

The Spy Who Borrowed My Identity

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Nine

E.V. GREIG

The Spy Who Borrowed My Identity
© E.V. Greig 2020. All Rights Reserved.
ISBN-13: 9781655938450

Published by Upatree Press January 2020

This is a work of fiction for adult readers. No resemblance is intended or should be inferred to any actual person, place or event, now or ever. The author accepts no responsibility for the actions or inactions of those reading this work. No permission is assigned for the reproduction, alteration or distribution of this work in any format without the prior written consent of the author and should not be assumed. A copy of this book has been provided to the British Library.

THE SPY WHO BORROWED MY IDENTITY

In the direct sequel to *Too Many Fish*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence is stuck working alongside their nemesis. In Miami, ANI Agent Greg Hull faces up to the aftermath of past decisions, and Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy finds unexpected cause to brush up on her diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Craig Campbell is seeking redemption. Admittedly, mending fences with a certain canary might be a good bit simpler if he could avoid adding to the existing sources of stress...

Contents

1	Still Enough Smoke	Pg 1
2	Ground She'd Gained	Pg 14
3	Putting Up	Pg 27
4	Only Because	Pg 40
5	Lucky Break	Pg 53
6	Much Rather Know	Pg 68
7	The Best Advances	Pg 81
8	Unwinnable Position	Pg 92
9	A Few Pegs	Pg 105
10	Even On Saturdays	Pg 118
11	Fair Enough Chance	Pg 130
12	Any Six Others	Pg 143
13	Nine Lives	Pg 157
14	Troll Juice	Pg 170
15	If You Did	Pg 183
	About the Author	Pg 197

Chapter One – Still Enough Smoke

“Ma'am, I don't think you're hearing me. They blew up a private room at New Royal Bournemouth Medical Centre!” Greg Hull glowered past his phone at his supposed colleague whilst he listened to Pembleton's reply. “Yes, that's correct, Room 6, but why should that be okay?”

For their part, Nightingale Spence wasn't feeling all that inclined to care what Hull thought about the matter. The thin non-gender had already briefed their superior on the pertinent details via phone by the time that Hull arrived to berate them. As anticipated, BIINT deemed a minor incident of public inconvenience as perfectly understandable given the circumstances. “You don't appear to understand how we operate, Mr Hull.”

He wasn't looking any happier as he hung up. "Yeah, well Pembleton might feel that this mess is justified, but *she's* not the one who has to make it all go away. I'm surprised at you, Nightingale. I thought you were supposed to help cover up after the field operatives, not enable their destructive tendencies!"

Spence scowled. "Don't presume to bait me, Mr Hull, especially not whilst there's still enough smoke left to hide my stabbing you from the CCTV."

"Quit posturing. It's adorable, sure, but we both know that you aren't about to risk doing anything that stupid." Hull smirked, and then nodded curtly along the corridor towards the doorway leading into what remained of Room 6. "So, is it true what our fearless leader thinks – is that really Magdalena Vasnetsova in there?"

"It was." Spence focused on what had to matter most right now as opposed to the urge to make good on their threat. "From what I gathered during the interrogation, she'd been living under her assumed identity for the past six years."

"One of the planet's most wanted child traffickers disguised as a florist; jeez, you couldn't make this stuff up! Did either of the Bingham kids

know the truth about their supposed mom?" Hull paused and lowered his voice. "Did Campbell? Everyone's being kind of cagey with me but I gather he'd hooked up with her fairly recently."

"I don't know yet, and no, in that order." The detestable woman had confirmed *that* much anyhow. Privately, Spence never wanted to see pain like that in Campbell's eyes again. "She admitted having targeted him in order to have access to the older twins and Seamus – something about people being willing to pay her more for weapons descended from proven stock. Apparently, she hadn't counted on Mr Campbell falling for her to such an intense degree."

"I'm guessing that he didn't react well to hearing that?"

The answer to that really depended on one's perspective, but Spence opted for what the official line would be. "He did what was required of him as a BIINT field operative."

"Is that when the room *suddenly* blew up?"

"Of course it wasn't!" The non-gender watched dispassionately as an automated porter steered a sealed hospital issue casket out of Room 6. "The *controlled* explosion came afterwards; to cover the

matter. I saw to it once Mr Campbell left with Mr Moxton. Forensics will indicate that death was accidental: the ceiling of the en-suite collapsed whilst she was showering, and a piece of masonry from that ricocheted out of the en-suite and damaged one of the emergency oxygen canisters."

"You seem to have thought of everything." Hull narrowed his eyes. "What about the boy – John, isn't it? Did he witness the interrogation?"

"No, fortunately enough he'd already been sedated when I arrived to break the news. According to the chart, his doctor wanted to try to mitigate the shock of the abduction; ensure he got a decent night's rest. I also took the precaution of handing Seamus off to a colleague waiting outside the room under the pretext of running some additional checks on him before I risked outing Vasnetsova."

Spence didn't bother mentioning that the colleague in question wasn't on BIINT's books, or that the only people fooled by the ruse had been the other patients and staff at New Royal Bournemouth. *Thank crap Craig had enough sense to follow my lead. Voice or not, Zima and I would*

hardly have been much of a match for him if he'd kicked off and turned on us. With hindsight, it might easily have panned out very differently. If Vasnetsova had only kept her nerve long enough to bluff...!

The American yawned loudly then, unwittingly interrupting the non-gender's internal risk assessment of last night's revelations. "Okay, I guess the rest of this debrief can wait until we're officially on the clock again. I'm sure you're as tired as I am by now. Let's get you home, huh?"

"There's no such thing as a clock in this job, Mr Hull." Spence sidestepped the man's attempt to offer his elbow to lean on, and headed towards the emergency stairwell. "I've already arranged to liaise with Mr Campbell at the Bingham residence. Mr Moxton is driving me there now. Christ alone knows what Vasnetsova may have really had going on in that supposed greenhouse, but she has to have been keeping her real product housed somewhere. It's up to us to find them before they starve."

Curled up under the duvet in the guest bed that had been set up in the nursery for the duration of

her stay here in Bournemouth, Bryce Lenard clutched her phone in trembling hands. She halfway hated herself for having waited so long to check it. The voicemail from Senior Agent Volker that she had just listened to was proof. *Greg didn't do those awful things to Oliver!*

The blonde woman supposed she should have known that there was some other explanation. Greg wasn't the kind of guy who held someone down and forced them. *No, he gets in your head instead, and makes you pick yourself apart at the seams until you want him. That's pretty much what he did to me, after all.*

Yes, it was, but she still shouldn't think things like that. It wasn't grateful. Being here in England, so far away from him, it was messing with her. That was all. That was why she was wide-awake at two fifteen am, instead of sleeping soundly along with the kids. Her circadian rhythms were off. She wasn't eating all that healthily either. Once she went home, everything would be fine again. Greg would see to that. If she went home at all, that was, although she shouldn't think things like *that* either. It wasn't a good idea to dwell on those kinds of thoughts. *Especially not if they're true.*

Craig Campbell stared hollowly around him at the overturned furniture in the living room of Number 16 Latimer Hill. It was half past two in the morning. Seven hours ago, he'd stood more or less precisely on this spot; grappling with two cultists and yelling at Carol to get the children out. Except she hadn't been Carol at all, and the scar on her right shoulder blade hadn't been the result of domestic violence. It had all been a lie, and worse he'd thrown over everything and everyone that ought to have mattered to him for it. *Dad shan't ever let me hear the end of this!*

"For once I'm running clean up alongside a field operative instead of simply after one." Spence's familiar dry tone came from behind him then. Turning, he saw that the non-gender was standing just inside the doorway to the hall. "Well, it's still not the strangest way that I've started a Monday morning."

"That's a far more polite way of putting things than I really deserve." Campbell avoided meeting the ice blue eyes. "So how do we do this anyhow? Is it just us?"

"Yes. Moxton's on his way back to New Royal

Bournemouth to keep an eye on John, Hull's claiming he still has jetlag, and National can't send anyone for a few more hours; they're still busy dealing with the murder cult. We start by finding Vasnetsova's records. Where's her computer, and how do we access the greenhouse?"

The only computers in the Bingham household were John's laptop and an out of date desktop model kept in a corner of the front sitting room. The latter machine was still booting up by the time that Spence finished their initial check of the laptop. "There doesn't seem to be much on this aside from school stuff and a few of those horrible shooting games."

Campbell tried and failed to keep from chuckling. "I'm sorry; it's just sort of funny hearing someone in our line of work calling those games horrible!"

"They are, and you could have ended that sentence after the second word." Spence slammed the laptop shut and set it aside. "Is this going to be even remotely manageable or should we just wait for National to get here?"

He blinked. "Well, I don't see why it oughtn't...wait...Spence, do you not want us to

work together or something?"

"I was referring to the other computer. Is it likely to have anything much in the way of security features?"

"Oh." Campbell could feel the backs of his ears reddening. "Right, that. I've never noticed anything beyond the usual. That's not to say that there isn't some sort of encryption on her files. I didn't use it much, sorry."

"Hmm, there's that word again." Spence scrambled up abruptly from the sofa. "Let's leave it for the boffins then, just in case. What about the greenhouse?"

"It's this way." Campbell limped off towards the kitchen. "It backs onto the house. There's a door leading out from the utility room – it won't be locked, it never is. I'm not even sure that there's the means to do that."

He was right. Vasnetsova had put little effort into securing the outbuilding, which suggested that there would be little to find in here, Spence reasoned, looking around them at the assorted buckets of pre-cut stems. The air inside the lean-to greenhouse was thick with the echoes of damp petals and bruised leaves. It reminded the non-

gender partly of warmer places than Bournemouth, and partly of funerals, but primarily the latter. *Vivid colours and unacknowledged rot – I never did like cut flowers.*

Their companion sighed, scuffing the edge of his right shoe against the sticky linoleum flooring. "I *am* sorry, you know, Spence."

"I know."

"It doesn't fix things though, does it?" The former spy didn't wait for them to reply to that. "Of course not, how could it? I broke what we had together, and there's no excusing me. So I'm not looking for your forgiveness, but I am sorry."

"So you keep saying." Spence frowned, sniffing quietly. "Is that wisteria? There, in that bucket behind the workstation."

"I think so, yes." Campbell leaned impulsively across the countertop, rumpling the top few sheets of wrapping paper stacked there as he moved. Carding his fingers through the delicate white blossoms, he pinched off a sprig and straightened up again. "Here – for you."

"Oh, that's cleverly done!" Spence snatched the flower from him almost absently as they darted forwards, pointing at the now open trapdoor in the

floor behind the workstation. "This has been very neatly constructed. You must have tripped the switch that opens it when you leaned on the bench."

Hopes deflated, Campbell followed them. "I'm going to assume that secret passages aren't common features within floristry. Do you suppose this is where she keeps her real work? Down there, in the dark?"

"There's only one way to find out." The non-gender pulled the strap of their head torch snug and flicked on the beam, tucking the wisteria into their field kit. "You wait here. The steps look slippery."

He nodded grimly, watching as the thin figure vanished into the gloom. "Be careful, Housekeeping."

There was nothing to do but wait for them. Campbell resisted the urge to follow uninvited. With his leg still compromised, he'd be little help. *Lord knows that I've done more than enough harm already.*

Ten minutes later, Spence came clambering back out of the trapdoor. Their face was taut. "I'm going to call National and tell them to get a move

on – Headquarters too, for that matter. This is it. There's a dozen sealed cryostasis chambers down there, and they're all occupied. We need back up on multiple levels."

Campbell nodded, inwardly berating his failure for the umpteenth time. He waited until Spence had finished updating their colleagues before voicing any of it. "Damn that bloody trafficker, I ought to have caught on to what she really was!"

The thin, twill wrapped figure looked askance at him then. "Really? Having not recognised an expert in covert operations whose identity was unknown outside of Russia when none of the rest of us did either – *that's* the bit of your recent decision making that you're choosing to regret? Not that I'm implying that trafficking isn't indeed terrible, but are you *quite* sure that Vasnetsova's career path is the aspect within this whole sordid mess that you want to focus on right *now*?"

He winced. "I suppose I deserved that."

"You deserve a bloody punch to the testicles!"

"I'm not arguing otherwise, canary...!"

Spence lowered their left foot back to the floor, focusing on the tacky grip of residual plant matter instead of Campbell's sharp yell of pain. "Next time

I shan't be so nice as to aim for your shin, you cheating bastard! You *don't* get to call me canary. Not after what you did."

"Message received. I'm sorry."

"That is literally the only thing that I expect to hear you say to me for the foreseeable future, Mr Campbell."

Chapter Two – Ground She'd Gained

Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy stared at her reflection in the mirror above the downstairs bathroom sink as she washed her hands. She wasn't altogether sure if she liked the woman who stared back. Undeniably, the past couple of weeks playing doxy to the older Mr Hull had given her a new appreciation for the phrase necessary evil. Regardless, there was something about the quietness of four in the morning that gnawed away at her conscience: devaluing the precious ground she'd gained so far in her impromptu guerrilla war for custody. *Guess I should just be glad that I still see the kind of line I'm crossing, even if it is mostly through my rear-view mirror.*

Who was she becoming anyhow, with all of this

damn game playing and triple talking? Nodding along and acting as if she still hadn't beaten GETEC's conditioning. Letting that asshole do whatever he wanted with her body and feigning that he got her off. She barely recognised herself at times! *It's like I'm borrowing my own identity and twisting it until it fits the mission parameters.*

Everybody else here in Number 12 Latimer Hill was either still asleep, or had the grace to pretend as much. Spence had dropped by briefly, a couple of hours back, making sure that some mysterious Russian guy had dropped off Campbell's kid for safekeeping. Kennedy had been snatching some shuteye at the time, but from what Dobos had said before he traded sentry duty with her and turned in, the non-gender didn't expect to be home again until breakfast at the earliest. The red-haired man hadn't seemed remotely fazed by this. *I guess it's just that kind of job. They're all probably used to managing it by now.*

ANI Agent Greg Hull wasn't sure how long he'd been laid out. He *did* know that waking up with your hands cuffed behind you in what appeared to be the back of an unmoving windowless van was

never likely to be a good thing; especially not when the last thing that you remembered was the flash of a stun weapon. Add to this the fact that his boss, Senior Agent Laine Volker, was slumped on the floor beside him, also cuffed, and currently still unconscious. *Yeah, today's not shaping up so good. I should see about getting loose so that I can do something about that. Ideally, before whoever's behind this turns out to be involved in illegal organ harvesting.*

That was just the right level of potentially horrific death to jog his survival instincts into gear. Taking advantage of the fact that nobody was guarding them, Hull rolled backwards onto his shoulder blades and worked his hands down and then up over his feet. Once the cuffs were in front of him instead of behind, picking the lock with his tiepin was easy. That told him that whoever was behind this was uninformed, incompetent, or unlucky. *Maybe even a mix of all three – for all I know, there's been another biohazard unleashed, and the van's surrounded by infected! Hell, we might even have crashed and be stuck at the bottom of a swamp, surrounded by hungry gators.*

There wasn't any use in worrying about it at the

moment. Their metal prison was hermetically sealed, and Hull couldn't find any means of opening the door from in here. He'd need Volker's talents for that, and she wasn't showing any indications of waking up unaided. Had she been stunned like him, or drugged? *Most importantly, given that there's no sign of any air conditioning, how much time do we have left to get out of here before we run out of oxygen?*

He checked to see if any of his personal belongings were on him. No phone, but his keys and wallet were still there, and bizarrely, his ANI issue sidearm. He still had his wristwatch too. According to that, over nine hours had passed. It was still Sunday, but heading towards midnight now. Chances were that nobody at work even knew they were missing yet. *I guess we can't risk waiting to be rescued then.*

Volker's cuffs were no more complicated than his had been. Tossing them aside, Hull sat back against the wall of the van, cradling the unconscious psionic on his lap. She was alive, but limp, and her long red hair had lost its sleekness in the oppressive heat of their situation. He wouldn't risk thinking of it as a *tomb*, no matter how well the

word seemed to fit right now. *Positive mental attitude, remember? It's the first key to surviving in a hostile environment.*

He sighed and patted Volker's face. "Ma'am, you need to wake up. Can you hear me? Hey. Hey, come on – snap out of it, please. Open your eyes. Wake up. Damn it, Laine, wake up!"

