seems off about our field operatives."

Leister set the soup aside to cool. "Craig wasn't simply a part of your job by then though. He was personal to you, darling; you were in love with him. That's what made the difference." Turning, he joined Spence on their third orbit of the kitchen, pacing alongside them in support. "The trouble with love is that it tends to obscure our capacity to remain sufficiently objective. We stop seeing things clearly because we're too caught up in feeling them instead."

Spence sighed anxiously at Leister's words, glad of the empathy, but also unsure if they deserved such comfort from him. "I...I don't think I know *what* I'm feeling any longer, Cob."

"I'd guessed as much, darling." Leister reached

out and began gently tracing the fingertips of his right hand up and down Spence's spine. "I love you, Nightingale. That doesn't grant me any right to censor your relationships with others. All I ask is that you remain honest with me."

The non-gender slowed their pacing, arching their back into the caress. "You're talking as if you think that I might want to be with Craig instead of you."

Leister dipped his head and nuzzled the left side of Spence's neck. "Now, I really must point out that I never said anything about *instead of*, darling! Although, I'll accept that too, of course, if indeed it proves to be your decision. One must always respect one's partner's choices."

Spence thought of how Campbell would have reacted to a conversation like this. They could almost hear the imagined slamming of the door. Then again, perhaps that was more to do with actual memory. "No thanks. I'm better off right where I am."

"Might I presume that to mean you'll permit me to stay with you, darling?"

"Yes, well, if you still want to bother with all of my sharp edges, that is." Spence angled their head to

PROOF OF DEATH

the right, granting Leister ready access to more of their neck. "I shan't blame you if you go. I know I'm not easy to live with."

"You're yourself, Nightingale. That's all that anyone ought to be." Leister kissed the delicate area of skin offered up to him. "I'll stay. We'll investigate whatever really may have happened between Craig and Vasnetsova together."

Chapter Five – Hard And Fast

Getting out of the hotel had been just as simple for Zima as entering it. His stealth tech had covered Bryce along with himself and Grisha, rendering them non-existent to surveillance equipment, and hiding them from organic eyes beneath the holographic image of a nondescript quartet of tourists. The same disguise had left them free to board one of the regular public buses to Vallvidrera. Here, Zima had opted to abandon the main road in favour of a narrow trail that wound through the tall pine trees. It led to the rear gate of his friend Yuri Vanyavich Kuznetsov's property, but it was a convoluted enough route that he doubted if Bryce would be able to memorise it. If anything, she would likely believe Yuri's villa to be much farther

away from the main road that was truly the case. *Well, at least until she makes her way down the front driveway for the first time, but we will not permit her to do that, not before we are sure of her.*

He still hadn't told her his name. She hadn't asked either. Zima took this as a good sign. Curiosity had a way of sparking trouble. It was far better that the woman remained as uninformed as possible about her new situation. That way, should she prove to be too great a liability, they might retain the option of releasing her alive as opposed to eliminating her. *Yuri will keep the boy regardless. There is no reliable way to swear such a young child to secrecy and he has language enough to be able to babble to others about us. We cannot risk having the wrong person make sense of his words.*

Killing the boy was not an option. He was an innocent, and there had to be a line drawn where such things were concerned. No matter what the circumstances, one did not harm *children*. Terminally foolish adults were another matter, but Zima found himself hoping that Bryce would avoid belonging to the latter category. He did not bother to pretend that it was merely because her permanent removal would upset her son. *She is*

attractive. Not so much that I would risk taking her back to London with me, no, but I could perhaps see the value in having a woman of my own here for when I visit with Yuri.

He stopped walking and nodded curtly to Bryce. "We are far enough into the trees now to be safe, so I will turn off the holographic emitter. Stand still. I want to look at you."

"Okay." Bryce looked nervous but stayed exactly where she was while he paced slowly around her, Grisha padding silently at his heels. "What are you looking for?"

Zima halted directly behind her and unclipped Grisha's leash, trusting the dog to behave himself. Coiling the braided leather strap into a neat loop, he tucked it away inside his jacket. Then he cupped Bryce's waist with both hands, tightening his grip when she flinched. "You are the type of woman that I like. I can provide you with sanctuary from your past. Perhaps we can reach an understanding, yes?"

Bryce made a soft, desperate sort of sound. Then she nodded. "If you keep Fisher and me safe, then I'll do whatever you want."

"Your son will be cared for either way. My friend

has already agreed to adopt him as one of his own children." Zima wrapped his right arm snugly around Bryce's waist, pulling her backwards to stand flush against him. He moved his left hand up to stroke her hair and continued talking. "This discussion we are having concerns only *your* fate. I am prepared to give you another replacement identity, and to sponsor you financially in exchange for your companionship whenever I am here in Barcelona. I warn you now that I do not visit very often, perhaps twice a year at most. You would need to comport yourself appropriately in my absence: no gambling, no drunkenness, no drug taking, and no sexual involvement with anyone not approved by me. Aside from that, I do not care how you spend your time."

She trembled as he lowered his left hand to trace his fingers along her collarbone. "And...and your friend...he won't take...I mean, I'll still get to look after Fisher myself, right...?"

"You are his mother. If you do not make yourself a problem, then you may raise him, yes." Zima toyed suggestively with the neckline of Bryce's sundress. "Do we have an agreement?"

Bryce nodded again. "Okay."

Zima smiled and nuzzled the nape of her neck, inhaling the delicate floral scent of her perfume. "I would like to fuck you now, right here beneath these trees, hard and fast, until you don't even remember what it felt like to have any other man but me inside of you. You would let me do it too, not because you want to, but because you have learned that that is what works best. There is no pride left in you at all. It is worse than sad, it is *pathetic*." He slid his left hand down and gripped her left wrist, carefully repositioning her arm. "A mother must have pride! She must be fierce; like the she wolf, or else what good is she to her children? How can she teach them to stand tall in the world if all she does is cower? Now, pay attention: this is how you move your arm to defend yourself."

Spence set down the baby clothes they had been folding to put away and answered their phone. The familiar soft trill of the ringtone seemed louder than usual in the quiet of the currently empty nursery. "Yes?"

Campbell's familiar baritone responded. "It's me; I'm moored off the coast of Barcelona. Zoe's here too, and the kids of course, but that's not why

I'm calling you. Sorry, this is...well, it's not coming naturally to me."

The memory of their earlier discussion with Leister gnawed at Spence's thoughts. "What's wrong? Are any of you hurt?"

"No, we're all fine, thanks for asking." Campbell paused for a moment and sighed. "It's my dad. He's in Barcelona too. I had to bail him out earlier this afternoon; something to do with an old unpaid fine, from his days in action. You know how it is."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure that BIINT will recompense you in full for it, if that's the only reason for this discussion?"

"I'm afraid there's more to it. Bryce Lenard and her son were at the Port Vell Marina this morning. Dad said that he ran into them unexpectedly. Fisher...well...Spence, he's gone *missing*. The authorities think he drowned; nobody saw anything, but his hat was found in the water. They're still searching for him. It doesn't look good."

Spence hissed through their teeth. "For goodness' sake, he's not even three yet! Why wasn't anyone watching him?"

"That's sort of why I rang. Dad told me that he was talking with Bryce; comforting her or some

such. Apparently neither of them noticed Fisher wandering off until it was too late, but..." Campbell's voice trailed off for a moment. He sounded deeply unhappy. "I...I can't quite shake the question of whether Dad might secretly have spotted him and turned a blind eye. You know, because of Hull."

The possibility of Thomas being quite that much of a ruthless bastard was, Spence knew, regrettably far from zero. "Have you confronted him about it yet?"

"No. I *did* try to ask him why he wasn't watching Fisher when he disappeared, but he just interrupted and blamed the whole thing on Bryce. He told me to stop castigating him over it. You know how he is."

"So now you want me to look into what may or may not have *really* happened, is that it?" Spence scowled. "I trust you do realise that if your father did let that boy wander off on purpose, then he's accountable for whatever became of him? I shan't sweep it under the rug for him, Craig. Not with a child involved."

Campbell sighed again. "I know that, yes, and if it means anything, I agree with you. There's a line. I hope to God he hasn't crossed it, but if he has, then

he deserves no quarter. I'm cutting contact with him regardless. Zoe and I were talking about his behaviour in general. We don't want him around the kids."

An irrational flicker of jealous rage crawled through Spence's feelings at this hint of how close Campbell and Zoe had obviously become. Then the non-gender thought again of the fears they had shared with Leister. Their anger evaporated abruptly. Let Campbell find some comfort where he could; why shouldn't he? "Vasnetsova's dead again, by the way."

"Is she?" Campbell sounded immediately happier. "Well good bloody riddance! I only hope that it sticks this time. Do we know yet how she managed to resurrect herself between Bournemouth and then?"

"As of an hour ago, we have enough forensic evidence to make a decent guess. The autopsy of the most recent her identified the remains as a cloned body. It seems she has access to long-range RCS technology; the stuff Pembleton used for the Boston matter, back when we were first investigating Hull. I'd hazard that the same thing applied to her florist identity."

Campbell hummed. "So, we've likely never actually met the real her at all then, eh?"

Spence agreed. "I expect not, which makes a good deal of sense, when one considers it. Why put herself within reach of her enemies when modern technology makes it unnecessary?"

"Well, let's just hope that she's been using clones that look like she really does! I don't like the idea of having an enemy out there who I wouldn't recognise on sight."

"None of us do." Spence steeled their nerve and continued. "Listen Craig, I'm glad that you rang. I was talking with Cob earlier today, and something occurred to us. Your affair with Vasnetsova – do you suppose that she might have done something to control you; slipped you a pill or such, I mean?"

There was a pause from Campbell. Then he sighed sadly. "I don't deserve that level of forgiveness from you, Spence. I'm not some helpless innocent in all of this. No, I'm sure that she's exactly the sort of woman who'd resort to such methods, if need be, but in my case, she didn't have to bother. I got lonely and let my libido run away with me, plain and simple. Then I tried to hide it, to have both of you. That's the real reason why I asked Kathryn

not to tell anyone. Cob was right to throw me out, and you were right not to let me back in. I shouldn't have tried to change your mind; it was shabby of me. Still, at least it all worked out for the best in the end, eh? Let's face it: we were never really suited to each other as lovers."

Spence swallowed the sudden sharp feeling of relief in their throat. "I suppose we weren't at that, no. Well, I'd better get on. Goodbye, Craig."

Ending the call before Campbell could reply, Spence tucked their phone into their pocket and went downstairs in search of Leister. They found him on one of the sofas in the apartment's main sitting room, with Jacamar cradled in the crook of his right arm and Honeyguide in his left. The sheer domesticity of it made the non-gender pause for a moment, smiling slightly. Then they sighed and spoke to him. "Craig just rang from his yacht to say that his father is causing trouble in Barcelona. There's a possibility that he deliberately let a toddler wander off and drown."

Leister was openly horrified. He listened grimly whilst Spence recounted the details of what Campbell had told them. "That poor child, and his mother too, for that matter! I've no care for any

version of Greg Hull, darling, but his family isn't to be held accountable for his sins. We should ask young Whitby to take a gander at the matter post haste. He and Kellie are online with the children now; doing some more coding and general computing practise. If we're in luck, then one of BIINT's surveillance satellites will have been in the right spot to catch the truth of what happened."

Spence glanced towards the open door of the dining room, where they could see the three older children sitting around the table with their respective tablets. "Good idea, but I don't want the children overhearing the details of the matter. Let's wait until they've finished their lesson. That way Miss Hedturner can keep an eye on them whilst we talk things over with Whitby."

Chapter Six – Something Is Burning

Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy sat at her desk in her quarters on Deimos Base and watched the last of the departing vessels via live video feed with a relieved smile. It was nice to finally be rid of the diplomats. Things would undoubtedly be safer with them gone. Just as importantly, she'd be able to carry her infant daughter Ellie around with her again, instead of having to keep her hidden away in her quarters with whoever was available to babysit her. *My Marines have been real supportive during this whole thing, but it ain't fair on them to have to keep on giving up their downtime.*

Nobody here on Deimos Base was likely to have much in the way of downtime for the foreseeable

future anyhow. With the assorted Earth diplomats having been invited by the Szenoldyans to relocate to the underground facility on Ceres, Deimos Base was deemed capable for a return to active military duties. *And about damn time too, if you ask me. Now maybe we can get on with doing something about that recent spike in space pirate activity.*

She was pretty damn sure that C.A.K.E was behind the bulk of the attacks in some way or another. The pirates were far too well-equipped compared to their usual gear. Their vessels too were faster and better armoured than average. Somebody with deep pockets and very few scruples had to be funding them. C.A.K.E fitted that description on both counts. *I guess the only real question now is whether that asshole Carson Howard is still the one running things.*

Kennedy sighed. There had been a time when hearing that your enemy's head had been bitten off in combat had meant that you could at least cross them off as a problem! Modern flash cloning technology had ruined that. Mind you, it had also given Kennedy the means of keeping her daughter, so she wasn't really complaining. *Heck, Ellie wouldn't even exist if Hull hadn't cloned himself for*

our joint mission to save Mars!

She dragged her thoughts firmly away from the resultant memories of Yuudai before they could make her maudlin. The past was done. Kennedy had enough going on in the present without wasting time and energy dwelling on what couldn't be fixed. Her first priority was arranging replacement documentation for Ellie; hence the off the record video call that Kennedy had made to Spence yesterday. Unfortunately, the non-gender hadn't been able to help much. *It's just my luck that the guy they went to for Bryce's papers has dropped off the map. Oh well, at least they were still able to give me his number. Maybe he'll pick up, maybe he won't. It's worth calling either way.*

Spence stepped out onto the penthouse's balcony and closed the door behind them. They wanted privacy for the phone call that they were making. It was half past eight in the morning here in London, which made it half past nine in Barcelona. The risk of Thomas still being asleep by this hour was negligible, but he was hardly likely to take the news of his son's decision to cut him out of his life well. *I'd rather not risk having him be overheard by any of*

the children when he starts swearing at me about it.

Thomas answered the phone on the second ring. "Housekeeping, good, I was debating ringing you today, so you've saved me the bother! Craig's not answering his phone, and we were supposed to meet...!"

"Craig's fine." Spence interrupted him, wanting to get their explanation out quickly. "He rang me yesterday evening. There isn't a nice way of telling you this, so here it is bluntly. He's decided that he needs to put some distance between you."

"What? Why?" Thomas initially sounded surprised. Then his voice hardened. "Pray, do enlighten me as to why the stupid bastard wants to cut me off!"

Spence recognised the new tone of voice all too well. Thomas was hurt, and hiding it under a veneer of anger, because anger was safer than grief. "He and his new girlfriend have decided that they don't want you around either of their respective children."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, is this because of what happened with Fisher? That wasn't my fault!"

"I know it wasn't, Mr Campbell. Whitby has already checked our satellite feeds for the relevant

PROOF OF DEATH

area. You're bloody lucky that BIINT had coverage of it at the time. Otherwise, we'd be having this conversation face to face in a secure room over an empty vial of truth serum."

The latter threat checked Thomas' temper far better than any mere platitude would have. Spence heard him draw in a deep breath before he answered them. "I appreciate your informing me, Housekeeping. I take it that Whitby was able to determine where exactly the poor wee lad went into the water?"

Spence glanced down at the screen of the tablet in their other hand. "That's where things get complicated. There was a very curious blip in yesterday's surveillance coverage; localised to Fisher himself. It was as if he suddenly became invisible, and not only to our satellite, but also to the people who were around him at the time. There's a sort of blank look that settles over their faces whenever he ought to have been in their line of sight. It's eerie viewing. Our best guess is that Fisher was doing something psionic, most probably without even knowing given his age. Anyhow, whatever caused it, Ms Lenard and you appear to have been the first to be hit. Whitby was able to

extrapolate the child's route after he left you based on who else looked affected."

"Good God! The wee bairn can make himself disappear?" Thomas was clearly more fascinated than alarmed by this revelation. "So, what exactly did young Whitby extrapolate? Did Fisher end up in the water or not? Oh, and whilst we're on the subject of where people are, what about his mother? Where's she buggered off to?"

Spence waited patiently for the barrage of questions to end. "The satellite's surveillance feed picked she and Fisher up yesterday evening on the patio of a villa in Vallvidrera, along with several other people. Fisher has had a bit of a makeover. His hair is dyed dark brown now. Whoever disguised him did a good job. It's hardly surprising, given whose house it is."