If this were a movie, her eyelids would flutter open slowly, and then she'd sit up, fully conscious and ready to escape. Hell, even books tended to go with that option! Probably so that the people making the movie of the book wouldn't need to change anything. After all, readers and moviegoers alike didn't want to see their characters just sitting around – *waiting to suffocate* – doing nothing. "You're making our hypothetical audience bored, ma'am. You'd better wake up before they start demanding their money back."

Still nothing, to the extent that he double-checked her pulse. It was stronger now. Whatever had happened to her, she appeared to be recovering a little, thank crap. She was just out cold for now. Hull traced the tips of his fingers over the contours of her face and neck, savouring the illicit thrill it gave him. Naturally, he wouldn't take unfair

advantage of Volker's helpless state: he wasn't *that* kind of guy by any measure, whatever the assholes at BIINT had seemed to think! Still, it couldn't hurt for him to just *appreciate* her a little. Maybe it would even help with her recovery; his heartbeat could be a stabilising influence. "I guess this is the part that usually gets skipped over by the writer to make things more exciting, huh?"

Oliver Dobos jolted awake from an unsettled sleep. His phone buzzed insistently on the bedside table, the icon on its screen identifying the caller as his son. Rubbing the worst of the sleep from his eyes with his free hand, the red-haired man answered his phone. "Brett, what's wrong? It's barely five in the morning yet, mate – why are you even awake?"

"I needed to...to talk to you." The boy's voice shook a little. "Dad...I...I had a really weird dream; it was more like a vision, and I think Mom's in trouble. I tried calling her first but she didn't pick up...!"

"Okay, son, calm down. It's all going to be fine." Despite his spoken assurances to Brett, Dobos' mind went immediately to last night's supposed pocket dial, and then to his own vaguely remembered nightmare. *Laine's never fucking pocket dialled me*

before and she always answers her phone! "I need you to think back and tell me *exactly* what you saw in your dream."

Volker finally opened her strange, pale eyes just as the digits on Hull's watch showed midnight. She blinked groggily. "Agent Hull...? What is going on? What happened?"

He smiled down at her. "Oh, just the longest forty minutes of my life, ma'am! To be honest, I was starting to wonder if you were in some kind of medically induced coma."

She frowned and sat up. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. I woke up less than an hour ago myself, and found us both in handcuffs. I took care of those, but it looks like we'll need your abilities to get us out of here. I still have my gun, but our phones are missing, so no way to send for backup. If it matters, according to my watch we're now two minutes into May 5th."

"Thank you for the recap." Volker got to her feet with her usual poise, apparently unfazed at having woken up on his lap. "Do you suppose it likely that this vehicle is being guarded?"

Hull shrugged and stood up. "It could be. I

haven't heard any noise from outside, but maybe it's soundproofed. I'm actually kind of worried in case it turns out that we're under water or surrounded by Level Four biohazards."

"I shall endeavour to allow for any and all potential dangers." She gestured curtly. "Stand next to me, Agent Hull. I would prefer to minimise the energy used in our escape."

He moved closer to her, wondering if that were her way of admitting to the ordeal having weakened her. "Did you get a look at who took you, ma'am? All I remember is getting ready to drive away from your place, and then what I *think* was the light from some kind of stun weapon. It's still kind of fuzzy."

"At my last recollection, I was attempting to telephone Oliver. It was just before two in the afternoon."

Hull wasn't sure whether to hope that the British operative knew something was wrong or not. "So, there *might* be help on the way?"

"It would be impractical to speculate either way at this time." Volker's eyes glowed silver. "Ready your weapon, Agent Hull. It seems only prudent for us to be prepared for hostility."

Her pyrotemporal bubble cocooned them both, before expanding outwards to rend apart the van. Hull drew his sidearm as advised, peering warily through the flickering energies in search of a target. "Well, wherever we are, it's certainly dark, ma'am."

Volker stepped clear of what had been the van, the protective bubble moving along with her. Only the vehicle's floor and wheels remained intact, everything else reduced to an oblong drift of fine, white ash, barely visible in the gloom. "We appear to be indoors – to judge by the acoustics and the flooring, I would hazard that it is a warehouse or hangar of some kind."

"Based on what's left of our transport and how long ago I woke up, we must still be within nine hours' drive of your house." Prompted by the warmth of the bubble's wall behind him, Hull edged forwards to stand beside her again.

"Indeed, Agent Hull. Moreover, with the number of quarantine measures that are still in place, it is unlikely our abductors were able to smuggle us out beyond the city limits."

A myriad of harsh blue ceiling lights flared on abruptly, drenching them in an uncomfortably bright light. Blinking away the afterglow, Hull

spotted some familiar signage. "Ma'am, this is the executive level of GETEC Miami's indoor parking lot. The entire complex should still be sealed – what the heck are we doing here?"

The hiss and click of automated speakers activated from all four walls. An all too familiar voice echoed: the sneering tone instantly recognisable as that of Carson Howard. "What indeed, Greg? Why would I have had the two of you brought here, huh? I'll let you think about that on your way up to my office."

The speakers cut out again. Hull scowled. "Damn it, I was *really* hoping that he was completely dead this time!"

Volker's features remained impassive. "Clearly, he has maintained his habit of not dying. I suspect that our visiting his office now would not end well for us."

"I'm guessing that you've got a better idea?"

She nodded. "Yes. I propose that...!"

The pyrotemporal bubble vanished without warning as Volker collapsed. Hull caught her before she could hit the floor. "I'm guessing this *isn't* part of your plan, ma'am?"

Volker winced; her eyes wrinkled shut in pain, but

steady on her feet again. "Something is interfering...no, perhaps...yes...it is someone. Another psionic is nearby, one with dampening abilities. They are attempting to suppress my powers."

"Can you point out where they are?"

She grimaced for another moment and then opened her still silver eyes. "She is on this level of the building, approximately two hundred and fifty metres to the left of our current location."

Hull nodded. "Okay, that means she's in the stairwell leading up to the ground floor reception area. Can you keep her distracted?"

Volker sank down to sit cross-legged on the floor of the parking lot. "Yes. Do whatever is required, Agent Hull."

He double checked his weapon and jogged to the heavy double doors that led to the stairwell. Peering through the small, circular glass panel in the right-hand door, the ANI operative spotted what had to be the enemy psionic. A slight figure dressed in black skinny jeans and a tatty pink camisole style top, with golden brown skin, and a dense mass of jet-black curls framing her angular face. The young woman's almond shaped eyes glowed with the by

now familiar silver of mental energy manipulation. *Shit – she's barely even out of her late teens, by the looks of her! Trust Howard the asshole to rope in a vulnerable third party to do his dirty work for him. Then again, maybe he's counting on us feeling too sorry for her to shoot her or something.*

It was probably the latter. Hull scowled and dove forwards into the stairwell; slamming the right-hand door into the young psionic. She let out a sharp cry of pain when she collided with the wall, and cowered away from him as he approached, her nerve having obviously broken along with her concentration. "Mwen dezole...!"

He knew enough Haitian Creole to translate her apology. "I'll forgive you provided you quit messing with my boss' powers – do we have a deal, or do I need to shoot you?"

She flinched. "No! I mean, yeah – deal."

"Good girl. Come with me, and don't try anything." Hull dragged her to her feet by the scruff of her neck, before hastening back to where he had left Volker waiting. "I found the other psionic...Senior Agent Volker?"

His superior was gone. The scuffed-up ashes from the van and used tranquiliser darts told him that she

hadn't simply decided to wander off. It seemed that not all of Howard's new minions were inept. *Damn it, I was only gone for a few minutes! The bastard must have had a team waiting for us to split up. I guess I'll have to play along with his demands for now.*

Chapter Three – Putting Up

Thumb in mouth, eleven-year-old Tessa Waverly watched the sun crawling up through the gap in the curtains, and wondered why the social workers had ever thought that leaving her here in this place was any safer than letting her go back to live with her dad. *At least Dad and Az don't have anything to do with murder cultists!*

Neither had Agent Hull, for that matter, in fact, Tessa still wasn't sure why Bryce had dragged her and the two babies off to England without him. Had the monsters gotten him? Was he dead or something? The red-haired man: Oliver, with his smelly jacket, and the bald man who'd flown the jet hadn't explained anything to her. Bryce had

been too busy crying and fussing over Fisher; she'd barely even had time for little Ellie-Rayne, and she at least wanted to be her mom! *She doesn't like me at all; it was just Agent Hull who wanted me. Is that why he isn't here? Did they split up over me? Why'd Bryce even bring me along with her in that case?*

Vinnie – currently recharging himself in the corner of her latest bedroom – knew *something* about why they were here instead of in Miami, but he wasn't sharing. Tessa figured that meant that it was bad. Her APSU didn't bother shielding her from much. Dad and Az wouldn't talk about it either. All they'd said was that the outbreak had been contained, and that Waverly Industries was behind that. *Ugh, it's not fair! Dad's tech pretty much saved everyone in Miami, and that still isn't good enough for those stupid social workers to let me go home!*

She didn't like living here. The house was crowded, the older twins were creepy, and Spence was just as determined to make her get hearing implants as Agent Hull had been. Yeah, right, as if Tessa wanted to have to hear the babies' noise! Putting up with the smells and the clutter was bad enough. Why did they even need all that stuff? Had

Tessa had things like that when she was a baby? She couldn't remember. *I bet the babies here won't remember either once they're my age. It's such a stupid waste of money!*

Terrans were just wasteful in general though. They didn't know what it was like to worry about having enough water, or food, or whether the next bout of sand would be the one that finally took out the emergency shutters, or worse, clogged up the fans on the air supply vents for your underground storm shelter. Even those who lived their whole lives inside the relative luxury of Mars' main city knew what *that* meant. *Terrans don't have a clue about anything important.*

By now, the little clock on the bedside table read five thirty am. Sunrise had just about finished. She would pray, and worry about being stuck with the Terrans later. Az always said that was the point of shacharit anyhow: rising and climbing to get ready for your day. The old street woman – Tessa couldn't remember who she'd actually been to her – had insisted on it too, every morning until the one when she hadn't woken up. Of the dozen or so waifs and strays who had shared the house, Tessa had been the one to find her; wrinkled and still,

cold in her chair by the window. Was she my family?

She didn't know, and probably never would. The adults who took the body away had been strangers and they hadn't come back to check on the children. The ones who did take them in...no, she didn't want to waste thoughts on them. They were the past; they didn't matter anymore. *I found a new place for myself anyhow, despite all of that. I'll be okay now, as well. I'll climb.*

The young woman's driving license identified her as eighteen-year-old Nadine Michelle Prado Wang; an Asian Afro Cuban American dampener from the Goose Feather Avenue sheltered housing complex for psionic families in Little Havana. Hull had retrieved both sets of handcuffs and linked them together to make a longer shackle for her wrists. With the chain wrapped around her belt on either side of the back loop of her jeans, the psionic had only limited use of her hands. Frankly, Hull felt safer that way. "No offense, but I'd rather not risk you trying to snatch my gun. I really don't want to have to shoot you."

She nodded, staring at the floor. "Okay."

"I don't want you using your psionics against me either. Is that likely to be an issue?"

"No. We have a deal." Her eyes had returned by now to what appeared to be their usual shade: a clear, bright sort of medium brown, much like his own. "I only tried to stop your boss because Mr Howard had ordered me to. He's scary, you know? Like, I think maybe he's crazy – the bad kind of crazy."

Hull nodded. "You've got good instincts, Miss Prado Wang. Howard's not the kind of guy you should risk crossing if you don't have to."

"Can I blame you if he catches us?"

He smiled at her. "That's fair. I'm Agent Hull, by the way, but you can call me Greg. My boss' name is Senior Agent Volker."

"Oh."

Little Havana had suffered heavy casualties during the recent tragedy. Goose Feather Avenue had been the area worst affected. Hull thought back on the reports that he'd seen about it; trying to line their gruesome contents up with the young woman standing beside him. What might she have witnessed? *How do you even start to make small talk with someone who's possibly the only survivor*

from their entire neighbourhood?

She spoke again before he could try. "Most people I know just call me Nadimiche."

"Thanks for telling me." He sounded it out a little in his head: Nay-dee-misch-eh. "That's a pretty cool nickname – portmanteau of Nadine and Michelle, right?"

"Yeah."

Looks like we're back to monosyllables. Reminding himself to be patient, Hull nodded. "Okay, well it's time we got moving again – this way, Nadimiche."

They were halfway up the first flight of stairs before she said anything else. "Most people I know are probably dead now, aren't they? Mr Howard said they were, anyway. I haven't been back home to see either way yet. I tried, but the CDC security wouldn't let me past the quarantine zone, and I can't call anyone because I lost my phone while I was running from...from the infected."

Hull grimaced. "I'm not going to lie to you. Goose Feather Avenue clearly wasn't designed with Level Four biohazards in mind. That being said, you made it out alive, so others may have managed too."

She sniffed. "I wasn't home when it started."

Crap, well so much for raising her hopes! "Where were you?"

"In school; I had a whole bunch of make-up classes that day, over at the InterAmerican Campus of New Miami Dade. See, I had the flu earlier this year, and it really knocked my grades back, so my tutor arranged for me to come in over spring break."

He raised his eyebrows: impressed. "Wait, you're already in college?"

"Yeah; just finishing up my freshman year – well, I was before all of this happened, anyhow."

"What are you studying?"

"Marine geology, and *please* don't make any jokes about psionic dampening and the ocean having so much in common. Those are only funny when it's my dad telling them."

Hull found himself hoping that at least some of the young woman's family had survived. "I take it that the rest of your family are psionics too, given your home address?"

She nodded. "My dad's a dampener like me. Mom has a couple of latent nodes. Well, she had. He was. They were both home that day."

Definitely time to change the subject, Greg.

"How did you end up with Howard?"

"He bailed me." Nadimiche scowled. "I got picked up for unintentional vagrancy like, a week ago, can you believe it? The city's still *charging* people for being homeless, even after everything that's happened! It's sick."

It really was, but for now Hull was more interested in how a known criminal like Carson Howard had managed to buy out anyone's bail. "That shouldn't have happened. He's wanted for multiple crimes himself – did he bail you in person?"

"No, he sent a couple of big, scary looking guys. They bailed me out on his behalf and brought me back here a couple of days ago. It might have been more than that. M pa konnen...um, sorry, I mean, I don't really know. I was kind of out of it."

Hull looked at her warily. "Why?"

"Well it wasn't drugs, since *that's* clearly the first stop your brain made!" She glared at him. "The assholes that processed me took one look at my home address and decided that I had to be kept sedated because of having powers. Some stupid blanket health and safety rule that PID handed out. Never mind that I can't even do anything to

anybody aside from blocking other psionics! Ugh, nothing but a bunch of stupid, scared pigs."

First, the situation at Miami Psi, and now this disaster – ANI really does need to take a serious look at PID's activities. Regardless, Hull knew that he didn't have the luxury of letting Nadimiche think that she could try calling the shots here. Right now, he needed her to conform, for both their sakes, not to mention Volker's. "Watch your tone before you earn yourself a few hundred hours of social rehabilitation therapy! Unfair or not, as an ANI agent, I'm expected to uphold the law."

"What; even when it's a stupid law?"

He nodded. "Actually especially then: funnily enough, those tend to be the laws that people are most likely to kick off about."

She dropped her gaze again, clearly not even halfway aware of how hot doing that looked. "Yeah, well your job sucks then, doesn't it?"

"It kind of does, yeah. Too bad that you trainee marine geologists don't have much input when it comes to drafting federal regulations. I get the impression that there'd be some significant changes made."

That earned him a half smile. "I'd make things

fair if I was in charge!"

He paused at the doorway leading to the floor where Howard had his office. *Still no sign of any guards – this has to be a trap. On that note, the enemy psionic being a cute college girl was probably the bait. Maybe she'll turn out to be a killer robot or something. I hate those.*

There weren't any guards once they got past the doors either. Hull could just about make out the faint whirring of a departing helicopter, but the corridor leading to the former GETEC CEO's office was empty. Nothing stirred in any of the dozen or so unlit glass-fronted rooms along the way. The secretary's desk outside of it was unoccupied. *Yeah, it's official: everything about this screams trap.*

Hull opened the office door anyhow, leaving Nadimiche behind him to rest on one of the leather and chrome chairs in the waiting area. An automated holographic recording crackled into life as soon as he set foot in the darkened office: Howard's sneering tone instantly recognisable. "Glad you could make it to the party, Greg! I'm afraid I had to leave early, but I left a game running just for you. It's kind of like truth or dare, only with a

lot more actual *dying* involved."

Somewhere in the dark, there was the shrill whine of a surgical saw activating. The recording continued. "Let's bring up the lights and get things started." The room's overhead lighting activated, presumably keyed to Howard's speech. "Greg, meet surgical droid!"

Volker lay sprawled face up across Howard's desk, mercifully unconscious as the tiny robot in question continued sawing through her left thigh. Blood spurted as Hull charged forwards, firing directly at the mechanical horror. It toppled backwards off the desk and caught fire as it hit the floor. "Hang in there, ma'am, I can fix this!"

A video feed popped up on the wall monitor. The hologram started talking again. "Hey, check out the live-feed, Greg. It's streaming from half a mile *above* your house. See how everything's getting steadily bigger on the screen? That's because the camera's attached to the front end of the missile – talk about a front row seat!"

Hull glanced at the image, and then refocused his attention on stemming the flow of blood from Volker's femoral artery. "If you can hear me, then just keep breathing, ma'am."

Howard's maniacal narration continued. "Hmm, three-minute countdown remaining until impact. Not much time for an evacuation, is it Greg? Come to think about it, it's probably the same amount of time that you have to patch that artery. Now, here's the thing. I've left you a full medical kit to work with; regenerative salve, monomolecular suturing rod, the lot. It's in the left drawer of my desk. Your *phone* is in the drawer on the right. Whichever drawer you open will send an automatic signal to the other, telling the self-destruct device that's built into it to go off. What's it going to be: save your undeniably hot boss, or warn your family to get out?"

Even presuming that his security codes would still work, the medical wing of GETEC Miami was at least six minutes from here. Securing his tie around Volker's upper thigh as a temporary measure, Hull opened the left side desk drawer. A soft pop immediately sounded from his right, followed by the smell of burning metal and plastic. Humming quietly to himself, he opened the medical kit and set to work: ignoring the obvious temptation of the most likely poisoned regenerative salve in favour of the suturing rod. *We really do need to find Howard*

before he causes any more harm!

Behind him, the hologram flickered out. The screen of the wall monitor blazed a deadly shade of white: the live-feed cutting out abruptly. Volker was already stabilising. Thankfully, Howard had seemed unaware that Bryce and the kids were nowhere near Miami right now. It was a shame about Cassandra, but Saunders might still make it out alive. SCOs were tough. *Either way, at least this should finally draw a line under all those awkward questions Mike Cully keeps asking about the damn basement.*

Chapter Four – Only Because

Perched at the breakfast bar with a steaming mug of coffee in Spence's kitchen, Kennedy eyed Dobos with no small measure of concern as the red-haired man ended his phone call. "From what I overheard just now on your end of the conversation, things are spiralling pretty damn fast back in Miami – something to do with Senior Agent Volker?"

He nodded grimly. "That was Agent Cully; he works for ANI Miami as part of Laine's team. She's not missing, but that's only because she's in the fucking hospital after having been abducted and fucking tortured! To top it off, she was already recovering from having spent the past fortnight possessed by another psionic."

The Martian woman winced. "Jesus! You and she have personal history together, right?"

"Yeah, we used to date, years back." Dobos helped himself to coffee and toast. "Our son rang me two and a half hours ago: he'd had a vision in his sleep that made him feel sure Laine was in some sort of trouble. Neither of us could get her on the phone, so I've been chasing ANI for an explanation ever since. I'll have to ring him back and let him know that she's all right."

Kennedy glanced towards the door into the downstairs hall. "I thought I heard Hull's name mentioned too – is the younger version of him mixed up in this somewhere?"

He gulped down some of his coffee. "Remember C.A.K.E? Well they're back, along with Carson bloody Howard, and according to Cully, they dropped a missile on Hull's house. He wasn't home, because they'd snatched him yesterday afternoon along with Laine. It seems as if Howard set up a fucking no win choice scenario for him: save Laine or save his family. Obviously, his family weren't in the house either, thank fuck. It was just that SCO, Saunders, and the girl who's been nannying for them."

"I've met Saunders, but I don't think I know the nanny." Kennedy frowned. "Wait – why would there even be a nanny there now? Bryce and the kids haven't been home in over two weeks."

Dobos shook his head. "Ah, it's a fucking messed up dynamic, really – well, it was. From what I could tell, she was either screwing Hull already or else hoping they'd fucking *start*. Shit, that reminds me! I need to let Darren and Tanya know too. Excuse me."

He left the room, already dialling. Kennedy set down her now empty mug and weighed up the newest turn of events. *So, Hull now has no house, and there's a psychopathic criminal out for revenge on him? Maybe this is something that I can use to my advantage.*

Inspecting the scale of the destruction in person was hitting Hull harder than he had anticipated. There wasn't much left of his home. Structurally speaking, two of the exterior walls had survived along with their window frames and, bizarrely, the front door. The panic room too survived, along with its contents, having fallen into the basement during the house's collapse. Howard's damned missile had

obliterated everything else, rendering most of it to ash. *I was wrong: not even Saunders could regenerate from that kind of damage.*

He needed to find a new place to live and quickly too, before the court appointed enforcers brought Bryce and the kids home. He needed to do a *lot* of stuff. Thankfully, acquiring a new vehicle wasn't on that list; his car having been found intact on Volker's driveway. Two of the other agents from the Miami office had dropped him off there to collect it half an hour ago, and then driven behind him as an escort all the way to Desdemona Falls. It seemed Hull was finally starting to win back the respect he'd lost whilst at New Tallahassee. *It's about damn time, too! Honestly, just how many times do you need to rescue your boss before people take notice?*

After the recent chaos, Hull had opted to keep all his household's important documents locked away in the panic room safe as opposed to in his home office. He'd also made a habit of storing the inactive Perfect10 and his remaining BDSM kit in the safe, having already parted with the larger pieces of equipment prior to Tessa's placement. Admittedly, the latter changes had really been in

case any visiting social workers stumbled upon it during an inspection and freaked out. Some of the people working for Children's Services could be petty about that kind of thing. *Although I like to suppose they'd have drawn a line at blowing up the house over it!*

Ignoring the gawking neighbours, especially the asshole in charge of the Home Owners' Association, he picked his way through the rubble and past the ANI forensics team to the sealed door of the panic room. As he keyed in the code, he wondered if the company that had built the thing might be interested in using this situation in future promotional materials. Maybe they'd even be prepared to pay for it. *Presumably, it isn't every day that one of their panic rooms gets tested to these extremes.*

It took him just shy of a quarter of an hour to pack what he needed from the safe. Everything else could stay here for now: the panic room door would flummox opportunistic thieves anyhow. The final item that he removed was his back up cell phone; already synchronized to his main handset. Tucking it into his jacket pocket, Hull slung the duffel bag of belongings over his right shoulder and headed back out into the ruined house. Locking

the panic room once more, he climbed up the rubble to where the ground floor had been. *No sign of the press – maybe they're respecting the gag order.*

More likely, his fellow ANI agents were enforcing it to help preserve his privacy. Well, that and it was hardly a good idea to risk giving Howard's latest act of insanity any airtime. What was it his mentor used to say about infamy conferring legitimacy? Truthfully, Hull couldn't quite remember how the old man had phrased it. Still, the less visible C.A.K.E was to the general population, the better for everyone. *Besides, I don't see Children's Services appreciating seeing footage of my home in this state.*

Halfway back to his car, a slim, brown-haired figure tottered into view on what surely qualified as being almost terminally high heels. For an instant, Hull thought it was Cassandra: that by some miracle the brat had snuck out to go clubbing yet again. Then the newcomer reached the nearest streetlight, and her features became fully visible in the soft yellow light. It was the eldest daughter from the household two doors down, the Smyth family. She reached her family amid the mob of watchers at the same moment that Hull slid into the driver's

seat of his car. He could hear her complaining about how ANI had stopped her cab back at the main gates of Desdemona Falls. "Seriously, Mom, they wouldn't let him in! I had to walk this whole way...!"

An unanticipated wave of emotion rose in his gut. He shut the door a little harder than he usually did, cutting off the conversation along with the rest of the background noise. Screw it: he'd use the damn auto drive function. *I can't risk driving unaided right now.*

Quite where he was going was another matter. A hotel would require him to interact directly with people, albeit just to book in. The self-check motels offered fully automated front desks, but most of them would be fully booked out thanks to those left homeless by the events of Howard's damn biohazard. Cassandra's parents' house was out: even if he had felt capable of going anywhere near it, the repair crew hadn't finished. *Shit – her parents probably don't know yet. I need to contact the field office and make sure that someone tells them what's happened.*

Part of him wondered whether the seemingly eternally absent Mr and Mrs Shelby even knew

what their daughter looked like these days. Had looked like: past tense; he'd seen the forensic drone alerting to the presence of organic matter. ANI's lab at New Tallahassee had already provided the relevant DNA for identification purposes. The remains would just need filtered from the rest of the ash first. *Get over it before it drowns you, Greg; Cassandra's dead. They both are.*

The screen of the auto drive unit lit up as Hull keyed in his destination: the airfield where he kept the stealth jet. He'd just have to hope that Howard wasn't inclined to blow that up too. *Worst-case scenario, it's better than my inadvertently leading a missile to a hotel full of people.*

Spence, who was just home and by this point much too tired to sleep, was alternating sips of tea with bites of toast when Dobos returned to the kitchen. The non-gender nodded their hello. "Captain Kennedy told me the Miami related news before she went to feed Ellie-Rayne. How did Miss Darnell take her friend's passing?"

He sighed. "Darren didn't think waking her would help. He'll tell her when she gets up."

"Have you arranged to visit Senior Agent

Volker?"

"Not yet; the bloody quarantine around Miami is making it awkward to book travel. Moxton said he'd try and sort something. I've promised Brett that he can go with me, so ideally it needs to be over the weekend." Dobos dug in his pocket. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Spence shrugged. "Not if you do it outside. In fact, I may even join you."

The red-haired man blinked in surprise, and then led the way out to the back patio, handing his host a synthetic cigarette from the battered packet. "I didn't know you smoked."

"I have a number of vices that people tend not to suspect me of." The non-gender leaned forwards to let Dobos give them a light. "This is one that I tend to only indulge in on especially terrible occasions."

Dobos nodded his understanding. "So how are things with you and the twat who can't appreciate what he has now?"

"Well, I'm not letting him move straight back in here, if that's what you're wondering." Spence sat down on one of the plastic patio chairs; staring past their companion at the ivy-covered trellis obscuring

the rest of the garden from sight. "I told him to take Seamus up to Kenmore until he can find somewhere of his own to live."

"Good for you. Let Thomas handle the mopping up, mate – that's what dads are for anyhow, isn't it?"

"Is it? I wouldn't know." The smoke was stinging Spence's palette more than they had anticipated. They grimaced, dangling their cigarette at arm's length. "Mine only cared about killing and making more killers; better killers. He was very into blood."

"Yeah, I saw." Dobos flicked a bit of ash onto the mossy flagstones at his feet. "I suppose this whole mess with she who wasn't really a fucking florist is bringing back a few bad memories?"

"It's certainly not helping." Spence focused their gaze on an especially tall nettle. "What is it with people locking children in secret cellars?"

"Fuck, is that where she was stashing them?"

"Yes, down in the dark, in cryostasis chambers, although how she ever managed to install the equipment without it being noticed is a mystery. She hid the entrance in that ridiculous greenhouse. Mr Campbell accidentally tripped the switch to open it; else wise we might still be looking. Thank

Christ for the blind luck of field operatives."

Dobos chuckled darkly. "Good to know that we don't have to turn *that* in whenever we fucking quit the job."

The non-gender dropped the charred stub of their abandoned cigarette and left it to burn itself out against the patio. "Stop that. You didn't quit, not yet anyhow, and I still don't believe that Pembleton shall really go so far as to fire you either. Not after having observed Mr Hull's reaction to how we managed Vasnetsova's interrogation."

Dobos smirked happily at that. "Ha! So he's not fitting in with BIINT's methods then?"

"He rang Headquarters to complain about them." Spence savoured that memory. "I think he was assuming that Pembleton would take his side, just as he assumed that Mr Campbell caused the explosion."

"There were explosions? Damn it, andro, you should have invited me!"

Spence got to their feet and stretched. Something clicked uncomfortably in the small of their back. "There was *one* explosion, and it was controlled. I made very sure of that before triggering it."

"Wow. You blew something up in a hospital." Dobos shook his head; finishing his own cigarette with a final slow draw. "Hull's working for BIINT, Housekeeping's blowing shit up, and I'm passing for a responsible fucking parent. Did Whitby accidentally invent something that mucks about with reality or something?"

"If he did, then I have a ruddy laundry list of additional alterations for him." The faint sound of their twin infants' morning chorus nagged at the edge of Spence's hearing. "As to your parenting skills, I wouldn't mind some help. Miss Hedturner shall be busy enough making breakfast, and goodness only knows how Ms Lenard shall react when she hears about the missile incident. I'd rather not have to rely too much on her today."

He nodded affably and followed the non-gender back indoors. "What's going to happen to Phil and his brother? Here, were they even really her kids or...?"

"We don't know yet, and we don't know yet. I'm assured that it's being looked into thoroughly. Phil's to stay here for the meantime; on Pembleton's orders, just in case it transpires that he's some sort of deadly juvenile sleeper agent, and I expect that

E.V. GREIG

John shall end up in my charge too, at least until it's finally deemed as safe to hand them both off to Children's Services."