Thomas huffed impatiently. "Well don't keep me in suspense, Housekeeping! Who has them, and what are we going to do about it?"

"Officially, BIINT knows nothing and isn't doing anything about it, Mr Campbell, because officially that satellite doesn't even exist. But off the books, Ms Lenard and her son are at Yuri Vanyavich Kuznetsov's house. By the looks of things, he's

adopted them into his household. Our satellite has moved and won't be back in range of that area for another eighty days, but I suspect that there's no cause to worry."

"Ah, so Kuznetsov is involved, eh?" Thomas chuckled. "The world-famous *gymnastics coach*! I take it that *officially* we're all still vigorously pretending not to know what it is that he *really* does for a living."

"It's considered very poor form to out one's fellow spies unless truly necessary." Spence had already decided not to mention Zima's presence in the surveillance images at all, lest word of it leak back to the wrong ears at NIT, and leave Byron Caulfield with no choice but to go to Spain and track him down to interrogate him about his role in thwarting Vasnetsova. It felt like the least that they could do for all parties involved. *Friendship is such a horribly complicated beast to manage in this bloody job.* "Kindly let things be, Mr Campbell. Ms Lenard has finally broken free from Agent Hull's control. She and her son are both safe, and someone other than us is tidying up the loose ends of their disappearances. No one is hurt and nothing is on fire. That will do well enough."

"Aye, indeed it will." Thomas sounded pleased with the outcome. "I appreciate you reading me in, Housekeeping. Rest assured if they're found by the wrong people, then it shan't be because of loose lips on my part!"

Zima sat in the shade of a vast patio umbrella and sipped contentedly at his glass of kvass. All was currently peaceful and profitable in his life, just as he preferred. A new client, one Captain Susan Kennedy had approached him via phone on the previous evening, having acquired his contact details from Solovei. The documentation that the Martian celebrity required was simple to provide, and she had made no quibble over the cost. More importantly, the conversation had shown that Zima had been wise to take Bryce under his wing when he did. *First there was Thomas Campbell, and now this famous MMC officer. Who is to say how many others might know of the documents that I provided for her?*

It had now been almost a full day since he had brought Bryce back with him and Grisha to Yuri's villa. So far, she had given them no trouble. She had even volunteered to wear an electronic tracking

tag, something that Yuri had readily supplied. It was a subtle enough thing, really. The tag itself was tiny, and disguised as a diamond, embedded along with half a hundred other such stones in an ornate silver and platinum choker. Bryce had called the necklace beautiful when Zima locked it into place around her slim neck. Yuri had preened over her liking it.

They had not tagged her son. The boy seemed content with his new home anyhow, albeit that the other children at times overwhelmed him. Zima understood his difficulty. Four of Yuri's nine offspring were toddlers, and the other five were all aged between four and six years old. They operated as a pack. Zima, who knew all three of their respective mothers, felt sure that the children had inherited this tendency on some genetic level, and not from Yuri. He was not foolish enough to voice this opinion aloud.

Now, the children, and all four of the women too, were quite some distance away from him, on the carefully nurtured lawn at the opposite side of the swimming pool. The kitchen staff had provided a picnic lunch for them today. Yuri believed such activities would help with settling Bryce and her son

into his household. Zima was content to trust his advice on the matter, especially since the arrangement allowed both men to enjoy their own meal quietly on the patio, with only Grisha for company.

Yuri suddenly scrambled to his feet, dropping his still mostly full bowl of okroshka. He pointed towards what had startled him. "Is that smoke? Look – over there, beyond the shrubbery! Something is burning on the driveway!"

Zima stood up, setting his drink aside on the table and whistling for Grisha to follow him. "I will go and see what is happening, Yuri. You attend to the women and children."

His friend nodded grimly. "I will escort them indoors to be safe and then join you myself. Be careful, Zima."

The fact that there had been no word from any of the staff about the apparently large fire went unspoken between the two. Yuri did not employ fools. Something was very probably wrong over there, and if so, then Zima intended to put it right. *This villa is supposed to be a haven for my friend and his family!*

Volker paused and confirmed that the four guards whom she had just rendered senseless were all still breathing. Satisfied with the men's wellbeing, she returned her focus to the defensive blaze that she had created at her back. It had been a necessary precaution at the time, but now it was more prudent to extinguish the flames. *It would not do for them to spread any further. The ground here is dangerously dry.*

She had not intended to resort to such blunt methods. Unfortunately, her attempt at entering the property unobserved had failed moments in. Volker did not deny that it was her own fault. She had forgotten quite how difficult it was to track another psionic by their thought patterns alone. The effort needed had distracted her, to the point where she had not immediately noticed herself tripping a silent alarm whilst she was levitating over the boundary wall. Ten seconds had passed before she realised her mistake and shut off the signal with a pulse of telekinetic energy. *Too little, too late, it would appear.*

Volker glanced down at her now limp and all too rapidly swelling left wrist. It was at the very least dislocated, but given the force with which her

opponent had twisted it behind her, she suspected that a spiral fracture of the distal radius was more likely. *I should leave now, and return with appropriate assistance to retrieve Fisher. He is somewhere within the confines of this property and...!*

Something large and heavy collided with her back, slamming her into the ground. Volker winced as the impact with the gravel sent a fresh wave of pain through her already injured limb. There was the faint sound of bone moving as the arm gave way beneath her. Already unbalanced by the weight of whatever had struck her, Volker could do nothing to prevent herself from collapsing leftwards. Her head hit part of the steep white marble kerb that edged the driveway, and then she knew nothing further.

Chapter Seven – Unicorns In Disguise

Zima called Grisha back to heel and warily approached the slumped form of the red-haired intruder. Clad in a formfitting grey jumpsuit and matching boots, she was tall, thin, and almost exotically beautiful. He drew his stun pistol and shot her twice at point blank range before assessing her any further. "Hmm, you look familiar somehow. Let us see if you are carrying any identification."

He found her phone, passport, bankcards, and keys inside the pockets of her jumpsuit. There was also a small energy based sidearm, and an official ANI Miami ID lanyard. Zima scowled at the sight of the latter item. "Senior Agent Laine Volker...ah, yes, now I remember where it is that I have seen you before! Those news reports about the aliens found

living within Ceres. Well, at least we know who you are! Unfortunately, I suspect that I can also guess at why it is that you were here."

Yuri arrived then, accompanied by a dozen more of his guards, all armed with heavy assault energy rifles. The blond Russian signalled for them to attend to their fallen colleagues. "Check the main front gate too! The other teams are searching the grounds. Zima, who is she?"

Zima handed him Volker's belongings. "Senior Agent Laine Volker, a psionic according to what I have seen on the news reports, and most likely a pyrokinetic to judge by what I saw her doing before Grisha took her down. She works with the same branch of ANI that Gregory Hull is employed by."

"That is a worrying coincidence indeed." Yuri passed the items to the nearest one of his guards. "Mikhail, have our people strip whatever they can from the phone, and then get rid of it along with all the rest of this. Make sure that there are no records of her ever having arrived here. I do not care who claims otherwise, but this woman never reached Vallvidrera!" He turned his attention back to Volker then, prodding her in the ribs with his foot. "So, what do we do with her, eh?"

Zima checked the unconscious woman's pulse. "Killing her immediately is too risky. We do not know who knows where she is. ANI may have some record of her coming here. Records can be wiped and rewritten, yes, but we still might have to deal with other agents if she is here officially."

Yuri nodded. "I will make her tell us everything necessary. Then we can decide what to do with her. Come; let us take her down to the lower level. We do not want her waking up and using her psionics to escape. My people have the right drugs to shut down that part of her temporarily." He scowled as he glanced at where the guards whom Volker had bested had begun being loaded onto stretchers. "I might yet order them to make it permanent, given what she has done here today!"

"Few would blame you, old friend." Zima lifted Volker bodily and rose to his feet. "As you say, let us hurry and get her secured. She probably has at least a concussion herself."

They strode back up to the villa and in through the front door. Here, Yuri took a brief detour into the main lounge, where he let the women know that it was now safe for the children to play outside again. Bryce, who was sitting on one of the three large red

leather sofas with Fisher on her lap, gasped when she caught sight of Zima standing just outside the doorway with the still unconscious Volker in his arms. She looked up anxiously at Yuri. "I know her! She's Greg's boss at ANI Miami. She's a psionic, like Fisher, except he's just a dampener, and Greg said that she has all kinds of powers."

Zima blinked. "The boy is also a psionic?"

Yuri chuckled. "Ha! That must explain how he was able to slip past my guard when he first arrived here! Such a clever child! We are *definitely* keeping him now; he will be a valuable asset to us one day." He reached down and tousled Fisher's hair fondly. "Isn't that right, Visha? Oh – that reminds me! I have seen to his new documents. From now on, he is Viktor Zimavitch Bogomolov or Visha for short. It sounds similar enough to his old name for him to adapt to it quickly."

Bryce said nothing further, although she looked somewhat unhappy at having had no input on her son's new name. Zima was nowhere near as sanguine. He switched to speaking in Russian, hissing angrily at Yuri whilst behind them all the women escorted their various offspring back outdoors to resume enjoying their picnic on the

lawn. "What is this? I specifically told you *not* to name him after me!"

Yuri shrugged. "Yes, but then you changed part of our agreed plan and claimed his mother as your woman, and so obviously, he had to become your son instead of mine. It is all very simple indeed, my friend!"

They took Volker on through the villa and down via elevator to the subterranean part of Yuri's home. Here, some three hundred feet beneath the earth, behind blast doors constructed from ten-inch-thick steel and plated over with both lead and gold, was the evidence of the other half of his life. It included a state-of-the-art medical bay complete with several silent but efficient staff. Zima handed Volker over to them and stepped back to wait with Yuri and Grisha whilst she was assessed and treated. The outcome was of course far more complicated than a mere concussion, because the universe hated them. According to the doctor, Volker had sustained a minor brain injury in the fall. She was likely to have near total retrograde amnesia when she regained consciousness, and if so, then it might very well be permanent.

Yuri swore viciously. "This woman is proving

herself to be the bane of my life! All this fuss and trouble from her, and now we most probably cannot even hope to interrogate her!"

Zima folded his arms across his chest grumpily. "It is all the luck that you deserve, after having named that boy after me! I have no interest whatsoever in being anyone's father."

"Ah, you will soon adapt to it! Just think of it as being another reason for his mother to look at you as if you hung the moon in the heavens." Yuri ran his hands through his spiky blond hair. "Anyhow, come back upstairs with me. We have not finished our lunch, and there is nothing more to be done here, at least for now. My people will inform us if our guest awakens."

Zima spluttered indignantly. He hurried after his friend. "She does *not* look at me in *any* such way! Why must you say these insane things? You have spent too much time out in the sun!"

Yuri laughed and patted Zima's cheek. "Ha! Deny it all you wish, but I am not wrong. You have done as the old magician warned his king, my friend, and invited your doom in!"

"What is this? You are referencing books now?" Zima scowled as the two of them entered the

elevator, Grisha following along at their heels. "Well, firstly, this is *your* home, not mine, and so if anyone needs to be wary of unicorns in disguise, then it is you. Secondly, we came in by the *back* door, not the front."

"Ah yes, of course, because such minor technicalities, they matter." Yuri smirked as the elevator began to rise. "You could do worse for a woman, and Visha has already done worse for a father. It all balances itself out in the end. Why even try to fight it, eh? Enjoy your good fortune!"

Zima shook his head. "There is still the problem of the burning bull in your basement. What do we do about the Volker woman?"

"By now, my people will have shut off her psionics with something temporary. You know my powers well enough. Even if she does wake up without her memories, we can still make use of her." Yuri brightened. "In fact, I even know what to call such a scheme – Project Firebird!"

Zima scowled and signalled for Grisha to keep to heel again as he let Yuri lead the way out of the elevator. "That is a terrible name! I am banning you from choosing names for anything else from here onwards!"

Yuri chuckled as they stepped out onto the patio again. His staff had already tidied away the mess and provided fresh food and drinks for both men, as well as a large bowl of water for Grisha. "Well, in that case, you will have to see to Bryce's new papers yourself! Tell me: what will you name her? I think that she would make an excellent Natalya, but what do I know, eh?"

Zima looked over at where Bryce was busy encouraging her son to try something from one of the picnic platters. "She will be called Viktoriya. It connects her to her son. Her family name will be Volkova, after the wolf. Who knows; perhaps it may even inspire some courage in her."

"Ah, yes, that makes good sense indeed." Yuri nodded and picked up his soup spoon. "What about the patronymic?"

Zima deliberately waited until his friend had taken his first mouthful of okroshka before he replied. "That will be Pyotrovna of course; in honour of the man who wrote so very much about her alleged true species."

Greg Hull Senior glanced at the time on his phone before tucking it back into his pocket. It was

now twenty minutes to midnight on Thursday night, and he was two hours and forty minutes into his return flight to London following what had been his second visit on behalf of BIINT to New Zealand. Budget constraints meant that he was reduced to enduring an economy seat, but at least nobody had tried to kill him this time around. *It must have been weird for the ANI agents back in Christchurch; having a murder victim available to interview about his death. Spiteful or not, I hope my statement puts that stupid bastard Evan Shelby away for life.*

He wasn't travelling alone. To his left, beyond the empty middle seat in their row, sat the understandably deeply traumatised but somehow still unbroken Karen Bell; wide awake and staring out of the window across the smooth line of the plane's wing. She had given her statement to the relevant authorities in Christchurch the day before Hull had arrived to give his. Since the hospital had cleared her for travel, it had been deemed only practical for Hull to escort her as far as London. Representatives from the American Embassy would meet them at Heathrow and take over from there. *I sincerely doubt if we'll be able to keep the press from hounding her along the way, but at least she*

won't be on her own when they do.

A green uniformed and anxious looking young blond male flight attendant quietly interrupted Hull's reverie then. His nametag identified him simply as Alex. "Excuse me sir, I'm sorry to bother you, but you're flagged on the passenger manifest as being a BLINT operative. The captain has instructed me and my fellow flight attendants to confer with you about a potentially serious security issue. Please come with me."

Hull frowned. "I'm acting as escort for this lady. What exactly seems to be the problem?"

The attendant glanced about furtively at the nearby passengers, most of who were at least partially asleep in their seats. Satisfied, he leaned in closer to Hull, lowering his voice to a near whisper. "We have reason to fear that one of the passengers seated in business class may pose a danger to others."

Hull rose to his feet. He nodded to Karen, who had turned in her seat to watch the conversation. "I think you'd better tag along with us, Ms Bell. There may be an incident brewing, and I'd prefer it if you were in sight of me."

She blinked. "What kind of incident?"

Alex cleared his throat. "Ah, perhaps it would be best if your companion was to remain here in her seat, sir...?"

"Nope, that's not happening. ANI and BLINT have assigned me to protect her for the duration of this flight. She stays close enough to me that I can do that." Hull gestured for Karen to follow along. "Lead the way, Alex."

The young man led them along the aisle and out into the small lobby area that divided business class from economy. This part of the plane was where the flight attendants sat in between their various tasks. There were two green uniformed women waiting there. One of them, brown skinned with neatly bobbed curly black hair, stood wringing her hands anxiously. Her companion, a leggy blonde, sat slumped in her seat at the opposite side of the lobby, cradling her left arm and whimpering. The injured limb was wrapped in a towel, and blood was seeping through the thick white cloth.

Hull tamped down his rising sense of dread. He looked at Alex. "I take it that this relates to the matter you've asked me to help you with?"

Alex nodded. "One of the passengers in first class bit Marsha. We wrapped her arm up, and

then we spoke with the captain. Per his orders, I asked Kathy and Brian to stay here with her while I went to find you. Ruth and Betty are both still with the passenger – Brian and I, we uh, we may have subdued him with excessive force."

Hull shook his head. "If he'd reached the point of drawing blood with his teeth, it was time to use whatever force necessary to subdue him. He *is* subdued, right?"

Kathy piped up then. "Yeah, Brian and Alex managed to beat him unconscious with a couple of champagne bottles!"

Alex flushed scarlet. "It was all we could do in the moment! He was like a wild animal! He bit Brian too, but not as badly as he did poor Marsha. Her arm is lacerated. Brian just has a tiny little nip on the right side of his face."