Chapter Five – Lucky Break

Doctor Russell Kenlow deeply regretted his career with GETEC. Why had he ever thought that corporate medicine was a safe choice? You didn't see greengrocers, or janitors, or heck, even wedding planners, embroiled in these kinds of situations! No, those lucky types went through their respective lives unnoticed by megalomaniacal crime bosses. Although, with his crummy luck, Kenlow supposed that he would just have conflicted with C.A.K.E in some other way: perhaps by failing to pay up for a protection racket, or similar. *Yeah, most probably that, or worse – I could have fallen victim to that biohazard they unleashed back home! To think, all those people hurt or killed for a distraction!*

He refused to count his recent abduction during the Miami crisis as having been any kind of a lucky break, regardless of what that maniac Carson Howard liked to claim to the contrary. Given how his fellow abductees all seemed to be buying into that particular brand of madness, Kenlow had decided to keep his opinions private. Best-case scenario, others here in C.A.K.E's facility deep beneath the surface of Ceres were secretly doing the same thing as him. *Just keeping our collective heads down and hoping desperately for help from an outside party.*

Having previously worked alongside them for GETEC Miami, Kenlow knew better than to presume that was the case for everyone involved. Hector Smethwick maybe, and Adelaide Williams – neither of them had ever given him the impression of being actively evil or insane. They were just laboratory technicians. *Yeah, but then again, there was a time when I could have sworn that Howard was just our flamboyant CEO. People hide who they really are all the time.*

Bryce sank down onto the nearest armchair, alone in the front den now that her taciturn host

turned employer had left the room. She stared at the set of passports and other essential documents in her hands. They looked entirely genuine, right down to the official stamps! How had Spence ever managed to do this? *We only got word about the enforcers on Friday – surely, that's not enough time to arrange all of this?*

Her stomach lurched a little bit then: what if it really *hadn't* been enough time? Wasn't it far more likely that the entire situation back from Desdemona Falls up until right here in Bournemouth had been a set up of some kind? First, there had been Thomas just *happening* to move in across the street. Maurice turning up with his talk of her supposedly expunged record, and that secret bank account with her name on it. Oliver making that awful accusation about Greg, before conveniently being able to offer her and the kids passage to England. That last part had even happened right at the same time as when Brooke had possessed Senior Agent Volker again, too, presuming that the latter and Greg's texts on the matter were accurate. Quite the convenient series of events, all round, really. Now, here was Spence just randomly producing perfect fake identities! *It's all a little too*

good to believe; especially when I know that Spence still blames Greg for his having had to force them into protective custody while they were pregnant.

Petty revenge mightn't be the only motivation either. Bryce shivered as she recalled Greg's words back in New Tallahassee. He'd said that the bank account had most likely been part of a sting; told her that BLINT wanted Fisher because of his psionic potential. What if that was true and attempting to use these fake documents landed her back in jail? No, worse than jail: it could see her ending up for sale again as an indentured worker or companion! *Who knows who might buy my bail this time? I got lucky when Greg picked me. The next one could just as easily be another Marcus!*

She couldn't help being leery of taking that chance. Greg wasn't perfect, but he didn't hit, and she was pretty sure that he loved her. He was a good father too, despite what everyone here might prefer to think. Sure, he might come across as controlling at times, but that was just how he was: an assertive, take-charge type of a man. Overall, their situation had been good, for the most part. Certainly, it was better than whatever was going on

between Spence and their ex. *At least Greg and I don't cheat on one another! Our main problems were with Cassandra acting out, and David giving me the creeps sometimes, not that any of that would be an issue any longer. Oh, I never should have thought so badly of them! I really hope they didn't suffer!*

Hull's phone shrilled as he boarded the jet. "Hey, Greg, it's me: Kassie! Listen, listen, okay, so I'm sorry that I snuck out again, but this time it was totally...totally necessitated...um, no, wait, I mean necessary!"

Mind reeling, Hull stumbled to the cockpit. "Kassandra, honey, shut up and tell me where you are, right now."

She giggled. "Um, well which one? Shut up or tell you, I mean? Only I kind of can't do both...?"

He could hear glass clinking, and an off-key guitar solo. Thank crap she was twenty-one now. No, on reflection, scratch that: just thank crap she was alive! "Kassandra, give me your location. Don't hang up, and whatever you do, don't go back to Desdemona Falls. There's been an incident."

"Oh! Okay, Greg – I'll just...stay here...?"

"Yes, stay put. Now where are you?"

There was a hiccup, followed by another giggle. "I'm at the beach! There's a cook out. Mattie and Leo invited me, because it was my birthday last week and they missed it. I...um...you haven't met them yet, but we all used to be friends at college. You know; with Tanya, before she turned into such a raging bitch!"

Hull set the phone in the jet's hands' free cradle, and set to work tracing the call. "Okay, so you're with your friends, and you're at a beach. Can you tell me which beach?"

"Um...you know...South of Fifth...?"

That matched what the trace was telling him. "Yeah, I know it. Okay, Kassandra, this is important. I need you to wait for me there. I'll come and collect you in the jet."

Thankfully, his unimpressed glare proved enough to keep the rest of the guests at the cook out from attempting to follow her charred form onto the jet. "Are your sand covered friends back there all legally old enough to drink, Kassandra?"

She nodded; draping herself against him as the ramp cycled shut. A layer of skin peeled off from her chin as she looked up from cuddling; the pus

oozing from her burnt flesh had caught on the fibres of his suit. "Yeah...no...most of them might be...probably. I'm not really sure it even matters though – it's not like they're just sitting back letting Howard murder me or anything!"

He winced a little at her understandably disappointed tone. For some reason, his phone was still ringing. In fact, it hadn't stopped even when he'd answered it to her. That was weird. "Kassandra, I really think I should take this call. Excuse me for a minute."

The young woman backed away from him, crumbling to ashes even as she moved. She scowled. "Ugh, like, whatever Greg! There's just always going to be something more important than me, I guess."

The automatic lights in the stealth jet's cramped sleeping area flickered into life as Hull peered blearily at the screen of his back-up phone; reality swimming back into focus around him. With hindsight, he really should have set it to mute. Oh well, at least whoever was calling him at six-thirty in the damn morning had interrupted the third rendition of the guilt fuelled nightmare he'd been having on loop. "Hello?"

An unfamiliar male voice responded. "Hey, this is Officer Brian Rourkela calling on behalf of Miami Police Department. I'm looking for Agent Greg Hull?"

"That's me. How can I help you, officer?"

"Sorry to bother you outside of office hours, Agent Hull. One of our patrols picked up a young psionic named Prado Wang for suspected second count unintentional vagrancy. Prior to sedation as per the recommended PID protocols, she claimed that you'd be willing to bail her out; something about her being a key witness in an ongoing ANI counter-terrorism investigation."

Hull blinked. Nadimiche had named him as her reference – smart girl. Not to mention stupid colleague or colleagues at ANI who must have turned her out on the street after processing her statement. *Damn it people, she ought to be in witness protection!* "Yeah, of course I'll bail her. Where is she?"

"She's in the processing unit at New Central." Rourkela sounded disappointed. "Will you arrange collection, or should we transport her?"

"I'm making payment via your online system right now. Tell New Central to have a helipad clear,

and any paperwork ready for my signature. I'll be there to collect her within the next ninety minutes. She's considered as a potentially vital witness to our intended prosecution."

That was true enough for government work, anyhow. It also ought to dissuade anyone from taking advantage, or worse, rushing through an impromptu bail auction. Second count unintentional vagrancy was a six-month sentence, with bail set at a mere \$5000. At that price, an educated and attractive young woman with no next of kin would sell within minutes at most. *Six months in the wrong hands is as good as the death penalty.*

Money successfully transferred, Hull freshened up and changed clothes whilst the jet went through its automated pre-flight checks. He could claim back the cost of her bail from ANI. *Then again, if I don't claim it back, I can keep her myself for six months. She seemed sensible. Maybe she can watch the kids for Bryce and me. We're going to need time alone as a couple to fix things between us when she gets back.*

Doubtless, Volker would approve of his logic in doing that, especially given that Fisher was a

dampener just like Nadimiche. Mike Cully, on the other hand, would probably try to accuse him of deliberately framing the girl! That man had issues. *Ah, screw it: let him judge. I don't see him volunteering to help Bryce and me out with our childcare situation.*

Monday was rattling through. The clock on the wall of the study ticked quietly past four in the afternoon as Spence slipped their phone back into the pocket of their jeans; realising belatedly that they hadn't told Leister very much of anything that had happened between last night and now. It didn't seem important now anyway. Not after what their mentor had just had to say. *Some things take priority.*

Mindful of their promise to Leister, Spence went in search of Kathryn and Barnabas; calling them away from the film that Heidi had put on in the front sitting room for all four of the older children currently in the house. The door into the hall took the soundtrack with it as Spence pulled it shut again. "I'm afraid that I have some bad news from Cob and Aunt Ashley. They've been to see some doctors. There isn't going to be a baby after all."

Kathryn frowned. "Why not?"

Her brother echoed her indignant curiosity immediately. "Weren't they approved for the licence? They *ought* to have been approved, shouldn't they, Kathryn?"

The girl nodded. "Aunty Ashley would be a brilliant mummy, and she and Cob both have jobs, and a nice place to live!"

Spence sighed. "It's not to do with the FIL. Sometimes things go wrong with babies whilst they're still inside their mothers, and they stop developing. There isn't anything to be done about it, and it's no one's fault. It's just horribly bad luck."

"Oh. I suppose that's that then." Kathryn looked thoughtful. "Are you going to offer them one of your babies to bring up instead, Aunty Val, so as the new nursery things that they bought aren't wasted? You could give them Jacamar, and we could keep Honeyguide, since I want her to be my little sister as well as my cousin, but I don't want another brother – especially not if Phil and John shall have to stay with us now that their mummy's gone!"

Not to be outdone, Barnabas chimed in. "Cob and Aunty Ashley might like to have Phil and John too, mightn't they, Aunty Val? Or else Craig might

keep them with him, I suppose. You ought to ring Cob and ask, just in case."

Spence twitched irritably. "Nobody is giving anybody else away to anyone! Adoption doesn't work that way."

Their niece scowled. "Well it *should*! You don't even *like* being a mummy, but you've got heaps of children now! You could spare Cob and Aunt Ashley one of them, and then everyone would be happy!" With that parting shot, the girl turned on her heel and stormed off upstairs. The sound of her bedroom door slamming shut echoed down through the void between the banisters.

Barnabas cut across Spence's resultant stunned moment of silence with a new concern. "Where are Craig and Sam going to live now anyhow, Aunt Val?"

"I told Craig this morning that he should go to Thomas' house; up in Kenmore." Mind still reeling from Kathryn's outburst, Spence supposed that one could only hope that the two Campbell men wouldn't end up razing Scotland to the ground over a difference in opinion on how to parent. "I'm sure they're there by now."

Rebalancing Sam against his right hip, Campbell set the last of their luggage down on the deck of the *Angry Canary*. He tousled the toddler's hair. "Your grandmother raised me on this yacht, you know. She didn't want to have to live with your grandfather either."

A woman's voice rang out from the driver's side window of a battered green and white camper van, parked on the nearby jetty. "I say, you're not um, well you're not planning on living aboard, are you?"

The speaker looked to be in her thirties, with an unruly mop of light brown curls held back from her pale face with a vivid green and yellow checked silk scarf. A dense mass of freckles patterned her nose and cheekbones. His instincts still shaken by the uncomfortably recent mess with Vasnetsova, Campbell scraped up a polite smile and cuddled his son slightly closer as he replied. "We might be, yes, but why do you ask?"

She blushed. "Sorry – it's just that I halfway thought you might like to swap contact details in case of an emergency. You know; since it looks as if we're mooring neighbours already. My daughter Primrose and I shall be living aboard the *Helter*

Skelter year-round now that I've finally sold our old house."

Campbell glanced at the red sailed vessel moored to the port side of the *Angry Canary*. "Oh, I see. I don't think we've met before; I haven't seen you around here."

"Well no, but I've done heaps of sailing: albeit back before Primrose was born! She's a bit young to help with anything like that yet anyhow, so it hardly makes any difference." The woman paused to catch her breath. "I'm rambling now, aren't I?"

The former spy found his smile getting easier to wear. "Just a bit, yes. I'm Craig Campbell, and this is my son, Sam."

"Zoe Rusdyle; I'm an artist, but you shan't have heard of me, no one has, not yet. Primrose is asleep in the back seat just now. I *think* by the looks of him that Sam and she are about the same age. Perhaps they might be friends?"

Campbell tensed at the coincidence. "My late mother was an artist who lived aboard."

"Was she really?" Zoe preened slightly. "Gosh, our meeting's pure serendipity, isn't it?"

Perhaps it was. Perhaps it wasn't, and Zoe would turn out to be nothing more than another she wolf

in sheep's clothing; out to steal Sam away to sell as a child soldier. On balance though, the latter was likely too specific a risk to dwell upon it. Campbell decided that he'd wait and see. *It would be nice for Sam to have a playmate his own age. Besides, surely I'm not doomed to run afoul of duplicitous human traffickers at every turn?*

Chapter Six – Much Rather Know

Phil huddled deeper into the armchair and tried to focus his attention on Tuesday morning's episode of *Captain Mars*. The cartoon series was now well into its second season. This morning's adventure featured space pirates raiding one of Earth's asteroid mining colonies. Under normal circumstances, the boy reflected, starting an extra day off school by watching his favourite programme with the sound on would have been brilliant. Now though, what with everything that had happened over the past day and a half, cartoons seemed as pointless as John had always claimed. *I never thought before that I'd miss him teasing me if he weren't here.*

His supposed older brother still hadn't been

released from the hospital. Tests had determined that the two boys weren't blood siblings. According to Agent Caulfield, the doctors needed to run a few more such tests, and then John would go directly to his new home, which wasn't here, because of reasons that were mostly too top secret for children to know about. Ms Spence had said that the main one was that Phil deserved a break, given how John insisted on throwing his weight around. *It's nice that someone finally noticed him picking on me. I'd still like to have been allowed to visit him so that we could say our goodbyes in person.*

Not that Ms was even Spence's correct title, Phil supposed guiltily. What should he use instead though? They'd said not to worry about it, which was awfully nice of them, but really, he'd much rather know the right word. His teachers always insisted that was important. *Mum would have said that Ms was fine regardless, but then she wasn't really our mum, was she? Not properly, not even though she did all the proper mum stuff for us, well, mostly, anyhow. When did she steal us? Was she going to make us into soldiers too?*

Phil wondered if anything that he'd grown up

believing was true; if perhaps Vasnet-whoever-her-name-was had only slipped into their *real* mum's identity recently – last year, say, when they'd abruptly upped sticks and moved to Bournemouth from Sheffield; cutting ties with everyone that they'd known in the process. He hoped it would be something like that, rather than all lies. Except that then he probably would have known that John wasn't his biological brother. *Agent Caulfield promised NIT would investigate either way as soon as there's time.*

So far, they were still too busy with the cult. NIT had arrested the surviving adults from nearly one hundred families over their participation. Phil knew most of his schoolmates were currently no better off than he or John, having ended up removed to emergency foster care placements. The scandal was making headlines to the point that, currently, there were more journalists than there were inhabitants in the Latimer Hill area. He'd noticed several yesterday being warned off from photographing Number 16, which was still swarming with white clad forensic investigators. Thankfully, none of them had approached Number 12, or at least not yet. *I expect they're bound to eventually,*

unless there's a special, top secret spy protocol being used.

The door into the front sitting room swung open behind him, and Captain Kennedy entered, cradling her baby against her left shoulder. "Hey, kid. How're you holding up?"

Phil tried and failed not to yawn as he replied. "Not too bad thanks; just a bit tired still, what with having been up so late on Sunday night."

"Okay. I just figured that I should check; given how rough a Bank Holiday weekend you had." His hero shook her head at the cartoon as she sat down on the adjacent armchair. "Any chance we can watch something that ain't wholly inaccurate?"

He frowned. "What do you mean? I thought this was based on real events?"

"Where do I even start?" She sighed and pointed at the screen. "That middle-aged white guy there; he's *based* on my Gunnery Sergeant, right? Well, it's more like they took his name and tossed the rest of him. The real Archibald Woods is nothing like that asshole."

"Um, are you allowed to say words like that in front of children?"

"You're almost eleven, and Ellie here ain't old enough to do more than babble, it's fine." Kennedy paused to burp her daughter. "Besides which, everyone who knows anyone from Deimos Base could tell you we're a foul-mouthed bunch of ne'er-do-wells at the best of times."

"That's um, that's not mentioned in the cartoon, or in any of the comics."

"Of course it ain't! They want people to buy them, not boycott them, kid." The Martian woman chuckled as another character appeared in the cartoon. "Aw, heck – they think *that's* what Davies should look like? Davies ain't anywhere near that short! She doesn't bat her eyelashes and simper either. Who wrote this?"

Phil blinked. "Don't you have anything to do with this then? I thought the creative team had worked closely with everyone on Deimos Base! That's what all the interviews say, anyhow."

"Yeah, well I hate to break it to you, but people don't always tell the truth, kid. This whole *Captain Mars* franchise thing is completely out of my hands."

"Oh. That's a bit unfair. Do you at least get paid for them using your likeness?"

Kennedy nodded. "Yeah, I get a stipend. Come to think about it, that's probably why none of the rest of these characters look or act right: saves paying out to the people they're based on."

"That's even more unfair!" Phil scowled at the television. "They ought to complain."

"If they did, then chances are that nobody would care. After all, aside from Woods, we're all Martians born and raised. Worst case scenario, some idiot at the higher levels would try and fix things by transferring anyone who complained to another base and replacing them with actors or some such."

The boy folded his arms. "Well...well, Woods ought to complain at the very least, since he's not Martian, not that something like that should even matter. Or else I could do it – I could email the official fan club and tell them to stop cheating people out of money that's owed to them."

Kennedy smiled at him. Phil thought privately that her expression looked rather strained. "You're a good kid, Phil. I'm sorry for snapping at you like that back when we first met. Tell you what: do you still have that special edition comic book you mentioned?"

A spike of excitement rolled through him as he nodded. "It's upstairs in my suitcase along with the rest of the things that Agent Caulfield brought for me."

She picked up the remote control and switched off the television. "Well, you go on up and fetch it now and I'll sign it for you."

"Oh, wow, thanks! I'll be right back!"

"There's no rush; I'll be here." Kennedy watched the slight figure sprint from the room. Her smile faded as the door swung close behind him, or more accurately, behind it. *Don't go getting sentimental, Marine. It's not on you that his so-called older brother wasn't a real kid. Spence will break that to him once he's ready to cope with knowing about it.*

She'd heard about surveillance drones passing as real animals and people before, of course. It figured that someone like Vasnetsova would have used the same technology to better scout out potential targets. Nobody thought twice about a woman with children hanging around in parks and playgrounds, after all. *That conniving bitch is just lucky she's already dead.*

The truth had leaked when the drone known as John Bingham had suffered a critical malfunction at

six pm the day before when the hospital decided to run an MRI to check for any old injuries. Moxton, who'd delivered the news, had arrived at Spence's house with minor burns and a shrapnel injury to his right forearm. Kennedy suspected that the handler had been halfway in shock over what he'd witnessed back at New Royal Bournemouth. *Guy watched what he thought was a kid exploding in front of him. Hell yeah, he had to be shocked by that. I was shocked just hearing about it second hand!*

Once they'd had reason to look for such things, NIT had found a recharging station disguised as part of the bed in John's bedroom at Number 16. Apparently, this tied in with something that Campbell had mentioned in his statement, not that the spy had joined up the dots at the time. *He sure must be kicking himself about that now, among other things.*

The cold yellow glare of the overhead lighting in his laboratory flickered as Kenlow peered down at the desiccated greenish-grey carcass on the gurney in front of him. The misshapen face, scythe shaped pair of additional forelimbs and chitinous

exoskeleton indicated that it wasn't human, but then insects didn't get this big. They didn't wear clothes either, be they of rainbow hues, exotic looking fashions or otherwise. It must be an augmetic of some kind, primary generation, hence the bizarre physiognomy. "Where exactly did you say these remains were found again, Dr Smethwick?"

The male laboratory technician checked the report on his tablet. "Uh, one of the drill teams working on enlarging the base dug into a pre-existing subceresean cavern."

Kenlow sighed. "Since when are we using made up words?"

"It was Adelaide's idea to start off with, but I agree with her." Smethwick nodded to where Dr Williams was cataloguing samples at the opposite side of the room. "We're on Ceres. Calling it subterranean is geographically inaccurate. Isn't that right, Adelaide?"

The pink haired young woman gave them a brief thumbs up, without ever looking away from her screen. "Yuppers, Hector!"

By now seriously reconsidering whether Williams and Smethwick belonged on the not crazy list,

Kenlow pulled on a fresh pair of latex gloves. "Well, whatever terminology we're using for Ceres, I still need to autopsy these remains."

Smethwick passed him a scalpel. "How do you think they got here?"

Kenlow shrugged. "My best guess at this stage is that there must have been an exploratory mission to this part of the solar system using insect based augmetics as test subjects. Judging by the desiccation level, it was probably back around the era of the original Earth to Mars transplantation projects, when everyone was still trying to determine ways of minimising the impact of deep space travel on the human body. That would explain the use of insect DNA. Presumably, any records of the mission were lost due to the events of WWII. We'll find their dog tags or an ID chip of some kind soon enough."

Williams hummed. "It could also be an alien!"

That settled it: Kenlow was *definitely* switching her out from the not crazy list. Choosing to ignore the ridiculous suggestion, he began the arduous process of cutting away the thin material of the corpse's garment. "Hmm. This could have been the base layer for an EV suit of some kind, but the way

that it's wrapped around the torso makes me think more of a blanket than anything else. Perhaps they died whilst in their sleeping pod, or in a cryonic storage chamber."

Smethwick leaned in to take a closer look as Kenlow peeled back another segment of the strange material. "Those fibres look organic. I always thought that materials used in space travel during that era were synthetic. Hey, do you suppose the vessel was intended as some kind of ecologically friendly prototype, or something?"

Williams cleared her throat. "Um, so you guys know that the drill team hasn't actually *found* wreckage, right? As far as they can tell, there was no vessel; just the body there."

Both men turned to stare at her. Kenlow began a wary sidling towards the exit as his hindbrain added up what the lack of a vessel might indicate. "We *really* needed to know about that sooner than this, Dr Williams!"

Smethwick gave a soft snort of derision. "Oh, calm down, already! So what if there's no wreckage? Maybe whoever this was survived the crash long enough to wander away to where they were found. You said it yourself: they may have

been wearing an EV suit. What if they went crazy from oxygen deprivation and stripped off? Regardless, it's not as if their remains are going to get up and...!"

There was suddenly a great deal of blood. Smethwick's headless corpse toppled to the floor beside the now empty gurney. Something rattled amidst the tall metal cabinets on Williams' side of the room. Not risking staring, Kenlow fled out into the corridor, punching the button to activate an emergency lockdown of the laboratory as he went. The blast door slammed shut between him and the sound of Williams' terrified screaming. *Those supposed remains got up so damn fast that we didn't even see them move!*

He never should have doubted Williams' alien theory. Look at what GETEC had disturbed on Mars, after all. There had been life in the Voltaire cavern complex on Deimos too, albeit microscopic. Neither of those species had proven friendly. Why should whatever C.A.K.E had disturbed be any different? No, if anything, it would probably be worse. Things that were smart enough to invent clothing were bound to have other technology as well, including weapons. Not that something with talons as long as

E.V. GREIG

a grown man's arm didn't have perfectly good means to defend itself already. *Just ask Williams about how sharp those means are, or Smethwick, for that matter! Where did his head even land anyhow?*

Chapter Seven – The Best Advances

Central London, Hull had decided, would be a fun place to live, and more than affordable on his current salary. He just needed to find enough free time to well, find a place. In the interim, he'd secured a two-bedroom suite at one of the better hotels. That way, there was plenty of space for Bryce and the kids, once he persuaded her to go with him instead of the new guy. *Doing that would be a heck of a lot easier if my new colleagues would just stay out of my way.*

On the bright side, they still hadn't managed to put Susan off dating him. If anything, the Martian woman was even keener on him now than she had been back in Miami. Case in point: her current efforts towards soothing his work-related stress

headache while he finished signing off on the frankly terrifying amount of paperwork connected to the incident at New Royal Bournemouth. Was it a Martian thing for a woman to be so single-mindedly attentive to her partner's needs? If so, then the normalised prejudice between their two planets seriously needed rethinking. *Maybe it's just her. Maybe being down on her knees with her mouth full like this on Tuesday evenings is what gets her off.*

Speaking of which, it was getting difficult for him to concentrate on keeping his signature inside the correct boxes. Tossing the pen aside, Hull tugged at his guest's hair. "Get up. We're both wearing way too many clothes right now."

"I couldn't agree more, Greg." Kennedy rose to her feet, careful to continue reacting as expected to the man's idea of seductive conversation as he led the way into the suite's main bedroom. Had it worked, or had he stopped before he got to the extra set of papers that she'd slipped into the pile on his desk? *Nah, if he'd spotted them for what they are, he'd have said something by now. Either he hasn't gotten that far yet, or he fell for the fake BIINT issued Top Secret label I stuck over the real address and signed them without reading them.*

Shrugging out of her top, she hoped once again that the latter was the case. Honey trapping wasn't something that came naturally to her. If there had been any other way to get his signature onto the custody transfer papers for Ellie, then she would have gone for it. Unfortunately, forgery came even less naturally. *At least he and the other version of him both share the same signature.*

She closed her eyes as he kissed her. Just one more damn night of pretending and that would be it. Well, hopefully, anyhow – if it turned out that he hadn't signed the papers yet, then she'd have to schedule a repeat performance. How actual spies did this kind of crap repeatedly for a living boggled the mind! *No wonder those poor bastards end up all kinds of damaged.*

Howard sneered as the security footage from the now sealed laboratory finished playing. "Let me see if I have this straight, Russell. The remains you were supposed to autopsy turned out not to be dead, and instead of utilizing this amazing find for every cent that C.A.K.E can get from it, you want me to authorize its destruction?"

Trapped between two burly guards at the

opposite side of his ex-CEO's office, Kenlow wrung his hands miserably. "Sir, it's already killed two of our people...!"

"Minions can be replaced!" Howard gestured dismissively. "That creature, on the other hand, is likely one of a kind. Believe me when I tell you that it therefore ranks way above you."

"Yes sir." The doctor visibly deflated. "What...what shall I instruct the rest of the technicians to do first?"

"Whatever makes for the best advances, of course – seriously, Russell, what the fuck do I pay you for? Get out of here and start finding ways for us to use that giant bug!"

Caulfield brought a veritable armful of frilly cream carnations and delicate white hyacinths with him to Number 12 on Wednesday morning. Spence frowned as they led the NIT operative through to the kitchen. "What are those for?"

"They represent a plea for forgiveness in the floral code. I wanted to apologise for trying to foist a nickname on you without asking." He doffed his hat. "I'm sorry. It was rude of me, and it shan't happen again."

"I suppose we'll see about that." The non-gender flicked the kettle on, before opening a cupboard in search of a vase. "Miss Hedturner has just left for her morning classes, but I'd best make a cup for Ms Lenard. She's upstairs in the nursery with the assorted smalls – they're all safely down for a nap, but I don't think that she trusts the baby monitor to do its job. Mr Dobos dragged Vinnie and the four older children out to the library to give her less to fuss over. Phil's school agreed to let him study remotely for the rest of this week. I gather they're missing several teachers anyhow."

Their guest nodded. "The headmistress and four other members of staff were among the lead cultists attending the attempted sacrifice."

"To think, when we first moved in, I worried that people locally would think that *this* was the weird household."

Caulfield shrugged. "None of you are cultists. Around here, that probably counted as terribly weird indeed."

"You make a fair point – Byron."

He smiled and handed over the bouquet. "Glad to see that we're back on first name terms, Nightingale."

Spence risked a careful sniff at the flowers whilst arranging them in the vase. The carnation stems needed trimmed first. "At least I didn't see any of these in Vasnetsova's greenhouse."

"Gracious, she really was a terrible excuse for a florist, wasn't she?" Caulfield set to work making tea for them both. "I'll speak to Phil once he gets back. I need to take a DNA swab from him to help with searching for his birth family. We still haven't found any clues as to who they might be, I'm afraid. All that's certain is that there never really was a Carol Bingham."

"His entire life has been a lie then? He'll not like that news. He's been holding out hope that she only stepped in recently."

"Yes, I know. Still, it explains why he never suspected that John wasn't really his older brother. Our technicians examined what's left of the drone. They think that Vasnetsova must have had a series of them over the years; swapping each one out as and when needed in order to keep growing up alongside Phil, or so the poor boy would have thought."

"I honestly don't know how we're going to break that part of it to him."

"Very carefully, and in the presence of appropriately qualified professionals would be my suggestion." The NIT operative glanced towards the door of the kitchen. "On another subject, I'm afraid that Lottie and I have run out of additional paperwork to throw in the way of that enforcement team you mentioned. They'll be here tomorrow afternoon."

"We knew it was inevitable." Spence sipped at their tea. "I appreciate you delaying them. It's given Ms Lenard a few days grace to memorise what I told her to say when they interrogate her. Hopefully, she'll keep her nerve."

"I've been thinking about that aspect of the plan. If you don't mind having my opinion, you may want to consider not presenting the replacement identity documents up front. If Bryce cracks and confesses who she really is *after* the enforcers have seen those, they'll likely try and charge you on the spot."

"That wouldn't end well for someone."

Caulfield wagged his right index finger mock sternly. "Remember now, we agreed – no disintegrations! Not given the amount of paperwork that's involved for the unauthorised usage of ray

guns in a private dwelling."

The soft hiss of a landing hover jet came from the back garden then. Spence set down their tea. "That must be Mr Waverly and Mr Zahn. They said they'd visit today. Something to do with helping Tessa prepare for Pentecost next week."

"It's a good thing that you have enough space out there for them to land."

There was a yelp from outside. Spence smiled thinly. "I probably ought to have warned them about the nettles."

Sure enough, Zahn was nursing several stings to his pawed feet when he and Waverly reached the French windows leading in from the patio. The tawny furred augmetric glowered at Spence. "You ever consider maybe hiring a gardener for that jungle?"

Caulfield interceded blithely. "It's a nature garden. Nettles and such are a haven for all sorts of British wildlife."

Waverly held up a lidded plastic container. "We brought cheese kreplach. They should keep fine in the refrigerator. Also, Az will need to be able to video chat with Tessa overnight next Thursday so that they can study the Torah together."

"We'll be reciting the Yizkor together that Friday morning too." Zahn set his own parcel down on the breakfast bar. "I brought her the candles she'll need for that and for the rest of Shovuos too. Nice choice of flowers."

"Byron brought them." Spence eyed the still wrapped candles. "I trust those are electronic as opposed to real flame?"

The augmetric's tail twitched irritably. "Of course they're real flame candles; it's an important religious tradition to us! Don't worry, Tessa isn't going to burn your house down. Vinnie will help her monitor them anyhow."

Spence's expression tightened. "You do both know that outside of Antarctica and the Middle-East, publicly engaging in acts of organised religion is at best still classed as an unlawful activity here on Earth, don't you? I wouldn't want either of you to mention your faith in front of the wrong people."

Zahn snorted; a high sort of whiffling noise due to the structure of his nasal cavity. His whiskers twitched. "What are they going to do – deport my entire family to Mars for the *second* time? Anyway, yeah, I know the risks. Tessa does too. Thanks for caring enough to check."

Footsteps on the patio interrupted the discussion. Kennedy walked in; her head high despite her rumpled clothing. She pulled a thick sheaf of papers from inside her jacket with a triumphant flourish. "Okay! I have official transfer of custody papers with that asshole's signature in triplicate. Where's my baby? I'm taking her back with me to Deimos Base!"

Spence waited for Waverly and Zahn to finish congratulating the Martian woman before speaking. "I shan't ask how you negotiated that. Just don't forget to file them from somewhere inside Miami. It doesn't do to risk loose ends."