Hull drew his energy pistol and set it to heavy stun. Maybe he could avoid there being any fatalities. "Okay. Where exactly is Brian now, and is the passenger involved restrained?"

Alex nodded hesitantly. "Um, well we tied him to his seat, so yeah, he should be secure. He didn't have anybody seated next to him, and we moved the people behind him to another row. I'm sure that

Ruth and Betty would have raised the alarm by now if he'd gotten free. Brian was here when I left."

Kathy pointed to a small door directly opposite Marsha. "He's in the bathroom. He wanted to check his injury in the mirror."

A guttural snarl emanated from inside the bathroom. Everyone flinched at the sound. Karen, who was already standing as far away from the rapidly imploding situation as she could without fleeing, edged back another step. "Uh, he doesn't sound too good! Maybe we should see about barricading that door or something?"

Marsha rose to her feet and stood there swaying for a moment. Her face was pallid, and her brow beaded with sweat. "There's a security code to lock it from the outside. I'll put it in now." She stumbled forwards and typed in the code. There was a soft beep as the emergency locks engaged, sealing the unfortunate Brian inside the bathroom. Task complete, Marsha staggered back to her seat.

Hull smiled at her as she sat down. "Thank you, Marsha." He shot her square in the chest, stretching out his free arm to block any of the others from moving to catch her as she fell to the floor. "She's just stunned! Alex, are there any security restraints

left unused?"

Alex pointed to a nearby cabinet. "Uh, yeah, there are some in the emergency kit right over there. Should we...should we use them?"

Hull nodded. "She'll only be under for about an hour, and I don't want to have to shoot her again. Be careful of her teeth and her nails. We don't want anyone else infected."

There was a sudden scream from the business class seating area. It was immediately followed by animalistic snarling, and then a lot more screaming, this time from more than one person. Hull, who knew more about these kinds of disasters than he liked, grimaced, and ran towards the screams, weapon still in hand. *I've got to get this situation under control, or the authorities will order the entire plane obliterated regardless of any uninfected people on board!*

Chapter Eight – Makes Me Wonder

Hull stood alone in the middle of his study and scowled down at his cell phone as if it had personally betrayed him. "How am I meant to stay in the loop with the investigation if my boss doesn't answer her damn phone?"

Volker not picking up was weird. It wasn't as if he'd called her too early. She clocked on every morning at seven thirty sharp, and it had just gone eight. Besides which, he'd called her on her cell phone, so it shouldn't have mattered if she wasn't in the office. *Although I'm not sure where else she'd be right now. She told me she'd be taking the lead on the investigation; liaising with our agents over in Barcelona. Maybe she's checking out the airport security logs again; to see if there was anyone*

travelling from Miami with Bryce and Fisher. Signal can be spotty at Miami International sometimes.

At least now they knew for sure that there had to be a third party involved in Bryce's recent actions. Her disappearance from the hotel confirmed that much. Conveniently timed inexplicable power outages or not, there was simply no way that the Guardia Urbana wouldn't have found her by now. *Yeah, and that's something too, isn't it? The power to all the hotel's security cameras cutting out at just the right time like that. The Spanish authorities can't seriously believe it's a coincidence! No – the only question now is whether the asshole responsible met up with Bryce in Miami or in Barcelona.*

Hull sighed. ANI's regulations on mandatory compassionate leave were doing him more harm than good right now. Sure, it was understandable that ANI would want to bench their agents during such times of personal crisis, but not knowing what was going on was driving him crazy! Maybe he should just pack up the rest of his family and take a quick trip by stealth jet to Barcelona to look for Bryce and Fisher himself. *After all, there's nothing stopping me from travelling. I'm certainly not in the frame as a suspect or anything, even if Mike Cully*

wishes otherwise.

His fellow ANI agent's wholly unreasonable mistrust of him was why Hull hadn't tried calling the main office phone yet. He really didn't feel like getting into it with the guy right now. There was too much at stake. No, it was far better to just communicate directly with Volker; let her handle the office politics. *Except that she's not answering her phone, and that's seriously out of character for her. I don't like it. What if she's been in an accident, or gotten herself into some other kind of trouble?*

Knowing his boss as he did, Hull was more inclined to suspect the latter risk. He grimaced as he contemplated her history of deliberately going off alone into dangerous situations. If she'd found a lead that she felt might not be wholly approved by ANI, then she might very well have followed it up off the books. *And if she hadn't wanted to risk getting my hopes up for nothing, then she wouldn't have told me either. Damn it, I won't lose her as well as them!*

He opened one of the less than legal apps on his cell phone and began an unofficial search of his own. Moments later, he had enough answers to be even more concerned. Volker had flown out to

Barcelona yesterday. Presumably, that was what she had *really* meant by liaising with the agents there. She had a talent for telling people the truth in a way that suited her. *Ugh, I should have guessed that she'd go there in person! I should still be able to reach her by phone though.*

Best case scenario, Hull supposed that there might be some a cell phone signal issue between Miami and Barcelona. Life having taught him better than to presume the best, he scrolled through the illicitly gathered data on Volker's movements since arriving in Spain. She'd checked in at an ANI approved hotel in Barceloneta. Next, she'd met with some of the agents at the local field office. *After that, it looks as if she may have gone off book, without any backup but where?*

Hull sighed worriedly, dialling Volker's cell phone number again in the hope that she'd pick up this time. Just as before, it rang until it went to voicemail. He left a message. "Senior Agent Volker, it's Agent Hull here. Call me back when you get this message. I...I'm worried for your safety ma'am. I know you went to Barcelona alone to investigate. I'm guessing that you must have had a reason for that. Now you aren't picking up your phone. It

PROOF OF DEATH

makes me wonder if you're okay or not; especially with how Bryce has vanished. Anyhow, I'm going to head over there myself as soon as I can arrange a flight plan. I'll bring the other kids and Callista along with me. Hope we see you there."

Karen Bell had always tried to be a good person; someone who did her best to put others first. Now though, having survived abduction and subsequent weeks of torment only to end up trapped here aboard a moving aircraft with a bunch of dangerous infected people, she was starting to wonder if it was maybe safer to be selfish than good. *Everybody has a line in the sand. I guess this is mine.*

The only positive about the situation was that the guy escorting her to England was now busy stunning and containing infected passengers and crew. There was something about him that Karen didn't trust. At first, she'd told herself that she was being paranoid; letting her trauma take control of her feelings. And yeah, that was all true too, and yeah, she probably should have insisted on a female escort, but no. No, it wasn't only that he was male. There was something about him that her

subconscious didn't like. *Not like he might get physical if you annoyed him or anything, but just...just kind of off.*

Something had felt off about his clone too. The rest of her removals crew hadn't picked up on it, but they'd been busy lugging boxes and furniture around. Karen had been the only one who had to interact with him. He'd given her the creeps. She still worried for his family. *The kid's APSU ending up in with the trash. No way that was an accident! Ugh, and we're neighbours!*

Maybe she'd move house. Hell, after everything that had gone on in Miami this year, maybe she'd move city. It wasn't as if her crew couldn't run the removals business without her. They'd managed to do so while she was missing. In fact, Karen suspected that they'd be more than happy to buy her out completely if she offered. Even if she stayed put, there was zero likelihood of her engaging with Agent Hull's family again. *Who's to say that he didn't have a hand in what happened to me? I bet he could have done. ANI probably makes people disappear all the time.*

She caught herself before her thoughts could spiral any further. Okay, so Greg Hull – both versions

of him, from what she'd observed – was creepy. That didn't mean that he'd had her trafficked! What would even have been his motivation? Her returning the APSU? Offering to buy some freaking cereal? Thinking that he should have made sure his partner had access to a car while he was away? *Nobody's that petty! I'm just spooking myself for no reason. I should try and focus on what's happening now instead.*

A hand closed over her left shoulder. Karen shrieked and tried to pull free. "Don't touch me!"

Hull shushed her. "Calm down, Ms Bell. I've contained the situation, but I'll need to monitor the infected for the remainder of the flight. The attendants are going to help me with that. How are you holding up?"

He still hadn't let go of her shoulder. Karen squirmed uncomfortably. "I'm fine. You...you can let me go now, thanks."

To her trepidation, he tightened his grip instead. "I think it's better if I keep a hold of you, at least for now. You look like you're right on the verge of having a panic attack. Physical contact will help ground you. Come on – Alex is finding us some better seats up in first class."

Karen found herself propelled along; Hull's left hand still clamped down firmly on her shoulder, and his arm wrapped snugly around her upper back. She tried not to look at any of the sobbing passengers, or at the blood spatter on several of the empty seats they passed. "Where...where are the infected people...?"

Hull's voice was calm. "We've moved everyone aside from Brian up to first class."

"But that's where we're going!" Karen tried and failed to twist free again. "I don't want to be any nearer to them!"

The hand on her shoulder shifted ever so slightly. Pain seared through her as Hull replied. "Ms Bell, you need to calm down, and trust me to keep you safe. They're all perfectly secure, including Marsha. You were so out of it that you didn't even notice us moving her."

Karen couldn't speak. Her entire world had shrunk to encompass nothing more than the pain in her shoulder and Hull's voice. She stumbled, almost falling as he knees gave way beneath her.

Hull scooped her up into his arms. "It's okay, Karen. I've got you. You're safe."

She knew she wasn't. She nodded silently

anyhow, and closed her eyes; resigned to letting him carry her. Her time in captivity had taught her how to hold still and take whatever was done to her without reacting. *I should have stayed in New Zealand for a few more days.*

Her newest captor – Karen believed in calling people what they were – carried her into first class and positioned her in one of the luxurious seating areas. “Just try to relax, Karen. I’ll be right here beside you most of the time, and when I’m not, I’ll still be within sight and sound.”

It was a nicely worded threat. Karen kept her eyes shut and didn’t answer. Better not to react. He’d lose interest in her faster that way. At least she hoped so. *What if he doesn’t?*

Hull sat down on her right on the double wide seat. His hip brushed against hers. She heard him close the privacy screen, and then felt him take hold of her right hand in both of his. He squeezed it gently. “Karen, look at me.”

An unspoken or *else* hung in the air. Not wanting him to hurt her again, she turned her head towards him and obeyed.

He smiled at her. “You took a bit of a turn on our way here. I was worried.”

Karen gulped at the outright lie, and at how glibly he uttered it. "That...that's what your report's going to say, isn't it?"

"Pretty much, yeah. It was probably just a panic induced blackout." He tilted his head slightly. "Unless you turn out to be infected."

She flinched. "I'm not!"

"That's good." Hull turned her hand over and checked her pulse. "Okay, you seem stable now. I'll leave you to rest while I speak with Alex. Stay put please. It's for your own safety."

Eleven-year-old Tessa Waverly – not Hull, not Lenard Hull, not ever, ever, ever – didn't know that she'd missed several important doses of medication in the wake of Bryce's departure. Neither of her legal guardians – not her parents, no matter what the people in charge said – had informed her about taking it in the first place. The pills had been hidden in her meals and in her drinks; rendering her docile. All for her own good, of course. Her doctor had assured Hull and Bryce of that. Tessa's renewed violent objections to living with them when they'd tried to take her off the pills had only confirmed his diagnosis. But Tessa still didn't know about any of

that.

She *did* know that Bryce had left – run away from – home, and taken little Fisher along with her. And that something else had happened since then; something bad enough that there had been ANI agents attending the property again yesterday morning. Agent Hull – not Dad, she'd never call him that – was on leave again because of it. Compassionate leave, she'd heard Senior Agent Volker call it. Tessa was pretty sure that that meant somebody close to him must have gotten sick, or hurt, or maybe even died. And Bryce and Fisher were both still gone. She tried not to let herself join up the dots. *I don't want to be sad for Agent Hull, I hate him!*

The trouble was that it felt like her brain was working faster than had become usual for her lately. Really, she couldn't help figuring it out. The bad thing involved Bryce and Fisher. Tessa hated Bryce too, but she didn't hate Fisher. He was too little for anybody to hate him; just a baby, really. Or he had been. *I don't think Agent Hull would be hanging around here right now if his son was only missing. He'd go look for him.*

Watching him now, from around the corner of

the door of his study, Tessa got the impression that Agent Hull might be planning on doing exactly that. He seemed to be packing for a trip somewhere. She'd heard him make a call to someone official, where he'd confirmed a series of coordinates and times. It had sounded as if he was filing a flight plan. Maybe things weren't as bad as she'd thought after all. Maybe Bryce and Fisher were both okay, and Agent Hull was going to have to leave to go get them. *If he does, I can probably sneak out without Nadimiche or Callista realising I've gone!*

Agent Hull turned and looked straight at her then. He signed his words as he spoke. "Having fun eavesdropping?"

Tessa froze. He'd spotted her! Was he going to be mad about it? He didn't look mad; at least, not yet. But she'd heard him yelling yesterday after he found out about Bryce having gone. She edged back a little, just in case, and raised her hands to sign a reply to him; not bothering to speak aloud. "What's going on?"

He sighed and shook his head. "Tessa, honey, we've been over this. You have your hearing back now. You need to start using your words again, in conjunction with signing. Like I'm doing, see?"

PROOF OF DEATH

Tessa scowled at him. As if she was ever going to accept the treatment that had been forced on her! Instead, she signed back sharply; telling him exactly what she thought of him and the doctors.

He stood there and let her rant at him until she ran out of suitably offensive things to sign. Then he smiled. "Feel better yet?"

She stomped her foot angrily. Her hands shook a little with frustration as she signed. "How come no matter what I do you *never* react? You got mad at Bryce yesterday! Why not at me?"

Now he looked sad. "Responsible adults don't let ourselves get mad at kids, baby bird. We control our feelings and process them appropriately later. That's one of the things I've been trying to teach you to do too, remember?"

Tessa rolled her eyes. "Yeah."

Agent Hull gestured for her to come closer. "I need to talk to you about what's going on."

The young Martian hesitated for a moment, before her curiosity won out. Shuffling into the study, she made her way over to the chair he offered her and sat down. "What is it?"

Agent Hull didn't sit down. Instead, he leaned against the edge of his desk while he explained

that Bryce had taken Fisher to Spain, and that he'd drowned in the sea there. Now Bryce was missing and Senior Agent Volker had gone to look for her. Agent Hull thought that somebody else was involved in everything Bryce had done, but he didn't know who yet. He was planning to take them all to Spain with him while he investigated. "I already told Nadimiche and Callista. They're upstairs packing right now."

Tessa sniffled. Suddenly, it wasn't so easy to hate him. Not with how sad he was. Clenching her fists on top of her knees, she whispered her first words to him. "I'm sorry about Fisher."

Chapter Nine – Do Anything

Zima went up to bed a little after ten on Thursday night. He had just finished changing into his nightwear when there was a soft knock on the door of the guest bedroom assigned to him. Opening it, he found the freshly renamed Viktoriya standing trembling before him. Her legs and feet were entirely bare. Above them, she was wearing something far too short and diaphanous to count as an actual item of clothing. It involved a plunging neckline and no sleeves. The faint hints of white and silver amid its near total transparency combined perfectly with her choker. She bit her lip nervously. "Yuri told me that I should come to you tonight. I'm sorry if it isn't what you want."

Yuri had many things to answer for, Zima

reflected inwardly. He stepped backwards, gesturing for her to enter his room. "I have no objection to your company."

She padded across the polished wooden floorboards to stand by the foot of the king-sized bed. Grisha, who was lying on the rug there, lifted his great head and peered up at her. Then he yawned, clambered up onto his paws, and took himself off into the en suite bathroom to lie on the rug in there instead.

Zima shook his head at the sight. "Apparently my dog feels that we will require our privacy! Is he correct, or do you just want to share the bed with me for now?"

She stared at him, obviously surprised that he was giving her any kind of a choice in the matter. "I...I get to decide if we...if we do anything?"

He nodded and relocked the bedroom door. "Yes, of course you do; every time. It is called *consent*, and it is very important."

Viktoriya sighed and relaxed a little. "I wasn't sure if consent applied to...to whatever this is."

Zima scoffed impatiently as he strode past her to the bed and turned back the thin black satin coverlet. "Do you not remember what I told you in

the woods yesterday, about having pride, or how I showed you how to protect yourself?"

She stared down at her feet, blushing. "I remember, yeah, but Yuri said that...!"

"Yuri says a lot of things. Sometimes a few of them are even true." He settled himself against the pillows and beckoned curtly to her. "Come. Sit with me here on the bed, or lie down if you prefer to. We can talk some more about the details of our arrangement."