The Marine grimaced. "Ugh, good point! I guess I'll have to risk stopping off on my way to the spaceport there."

Waverly shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Susie! Az and I can give you a ride to wherever you need. We just need to organise a few things for Tessa first."

"Oh, okay. Thanks, Robbie." Kennedy tucked the custody papers away again. "I'll go make a start on packing Ellie's stuff."

Spence shook their head. "What you'll do is shower and put some arnica on those bruises that

you're not hiding as well as you think you are. The ones on your wrists that we're *not* going to press you about, isn't that right, gentlemen?"

The others muttered their assent. Kennedy tugged her sleeves down further. "You really don't do tact the same way that other folks do, do you, Spence?"

"Stop your grumbling. I knew what to look for, and could hazard how you'd react to people fussing about it." The non-gender picked up a fresh cup of tea. "You can take this up to Ms Lenard on your way to the bathroom. She's in the nursery. Try not to rub her nose too hard in your having won back custody."

"I make no promises." The Martian woman took the tea and exited the kitchen.

Caulfield took another sip of his tea. "Gosh, it's all go here today! I wonder whether anyone else is having such an exciting time of things."

Chapter Eight – Unwinnable Position

Despite Monday's brush with death, Volker was fully conscious and upright in bed when her agents trooped into her hospital room on Friday morning. "My doctors have advised that I remain here over this weekend. I see no reason as to why that should preclude my involvement with our investigation into the recent biological attack on Miami. Agent Anderson, you may begin."

The youngest of the three visiting ANI agents activated the holographic projector on her work tablet and began her report. "As you advised us to, ma'am, we pulled all available surveillance footage from the Miami area in the twenty-four hours leading up to the release of the initial infected. That data, coupled with statements taken

from Agent Hull's witness, has confirmed all those responsible as having been members of CA.K.E, acting on instructions received from Carson Howard."

Hull stepped forward and handed Volker a printed copy of Nadimiche's testimony. "As you can see here, Miss Prado Wang also gave us a lead on why he may have done it, ma'am. She overheard him discussing C.A.K.E having successfully acquired something from GETEC Miami – apparently, and I quote: 'The biohazard made for an even better distraction than was anticipated', end quote."

Volker nodded. "That is in keeping with his psychological profile and confirmed actions thus far. Do we know what C.A.K.E acquired?"

"We're pretty sure that it's not so much what as it is who, ma'am." Cully paused whilst Anderson enlarged the relevant images. "These people are among those still unaccounted for in the wake of the tragedy. Two things connect them. They're all scientists, and they all used to work for GETEC Miami."

As usual, their boss showed no outward emotion to the announcement. "It would appear that Mr

Howard is recruiting for his organization. That is unlikely to be a good thing for anyone. What of his current location?"

Anderson shook her head. "That's where we're coming up blank, ma'am. We managed to track his escape route from Monday's incident, but only as far as the International Stellar Observation Base on Luna. From what we can gather, he ditched the shuttle that brought him there from Earth and changed vessel. I'm afraid that it's anyone's guess as to what direction he went in."

Hull cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I suspect that Agent Cully will probably try and continue to argue that it's a bad idea, but with your permission, I'd like to take a team up to ISOB and see if we can't rattle some information loose. Someone there may know more than they're admitting to. Also, the docking zone keeps records on all of the vessels coming and going – at the very least, we can cross-reference those against those registered with any known C.A.K.E operatives."

Cully scowled. "It is a bad idea, ma'am. There's no way that Agent Hull can be viewed as objective given the attack on his home! If we manage to arrest Howard then any evidence that Agent Hull

might find could be viewed as prejudicial when we go to court."

Volker gazed impassively at her agents. "Our superiors do not require that Mr Howard be taken alive. I suggest that we set aside any concerns regarding a trial, and instead discuss our options in terms of armed tactical response."

Kathryn tagged at Spence's heels all the way upstairs that evening. "Barnabas says you're going to shave your head again, like it used to look, Aunt Val."

Her aunt glanced at her. "Yes?"

The girl scuffed her sandaled feet against the landing carpet. "Will you cut mine too? I want to try having it short."

"What's brought this on? I thought you liked your hair the way it is."

"I don't know." Kathryn shrugged. "I just want to be different. Maybe so that Craig will like us enough to come back. He liked you when you had short hair, Aunt Val."

Spence sighed. "Kathryn, Craig didn't leave because of anyone's hairstyle!"

"I know, but it still might make him decide to

come back, mightn't it?"

"Kathryn, I've told you already: Craig *isn't* coming back to live with us. I'd appreciate it if you'd accept that."

That statement proved unpopular. Kathryn's pale face flushed bright with fury, and her fists clenched. "And *I'd* appreciate it if you'd stop sending him away! I miss him!"

Watching the girl stomp away, the thin non-gender decided to make finding a new child psychologist their main priority. Clearly, their niece wasn't quite as rehabilitated as Leister had hoped, despite the six months of therapy that she and Barnabas had attended during Spence's enforced absence the previous year. It would only be prudent to speak with whomever they'd seen about a referral to someone more local. *I don't want to mention it to the old swan now though; not given Jenkins' and his loss. Perhaps Benedict might know whom it was that the twins saw back in London. I suppose that I might as well err towards caution and lock any sharp objects away in the interim too.*

The hospital's automated lunch delivery trolleys

were active by the time that Volker finally dismissed her three agents. Anderson cooed appreciatively at one of the machines as it glided past them in the corridor. "You have to love these little guys!"

Cully blinked. "Why? They're just machines."

Hull tuned out the subsequent chatter between his companions in favour of checking his phone for any word from the enforcement team assigned to retrieving Bryce and the kids. *Still nothing – well, so much for their ensuring a prompt resolution to the matter! Do I need to go to Bournemouth in person?*

He hoped it wouldn't come to that. There were far too many hostile elements lurking across the pond for comfort. His older self might be fine in that kind of environment, but frankly, that version of him was all kinds of weird. It was almost as if his original body missed working to GETEC's protocols or something. Had the other man even *tried* to break his conditioning yet? It sure didn't seem like he had. *I need to tell Susan that I don't want him helping her look after Rayne during contact. I might even arrange to send our new nanny along to chaperone.*

He smiled inwardly as he thought about Nadimiche. The young psionic was proving to be

money well invested. It helped a lot to have someone to talk to in the evenings and mornings, as opposed to the ghost-ridden silence that solitude had become. In addition, she earned him use of one of ANI's official safe houses. The latter was only a temporary solution, and painfully basic, but still better than living out of his jet had been. He'd also found that realtors didn't like it when you had no current address to put down on your application. *You'd think there would be different protocols for emergency situations.*

Maybe he really should see about encouraging Nadimiche into politics. The current system could do with an injection of idealism. Given what he knew of her so far, she'd be amenable to that. At the very least, more than she had been to his suggestion of her helping with the kids when Bryce came home. Apparently, not all women liked kids. *Yeah, right – she's just nervous about messing up with them given how young she is! After all, Kassandra was nearly twenty when she first looked after Fisher.*

Hull shook his head. He really needed to stop letting his mind wander back to her. It wasn't healthy to dwell on stuff like that. Besides which, he

ought to be focusing on supporting Nadimiche – from the looks of things, her parents were indeed among those killed during the outbreak. Since the shredded remains found in their home hadn't been officially identified yet, the young woman was still clinging to the hope of finding them alive. *I should quit moping and chase up the laboratory reports on the bodies for her. It's not right keeping her in limbo like this.*

The doors of the nearest elevator opened as the ANI agents reached the landing area. A hover gurney with a sleek grey isolation pod on top glided out, the elderly porter steering it pale and sweating, both of his wrists cuffed to the handle. "Everybody get out! Please, you must evacuate the hospital before this thing opens! It's on some kind of a timer and I can't shut it down!"

All three operatives drew their weapons and ran immediately to the gurney. Cully dropped to a crouch to examine the wires that he'd spotted. "Damn it! The gurney's been wired to blow if those cuffs are tampered with in any way. I see at least enough plastic explosives here to gut this entire floor."

Anderson was already on her phone,

demanding back up from ANI. "We need a bomb disposal team over at New Mercy Hospital, ASAP!"

The porter shook his head miserably, still walking. "They said there were sensors and that if I went anywhere near the isolation area or tried to leave the building then the pod will just open even faster! I figure that I should get it up to the roof – there ain't anybody up there for what's inside it to hurt, at least."

Hull patted the despairing man on the back. "Okay, we'll help you get it there. That elevator back there only goes as far as this floor, huh?"

"Yeah; it's a safety feature in case of there being an outbreak." The old man nodded towards his security lanyard. "Can you grab that? It'll open the fire exit over there. We can get to the roof faster that way, and we won't have to go near any more of the wards."

Tossing the lanyard to Cully, Hull took a better look at the pod: a mundane construct, but with the all too familiar C.A.K.E logo stencilled on either side. Inside it, something that had once been human clawed at the transparent segment of the lid. "This is one of the surviving infected from the outbreak, isn't it?"

Their new companion nodded. "That's what those two assholes in ski masks said anyhow. They jumped me down near the morgue."

Hull grimaced. "Okay. Anderson, you stay back and help with the evacuation. Make sure you get Senior Agent Volker out. Mike and I can manoeuvre this thing up the stairs, right, Cully?"

"Yeah, sure we can, but what about him?" Cully gestured at the porter. "No offence, sir, but you look about ready to drop."

"They stuck me with something; a needle. It might just have been a sedative, but with how they were laughing, I doubt it." The porter was looking worse by the minute. "I can make it to the roof either way...probably."

Hull shook his head at Cully as they each grabbed a handle of the hover gurney. "Let's worry about the details once we're up there."

All three men made the rest of the journey in silence, aside from the porter's increasingly ragged breathing. Four flights of stairs later, they exited onto the gravel-covered roof. Cully propped the fire door open behind them. "These pods are too sturdy for us to be able to shoot the biohazard before it's released, and once that happens there's no

guarantee that it won't simply overpower us before we can take it down. How much is left on that timer?"

The digital clock on the side of the pod was initialising a three-minute countdown. Hull grabbed the porter's left hand without warning and dislocated the thumb. Sliding that limb free of its cuff, he repeated the process with the now screaming porter's right hand. "We need to get him back inside and lock the door between us and whatever comes out of this damn pod!"

"You know we can't risk doing that." Cully blocked the door with his body. "Look at his physical symptoms. He's clearly infected. What if he turns before we can isolate him?"

Hull glanced back towards the rapidly decreasing numbers on the clock. "Well, we've now got less than ninety-nine seconds left to debate that, Mike, so what do you suggest?"

The porter whimpered. "Please, I don't want to be out here when that pod opens...!"

His colleague lowered his sidearm as the man's corpse crumpled. "Don't ever put me in that kind of unwinnable position again, Agent Hull! You know the protocols as well as I do. It wasn't fair to get his

hopes up like that."

It probably hadn't been, Hull supposed, as he followed Cully back into the hospital, slamming the door shut behind them. Damn. The other agent was annoying enough already, without adding vindication to the mix. Hull grimaced as he realised that it was probably too late to avoid that happening now. *Yet another reason for me to want the Luna assignment, not that admitting it would make me popular around the office!*

With nothing else to do thanks to how efficiently Cully and Anderson were managing things here between them, Hull pulled out his phone to check through his emails. Finally, there was an update there from the court appointed enforcers! It was about damn time too. Scrolling down past the initial block of form written legal jargon, he found the information that he'd been waiting for. *Subject Name: Bryce Lenard; Status: Indentured (Private License); Additional Dependent Subjects: Two; Reacquisition Date: Thursday May 9, 2097; Current Location: In Transit (Track [HERE](#) – Find Quarantine Information [HERE](#)); Available For Collection/Delivery: Monday May 13, 2097 (Schedule Collection/Delivery [HERE](#)).*

It was official. His family were coming home. Now all he needed to do was to arrange a better place for them to live in the long-term than within the cramped confines of an ANI safe house. Sinking onto the nearest available chair, Hull placed a call to the real estate agent he'd registered with. "Hi, Melinda, it's Greg Hull here. I've decided that I'll take the second property you showed me yesterday; the six-bedroom new build up in Shorecrest. I'll drop by your office this afternoon to sign. Yes, my insurance company has already agreed to meet all costs. Oh, yes, very pleased with that – I'd definitely recommend them, yes. Uh-huh. Okay, so you've pencilled me in for four fifteen; that's great. Okay, I'll see you then, thank you."

Fleetingly, he wondered why the number of Additional Dependent Subjects stated in the email read as being two and not three. Was it a typo, or were Children's Services delaying transferring Tessa's foster placement back from Spence? *Damn it, there's probably a lot of red tape between the social workers in the UK and here. Oh well, I'll chase them up and have her new bedroom ready anyhow for whenever she finally does come home.*

Chapter Nine – A Few Pegs

Having a synthetic brain had its benefits, Kellie Rosa supposed. Being able to slip out for a round of Friday night cocktails like this was one. Before, back when she was purely human, there had barely been enough hours in the day for her to fit in both work and sleep, never mind go drinking! Not having to worry about a hangover the morning after certainly helped change that. *It's all very liberating, really. Not that it makes up for losing my status as a proper human being. There's not enough...oh, bother, what does Spence always say again? Ah yes – there's not enough gin in the world to make up for that!*

She took another sip of her martini. *Spence still calls me human, and so do Nathaniel, and Doris;*

really, almost everyone at work does. Almost was such a mean little word. Rather like the odious fellow in Employee Welfare & Resources: Bill, or Brian, whatever his name was. The prat who'd failed her on her emotional quotients. Yes, that one: he and his stupid, identification lanyard suggestions could just...just go and get in the sea! "I don't need a ruddy tag!"

The grey bearded man sitting at the barstool to her left chuckled. "I'm sure you don't."

Rosa blushed. "Sorry – that was supposed to stay as an internal monoleek. Monologue! I meant internal monologue, nothing to do with vegetables. Honestly, I do speak English."

He smiled, albeit that he was still looking down at his drink, and she couldn't really see his face too well in this lighting anyhow. "What a coincidence, so do I. Small world."

Irish, she thought, to judge by his accent. The dead man and the arson attack in Bournemouth occurred to her immediately. Her stomach pitched. Spence had gone on a vendetta too. There were far too many reasons why encounters with mysterious Irish sounding people might not be good right now. She needed not to antagonise him. "I

have to go now, bye."

If he even heard her mumbled words, he gave no sign of it as she slid off her barstool and hurried away. Another benefit of maintaining a clear head despite alcohol: one could be sure of getting home safe. Well, reasonably sure, at least; it wasn't as if she'd been drinking when she was attacked before. *I really shouldn't dwell on that when I'm about to head out into the darkened streets of London on my own.*

The latter was a ludicrous fear, really. It was the middle of May, so the streets were hardly dark yet anyhow. She could do this: it was fine. Worst case scenario, there were plenty of people around. Admittedly, some of them were already thoroughly inebriated, but still. At most, it was a three-minute walk to the entrance of the nearest Tube station, and nobody would try anything with this many potential witnesses. *I hope.*

No one did, but Rosa remained on high alert all the way to her platform. She was still tense when the train arrived; only breathing easily again once the doors of her carriage closed. Settling back in her seat, the young technician closed her eyes and focused on the familiar rattle and sway of the Tube

in motion. *At least there are plenty of seats available at three in the morning on Saturdays.*

"It reminds me a little of the Orient Express."

Rosa opened her eyes immediately at the sound of the soft brogue to her left. The man from the bar was two empty seats down the row, sitting with his back to the flickering dark of the window just as she was. He still wasn't looking in her direction. This time, he held a tablet, the sound muted. A pile of kittens tumbled silently across the screen in pursuit of a knitted sock. Rosa gulped. "Sorry, but are you following me?"