"Okay." Viktoriya slid in beneath the coverlet on Zima's left. She was clearly still nervous. "I'm sorry for doubting you. It's just, this is all a lot to take in, you know? I mean, you keep on telling me that I have a choice, but then the next thing I know, you and Yuri go ahead and do whatever you want, and suddenly I have no say at all! You even dyed Fisher's hair dark brown and changed both of our names without letting me have any input on them."

Zima smiled at her. "That took courage for you to say to my face. I am proud of you."

She bit her lip again. "Thank you."

He reached across with his right hand and gently stroked her lower lip; rolling over onto his left side as he did so. "Stop chewing on this. It is going to end

up bloody."

"Sorry."

"Do not be sorry, Vikusha." Zima cupped Viktoriya's chin, tilting her head around to face him fully. "Just stop doing harm to yourself. Something so lovely should not ever suffer."

She went an even deeper shade of pink at that. "What does *Vikusha* mean?"

"It is pet name for Viktoriya; as *Visha* is for Viktor." Zima leaned in closer and nuzzled her cheek. "I am very tempted to kiss you now. Would you like me to do so, my *Vikusha*, or is it still too soon?"

"I...I'm not sure what I want." The blonde woman was trembling again. She reached for him, tentatively, but willingly nonetheless. "Promise you'll stop if I ask you to?"

Zima put his arms around her and pulled her to him. "You have my word, yes."

She nodded shyly. "Then I think I'd maybe like it okay if you kiss me now, yeah."

He did so, and took his time with it, beginning at the hinge of her left jaw and moving gradually upwards and across until he reached her mouth. Her lips were tense beneath his, and she parted them far too readily for his tongue. Zima sighed and

pulled back to study her face again. "You have never learned how to do this on your own terms, have you, Vikusha?"

Viktoriya blinked, obviously confused by him stopping. "I'm sorry if I did it wrong...?"

"You are not the one who is to blame." Zima wondered idly if it would be worth the effort involved for him to eliminate Gregory Hull. "It is okay. I will help you to learn what it is that you like doing. If need be, we can find you work here in Yuri's home to earn your living instead; as a maid, or perhaps even a nyanya."

"Work as...as a *what?*" She shook her head. "Zima, please, I don't speak Russian!"

He clicked his tongue. "Nyanya is one who looks after children and babies. It is a good job."

"Oh, a *nanny*, right!" She nodded her understanding. Then she frowned. "Well, I wouldn't mind doing that instead, but...but don't you want me for yourself...?"

Zima shrugged. "I do."

Viktoriya choked out a bitter sounding laugh. "Great; now you're speaking perfect English and I'm still lost!"

He traced her spine with the fingers of his right

hand, smiling as she shivered. "I want you to understand that you have the *choice*."

She sighed. "I don't think I'm all that good at making choices. I mean, I *try*, Zima, I really do, but it never goes right. Somehow, I always manage to screw things up!"

Zima leaned in closer to her again. "That warning is appreciated. I will bear it in mind." He resumed kissing her, this time focusing his attentions on her neck and throat. "Are you perhaps blaming yourself for your son having wandered away unnoticed?"

Viktoriya hesitated for a moment. Then she nodded, her eyes brightening with tears. "He could have *drowned* yesterday, or been hit by a car, or...!"

He pressed his right index finger to her lips, silencing her. "Stop berating yourself over things that did not occur. Visha is safe now, and so are you; far better than I suspect would have been the case had you not in fact lost him."

She stared at him, the centres of her bright blue eyes widening in sudden fear. "I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

Zima supposed that she deserved to know. "You

were in the company of Thomas Campbell. I think that perhaps you do not yet grasp how dangerous that situation was. That old man is no hero, and never has been. He is a killer with ice for blood and a book of tactics in place of a heart. He has no compunctions about using and destroying those around him to meet his goals. From what I know of his connections, he is also an enemy of the man from whom you have fled. Do you see the threads of it yet, Vikusha?"

She whimpered, nodding her head in horrified comprehension. "You...you think he would have hurt us to get to Greg...?"

"I know that he has done far worse before." Zima kissed the by now trembling blonde woman on the corner of her mouth. "Certainly, it was why he told you to speak so very publicly about what had seemingly become of your son. You are likely very fortunate that the Guardia Urbana arrested him when they did."

Viktoriya sobbed, curling forwards to bury her face against his chest. "Why are people *like* this? Why does the world have to be so cruel?"

Zima resigned himself to there being no real likelihood of sexual activity between the two of

them tonight. He pulled Viktoriya in closer yet and stroked her hair soothingly as he replied. "Our world is what it is, Vikusha. All we can do is to live out our days and attempt not to go entirely mad."

She huddled into his embrace, still sniffing, but clearly attempting to calm herself. "I...I'm sorry for crying, Zima."

"Eh, do not worry. It is natural." He glanced over her head, at the clock on the bedside table. "I had intended to have an early night. You may stay here and sleep alongside me if you wish to. Otherwise, you should go. Either way, I am about to switch off the lights now."

Viktoriya seemed surprised. "I...I thought you wanted us to...you know...?"

"At this moment I would prefer to sleep." Zima made to roll clear of her. He frowned when she clung to him. "What are you doing?"

His companion wailed. "I don't know! I'm not used to being treated like this, Zima; I don't know what I'm supposed to do, or say, or...!"

This time, Zima silenced her panicking with his lips. He curled his left arm up and around her waist, his fingers clenching in the soft cloth of the scanty robe. With his right hand, he gripped the back of

her hair, pinning her head in place as he ravaged her mouth with his own. By the time that he broke off the kiss, Viktoriya was almost breathless. Zima stared into her eyes intently. "Is that better, my Vikusha?"

She nodded wordlessly.

Zima nodded, more to himself than to her. "I think that perhaps I am beginning to understand you a little better. Very well – you will stay here with me tonight to sleep. Anything else between us can wait until I am certain that you have at last remembered how to say *no*."

As instructed, Yuri's staff down in the medical bay sent for him the moment that Volker regained consciousness. That this auspicious event occurred at barely five o'clock on Friday morning made no difference, save that Zima would likely have murdered him on the spot had Yuri attempted to waken him. Instead, the blond spy went alone, yawning and grumbling to himself about worms and early birds on his way down in the elevator. *She had best prove to be worth the effort that I am exerting!*

Volker was sitting up in bed when he arrived.

There was a neatly wrapped cast on her left wrist. Her red hair hung about her like a torn curtain, and her face was pallid aside from the bruising caused by her fall. Her pale grey eyes were wide, her pupils dilated in fear.

Yuri spoke in English to begin with. "Hello, my dear. How are you feeling this morning?"

Volker flinched backwards and then stared at him for a long moment. When she finally spoke, it was with the tone and phrasing of a young girl, and not at all in English. "Wo sind meine eltern?"

Yuri sighed and walked over to stand beside the right side of her bed. He patted her uninjured hand, switching to speaking in German as he answered. "Sadly, your parents cannot be here. They perished in the same terrible accident that has so badly damaged your memory. That is why I must take care of you instead."

"Who are you? Do I - should I know you?"

He smiled kindly at her. "My name is Yuri Vanyavich Kuznetsov and I was a very good friend of your papa. Alas, we lived far apart, and so you have not met me in person before, no. In fact, I think that he had not yet even mentioned me to you by the time that you attained the age which

you currently believe yourself to be again."

His unwitting prisoner shook her head in confusion. "I do not understand."

Yuri reached out and gently smoothed her hair away from her face. "Do not worry; I will explain it all to you. You have been involved in a car crash. Your parents died instantly, whilst you became comatose for almost two months. The doctors told me that you had suffered a minor brain injury, and that it would affect your memory. Do you recall how I spoke to you in English at first? Well, that was because you have now lived in that country for many years, along with your parents, and so I expected you to be more comfortable with it as a language."

She looked down at herself, staring at her obviously adult body, and the flimsy green hospital gown that covered it. "I honestly do not remember any of that, save that I feel certain that I did indeed *have* parents. My papa had a beard; it was greyish brown. My mama had red hair, like mine. Who were they; what were their names? Who am I? What language are we speaking in now? Did my parents speak it too?"

"Hush, hush, calm yourself a little." Yuri stroked

her hair again; this time tracing his fingertips across her scalp, and rifling swiftly through her fractured memories. Some of them he could use, but others would need to be wholly erased. That part could be done later. For now, he still needed to be gentle with her. Her powers were blocked by the drugs, but it would not do for him to inflict too much stress on her injured brain with his own psionics. "I will tell you everything that you need to know, I promise you. Firstly, we are currently speaking to one another in German, and yes, your parents were both fully fluent in it, as well as in English, and of course Russian. Your mama also spoke French. She had a true gift for languages. Her name was Anna Artyomovna Morosova, but almost everyone called her Anoushka instead. She was very beautiful. You resemble her a great deal, aside from your eyes. Those come from your papa. He was called Zhar Kirillevich Morosov, and he was one of our people's greatest spies."

"What are spies?"

Yuri was enjoying himself immensely now. "Ah, a spy is someone whose job it is to secretly gather information about others. It is a very important job. Zhar was extremely good at it. Anoushka was too,

but she gave up going on missions once you were born."

"Oh, I see." She frowned as she considered all that he had told her so far. "And...and who am I? What is my name? Am I a spy too?"

Yuri clasped her face tenderly between both of his hands. He gazed into her eyes as he spoke; calculating swiftly as to how much he could alter the truth of her age based on how she looked. Telling her that she was ten years younger seemed safe enough. "Your full name is Anastasia Zharovna Morosova. Those who are closest to you call you Asya. You are twenty-nine years old, and you have recently graduated from Oxbridge University in England. As for the rest, no, my dear, you yourself are not a spy. Well, at least not yet. You were supposed to come and live with me here this summer so that I could begin teaching you the necessary skills. Your parents were in fact bringing you to my home when the accident occurred."

She wrinkled her brow. "I do not feel as if I am twenty-nine. It feels...incorrect."

"Oh?" Yuri winked slyly at her. "Hmm, then perhaps your poor Uncle Yuri is wrong, and you are in fact secretly much, much older than you look,

eh? Yes, I expect that that is it – you are in truth a wizened old crone in disguise, like in a fairy tale!"

The sheer ridiculousness of his suggestion did its intended job. She giggled despite the recent double tragedy that he had assigned to her: a young girl's laugh emanating from a woman's mouth. "No! No, I am not a crone!"

"How would you know? You have amnesia!"

"Do I?"

Yuri nodded solemnly, almost genuinely saddened for her. It was difficult to remain unmoved by such innocence "Yes, that is what losing one's memory is called, Asya. Still, do not worry. Uncle Yuri will take care of you, no matter what age you are."

She leaned into him, content now for him to hold her in his arms and rub her back. "Thank you, Uncle Yuri."

"You are welcome, dear one." He kissed her brow as if she were one of his children. "Try to get some more rest now. You are still recovering. That is why you must remain here with my doctors for a while longer. Remember that whatever treatments they give you it is only to help. You must be a good girl for them. It is what your parents would have

wanted."

"I understand. I will not be any trouble."

Yuri smiled fondly at her as he tucked her back under the sheet. "Sweet dreams, Asya. I will visit you again very soon."

Chapter Ten – Not Like Her

Spence answered their phone on the third ring, which they felt was more than prompt enough, given that they still were on leave and in the middle of eating Friday lunch at home with Leister, Heidi, and the children. In truth, they might not have bothered to do so at all, but the screen showed that it was Oliver Dobos' number calling them. Doubting that the red-haired operative would contact them without due cause, Spence had abandoned their meal and hurried out of the dining room to take the call. "Mr Dobos, this had better be...!"

He cut across their words immediately. "I can't reach Laine. Brett had a sense of her being in danger yesterday morning; he passed out from it.

Literally just collapsed in my mum and dad's kitchen. We could tell that it was psionic related, of course, but we couldn't wake him, so we took him to the local A&E. They admitted him for observation straight away; ended up sending for a specialist in juvenile psionic health."

Spence could readily imagine the roiling sense of helplessness that Dobos must have felt. "I'm sorry to hear that. How's he doing now? Do you need me to speak to Mr Moxton for you about arranging some more leave?"

"Nah, I can manage all that part, thanks. Brett finally woke up about twenty minutes ago, thank fuck. I rang you because of what he told us. He says that when he collapsed, he sensed his mum being in pain. He saw something through her eyes, like white stones or gravel maybe, and then just *nothing*. The thing is, I've tried ringing Laine over a dozen times since he collapsed and she's not picking up her phone. That's not like her, andro. It's not fucking like her at all. Somebody needs to check in with ANI and find out where the fuck she is. The bastards won't talk to me."

Spence sighed at the all too typical inter-agency administrative snobbery. "I'll get right on it. Try not

to give yourself an ulcer worrying in the meantime. And for pity's sake, don't go bogging off to investigate it in person. Stay with your son, and let me do my job."

Thanks to the mileage involved and the time difference between countries, it had been one in the morning when Hull and his remaining family members had finally arrived in Barcelona. Even travelling by private aircraft couldn't change that. They'd checked in at their hotel and gone straight to bed. Hull knew that Callista and his two older daughters had likely all been jet lagged from the flight. He hadn't felt great either, but he was used to coping with such things. *Besides, I had to look after Rayne. Kids her age don't care if you're tired. They just want their caregiver.*

Now, twelve hours on, he'd handed over that role to Callista, with strict instructions on how to care for the infant. Nadimiche was babysitting Tessa. Hull had left all four of them in the hotel suite together. It hadn't seemed like a good idea for them to be present while he met with the local ANI agents. Not with the kind of things that needed to be discussed. *I didn't want them knowing any graphic details*

about what might have happened to Fisher.

The agents at the local field office understood Hull's concerns, and had organised a security detail to wait at the hotel with the girls in his absence. Volker's disappearance had already triggered ANI's security protocols. A small child, even one who was the son of an ANI agent, wandering off and drowning could be seen as a simple tragic accident, and it had been. His mother then disappearing had raised some red flags, but at first the most likely theory had been that Bryce had committed suicide due to grief. That, or an opportunistic human trafficker had lured her away; perhaps by claiming to know where Fisher was. *Except that then my boss showed up and ordered everybody here to start treating the case differently. Volker thought they were both still alive!*

Hull had almost fallen off his chair when Senior Agent Ramone Lanza had told him about Volker's theory. He was still reeling from the news. It didn't prevent him from insisting on helping with the search. Lanza and his agents were happy to have him on board. They wanted to throw everything available at the investigation. Given what he now knew, Hull had expected nothing less. *Three missing*

American citizens, one of them an ANI agent, and a report from the Guardia Urbana stating that Thomas fucking Campbell was probably the last person to see two of them. Yeah, I think we can all guess who was responsible for those weird shorts in the hotel's surveillance systems!

He knew all too well that Thomas had tried befriending Bryce once already. Who was to say that he hadn't managed to worm his way back in since then; bent on completing whatever revenge scheme he'd begun back in Desdemona Falls. Hull had hoped that all that was over and done with, but maybe stealing Kassandra away hadn't been enough for the bastard. Then again, it was equally likely that BIINT had sent the old man in to acquire Fisher as an asset because of his psionic capabilities. *If that theory Volker shared with Lanza turns out to be correct, then there isn't an Intelligence agency on the planet who won't want him on their books!*

A small, battered part of Hull's psyche desperately wanted to be able to blame all of Bryce's recent actions on Thomas or his agency. Still, he couldn't quite get past the phrasing that she'd used in that damn note of hers. The fact that

she ultimately hadn't gone to Canada at all didn't change how vicious the lie had been. And it wasn't as if Thomas had written the note for her. ANI had already confirmed that he'd been touring Europe with Cassandra at the time, and there was no sign of any contact between them and anyone in Miami. No, Bryce had been the only one to claim that she was going back to live with her estranged parents. It made Hull seethe just thinking about it. *Calling them her and Fisher's real family! What the fuck does that make me and the girls?*

Zima answered his phone with a mild degree of wary surprise at the sight of the name displayed on the screen. "Solovei, to what do I owe this unanticipated pleasure...?"

The non-gender cut across his attempted greeting in acid tones. "Don't start with any of that, Mr Bogomolov. I know for a fact that you're at Kuznetsov's Spanish property, and that you have Bryce Lenard and her son squirrelled away there too. That's all to the good in my view. The trouble is that I suspect there may *also* be an ANI agent named Laine Volker somewhere in the mix, and that she's hurt in some way; an injury involving white

stones, according to her preteen son, Brett. I'm sure that you remember him. He was the boy in the park, with the Vizsla."