Finally, he looked at her. "Yes."

"I...well, why? What do you want?"

The skin around his blue eyes creased as he smiled. It looked as if he'd spent a great deal of his life smiling. "I'm supposed to tell you a story now about how you've accidentally lifted my keys from off the top of the bar instead of your own. It's a grand yarn. Her on the other end of my earpiece must have spent days on it. She's – hold on a minute." He handed Rosa his tablet and paused to remove the tiny device from his right ear, tucking it away into a pocket. "She's very thorough; hates it when I do these sorts of things instead of keeping to

the plan."

Rosa stared at him whilst he spoke. Warily passing him back his tablet, she dug about in her handbag. He was right: she had the wrong keys. "You swapped them on purpose back at the nightclub, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid so, sorry. It was argued that I'd need an excuse to have followed you out. If it helps any, I also knocked out a fellow I'd noticed watching you from where he clearly knew that you couldn't spot him. Left the creepy sod passed out in the toilets for the staff to find later." He slid the tablet into another pocket and held out his right hand. "Clacher, Brendan Clacher – that's how you folk at BIINT like to introduce yourselves, isn't it; surnames first and all of that? I've always thought that it's a funny sort of a tradition."

His story of having protected her was likely part of his deception too. She edged backwards onto the next seat, not taking his hand. "Where are my keys and what's going on, Mr Clacher?"

He held up her keys in his left hand; turning his right to face palm up. "Here. Shall we swap back? On three – I'll toss them over to you, and you do likewise."

The exchange went smoothly. Rosa clenched her hands around her keys. "You still haven't told me what's going on here. Who do you work for?"

Clacher settled more comfortably in his seat, lacing his hands behind the nape of his neck. "We're just talking. As for whom I work for, let's just say that they prefer to remain mysterious. If I tell you, they'll take away my expenses account. God forbid, they might even transfer me to a desk. The quality of office furniture in Kildare isn't what it used to be."

Rosa breathed a little easier. "I wouldn't have thought that Clacher was an Irish name."

"It's not. Somebody from my father's side moved over from Scotland a few generations back or so. People do that sometimes; relocate and start over fresh for themselves. You should know I'm sure, what with your job over in Miami and such."

She shoved her keys back into her handbag and glared at him. "For your information, GETEC forced me to take that position!"

"That tallies in well with what I've heard about GETEC. Still, I'm not here to talk about any of that." Clacher looked straight at her. The smile was gone from his face. "I need you to help me get in

contact with Housekeeping. Those hornets that they smoked out are showing signs of nesting again."

The doorbell of Number 12 rang shortly after eleven on Saturday morning. Only one of the two people standing on the doorstep was familiar to Spence. "Dr Rosa – I wasn't expecting a visit. Who's this with you?"

Rosa handed Spence a tablet. "His name is Brendan Clacher, and he's with Irish Intelligence. You need to see what's on this, Spence."

Clacher inclined his head politely as he followed Rosa across the threshold. "Very practical haircut – more people should consider using one like that."

A hover taxi pulled into the driveway behind what Spence surmised to be the Irish operative's vehicle. Spence frowned as Tanya and Jolley clambered out. "Miss Darnell, what brings you and Mr Jolley to my door? Don't you have better things to do with your Saturday mornings?"

Tanya, apparently much too upset to care about Spence's preference for personal space, flung her arms around the thin non-gender. "Kassie's dead, Miami's totalled, there are like two Halls creeping around, and one of them is

apparently going to be my new supervisor, and I can't deal anymore, Spence, I just can't...!"

She dissolved into sobs. Jolley met Spence's gaze across her shoulder. "Sorry about this, Housekeeping. She needs propping up. We'd have gone to Cob instead but, well, you know."

Spence managed to nod. "I do. Come in and sit down, all of you. Miss Hedturner has taken the smalls out to the local park, so we'll have peace to talk."

Jolley closed the front door behind all of them. "Is Ollie still crashing here then?"

"Unofficially, yes, but don't spread that about. I wouldn't want anyone thinking that I've changed my stance on long term house guests." Spence wriggled free of Tanya and coaxed her into the back sitting room. "He's en route to visit his son at school; they're going to video chat with Senior Agent Volker this afternoon. That latest C.A.K.E attack made visiting in person too risky."

Tanya sniffled as she curled up next to Jolley on the smaller of the two sofas. "Sorry, Spence; I didn't mean to get snot on you."

"It's fine, Miss Darnell. Now, let's get back to the matter at hand. Dr Rosa, you say that I need to see

what's on this tablet?"

The technician nodded. "It's to do with what's been happening with the Irish."

Clacher huffed softly as he sat down next to Rosa. "Well, to be precise, with some of the Irish. We're not all like that."

Tanya hiccupped. "Yeah, I sure hope not, considering how you're sitting here with us!"

The tension in the room peaked at her outburst. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Then Clacher laughed. "Aye, it would make things terribly awkward, wouldn't it? Anyway, not to be a bother, Housekeeping, but is there any hope of a wee cup of tea whilst you review that? If you point me towards the kettle I'll be happy to do the rest."

Jolley bounced to his feet before the other man could begin to rise from the sofa. "I'll get it, Spence! Here, do you want me to check on the older ones as well while I'm up?"

"No thank you, Mr Jolley. Kathryn isn't in great form today, and Barnabas and Phil are engrossed with a model kit." That ought to be sufficient warning for any sudden noise that the older children might make. Spence knew better than to risk startling a field operative, and right now, there

were two such individuals present. "Why don't you tell me what's troubling you, Miss Darnell? I'm sure I can read this and listen at the same time."

The young handler sighed. "I just can't believe that Kassie's gone, Spence! I mean, I know we weren't exactly friends anymore, but I always thought that we'd work things out eventually. I hate that she died still mad at me. I miss her."

Spence frowned at the information on the screen. "It shall likely always hurt to dwell on, Miss Darnell. That's the cost of caring. I doubt whether it's much solace to you now, but with time you should find that the loss scabs over enough for you to put it behind you."

Rosa twitched slightly. "I *think* what Spence means to say is that you need to give yourself time to grieve, Tanya."

Tanya wiped at her eyes with the corner of her sleeve, and managed a weak smile. "No, I'm pretty sure that they meant their version! Thanks, both of you. Now – what are we going to do about having to work alongside Hull the elder? Do we have a plan in place to get him fired yet? Only I'm seriously not sure how long I can stand being around him. He's even creepier than the version that I already

know!"

Her host tapped at the screen of the tablet to bring up the next page of the report. "Pembleton appears to have long term plans for him, so I suspect we're stuck with the bastard. Well, short of our remaining field operatives all engaging in some form of mass protest over him, but then we'd have that to clean up."

The unsettling matter that was Dobos' current situation hung unspoken between the three BIINT operatives who were still in the room. Apparently sensing the tension, Clacher leaned forwards abruptly, clapping his hands together into a loose knot. "So! Office politics aside, this Hull fellow; is he going to be a specific problem where our joint interests are concerned, or is he just generally a prick? Not trying to be nosy, but I'd prefer to know ahead if I'm likely to need to bury him in a peat bog."

Spence replied before Tanya or Rosa could fall any harder for the man's implied would-be chivalry. "Frankly, your Iron Age style interment related hobbies are none of our business, Mr Clacher. You're here because neither of our nations wants or needs the sort of bother that the individuals named

in this report intend to stir up. Let's not insult one another by pretending to believe that there's any nobler motivation behind your actions."

Jolley returned then with the tea and biscuits. "Did I hear Housekeeping taking someone down by a few pegs just now?"

"Yeah, Darren, we all did." Tanya aimed a disappointed glower towards the non-gender. "Seriously, why can't you just be *nice* to people occasionally? Not everyone is out to get us!"

To judge by the increasingly feral grin on Clacher's face, he wasn't even remotely offended. "Ah, but hold on now – wasn't it yourself just now who cracked the joke about all of us Irish being the same threat level, Miss Darnell?"

"Huh?" She blinked at him. "Dude – I wasn't joking about that. Actually, I'm still kind of worried that you might try and murder us. It's just that I'm even more worried about being forced to go along with having Hull as my supervisor again, and you basically offered to take him out! That *totally* has to count for something."

Spence shrugged. "Don't look to me, Mr Clacher. You're the one who started bragging about having access to peat bogs."

He raised his mug in a mock salute. "Fair play – I'll keep my beak out of BIINT's business. Let's just crack on with what I'm here for, eh? The sooner we deal with those boys, the better it'll be for everyone."

Chapter Ten – Even On Saturdays

Kennedy prodded warily at the bottom right corner of the keyboard of her office computer terminal. The aged plastic cracked even further under her examination. "Well, it's official, Woods. I need to requisition a new keyboard for this thing."

Woods snorted. "That's probably because you insist on poking at it every time you sit down, ma'am!"

His CO shook her head. "Be fair, Woods! There was also that time when I employed it as an improvised assault weapon."

"The manufacturers should have tested using it against pirates before they released it for use by the Corps, if you ask me, ma'am. It ain't as if they didn't know who they'd contracted to supply, after all."

"Yeah, there is that." Kennedy leaned back a little in her chair; carefully adjusting the sling in which she was cradling Ellie. At the far left corner of her desk, the small, dome shaped holographic emitter that Waverly had gifted her during the recent voyage back to Deimos Base from Earth continued cycling through the multitude of images loaded onto it. "Anyhow, didn't you have a few strong and thoroughly unreasonable opinions that needed airing?"

"You mean my perfectly legitimate concerns about your recent dating habits, ma'am?"

"Don't you trust my long game, Woods?"

"Not if it gets you hurt, ma'am."

"Well, in that case, you'll approve of my having called it quits, won't you?"

The grizzled older Marine stared pointedly at the contents of the sling. "Are we even going to acknowledge the matter of how tactically you acquired what you brought back, ma'am?"

"Nope."

"Okay then. Reckon it ain't even my concern anyhow." Woods' disapproving expression softened slightly. "Request permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

"Granted, Marine; what's on your mind?"

"Why in all that's holy did it take you so damn long to bring our official base mascot home?" He leaned forwards, reaching across the desk to stroke the sleeping baby's cheek. "Anybody would think I never taught you how to flip the bird to the system or some such nonsense."

Kennedy sighed. Her second in command was a good friend, but there was still a limit to what she was comfortable sharing. Thankfully, he clearly wasn't planning to push to know *all* of the details about how she'd gotten the replacement custody papers signed. "I guess I got myself caught up in the idea of doing things the spy way instead of the sensible way. I sure won't be doing that again."

"You better not, ma'am. You ain't good at it, for starters. Just look at what you told me about Wednesday. Honestly: who flat out forgets that they know a billionaire inventor with unlimited access to private space transportation? Your mamma, Ellie, that's who."

"Did you just introduce my infant daughter to the concept of your mamma jokes, Woods?"

He smirked. "Afraid it's just one of the many perils of her growing up on base, ma'am!"

"Gee, and to think that all I was worried about was baby proofing her new environment, and blocking any incoming calls from either of the Hulls. I hadn't accounted for needing to...!"

The communication panel buzzed into life on Kennedy's desk; Corporal Davies keeping her voice somewhat lower than she usually would. "Sorry to interrupt you and Gunny Woods, ma'am, but we've picked up a distress signal from Ceres. It seems that somebody's gotten into difficulties whilst trying to establish a mining base there."

Kennedy frowned. "Did they give any details about who they are or what happened, Corporal?"

"No, ma'am; it's just an automated loop stating that they require immediate evacuation of all surviving personnel following a mining related incident."

"The last I heard, there wasn't anything on Ceres aside from asteroid farts!" Woods had straightened up and returned to scowling. "This situation's got illegal activity by terminally stupid individuals written all over it, ma'am."

His CO nodded grimly. "Davies, inform Lance Corporal Vance that I want pilots in place to keep away any civilian attempts at assistance. We'll send

in a drone to assess what's really happening before I risk Marines on the ground."

Volker logged in at her end of the video chat with mild surprise. "Oliver, Brett – I had not anticipated speaking with you quite this early. Even on Saturdays, most friends and relatives wait until after the patients are likely to have finished breakfast before contacting them. As you can see, my tray has just arrived."

Her son ignored her politely worded rebuke. "Mom, were there really rampaging zombies in the hospital yesterday?"

"No. There was an existing infected survivor of the initial outbreak housed in an illegally modified isolation pod, and a newly infected porter. My agents saw to it that neither of them engaged in any form of rampaging. Nor indeed, did they technically count as being zombies. Both of them were still alive."

"With sad but unavoidable emphasis on the past tense, I see." Dobos waved from where he was slouched in the chair on Brett's right, his red hair hanging in lank strands about his ears, and his poppy petal blue eyes hooded from lack of sleep.

"C.A.K.E certainly has a lot to answer for. Anyhow, how's the leg?"

She took a sip of her fruit juice. "My recovery is progressing as well as is to be expected, given the injury involved. I should regain full mobility. As I said in the email that you did not deign to reply to, the doctors say that Agent Hull's prompt reactions may very well have saved my life."

He winced. "Don't start this argument in front of our kid, Laine. Not if you're ever planning on seeing him in person again."

"Precisely what are you implying, Oliver?"

"I'm not implying: I'm outright effing *stating* that I won't have him around anyone who supports that piece of scum."

Brett rolled his eyes impatiently. "Jeez, Dad, can you chill already? I already know that Agent Hull is a total creep. It's not like I'm stupid. Mom isn't either, so she must have a plan about dealing with him or something, right, Mom?"

Volker stared pointedly at her former lover. "Our son appears to have acquired your opinions about my agent. Did that occur before or after I emailed you about the misplaced memory?"

"Our son makes his own opinions. I just happen

to support them." There was nothing but coldness in Dobos' expression as he replied. "As for the contrived excuse Hull gave you about our supposed memory swap, give me one reason why anybody should believe a word of that!"

"He did not discover it, Oliver."

That brought him up short. "So you're saying that someone else looked...?"

"Memory working is not legal in the United States, and that is where Agent Hull has always lived. Therefore, it is not something that he could ever have learned how to do." She would not be so unwary as to say more than that aloud.

Brett paled slightly as he caught on to what his mother had done, even if he remained unaware of why. "Mom, are you sure you're allowed to do that?"

Dobos seemed to recover himself. "Your mum wouldn't do anything that wasn't fully legal. Everyone knows that. Laine – can we discuss the rest of this some other time? It's not for young ears, regardless of who was involved."

She nodded. "I had presumed that you would prefer that we do so. We must arrange to meet in person. In the meantime, Brett, how is your

schooling progressing?"

Their son scowled at the change of subject. "Can't we go back to talking about the not zombies instead? At least that was exciting!"

Volker began slicing her baked avocado into bite-sized pieces. "Evidently your teachers have not yet clarified the difference between exciting and tragic. Perhaps your father should request that they make more of an effort."

The boy squirmed in his seat for a moment, and then gestured to something out of sight of the camera. "Um, sorry, Mom, I have to go take Scooter out for his afternoon walk! Love you, talk again real soon, bye!"

Left alone with the video feed, his parents stared at their respective cameras in silence for several seconds. Dobos was the first to resume speaking. "So, we definitely need to meet up then, yeah? Since knowing you, there's no hope of just letting the whole thing go."

"Such deliberate inaction would inevitably result in issues further along the line, Oliver. I see no reason to store up trouble for ourselves."

"Fine, fine – I'll let you decide when's best for you to come to the UK for a visit! At least that way

there's a bit less risk of me ending up stuck in the same bloody room as your allegedly innocent agent."

Kennedy stared at the admittedly grainy footage broadcast to Deimos Base by the drone. "Hey, Woods, am I seeing what I *think* I'm seeing right now?"