Zima grimaced. "I remember the boy, yes, but why do you suspect that his mother...!"

"Because after several hours of stonewalling, ANI have grudgingly confirmed to me that she went to Barcelona on Wednesday looking for Ms Lenard and her toddler, and because young Brett saw what she saw before she lost consciousness. He's psionic, like she is. More dangerously, like his father, Oliver Dobos. That's the fellow I brought to **unDer** with me; you know, the time you helped me out with those replacement documents. He's one of our best operatives."

The latter sentence was enough to send chills down the spine of any sane person. Zima decided that it didn't matter how it was that Housekeeping knew what they knew. He picked his words carefully. "I regret to inform you that there has been an unfortunate accident involving Senior Agent Volker."

Spence's tone of voice was dangerously unreadable as they replied. "Is she alive?"

"Yes, but she hit her head on the kerb of Yuri's

driveway, and now she has total amnesia."

That news was received better than he had hoped it might be. "Alive is good enough."

Zima relaxed slightly. "I am very glad to hear that it is so, Solovei. Doubtless, you will want her returned. Might I enquire with you as to where and when we will perform the handover?"

There was a brief pause as Spence conferred quietly with someone else at their end of the phone. Then the non-gender answered Zima's question. "It's best if we leave ANI out of the loop on this. They'd only complicate things. Cob will collect her tomorrow afternoon, at three thirty precisely. Oh, you should know that he's younger looking now than he was. Cloning stuff; he'll explain it when he sees you. Anyhow, see to it that Volker's brought to the west side of the Parc de la Trinitat. We'll take care of things from there. I suggest that you find some means of preventing any further instances of people stumbling onto Ms Lenard and her son's new and improved situation. Perhaps flash clone them both and then use the clones to fake their deaths. That generally helps matters along nicely, with regards to stopping people looking."

Zima went in search of Yuri as soon as the phone

call with Spence was over, Grisha padding silently at his heels. He found him upstairs in the villa, dressing for dinner. "Yuri, old friend, we are in trouble."

The other man frowned at him as he fastened his shirt. "Eh? How so?"

Zima explained the matter swiftly and succinctly. "Your clever plan of giving her a new identity was perhaps not so very wise a choice."

"Only thanks to British Intelligence!" Yuri threw up his hands angrily. "How do they even know these things? My people erased every record of her having been in this area!"

"I did not ask. It hardly matters. We must give her back to them tomorrow regardless."

Yuri shook his head. A familiar gleam had lit in his eyes. "No – we must only give Senior Agent Laine Volker back to them. Asya we can keep, and we shall! I will see to it that my people create a clone of her body and transfer a copy of her consciousness into it. Then they can wipe the past seventy-two hours from her original brain. It will be blamed on the head injury."

"In that case, why not make the cloned body match the age which you have assigned to her? Or

perhaps better yet, make it match the age which she has settled at mentally. That way, you could tell her that she is now in a cloned body, and she would believe it to be a favour to her." Zima held the opinion that the more the frankly terrifyingly powerful psionic felt indebted to Yuri, the safer things would be for all of them.

Yuri nodded. "Yes, that should work. It will also preclude any need for us to hide the process from her. I will instruct my people to begin the necessary preparations immediately!"

Greg Hull Senior paused as he exited the plane, and smiled down at his soon to be former travelling companion. He'd been worried for a while that he might need to sedate Karen to help her cope with the situation on the plane, but thankfully it hadn't come to that. She'd managed to tamp down her understandable terror over the outbreak all by herself. In fact, she'd proven to be surprisingly good company during the remainder of their flight. Thanks to the UK's recently updated biohazard safety protocols, the plane had been rerouted to an isolated airfield on an otherwise uninhabited island just off the coast of Scotland. Those

responsible had clearly learned well from the tragedy in Miami. *I like that my new country takes these things so seriously. Quarantining us all here makes a lot more sense than doing it somewhere like London.*

Having worked for GETEC, Hull knew better than to assume that only those who were already showing symptoms were infected. For all that anybody knew, the damn thing might be airborne! Hence the highly trained people in hazmat gear who were now guiding him and his fellow travellers off the plane and through a series of hermetically sealed plastic tunnels into the waiting quarantine facility. *Hopefully, it'll only be a matter of time and testing until we all walk out of it again.*

He nudged Karen gently with his left elbow. "Hey. How are you holding up?"

She shrugged. "Oh, you know. Coping. It's not like there's any other choice."

Hull nodded his understanding. "Well, it looks as if they're separating everyone for the initial testing and decontamination cycle now, so I guess this is where we say goodbye. Don't worry. I already made sure to inform the people in charge about your circumstances. You'll be assigned appropriate

medical personnel.”

Karen seemed to appreciate that information, to judge by how she brightened up. Unfortunately, she didn't get a chance to thank him. The medics called her name and whisked her away through the partition, leaving Hull to wait his turn with the others. *Ah, so they're sorting us alphabetically. That makes sense. It'll help with keeping families together too.*

He glanced around him at those still waiting. Thankfully, there hadn't been very many kids on board, and none of them had been seated in business or first class. Their parents – and, in one case, grandparents – were doing a sterling job of keeping them as much in the dark as possible about what was really going on. *There's no sense in frightening them with the truth.*

By now, the investigation into who was responsible for the outbreak was likely well underway. The only certainty in Hull's mind about it was that it had to have been manmade. No natural pathogen caused people to transform into ravening savages, hungry for blood. He couldn't think of any that spread so quickly either. No, it was undoubtedly part of some sick bastard's evil

scheme. *Probably C.A.K.E again. It's too much to hope that we've seen the last of those assholes, even if Carson Howard does everyone a favour and stays dead this time.*

Chapter Eleven – Quietly Acquire

Billionaire inventor Robert Waverly stared at the tersely worded email on his computer screen. According to Spence, Agent Hull's supposedly oh so very perfect home environment had abruptly shattered. This could be the opportunity that Waverly's legal team needed to challenge Tessa's placement there! The adoption had already been finalised, but it had been rushed through thanks to her Martian heritage. A good enough lawyer would be able to use the latter fact to convince Children's Services to reopen her case. And Waverly's lawyers were the best there were. The same held true for his PR department, which had worked round the clock to justify some of his past decisions regarding Tessa's care. Add in his recent role in ending the Miami

tragedy with his APSUs, and Waverly knew that he stood a strong chance of regaining guardianship over her, this time officially. *At the very least, I can see to it that she's permanently removed from Agent Hull's clutches! But what if I don't win custody and she ends up with someone worse than him? I mean, there's no doubt that he's a frankly terrible human being in general, but he hasn't mistreated Tessa. Vinnie would have flagged that.*

The APSU in question hadn't reported in at all in quite some time now. Waverly wasn't concerned by the lack of communication. He knew perfectly well that Vinnie's personality wasn't in line with that of the other APSUs. It was understandable. He'd been the prototype for the design. As such, there were a few quirks in his coding, most of which Waverly had carefully edited out for the later models. One example was his independent streak. *Still, I know he'd tell us if Hull so much as looked at Tessa the wrong way. Mostly so that we could organise the clean up operation for him! No, she's safe.*

Waverly sighed as he recollected the numerous mistakes which he'd made with raising Tessa. He'd just wanted her to be happy! The trouble with that

was that kids weren't always happy about what was best for them. He knew now that he'd been too permissive on some things. Not insisting on her having her vaccinations had cost Tessa her hearing. *If I'd looked after her better, then Hull might never even have given my parenting a second thought. Maybe I don't deserve a second chance. What if she's happier living with him?*

The door to Waverly's office opened then, and his best friend and business partner, the feline augmetric Ari Zahn, walked in; his tail twitching irritably. "Bob, you aren't going to like this! You know how Vinnie hasn't been in contact with us for a while?"

Waverly blinked. "Uh, yeah, I was just thinking about that! Why?"

Zahn handed him a somewhat crumpled looking envelope, inscribed with Waverly's name in neat handwriting. "This just arrived. It's from Bryce Lenard of all people. Some random cab driver brought it; he left before I got there, but he told the staff down at the front desk that a hot blonde woman gave it to him a couple of days or so ago when he dropped her off at the airport. Claimed she didn't give him a name; just paid him extra to hand

deliver it to us. Too bad she didn't just mail it the regular way, given how he apparently forgot to bother about it until this morning."

"What is it, Az?" Waverly pulled out the letter from the already opened envelope. His eyes widened as he read the contents. "Oh. Oh no. No, no, Az, this is bad! This is *really* bad!"

"I know that, Bob; I already read it!" Zahn slammed the office door closed behind him to give them privacy. "Vinnie's been offline for weeks! Apparently, there was an accident when they moved house. We need to add in a safeguard feature to the APSUs for those kinds of situations; in case they don't get reported to us. I mean, if Hull's lady friend hadn't sent this letter, then we *still* wouldn't know about poor Vinnie!"

"Actually, she's his ex-lady friend now. She ran away with their son. Must have been why she was headed to the airport." Waverly hurriedly told Zahn about Spence's email. "I was just debating whether or not I should get my lawyers to contact Children's Services about reopening Tessa's case."

Zahn stared at him. "What's there to debate? The guy's a psychopath! You saw what he did to Susan; all those bruises on her wrists."

"I figured he only did that stuff with adults. And besides, that wasn't the version of him that has custody of Tessa, so...!"

"No, so nothing, Bob!" Zahn interrupted Waverly's attempt at explaining. "Psycho's gonna psycho. Greg Hull is a monster, no matter what version of him it is. And Tessa won't be a kid forever. What happens once she grows up? You think he won't use physical force to make her toe the line? I mean, presuming he hasn't brainwashed her into obeying his every word by then. Hell, maybe he already has! It's not as if Vinnie's been there to stop him!"

Waverly flung the letter down on his desk. "I know that, Az! It's...it's just I started worrying if maybe I wasn't good enough to be her parent. It's my damn fault that she's deaf, after all."

Zahn shook his head firmly. "Stop blaming yourself for that, Bob. Nobody could have predicted that outbreak of super measles. She would've been fine unvaccinated aside from that. You did the best you could at the time, and you'll do better from here on in. I'll kick your ass otherwise, pinkie promise. Now, enough with all the impromptu Saturday morning melodrama – what are we going

to do about this mess?"

Spence checked the time on their phone; ignoring the disapproving looks from the other parents and guardians in the observation gallery of Battersea Park Equestrian Centre's indoor arena. It was four o'clock in the afternoon here in London, which made it five o'clock in Barcelona. By now, presuming that all had gone to plan, Leister would have collected Volker. The two of them ought to be on their way back to England, accompanied by Moxton, who was piloting the private BIINT jet, and his operatives. There had been no persuading Dobos not to go along on the retrieval mission. Spence understood the fellow's concern for his former girlfriend. *One can only hope that he hasn't kicked off at our Russian allies over her injuries. The last thing we need is them turning on us.*

The thin non-gender glanced briefly through the soundproof viewing panel, glad that their au pair had volunteered to look after their twin infants for them this afternoon. From the looks of things, the older three children were enjoying themselves. Kathryn especially; their niece was beaming as she patted the scruffy looking cream pony she rode on.

Quite what pleasure was to be found in learning how not to fall off a half ton animal prone to abrupt shifts in temperament was beyond Spence's reckoning, but each to their own. *Goodness knows that risk taking behaviour runs in the family.*

Their phone vibrated into life in their hand then. A familiar name showed on the screen. Spence rose to their feet and exited the gallery before they answered the call. "I was beginning to worry that something had gone wrong, Cob."

Leister's voice was sombre as he replied. "I'm afraid that it has done, darling. The agents here at ANI's Barcelona field office arrested Craig on suspicion of aiding and abetting a fugitive, and there's a warrant out for Thomas."

Spence tensed at his phrasing. "What do you mean the agents *here*? Please tell me you haven't been charged too!"

"Mercifully not, darling. We were stopped at the airport when we arrived, but I was eventually able to satisfy ANI that we only came to Barcelona to help reunite Senior Agent Volker with her next of kin." Leister sighed and continued. "Unfortunately, it's taken me most of the day to do so. Perils of necessary discretion and such, you know how it is.

And then young Oliver got into a bit of a heated discussion with the fellow in charge, Senior Agent Ramone Lanza, so of course there was all of that to smooth over too. We're only just leaving the field office now."

The consequence of that delay was all too obvious. Spence groaned. "You haven't collected Volker then! What exactly is it that ANI thinks Thomas has done?"

"He shot and killed two of their agents."

Spence had worked with field operatives too long to even blink at the latter revelation. "Bloody idiot. Do we know why yet?"

"Yes, but it only makes things worse." Leister sounded tired, and a little frustrated. "ANI suspect him of having enabled Bryce's departure to Spain. They attempted to bring him in for interrogation on the matter yesterday evening. The pair of agents they sent never returned. Their bodies were found in Thomas' hotel room when the maid entered it this morning. By then, Thomas was already in the wind. Senior Agent Lanza decided that the best hope of finding him would be to lean on Craig."

"How much of Spain is now on fire?"

"None that Craig's responsible for, darling. He's

done nothing but cooperate with them from start to finish."

Spence raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Are we sure that it's the real him?"

Leister chuckled. "DNA suggests so, yes. I gather that he's trying to turn over a new leaf. Zoe's influence, from what I can tell. Anyhow, it's a jolly good thing that we were here today, darling. I've managed to talk some damned sense into Ramone; got him to release Craig along with the rest of us. It helped that I could assure him of Senior Agent Volker's wellbeing. She's their primary concern as far as missing American citizens go. I explained that she'd been in an accident, and that an old friend of mine had taken her to a private medical facility."

Spence hummed; aware that ANI was very likely listening in on the call. "I'll chase things up for you and reschedule. Christ alone knows what your friend thinks has happened to you, but he hasn't been in touch with me about it."

"That's all to the good, darling. I don't want you dragged into this. Not with ANI throwing out accusations at all and sundry about how Bryce and Fisher might have gotten here." Leister's meaning

was already clear, but he emphasised it further. "Why they can't simply accept that she was somehow able to quietly acquire forged documentation in Miami is beyond me."

"Is there any news at that end about her or her poor son yet, Cob?" Spence knew that ANI would expect them to ask something along those lines at this point in the conversation. *Best to give them something to note in their transcript.*

Leister made an affirmative sound. "Sadly yes, darling. Remains have been found in the water, a little way along the coast from the marina. Those awful currents, you know."

"Yes, I can guess at how it must have gone." Spence pitched their voice carefully as they remarked on the apparent double tragedy. "Such a shame. I suppose she couldn't live with herself over having lost him."

"I suspect so, darling. Ramone says that Agent Hull is taking it very hard. He's here too, although we haven't seen him yet. He brought his remaining family along with him. Anyhow, I'd best let you go. Obviously, we won't be departing as planned now, so we're going to find a hotel. I'll let you know once I've rescheduled things with my friend regarding

Volker."

"Talk again soon then, Cob. I love you."

"I love you too, Nightingale. Be safe."

Thomas tugged again at the steel cuffs chaining him to the damp wall of the room where he had woken up. It was suffocatingly hot, pitch dark, and utterly silent, aside from his own breathing and the clink of the chain as he moved. The retired spy blamed himself for the situation. He'd gotten too bloody careless in his old age; careless enough that he hadn't spotted the woman following him back up to his hotel room on Friday night until an instant too late. Thomas grimaced as he recalled the viciousness of her attack. His nose was almost certainly broken, and he suspected that at least two of his ribs were cracked too. *Perhaps it's just as well that Craig never saw through her disguise when they were together. Might have ended badly for him.*

Vasnetsova hadn't settled for simply beating him to a pulp in combat. Once he'd collapsed at her feet, she'd pulled out a pre-loaded syringe, the contents of which had rendered him unconscious less than a minute after it entered

his bloodstream. The last thing he'd seen had been two additional sets of legs and feet somewhere behind his assailant. Someone had started shouting in Spanish, but Thomas couldn't recall what they'd said now. He doubted it mattered much. *Probably just some hired goons there to help her. Not that she'd have had much difficulty in carrying me herself! She must be using one of those muscle enhancement drugs.*

The long chain looped through the cuffs held firm, as did the wall that it was bolted to. Thomas growled in frustration and glanced at the screen of his watch. The soft glow from the display was the only respite from the dark. Presuming that his captor hadn't altered the time and date settings for her own sadistic amusement, it was now half past five on Saturday evening. Nineteen hours since he'd been captured. Three and a bit since he'd regained consciousness. Since waking up in here, clothed, but stripped of his phone, his gun, and all four of his knives, he'd seen no sign of Vasnetsova or anyone else. *Not that I can see much of anything in this damned darkness!*

He blinked suddenly and then bit back a chuckle at his own stupidity. Vasnetsova hadn't

removed his watch. *Whatever was in that fucking syringe must have pickled my brain! Ah well, let's call it five seconds since I finally regained enough of my wits to get myself out of this!*

The miniature cutting device built into his watch made short work of the cuffs. Thomas clambered stiffly to his feet. Tapping again at his watch, he switched on its emergency torch function and looked at his surroundings. Plain concrete walls and ceiling, with plastic tiling on the floor, and no windows. At the far side of the room was a dusty wooden staircase leading up. *A cellar then. How quaint. Now, where's that bitch Vasnetsova gotten to?*

Chapter Twelve – Such Sharp Things

The thing about most of the precious metals used in jewellery was that they were relatively soft. You could cut through them easily with an average pair of handheld garden secateurs. This was why Bryce was in the sleek steel framed structure that counted as the villa's tool shed. It was about the size of a standard double garage, and contained everything that could be needed to maintain the villa's expansive grounds, including four automated lawn mowers. She'd needed several minutes to find the tool that she'd been looking for. The delay had made her even more nervous. Her hands trembled as she snipped through the latch of the choker around her neck. *If they catch us now, I'm dead.*

She was under no illusions about the kind of

people she and Fisher had ended up with here at the villa. For all their smooth words and kind smiles, Zima and Yuri were dangerous men. Yuri's women seemed cut from the same kind of cloth; they all acted the part of wealthy socialites, but there was an unmistakable coldness to their eyes. Something ruthless. Bryce was positive that they'd not only seen many terrible things, but done them too. *There's no way I'm letting Fisher be brought up here. I don't want him ending up as some sort of career criminal!*

The choker hit the floor of the tool shed with a soft clink. Bryce kicked it aside, dropped the small secateurs, and grabbed a pair of bolt cutters instead. She'd need them to get back out through the little gate at the rear of the property. Gripping them tightly in her left hand, she beckoned to her son with her right. "Fisher, come on now, baby. We need to go."

Fisher looked up from where he sat cross-legged on the floor; clearly still more interested in the crayons and colouring book that she'd brought to distract him than in any plans that his mother might have. "Where we go, Mommy?"

Zima's voice came from immediately behind

Bryce. "I would like to know the answer to that question too, Vikusha."

Bryce spun and swung the bolt cutters at the Russian man with all her strength. She whimpered as he simply grabbed her left arm mid strike; forcing her to lower it to her side. "Zima, please, I just want to leave, that's all! I won't tell anyone that we were here, I promise!"

He shrugged as he peeled her fingers free of the bolt cutters. "Okay."

She blinked up at him in stupefaction as he let go of her arm. "Huh?"

Zima hung the bolt cutters back on the correct peg, then bent and picked up the secateurs. "You should be more careful of where you leave such sharp things. Especially when there are children present."

His reaction wasn't anywhere near what Bryce had imagined. She managed to reply. "I...you'll let us leave? Just like that?"

"No, of course not. It is too late for that now. We have already faked both of your deaths. But still, it is okay that you *want* to go. I understand." He hung up the secateurs, gesturing curtly for Bryce to come closer to him. His voice lowered. "It is better for the

boy to eat his dinner with Yuri's family while we talk about this, yes?"

Bryce's heart sank. She turned to try and look at Fisher again, only for Zima to step between them, blocking her line of sight. Her voice caught in her throat as she tried to plead with him. "Don't take him away from me, Zima, please...!"

He touched the tip of his right index finger to her lips, silencing her instantly. "Calm yourself, Vikusha; for your son's sake. You will only upset him if you carry on so."

Bryce gulped back a sob; trembling as Zima moved his hand away from her mouth to caress her hair. "I'm sorry. I...I'll be good from now on, I promise. I won't try to leave again. You...you don't have to separate us...!"

Zima pressed his finger to her lips again and shook his head. "I am separating you because we need to talk, but it is dinner time, and Yuri has informed me that children should not miss meals. That is why I was looking for the two of you to begin with." He kept his finger pressed to her lips as he continued. "We will leave Visha with Yuri and his family for the evening. You and I will eat upstairs in my room. We clearly have much to discuss. If it all

ends in shouting, then it is better for us to be somewhere private."

The latter sentence was too much. Bryce stumbled backwards and shook her head; half-laughing and half-crying at the implication. "Oh, yeah, sure! Somewhere private so that you can *discipline* me without interrupting dinner!"

Fisher peered up at them both anxiously. "Mommy sad? What wrong, Mommy?"

Zima scowled and scooped him up; balancing him on his hip. "Hush now, Visha. Your mother is fine. We are just talking about important things, that is all. Tell him not to worry, Vikusha."

Bryce forced herself to smile at her son. "It's okay, baby. Nothing's wrong."

Fisher wasn't convinced. "Mommy scared!"

Zima's scowl deepened. "That is because she has spent too many years in bad company!" He patted Fisher gently on the back. "You must be a brave boy for us now, and eat your dinner with Uncle Yuri while I look after your mother. She is sad, yes, and scared, but it is not for you to fix. That is my job, Visha."

The toddler nodded; clearly understanding very little, but successfully distracted by the mention of

dinner. "Okay. Zima and Mommy go work now. I eat my dinner!"

Bryce found herself with no real option other than to walk back to the villa with Zima. Grisha, who had been waiting patiently outside the tool shed, padded silently along at their heels. True to his word, Zima deposited Fisher with Yuri, who acceded cheerfully to whatever explanation it was that Zima had made. Since the conversation was in Russian, Bryce couldn't even begin to guess at what was said. *They could be planning my murder right here in front of me, and I wouldn't understand a word!*

Thomas had found getting out of the cellar easier than he'd expected. Surprisingly, the door had been unlocked. It seemed that his captor really hadn't known about the extra features hidden in his watch. Otherwise, she would have removed it along with his phone and his weapons. It was a bit of good luck for him; one that he felt more than owed to him after everything else that had gone wrong recently. *Delayed flights, old fines tripping me up, and being bloody well abducted! Aye, I think I've had my three disasters.*

Now he made his way carefully through the rest of the building. It had two floors aside from the cellar. On the ground floor, Thomas found a wide tiled hallway, with the entrance to the cellar stairs at one end of it, and a securely locked front door at the other. To one side was the kitchen and the dining room; the latter room boasting double glass doors leading out onto a patio. On the other side of the hallway was a cramped little sitting room, and a bedroom with a small en suite bathroom. *Vasnetsova's room, by the looks of it.*

He guessed by the look of things that the house had originally been built as a holiday let. Skills honed during his long career as a spy and an assassin and never lost since his retirement meant that he made no sound as he walked. There was a convenient lack of security cameras. Presumably, Vasnetsova had no wish to record her own activities here. Thomas was glad of that. It made things easier for him. Another set of stairs, far cleaner than those to the cellar, led him upwards, past a bathroom and onto a narrow landing with four more doorways opening off from it. Three of the doors were padlocked shut from the outside. *I wonder who or what she's got stashed in there.*

Those rooms would have to wait for now. The fourth doorway, situated at the opposite end of the landing from where he stood, lay open. Thomas could hear the soft hum of machinery from inside the room. More urgently, there was the sound of a very young child crying, and Vasnetsova shouting at them in Russian. Thomas scowled. *Time to put a stop to her, permanently!*

The former spy crept forwards and slipped into the room. Vasnetsova had her back to him; wrestling a small, freckle-faced toddler into what looked like a cryostasis chamber. Presumably, it was one of her infamous child soldier programming capsules. Thomas wasn't about to wait to see what happened next. Crossing the room in three long strides, he snapped Vasnetsova's neck before she could even notice his arrival. "Proshchay navsegda, bitch!"

The child, a girl, continued squirming and crying amid the assorted straps and wires. There was dried blood spattered on her clothing. Thomas did his best to sooth her as he lifted her clear of the pod. "There now, lassie. It's alright. I've got you. Let's check you over."

Thankfully, or perhaps not, all the blood

appeared to have come from a third party. Cradling the frightened but uninjured child to his chest, Thomas began a careful search of the rest of the room. There were three other pods, only one of which was occupied. It hadn't been activated yet, which meant that the young victim inside it was still fully conscious when the lid opened. Thomas bit back a snarl of fury as he recognised his grandson. "Sam! Hold on, lad, I'll get you out of there!"

Sam was just as distressed as the little girl, but he seemed to remember his rescuer. "Ganda! Ganda, up!"

Thomas readily obliged with the demand; wincing as a small foot dug into his injured ribs. With his arms now full of two squirming toddlers, he exited the room. Finding his belongings was now even more imperative. He needed his phone so that he could contact Craig, or Housekeeping if his son didn't pick up. The latter possibility now had a far more worrying potential cause behind it. *For all I know, Vasnetsova may have killed him! He'd never have let her take Sam from him willingly, that's for bloody sure.*

Campbell clambered aboard his yacht with no

small amount of trepidation. He wasn't expecting an especially warm welcome. Indeed, Zoe hadn't even answered her phone when he'd rang her after his release; most likely because she was still scared and angry over how ANI had raided both of their vessels in search of him. It was hardly surprising that she'd give him the silent treatment for getting her and Primrose mixed up in his dad's mess! *First the Irish matter, and now this. She's probably sorry she ever met me.*

He'd kept trying to contact her all the way back to the marina, where Moxton had helpfully secured a motorboat as transport out to where the *Angry Canary* and *Helter Skelter* were moored together. With Volker's extraction now rescheduled for the following afternoon, the visiting BIINT operatives had nothing to do this evening. Campbell had still been relieved when Moxton and Leister had both offered to come along with him to explain things to Zoe. *Let's face it, I haven't been the easiest person to remain friends with lately. Maybe this is my chance to start fixing some of the damage I've done.*

There hadn't been enough space in the motorboat for everyone. Jolley, Tanya, and Quincy had all opted to head to the hotel that Leister had

found for them. Dobos had muttered an excuse and slunk off towards the nearest bar; probably to drown his fears for Volker in alcohol. Campbell sympathised. He might yet make a similar attempt himself, if Zoe really did end up deciding to cut him out of her life. *Except I can't afford to hide from the pain in a bottle this time. Not when I've got Sam to look after.*

It had just gone six o'clock in the evening, but the sun was still blazing brightly, and would be for another few hours yet. Campbell was surprised that Zoe and the children weren't up on deck. They'd formed a habit of taking their evening meals outside since arriving in Spain. Then again, perhaps Zoe had deemed it safer to keep Sam and Primrose inside while she was on her own with them. *She might be worried about keeping an eye on them both at once; what with the water and all, and what we thought happened to Fisher, and now Dad running amok.*

There wasn't much that Campbell could do about his father's proclivity for violence, but at least he could tell Zoe the truth about Bryce and Fisher's combined fates. Leister and the others had read him in on the way to the marina. Campbell smiled

as he recalled the conversation. He turned to offer a hand up to his two guests. "Welcome aboard, both of you, and thanks again for coming with me. I suspect I'm in the doghouse with Zoe at the moment! Perhaps she'll be happier talking to you than me."

Leister patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure she'll forgive you eventually, darling. It's not your fault that Thomas is the way he is."

Moxton nodded grimly. "If anyone owes her an apology, it's ANI. Lanza overstepped today; sending in that tactical squad to arrest you. He's lucky you didn't kill the lot of them!"

"To be honest, I'm trying to move away from being that sort of person." Campbell frowned as he reached the door of his wheelhouse. "Huh, all locked up! Zoe must have taken the kids over to her boat instead. She's probably flung herself into her sculpting to work out the stress." He tapped in the security code to unlock the door. "You two go on down and make yourselves at home. I'll pop over to the *Helter Skelter* and see about begging forgiveness!"

The steel frame of the passerelle rattled as he limped across it. Campbell called out for Zoe as he

stepped down onto the deck of her vessel. "Zoe, it's me! Where are you?"

A faint moan came from below deck. "Craig...help me...please...!"

Campbell descended into the living area of the yacht as quickly as his leg would let him. He cried out in horror when he saw his girlfriend. "Oh my God, Zoe!"

She reached for him weakly from where she lay sprawled amidst her sculpting equipment. There were deep slashes on her hands and on her arms, a knife embedded in her ribs, and so, so much blood. "Craig...it wasn't him...she said she'd make people think it was...!"

Campbell knelt by her side and pulled her close to him, gently taking her in his arms. Her skin was already cold to the touch. Even with the motorboat so close to hand, they still might not reach the shore in time, let alone get her to a hospital! He bit back his tears as he rose carefully onto his feet again. "Zoe, who did this to you? Where are the children?"

Zoe coughed as he carried her up onto the deck. Yet more blood spattered down her chin; most likely from a punctured lung. "A blonde woman...she...just...she stabbed me and then she

took them. She...she sounded...Russian...!" Another agonised cough racked her. "Craig...Craig...don't blame your dad for this. That woman...she said...said she wanted to make you...make you blame him...!"

Her eyes closed then, and her head lolled back. Campbell cradled her unconscious form helplessly; shouting for Leister and Moxton as he hurried back across the passerelle. He glanced down at the knife. Sure enough, Thomas' initials were engraved on the handle. Zoe's attacker had meant to frame him. *And based on what Zoe just said, I can guess who she is.*

Chapter Thirteen – So Do I

Dobos turned his back to the departing taxi that had ferried him to the front gate of Yuri Kuznetsov's villa. He'd debated asking the driver to wait, but it hadn't felt fair on the bloke. Not given how these situations usually tended to play out. *Cob might reckon that Kuznetsov counts as an ally, but he's not the one whose kid sensed his mum going into a fucking coma!*

Reminding himself again of the plan, Dobos hunched his shoulders and approached the very unfriendly looking pair of security guards who had come to investigate his arrival. He glared at them through the tall metal bars of the gate. "I'm here for Laine Volker. If your boss has any fucking sense, he won't fucking piss me about."

The two men sneered back at him. One of them pulled out a radio and began speaking rapidly in Russian; informing an unidentified superior of what was happening and requesting orders on what to do about it. The other one gestured curtly to Dobos. "You have ID, yes?"

Dobos nodded. He pulled out his official BIINT ID and held it up. "The name's Dobos, Oliver Dobos. Laine's my ex-girlfriend. Our kid wants her back. So do I."

Both guards flinched as he finished his ultimatum. Then they dropped to the ground, unconscious. Dobos put his ID away and shook his head as the gate opened. "I still can't get my head around how you do that, Brendan!"

His boyfriend, Brendan Clacher, chuckled; still psionically camouflaged and utterly invisible to both the naked eye and cameras alike. "From what you've told me, the wee lad that Laine came here to find can do the same thing, love!"

"Yeah, which is all the more reason for us not to leave him with the Russians." Dobos jogged forwards along the driveway. "Let's go."

Dobos kept close to the shrubbery as they went; making sure to look like he was trying to use it as

cover. In reality, of course, he was only the distraction. While everyone was busy hunting him down, Clacher would enter the villa alone. His masking capabilities were strong enough for him to hide others too, if he was within thirty feet of them. *All I've got to do is keep these fuckers off balance long enough for Brendan to find Laine and the others. Once he's got them, we can all escape together.*

It was a good plan, for all that his fellow BIINT operatives were going to be pissed with him about it. Dobos supposed, as he punched out a startled gardener, that they'd accuse him of undermining things. Leister especially would have reason to be angry. Spence too, for that matter, but at least the non-gender wasn't there. He wouldn't need to worry about them until he got back to London. *Fuck knows how Cob will react when he finds out though.*

Another brief scuffle then; this time with a second pair of security guards. Dobos felt better about fighting these men than he had the hapless gardener. He still opted for non-lethal measures, just as Clacher had at the gate. There was no sense in killing if they didn't need to. Both of their respective

agencies had enough active threats to deal with already, without this evening triggering an official dispute with Russian Intelligence. *I'm pretty fucking sure that Pembleton would fire me for that. She might do anyhow, I suppose...!*

Someone grappled him suddenly; someone he couldn't see. Dobos let himself be dragged into the depths of the shrubbery. "Brendan, seriously, what the fuck?"

His assailant shimmered into view. It wasn't Clacher. Instead, Hull glared at Dobos along the barrel of his sidearm. He was wearing a stealth suit, and he looked ready to commit murder. "You bastards at BIINT were going to let me believe that Bryce and Fisher were both dead!"

Dobos shrugged. "Seemed like the kindest thing we could do for them, yeah, but how the fuck did you find out?"

Hull gestured to his stealth suit. "I followed you from the field office to that bar. Figured you might head off to visit Laine tonight; given how you've got a kid together. It was the least I could do, given how much I owe her for getting me out of GETEC. Nobody else at ANI was ever going to bother. Your friend Leister didn't bother informing ANI where she

was, and I wanted to make sure she was safe."

"It's almost as if you don't trust us." Dobos frowned. "Why the fuck didn't Brendan or I sense you following us?"

"After all the trouble we had with Brooke Rawlings, I started carrying a psionic jamming device with me, just in case I needed it. Combined with this suit, there was no way for either of you to detect my presence." Hull still hadn't lowered his weapon. "And, no, I *don't* trust BLINT, and hey, guess what? This little conspiracy to keep me in the dark about my family isn't helping with that!"

Dobos scowled. "You've got some fucking nerve, calling them your *family*, you controlling prick! You *bought* Bryce. I know what you put her through. She talked to me about it while she was staying with Spence. Told me how she never had any fucking choice in being with you; how you brainwashed her."

Hull's eyes went flat. He brought up his other hand, and slammed the tip of an electric baton into Dobos' abdomen. Dobos collapsed instantly in a heap of raggedly twitching limbs. To his horror, Hull moved right along with him, kneeling, and keeping the device pressed firmly into his gut. "You

know what, Oliver, between her nasty little goodbye note and what you've told me, I suddenly feel like I could get by just fine without ever laying eyes on Bryce again. Thanks for the therapy."

Finally, the pain stopped. Dobos whimpered and coiled in on himself while he gasped for breath. He groaned as he felt Hull grab his wrists and twist them behind him. "No...no...get...get off me, you fucking fuck...!"

"Shh, now, there's a good boy." Hull had already positioned him face down on the dirt and cuffed him. Now he was securing his legs at the knees and ankles. It felt like zip ties. "Just relax. You and I are going to wait here for your boyfriend to get back – Brendan, wasn't it?"

Dobos groaned in pain as Hull manhandled him up onto his knees. "He'll kill you for this!"

"For what?" Hull smirked nastily as he rose to his feet. "Getting the drop on you? Tying you up and making you kneel for me?"

"You're fucking insane! We came here to...!"

Hull jammed the mercifully inactive baton into Dobo's mouth. "Think very carefully about what you say next, Oliver. I overheard what Leister told Lanza about your son's ability to sense when you and

Laine are in danger. I'm guessing that you might have a similar bond with Laine, and maybe with Brendan too. Heck, even Fisher might be at risk of picking up on it if I hurt you enough! But fun fact: this close to me, the jamming device will keep you from broadcasting your pain to other psionics. Nobody will know what I do to you." He pulled the baton out and traced it across Dobos' chest. "Speak."

"We...we came here to get them out." Dobos eyed the baton warily. "Laine, Bryce, and Fisher. We didn't trust the Russians, so we came to get them out. That's what Brendan's doing right now. I'm supposed to be the distraction."

"He'll have to manage without you." Hull flicked the baton up; catching Dobos on the chin with it and tilting his head back. "Think he can?"

Dobos grimaced. "I...I think so, yeah."

"Better hope that you're right." Hull pressed the baton against Dobos' lips. "Because if he screws up and gets my son or Laine hurt, then I might just be tempted to keep you as compensation. Hell, maybe I'll do that anyhow. I mean, it's not like it would be difficult to make you disappear right now, given how you came here off book. I could blame

it on the Russians. Let this Brendan guy and BIINT go after them; let them burn each other to ashes. Really, it's the least that all sides deserve."

Dobos contemplated flinging himself backwards, away from the baton. True, it would only buy him a few seconds at most, but perhaps he could scream for help before Hull reacted. At this point, taking his chances with the Russians felt preferable. *Except that if the fuckers don't hear me, then I'll still be stuck here with Hull, and he'll be even more fucking pissed off with me.*

His captor stepped around behind him then, cutting off that option for self-endangerment. Dobos tensed and clenched his jaw shut as the baton was pressed harder against his lips. Hull smacked him sharply on the back of the head for the refusal. "Open up, Oliver." He traced his thumb over the power button. "Unless you'd rather I use it for its intended function?"

Dobos closed his eyes and obeyed. He gagged as Hull thrust the baton back into his mouth. The rubberised shaft was much too long to go in all the way, and slightly too chunky to fit comfortably between his teeth. Dobos focused on trying not to choke; relieved that the metal conductor at the tip

of the baton was kept covered by an insulated disc when not in use. He knew that it would still be at least red hot. *Which is the least of my fucking worries here, really.*

A deep voice rumbled angrily from behind them then; the wording English, but the accent and intonation unmistakably Russian. "Stop what you are doing right now and put your hands up! We have you both surrounded!"

The order was accompanied by the sounds of multiple guns being readied amidst the shrubs around them. Dobos opened his eyes and slumped back onto his haunches as Hull stepped away from him. It took the field operative a few seconds to process the fact that the electric baton was still jammed into his mouth, and that he couldn't quite manage to eject it without the use of his hands. *Seriously, fuck my fucking life!*

A tall man with short, spiky blond hair, stepped into view in front of Dobos, and then crouched down to inspect him more closely. "Ah! Okay. I will take this out for you now, yes?"

Dobos nodded helplessly. He recognised the man by his voice as the same one who'd ordered them to surrender. *Great, rescued by the fucking*

Russians! How much fucking worse can things fucking get at this point?

The blond man cupped Dobos' face in his hands and gently extracted the baton from his mouth; tossing it to one of the other Russians. "There now. Just breathe, that's it. Very good. Very brave." He patted Dobos on the shoulder and stood up, gesturing to two of the security guards. "Take this one indoors. I will deal with him personally."

The two men nodded and hauled Dobos up by his upper arms and elbows, one of them walking at either side of him as they dragged him away. Neither of them spoke as they took him into the villa, up the stairs, and on into a large, bright bedroom.

Dobos blinked at the sight. "What, are the dungeons all full already?"

The guards ignored him. They carried him over to the massive four poster bed in the middle of the far wall and laid him there on his back. It was without question the most comfortable bed that Dobos had ever known. If he hadn't still been bound hand and foot, he thought that he might have enjoyed the luxury of the situation.

As it was, he immediately sat up. "Okay lads,

thanks for the hospitality, but...!"

One of the guards shoved him back down and glared at him. "Do not move. Do not speak."

Dobos sensed that arguing would end badly for him. He lay quietly; waiting for the blond man to arrive. *Based on how he acted, and this room, I'm going to hazard a guess that he's somebody pretty fucking important around here. Fuck, for all that I know, he might even be Kuznetsov!*

Bryce whimpered and wriggled; straining futilely against her bonds. Her legs were free, but her arms were stretched out at opposing angles above her head; a pair of thin silk cords securing her wrists to the headboard of Zima's bed. She wasn't sure how much more of this her body could take. *Not that it matters to him...!*

In the end, there hadn't been any shouting. Instead, Zima had taken her in his arms and kissed her the instant that he finished locking the bedroom door behind them. Bryce had felt the fear in her die at his touch; shrivelling away like a flower caught in a sudden frost. She'd opened her mouth to him hungrily. Her fingernails had caught in the crisp white fabric of his shirt while she whispered her

consent to his murmured query. Aside from pausing briefly to send Grisha into the en suite bathroom to sleep, he hadn't stopped pleasuring her since. *Except for right when I'm about to come...!*

Whatever Bryce might have imagined Zima doing to her as punishment for her earlier transgressions, it certainly hadn't been this wickedly sweet form of torture. She arched and squirmed beneath him; gasping as his fingers once again teased her to the edge of climaxing. "Zima...oh, Zima, please...please, let me...!"

"Not yet."

Bryce groaned as Zima moved his hands up to her breasts. "Please, I *need* to finish!"

He raised his head from where he had been kissing her throat and smirked at her. "Yes, I can see that. And perhaps I may even let you do so, but only after you have been *thoroughly* punished, Vikusha."

With that assurance provided, he returned his attention and his mouth to the task of marking out a ring of bruises around her neck. A collar that she couldn't take off, he'd called it. Bryce wondered if that meant that it would be regularly reapplied. A hungry sort of shiver went through her at the

E.V. GREIG

thought. *Maybe staying with him isn't such a bad option after all...!*

Chapter Fourteen – Sitting Drunk

Spence stepped carefully over the corpse on the floor of the penthouse's kitchen, and picked up their shrilly buzzing phone from where it sat on top of the breakfast bar. They sighed in relief as they saw Leister's name on the screen. "Cob! Lovely to hear from you. You're missing a truly *terrible* Saturday evening."

"Why, what's happened, darling?"

"Another one of those blasted C.A.K.E clones turned up here at home; you know, the ones they made of Mr Hull." Spence glared at the corpse in question. "It got the drop on me. Miss Hedturner took it out with a well-aimed skillet to the back of the head. It's occurred to me that I really don't pay her enough."

"I'll be more than happy to chip in if you can convince her to accept a raise, darling. Anyhow, are you all alright?"

"Physically yes, but it's set the older twins off. You know how they get. I'm hoping that tomorrow morning's MMA class will give them some opportunity to decompress. And they have their therapeutic arts and crafts group on Sunday, so that should help too. Now, what's happening at your end?" Spence sat down at the breakfast bar. "Did that old friend of yours send you the new arrangements yet?"

To their surprise, Leister chuckled bitterly at the offer. "Rescheduling our meeting with the Russians to tomorrow afternoon has been the only thing *not* to go wrong here!"

Spence listened as he described what had happened with Zoe, and how they'd feared the children lost until Thomas had finally managed to reach Campbell from a public phone. "And he's at the hospital with the rest of you now? Do you need me to contact ANI; try and smooth things over with Senior Agent Lanza?"

"No thank you, darling. I spoke with him and cleared things up before I had Daniel fetch Thomas

and the children back from Vasnetsova's hideout. ANI are processing the scene there now. She had several other young victims already in stasis, so Ramone has his people tending to them and liaising with Interpol."

"How are Craig and Ms Rusdyle doing?" Spence tried to ignore the irrational knot of jealousy that kept popping up in their feelings around Campbell's new relationship.

"Oh, you know Craig, darling! He hates these sorts of places at the best of times. Still, he's coping, and Zoe came through her surgery well. She's stable, and the doctors all seem to feel fairly positive with regards to her recovery."

"That's good to hear."

Leister sighed. "Unfortunately, that's where my good news ends, darling. Oliver has taken himself off, and isn't answering his phone to any of us. Now, best case scenario, he's sitting drunk in a bar somewhere, but just in case, I'd like our boffins to run a quick check of the local CCTV."

"I'll let Mr Whitby know immediately, Cob. He can check his bank account too; see where his spending might lead us."

"Good thinking, darling. I miss you."

"I miss you too, Cob. Stay safe, won't you? And give my best wishes to Craig, too."

"I will, Nightingale. I love you. Give Heidi my thanks, and pass on my love to the children."

"I love you too. Goodbye for now."

Hull woke up with the sort of blinding headache that was generally deemed unique to having been stunned with a high yield energy pistol. He groaned and sat up slowly; rubbing at his eyes and attempting to gather his wits. The room around him was large and brightly lit, with huge windows all along one side, the curtains on them currently drawn for the night, and three large red leather couches, one of which he was still sitting on. "Ugh. What...where am I? What hit me?"

An unfamiliar male voice with a deep Russian accent answered him in English. "You broke into my home and approached my children. I did not take it well."

The memories all came flooding back to Hull then. That delivery driver he'd met on his way back to his hotel. The story that the guy had given him about having recognised his face from the news. His claim to having seen a kid who looked like Fisher

in the garden of a villa in Vallvidrera while he'd been delivering a parcel there. And the resultant surge of all but insane hope that had seared through Hull at those words. How he'd grabbed his stealth gear from the back of his jet and gone straight to the address that he'd been given, without even considering reporting in with ANI or the Guardia Urbana first. His vaulting over the wall around the property and sprinting towards the back of the villa in search of his son at the faint sound of children playing. The little blond-haired boy playing in the sandpit. *It wasn't Fisher. It was just a kid who looked like him.*

The stranger spoke again; this time somewhat more kindly. "I took the liberty of checking your ID whilst you were unconscious. I gather that you have recently suffered an unspeakable loss, Agent Hull. For that, you have my pity. But I must insist that you explain your actions to me now. Why did you come here?"

Hull sighed sadly as he turned his face to finally look at the other man. "I did it because I ran into a delivery guy who claimed that he'd seen my son here. Seen him...seen him *alive*, I mean. I wanted it to be true so badly that I didn't stop to follow any of

the official protocols."

"Ah. I see." The Russian nodded slowly. "An understandable course of action, given the circumstances. I believe that I can excuse it. And in return, you must forgive me for having shot you on sight! When I saw a figure dressed in a stealth suit approaching my children, well. You can imagine what I thought, eh?"

Hull nodded. "Yeah. I'd have done the same." He thought again of the happy looking little boy who had so strongly resembled his son. "I'm sorry for breaking in here. I should have followed protocol and had ANI arrange for an official investigation into the suspected sighting."

His host patted him on the shoulder kindly. "Agent Hull, if one of my children were to have gone missing, then I would have burned down the world to find them. You have my sympathies. I think that the best thing now is for us both to draw a line under all of this and just move on. No harm, no foul, I believe is the saying."

"Thank you for being so reasonable about it." Hull rose gingerly to his feet. "Well, I should probably get going now. The rest of my family are still waiting for me in our hotel. I don't want to worry them any

more than I already have. Plus, I'll need to report in with Senior Agent Lanza; let him know where I've been. The agents he assigned to work security detail for my family have probably reported me missing by now."

"Of course. That is all very sensible." The other man gestured for Hull to follow him. "Please, come with me, and I will have my driver take you back to your hotel. It is the least that I can do for one who has endured such tragedy."

Dobos glared at Yuri when he finally entered the bedroom. "About fucking time too, mate! I've been lying here waiting for what, three hours now? Your goons wouldn't even untie me. I can't feel my fucking fingers!"

Yuri chuckled, and gestured for his men to leave. He closed the door behind them. "This room is fully soundproofed. Not for any sinister purpose, you understand. It is just that it is my bedroom, and I always think that it is best to be able to sleep in peace."

"Huh, so I guessed right then. You're Kuznetsov, aren't you? The famous gymnast bloke who owns this place."

"Oh, please! Call me Yuri. Everyone does." Yuri padded across to the bed and smiled down at his prisoner. "And let us dispense with the cloaks and the daggers, eh? We both know what it is that we do for work! There is no need for all this triple talking, not now."

Dobos scowled up at him. "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"What, does my rescuing you from that American brute mean nothing?" Yuri sat down on the edge of the bed. "And to think how much effort I have gone to in dealing with him!"

"I'm listening." Dobos eyed him warily.

Yuri pouted. "Maybe you are, yes. But I suspect that you are paying more attention to your *other* sense, hmm?" He put his gymnastic skills to use then; rolling over and snatching Dobos up, before scooting in underneath him so that the back of the younger man's head and shoulders were now cradled against him. "An empath! I can feel it, you know."

Despite the restraints, Dobos still made a valiant attempt at flinging himself clear. He snarled as Yuri pulled him back onto his lap. "Get your fucking hands *off* me!"

"Hush now!" Yuri wrapped his left arm tightly around Dobos' waist. "This isn't a sexual thing, I promise you. Oh, you are a very pretty boy, certainly, but I like my partners to be *willing*. No – this is all just purely business."

He felt some of the fear bleed away from Dobos at this assurance. "Then why not untie me? You know; since it's not fucking sexual."

"I questioned the American. He told me that you came here with another man. Brendan Clacher, of Irish Intelligence, no less! Agent Hull believed that the two of you intended to stage a rescue." Yuri paused to let his words sink in. "He claimed that you do not trust me to return Senior Agent Volker. That you think that the boy and his mother are not safe living here."

Dobos scoffed. "Yeah, well he's talking shite, as per fucking usual! I came here alone. Your CCTV will show you that. I wanted to see Laine, that's all. I'm worried about her, and I didn't like that there'd been a delay in the handover."

"Hmm. You see, I think that I could believe this story that you are telling me now." Yuri traced the tip of his right index finger slowly across Dobos' brow. "If only I had not *already* captured Mr

Clacher."

Dobos went very still. "You've got Brendan?"

"Yes, I do. It is a most pleasing outcome for me! He has been the irritating Irish thorn in other people's sides for far too long. Russian Intelligence has many questions for him."

"Yeah, well don't hold your fucking breath, mate. He's not the type to crack under pressure."

"No indeed he is not! And that, I am afraid to say, is where you must enter the puzzle." Yuri paused to let the latter information sink in. "Can you guess at what I mean by this, Oliver?"

Dobos snorted angrily. "It sounds like you think I'll help you for some fucking reason! Well, guess again, comrade, because that's *not* fucking happening! I won't help you!"

"I guarantee that you *will*." Yuri wrapped both of his hands around Dobos' head. "What do you know of memory working as a weapon?"

"Oh, fuck that!" Dobos tried and failed to jerk his head away from Yuri's hands. "Don't you even fucking try it! Do you hear me? I mean it! Don't you fucking *dare* pull that shit on me!"

"Rage at me all you wish. It will make no difference." Yuri tightened his grip as he carefully

layered his own psionic field over that of the empath; preventing Dobos from projecting his distress to others. Asya and Senior Agent Volker were both still down in the bunker, behind multiple psionic jamming devices, but it would not do to risk traumatising his children or little Visha. And didn't this man also have a son? "I will not lie to you, Oliver. The process by which I will secure your help is going to be very painful for you. But we each do what we must in life, eh?"

Dobos squirmed helplessly. "Fuck you, you fucking sadistic bastard! I'll *never* help you, no matter how badly you torture me! Especially not against Brendan."

"I am not going to torture you, but you *will* help me with this." Yuri focused his ability a little more. He could already feel the outermost layer of Dobos' mind cracking under the intrusion. "You just won't know that you are doing so."

"No! No...stop! Get out of my head...! Stop!" Dobos writhed helplessly under his touch. "Let me go! Fuck you, let me go!"

Yuri ignored his prisoner's screaming and ploughed on with his task; ripping through Dobos' mental defences with well-practised efficiency until

he reached his target. "Ah – there it is! This is the part that I was seeking in you." He tightened his grip. "Just try to relax now. The more that you resist, the worse that it will feel."

"Stop...no...no...please, stop...don't...!"

The unrelenting psionic pain of the forced memory working soon had its usual effect. Dobos' eyes rolled up in his head. He made a terrible, primal sort of sound. Then he went limp. Within a few hours from now, his shredded psyche would finish reforming itself in line with Yuri's wishes. *He will waken well enough once his mind is done with healing itself.*

Yuri eased Dobos's upper half off his lap and gently laid him out on the bed beside him instead. Then he set to work freeing him from Hull's assorted restraints. "That American could use a lesson in how to safely bind a prisoner! You will have many bruises from these. At least what I am doing to you leaves no outward mark."

What it was doing to Dobos inwardly was a very different matter, but Yuri was sanguine about that aspect. He had not acted out of malice, but rather because of duty. Nor had he sought any of his current prisoners out. No, instead all four of them

PROOF OF DEATH

had all come to him; had invaded his home and even harmed some of his people! Yuri would forgive them those sins, but only after the scales had been rebalanced. *Of course, the compensation owed will take a different form for each of them.*

Chapter Fifteen – Rest Your Head

Leister pinned a polite expression onto his face and stepped out of the front passenger side of the rented hover vehicle in which he and Moxton had driven to Vallvidrera. Senior Agent Lanza had insisted on accompanying the BIINT group when they collected Volker. The Spaniard had also deemed it necessary to include Agent Hull; citing the need for them to have someone there who knew Volker well. Given Dobos' absence, Leister had felt obliged to agree. *Although it's a damned good thing that Yuri and I arranged to meet here for the handover as opposed to at his villa! I dread to think how badly that might have gone; what with young Fisher and his mother both still in hiding there.*

He and Moxton walked across the neatly

maintained visitors' car park and up the gently sloping path to the front entrance of the Salud Milagrosa Healthcare Facility. Yuri had apparently called in several painfully expensive favours with his contacts in the local area to have Volker admitted here. There was even a wholly legitimate seeming paper trail for her care thus far. Under normal circumstances, Leister knew that the Russians would have demanded commensurate recompense for such assistance. He'd been impressed at Nightingale's bargaining skills. *Then again, I have no idea whether they've ever engaged with Kuznetsov before. I only even know that they know Bogomolov because of his role in what happened in the park last weekend.*

Lanza and Hull were waiting in the facility's main reception area. Leister nodded to them in greeting. "Shall we proceed, gentlemen?"

"Certainly, yes, although there has been a *small* change in plans." Lanza handed him an official looking sheaf of paperwork. "I think you will find everything to be in order."

Leister leafed swiftly through the documents. His voice hardened. "Hmm. I see. ANI doesn't want us taking her back to England then?"

Moxton glowered. "You do realise that her kid's back there waiting to see her, right? And that his dad is *literally* the one who she named as her emergency contact?"

"Oh, you mean Oliver Dobos?" Hull made a deliberate show of peering past them both as if looking for someone else. "Yeah, where is he?"

Lanza cut in before the argument could even begin. "The protocol for such unfortunate situations is very clear, Senor Leister. Since Senior Agent Volker's named emergency contact is uncontactable at this time, ANI must intercede as her employer. She is to be returned to Miami for a full assessment, prior to an appropriate care plan being devised for her. Agent Hull has already volunteered to be personally responsible for escorting her."

Hull nodded along with this plan all too readily for Leister's liking. "It's really no problem at all. There's plenty of space on my jet."

Leister stared coldly at the ANI agents. "I have every confidence that Oliver will rejoin us well before the doctors here clear Senior Agent Volker for travel. We *are* dealing with total retrograde amnesia here, you know. It shan't do to rush these

things." He inwardly resigned himself to asking the Russians for yet another favour; this time, to ensure that Volker wasn't released too early. Honestly, what was Oliver playing at; pulling a vanishing act now, of all possible times? "In the meantime, why don't we all go up to the ward and visit her? I'm sure she could do with having the company."

Clacher glanced up at the clock on the wall opposite him: eight fifteen in the evening. The date, displayed in much smaller font, informed him that it was also no longer Saturday, but Sunday. A full twenty-six hours had passed since he and Oliver had parted ways near the front gate. It had taken him less than five minutes to cross the grounds, get inside the villa, and locate the man in charge of it. Unfortunately, that was where the plan had fallen apart. Kuznetsov's mind was somehow shielded against psionic intrusion. Clacher had realised this less than two seconds before the blond-haired Russian man shot him square in the chest. Everything had gone dark. *And now I'm a prisoner.*

That he'd woken up at all was a blessing, Clacher supposed, ruefully. Finding himself stripped naked and strapped to a plain metal chair, in a

windowless room with nothing but a softly ticking clock as décor, was still better than being dead. At least, he hoped that it was. There were Russians involved though. And he'd broken into the home of one of their top deep cover operatives. *Aye, this is going to be a bad one for me. There's no way that it couldn't be.*

He hoped Oliver was okay. It was one thing to have gotten himself captured like this, and another entirely to think that his gorgeous lad might be in the same dire position right now. Clacher would never forgive himself if...no, no he couldn't let his mind go down that path. *It won't help anybody, aside from the Russians.*

Twenty feet to his right, the door of the room opened abruptly. Clacher turned his head towards it and saw Kuznetsov standing in the doorway. The Russian looked amused. "Ah, good! You're awake. Sometimes that little energy pistol of mine leaves people out cold for days."

Clacher grunted. "I suppose that makes scheduling their subsequent torture a wee bit tricky for you. Can't plan when to have the pokers warmed up for, eh?"

Kuznetsov laughed. It was a surprisingly genuine

sounding laugh, given the circumstances. "Ha! You are as funny as our file indicated. Good! That means that our sources are accurate. I like it when this is the case. I am sure you do too."

The Irish operative was bound too tightly to shrug. "I can neither confirm nor deny that."

"Eh, you will soon come around to answering my questions honestly." Kuznetsov snapped his fingers at someone outside the room. "Come here and let my other guest see you, Oliver."

Clacher's heart sank. He stared at Dobos in horror as the younger man shuffled into the room. "Oh, sweet fuck, Oliver! What have they done to you?"

Dobos didn't answer him, but the blank look on his face told enough of a terrible story. His poppy petal blue eyes were empty. It was as if the very soul was gone from him somehow.

Kuznetsov smiled at Clacher. "As you can see, he is not himself right now. He has been having a less than pleasant time of things."

Clacher bowed his head. "What do you want from me? Name it, and I promise you, if it's in my power, I'll do it. Just...just please, please don't hurt him again."

The Russian's smile broadened. "Excellent choice, my friend! Oliver, come closer. Kneel there and rest your head on our guest's lap. It may help in focusing his concentration." He waited until Dobos had done as instructed, and then uncuffed Clacher's left hand from the chair. "You may touch him, if you wish."

Clacher knew better than to refuse the offer. He dug his fingers into Dobos' hair and tugged gently. "It's okay, love. I'm here."

His interrogator began in earnest then: rattling off question after question as fast as Clacher could answer them. Some of them contradicted one another; clearly meant to trip him up if he dared to try and lie. There was no need for such precautions. Clacher answered honestly every single time. He talked until his voice began to croak, and then he kept on and on talking. His fingers carded through his lover's hair as he spoke. *Fuck all of it; just let me get him out of here alive!*

Finally, Kuznetsov appeared satisfied. He tucked the little recording device he had been using away into one of his pockets. "Okay! You have held up your end of our bargain. Now it is time for me to put you both out of your misery."

Clacher tightened his grip on Dobos' hair, as if he could somehow keep the younger man safe by doing so. "Please don't take him away."

Kuznetsov shrugged. "Eh, if you wish to watch it happen, then that is fine by me." He moved closer, and took hold of Dobos' head with both of his hands. "This will hurt him, but only for...!"

Clacher lowered the energy pistol that he'd snatched from the holster on the now unconscious Russian man's belt. "You're not murdering him on my fucking watch, you bastard!" He reached across and freed his other hand, and then dealt with the straps across his waist and his chest. "Oliver, love, I need you to lift your head up and sit back a wee bit for me there. Aye, that's it. Just you sit there and wait for me, gorgeous lad."

The straps around his legs took slightly longer to undo. Freed from the chair, Clacher stumbled to his feet and retrieved the recording device from Kuznetsov's pocket. Thinking better of remaining naked, he helped himself to the man's clothes too. Fortunately, they were of a similar height and build, because fuck only knew where his own things were by now. Stunning Kuznetsov once more just to be sure, he manhandled him onto the chair and

strapped him in place. "Okay, Oliver. Give me your hand, love, and stick close to me now. We're getting out of here!"

Spence frowned as they listened to Zima's terse explanation of why it was that Yuri hadn't yet gotten back in touch with Leister about the agreed upon need for delay in releasing Volker. "You're saying that someone broke into the villa at around ten o'clock last night, assaulted Mr Kuznetsov, and then left again, all without anyone else seeing or hearing them?"

"Yes, that is *exactly* what I am saying to you, Solovei." There was an angry tone underlaying Zima's words. "Yuri's doctors say that he may be unconscious for quite some time yet. It looks as if he has been stunned at very close range with an energy-based weapon."

"Well, I certainly hope that you manage to catch whoever it was." Spence glanced at the screen of the tablet in their other hand. Whitby had found an anomaly whilst tracking Dobos' recent movements and spending. Namely, that another spate of minor technical errors had erased all the potentially relevant data. "Have you checked

Agent Hull's whereabouts at that time? I recall him having access to stealth tech."

"I will look into that, thank you." Zima sighed. "I apologise for being so abrupt with you, Solovei. Things are not so good here at present."

"It's quite alright." Spence thought again of the methods involved in Bryce being spirited away from the hotel to Yuri's villa. And now Dobos had vanished. They didn't like how the dots of this appeared to be joining up. "At least you aren't blaming Monday morning syndrome for the impact of your weekend stresses."

That dragged a faint chuckle from Zima. "I must confess that yesterday was different to my usual Sunday routine."

"One would certainly hope so. I shouldn't think that a close friend coming to harm ought to count as part of anyone's normal Sunday." Spence kept their voice neutral. "Anyhow, I'd appreciate it if you could take over managing the delay in Senior Agent Volker's release until Mr Kuznetsov is back on his feet. ANI don't know to suspect Russian involvement, so they shan't be on the watch for it. And Cob's pulling double duty, thanks to Vasnetsova's latest scheme."

"Ah yes, I heard about that. Very bad business. Do not trust her to be truly dead yet, Solovei. Magdalena Vasnetsova is known for her annoying habit of surviving."

"Hmm, and here I thought she was only really famous for child abduction, torture, and random acts of home wrecking." Spence seized on the opportune excuse that Zima's warning had just provided to them. "I'm actually coming out there myself too. I want to help Cob investigate things; try to determine whether we're finally rid of her." They adjusted their tone slightly before continuing. "I do trust Cob, of course, but I can't bear to just sit back and wait. Not after what almost happened in the park."

"I understand your impatience. Good hunting, Solovei, and do not worry about Senior Agent Volker. As it happens, Yuri had already made all the necessary arrangements for the delay before he was attacked."

Spence made their goodbyes and ended the call. Then they went in search of their au pair, who had just returned home to the apartment with the older three children. "Welcome home. Children, we work Miss Hedturner far too hard. I'm giving her the

rest of the day off from looking after us. Go put your arts and crafts things away in your rooms, and I'll order us all a nice takeaway for lunch. Remember not to make too much noise; the smalls are sleeping."

With the children thus occupied, Spence returned their attention to Heidi. "Thank you for taking them to this morning's session, Miss Hedturner. I trust that it went well?"

Heidi nodded happily. "Yes, very well! I think that all the special drawing and sculpting there is helping them with the processing of what happened here on Saturday, as well as with the old things."

"I'm glad to hear it." The non-gender decided to cut straight to the point. "How would you feel about accompanying us to Spain?"

Heidi looked surprised at first, and then a little bit wary. "Is a work thing, yes?"

"I'm afraid so, yes, but I'm not telling BIINT that. Officially speaking, we'd be on holiday."

"And what about the not so official parts?"

Spence lowered their voice. They didn't want the children to hear the next part of what they needed to tell Heidi. "Mr Dobos has gone missing

over there, and I think the Russians may very well have something to do with it. I'm going to go and dig around for information; try and find him. Since C.A.K.E clearly still knows where we live, I don't want to risk leaving you or the children here alone." They paused for a moment, and then soldiered on; already dreading their own plan, but knowing that it would all too probably be necessary. "I'm also going to approach Mr Dobos' parents and request their permission to bring Brett along with us. I can dress it up as taking him to visit his mother in the hospital."

The young au pair sighed sadly. "I am guessing that there is the other reason too, yes?"

"Yes. As much as I truly hope that it won't come to it, the boy may end up being our best means of securing legal responsibility for Senior Agent Volker. He's far too young to take it on himself, but someone acting in loco parentis for him would certainly qualify. Especially if that someone was also the official emergency contact for his other parent. And as Housekeeping, I tick the latter box for Mr Dobos."

Heidi nodded, albeit nervously. "Okay. It is sounding like the safe enough plan to me! I will

come along with all of you."

"Thank you, Miss Hedturner. Also, after what happened here on Saturday, Cob and I want to increase your wages in line with the abnormal degree of risk that working for us entails."

"It is not the big deal!" Heidi blushed. "But...but I am happy to take the money, thank you, Spence."

"You're beyond welcome, Miss Hedturner."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Non-binary indie author E.V. Greig, who also writes under the pseudonym of Eibhlín Valdys, is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, and the co-founder of the literary e-zine *A New Ulster*. They have been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001, and to date they have received funding as an individual artist via the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2018/19, 2020/21, and 2023/24, and also via the University of Atypical's DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, cooking, reading, dog walking, chicken keeping, and equestrianism.