The older Marine grunted. "Either that, or we're *both* hallucinating about praying mantis people, ma'am."

"Well, I guess that's even less likely than this being real. So much for nothing but asteroid farts." Kennedy turned her back on the view screen. "Corporal Davies – send word out to all concerned parties that we've detected what appears to be a C.A.K.E controlled facility located beneath the surface of Ceres. Be sure and mention that it's been overrun by what look like some kind of large insect based augmetrics."

"Yes ma'am!"

Woods attempted to extricate his left index finger from the tiny hand currently wrapped around it. "I hope you ain't planning on bringing little Miss Mascot here along on the operation, ma'am. Don't

reckon that we've even got a set of cammies available in her size."

His CO chuckled and rolled her shoulders slightly under the straps of the sling. "Is that you angling to stay behind and babysit, Woods?"

"There ain't much sense in both of us going, ma'am. You got a preference, or should we flip the coin again?"

"That damn coin of yours is rigged, Woods. I'm pulling rank for this one, since sickbay keeps complaining about how you won't admit that you need to start slowing down." Kennedy dug around in her pockets and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "Here – this is her schedule. Skip over nap time at your peril, Marine."

"Lickin' Chicken, ma'am: she can help me with supervising the pre-launch checks for the shuttle. Have fun picking your squad." Woods tucked the paper away without reading it and scooped Ellie out of her sling, cradling her easily in the crook of his right arm as he strode out of the Command Deck. "Don't bother handing me that contraption, ma'am. I got this!"

"I ain't joking about nap time, you know!" Kennedy sighed and wriggled clear of the sling.

"Why is it that I suspect I may end up arm wrestling him to get her back?"

Kenlow jammed his knuckles into his mouth and curled silently into an even smaller ball. The under floor maintenance duct that he and the half-dozen other survivors had scrambled into some ten hours earlier remained unexplored by the creatures, and he had no wish to draw their attention! Not after what he'd seen them do to Howard and his security detail. *We'd just better hope that our distress signal is picked up by Deimos Base and not some poor civilian vessel. Sweet Lord, do the Marines even have anything that can stop those things?*

None of the available energy weapons here on Ceres had worked, but it was too damn late to worry about that now. They'd activated the beacon yesterday; during their attempted rebellion. At that point, there had been twenty would-be escapees, and only one murderous insectoid roaming the corridors. The latter monstrosity having seemed fixated on getting back underground, Kenlow and his allies had still counted Howard as the scariest thing on Ceres. Likewise, the former CEO, more focused on crushing his human

opponents, had largely ignored the reports coming up from the mining teams. *It's funny how surviving a sudden invasion of man-eating aliens changes how people see things.*

Only Howard had been crazy enough to try talking to the creatures. Kenlow remembered how, for perhaps three whole minutes, the hostilities had ceased. The alien nearest Howard had crouched forward, its vestigial mandibles clicking above his head. The self-styled leader of C.A.K.E had kept on speaking – some rambling diatribe about his importance, and how he could help them make valuable connections. The fear on his face had begun to fade, his usual smug grin reappearing in its stead. *Stupid asshole was still wearing it when that thing bit his head off.*

Chapter Eleven – Fair Enough Chance

"All aboard for a Sunday afternoon bug hunt, Marines!" Captain Kennedy's words echoed around the shuttle's interior as she led the way onboard.

"Aye Hell Yeah, Skipper!" Newly – and in her own opinion *finally* – transferred to Deimos Base, Corporal Kathleen Willows was determined to start things off on the right foot with her famous CO. *Officers tend to appreciate those who show enthusiasm!*

Private Nadia Alonzo side eyed her. "Nobody calls the captain that around here, winger." The technician elbowed the female Marine beside her. "Isn't that right, doc?"

The squad's medic, Private Hilary Madison

seemed too busy triple checking her kit to acknowledge the question. "Shouldn't you be up front by now anyhow, *boot* Corporal Willows?"

The latter phrasing sounded ominously as though the pilot was at risk of ending up with it assigned to her as a permanent nickname. *Lousy bunch of disrespectful slick sleeves!* Red-faced and sealing her ears mentally to the additional mutterings from what now seemed to be all ten of her non-commissioned squad mates, Willows stowed her gear and hurried off to the cockpit.

Captain Kennedy, already strapped into the co-pilot's seat, raised an eyebrow at her arrival. "You okay there, Corporal?"

"Ma'am, yes Captain Kennedy, ma'am!"

Her CO grimaced. "No need to shout, Marine. We ain't on the damn Parade Deck here."

"Sorry ma'am." There went her hopes of making a good first impression. "It won't happen again, ma'am."

Kennedy chuckled. "At Ease, Willows – I ain't about to demote you for unintentional over enthusiasm. And for the record, Skipper's fine. The others will get used to you using it."

Ceres, when their shuttle reached it, looked

wrong. Willows squinted at the readings on her screen. "Uh, Skipper? I think maybe there's some kind of serious geological event happening here. Ceres doesn't usually have so much debris floating around her. Scanners are detecting abnormal radiation at both poles too."

"Guess it must have been one Hell of a mining related incident." Kennedy pointed at the still barely visible landing zone. "There's the entrance that our drone identified. C.A.K.E seems to have gone to a lot of effort to conceal it. Rampaging praying mantis based augmetrics or not, we probably shouldn't anticipate them being especially grateful for us showing up to answer their distress signal. Take us in and land us, but keep the ramp up until I give the order."

"Aye, Skipper."

The facility's underground hangar proved abandoned, most likely due to whatever incident had left the outer doors standing open. Safely ensconced in MMC issue EV suits, the squad spread out warily among the six unattended C.A.K.E vessels. Alonzo got to work immediately on closing the outer doors; grinning triumphantly behind her faceplate as the hanger successfully pressurised.

"We got air in here now, ma'am!"

"Good work, Marine. Don't any of you even think about being dumb enough to risk breathing it, mind – mission of mercy or not, these are still the kinds of people who enjoy unleashing Level Four biohazards." Kennedy readied her plasma rifle. "Private Marsh, Corporal Willows – you two ladies stay here and hold the shuttle. I ain't about to see us stranded. Private Weatherly: find a nest somewhere in here and...ah shit, never mind, he's gone to ground already. Private Abernethy, you're on point. Private Keller, bring up the rear. The rest of you, fall in!"

The seven members of the squad exploring the Ceres facility were two levels in when ten of the insectoid creatures they'd seen on the drone footage swarmed them. Unable to get a clear shot without risking hitting her allies, Kennedy switched immediately to her knife. The blade clattered off her opponent's exoskeleton, but found ready purchase in the creature's far softer wing membranes. Naturally, she pressed that advantage: digging the point of the weapon up underneath the chitinous casing at the base of the

wing. Something in there popped, and the creature stumbled back, hissing. Kennedy grinned. "Heads up, Marines – those colourful draperies that we thought might be clothing actually appear to be wings!"

Private Gleason was already following her example; his knife slick to the hilt with vivid turquoise blood. "I didn't sign up to fight *ugly* naked aliens, damn it!"

"Don't you mean *bug* ugly?" Alonzo was her usual near battle manic self, clutching a pair of ripped off antennae in her free hand whilst repeatedly stabbing the entity that had sported them in its eye sockets. "Get some!"

At what had been the rear of their group, Private Bartram yanked a profusely bleeding Keller clear of a pair of foot long talon shaped forelimbs, and shoved a ready primed titanium shredder grenade into the maw of the creature responsible. "Choke on it, you fucker! Medic, we got a man down here!"

The remains of what had been the insectoid's head and neck splattered across everyone within ten feet. Madison groaned as she scrambled to Keller's side in the middle of the group. "I *knew* I should have brought my damn lazrella!"

Having successfully gutted one attacker, Abernethy stumbled backwards as his second opponent snapped at where his neck had been. "Shit! They bite, ma'am!"

"Not if you pull their mandibles off, they don't!" Alonzo waved her latest trophy above her head as emphasis. There were now two of the creatures lying dead at her feet. "Who's next, you mantis faced mother fuckers?"

The surviving five creatures circled the Marines, but did not engage. Kennedy, having decided to stick with what she knew worked, took the opportunity to draw her second knife and dual wield. "We can do this all damn day!"

"Indeed, you could." A sibilant baritone voice issued from the largest of their opponents. "Our hive consciousness believes that your assertion is genuine, human. We are prepared to cease combat with you and your drones at this time."

Slumped on the floor, wincing as Madison tended his wounds, Keller somehow scraped together a sneer. "You all just...just better hope we agree to make nice...!"

Alonzo snarled. "Yeah, who the fuck you calling *drones*, ass hat?"

"At Ease, Marines; let's hear what else he has to say." Kennedy edged forwards to face the enemy speaker. "So – what's the deal here?"

"We are of a species named the Szenoldyans: last remaining heirs to a long dead galaxy far beyond the reach of your observational technology." The alien lowered his arched forelimbs as he spoke. "Our ancestors set forth to explore the stars many centuries before the era when the waters of your home planet first issued forth life. What you call Ceres is in truth one of our generational vessels; set adrift through the void eons since, and long entombed by the debris of space travel."

Kennedy frowned, not lowering her knives. "You're saying that C.A.K.E essentially built their damn secret base on top of your ship?"

The Szenoldyan nodded. "One of our crew was abducted from his hibernation area whilst inert. He awoke during his captors' attempt at vivisection, and responded accordingly."

"Okay." The CO of Deimos Base knew an opportunity for a diplomatic solution when she saw one. "I guess we can understand why things got messy here prior to our involvement. Given that

C.A.K.E is an illegal organisation, perhaps our respective species can now move on from these unfortunate events in a less hostile fashion."

Her opposite number shook his head. "Alas, that shall not be possible. Our species is greatly skilled in what you would describe as psionic interaction. With this power, we learned your language. We have also examined the mind and memories of one of you: the entity known as Carson Howard. Based upon this study, our hive consciousness has deemed humanity unworthy of continuance. At our vessel's core, and as such protected by many hundreds more of our finest warriors, is a planet-destroying weapon whose power surpasses your species' pitiful attempts at comprehension. Even now, that weapon is charging. Soon it shall be utilised in the total annihilation of all the human inhabited planets within this solar system. You, your accompanying drones, and the remaining few from the humans who infested the exterior hull of our vessel shall be the only survivors. Doubtless, it is for the best."

"Wait!" Kennedy dropped both knives and held up her hands in supplication. "You said that you looked at what Howard had to offer and found it

lacking. Well, fuck that malingering goat rope anyhow. He was probably just about the worst damn example of humanity that you could have found to begin with! Screw that. If you're really going to judge our species accurately, then you need to examine someone else's grape too; for balance. It's the only fair option."

"I do not understand your usage of these words." The Szenoldyan's antennae twitched. "What do goats or vine grown fruit have to do with the potential worth of your species? Neither is sentient."

"It's a turn of phrase; one that Howard wouldn't have understood." Kennedy risked taking a step closer to the alien. "You want the context? Then go ahead and read *my* mind."

"Captain Kennedy, no – the process could kill you!" Madison shook her head fiercely. "We don't know how it works, ma'am!"

"That's exactly why it has to be me, Marine. I ain't ever held with voluntelling my squad before, and I sure as shit ain't about to start now." Kennedy locked eyes with the Szenoldyan. "Well? What are you waiting for? We doing this whole memory reading thing, or just practising our respective thousand-yard-stares?"

The alien bent forwards slightly. "I warn you, Captain Kennedy – your drone is correct. The memory reading may indeed kill you. For example, if our hive consciousness is displeased by what is discovered within your thoughts, your decapitation shall be immediate."

"Reckon I've got to go out somehow." Kennedy mirrored the Szenoldyan's posture as best as she could. "Besides, given that you're currently planning on eradicating virtually all other human life, it's a fair enough chance to take. Unless you'd rather that I just let my squad here have at you?"

Alonzo gave her the thumbs up. "Say the word, ma'am! We can take them!"

That might even end up being how this played out, Kennedy reflected, but for now, she wanted to give diplomacy a shot. *If nothing else, it'll buy some extra damn time for Willows to...ugh...time for other stuff.*

!...KNOWLEDGE. HOPE: THE WORST THING IN THE WHOLE BOX. BIG WALL. UNICORNS. FLUFFY BUNNIES. KITTENS WITH YARN. WHAT A MOTHER WOULD DO FOR HER CHILD. nO CRACKS YET THEN. aRT. bETTER EVEN – MUSIC. aLL THE DAMN MUSIC. sOLID. mEDICS. fIRE-FIGHTERS. tHE cORPS. fAMILY. yUT yUT

AND WHO SAYS WHETHER ANY OF IT'S
UNNECESSARY ANYHOW? bRICKS AS FAR AS THE EYE
CAN COUNT. hIPPITY-HOP, MOB STOP! IOVE. hOPE.
kINDNESS. mERCY. sELF-SACRIFICE. rUNNING
TOWARDS THE THING INSTEAD OF AWAY BECAUSE
SOMEBODY NEEDS TO. dLL STILL IN PLACE. cCLASSIC.
cHOCOLATE. hOT CHOCOLATE, WITH THOSE LITTLE
MARSHMALLOWS. tICK TICK, TICK, AND WHERE'S
THAT CLOCK, i WONDER? dOWN THIS DAMN RABBIT
HOLE? wHY CERTAINLY, BUT AFTER YOU – OH LOOK,
ENVIRONMENTALISM! eVERYBODY LOVES PANDAS.
bUILD IT HIGH, BUILD IT STRONG. eVEN MORE MUSIC,
RAH! rECKON MAYBE mOLLY mOTIVATOR MIGHT
HAVE BEEN A hOUSE mOUSE ONCE. fLYING MICE,
WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT? nOT THE CUCKOOS, THAT'S
FOR SURE. tHINKING OF IT, THOSE KIDS AND sPENCE'S
NIECE AND NEPHEW DO KIND OF MATCH UP. dAMN
CLOCK. gOOD WALL. nEEDS SOMETHING ON IT, TO
COVER UP THAT CRACK; MAYBE NEEDLEPOINT...!

She staggered backwards then, gasping as the
Szenoldyan severed the psionic connection
between their minds. "Well...?" Her tongue didn't
seem to want to form the words properly.
"Whuh...what'd you thunk...argh, think, even...?"

The alien raised his second pair of forelimbs and

began slowly combing his antennae. "There is much of interest in your – as you call it – *grape*, Captain Kennedy. Very well: since you have proven that the previous entity was not in fact representative of all your species, our hive consciousness shall engage in peaceable contact. I believe that we may especially appreciate knowing more of this *music* that we observed."

Skull pounding and mouth dry, Kennedy managed to smile. "Reckon that our real diplomats can probably arrange that for you. What do you say you get to shutting down that whole planet-destroying weapon situation while I see about contacting them?"

"That is acceptable to us. We shall also refrain from eliminating any of the surviving humans involved in the C.A.K.E infestation."

"Good." She let Madison prop her up: determined not to collapse fully whilst the Szenoldyans were still within view. "Glad to hear it. Bartram, nix whatever bright and terrible feat of ordnance it is that you're prepping there. Alonzo, get on the Comm and tell our Marines in the hangar to stand down the Field Expedient shuttle-based solution that I *know* we were all considering

using in place of Bug Juice just now, and which we shall not ever be so impolitic as to speak of in front of our new *friends*."

The squad medic growled as she finally manhandled her into sitting down. "Okay, the aliens are gone. You got any *more* damn orders to hand out before you pass out, ma'am?"

"Just the one, doc'." Kennedy let her eyelids droop closed. "Tell Keller he ain't cleared to die."

Somewhere at the edge of her remaining, rapidly shrinking awareness, she heard the injured Marine in question manage to laugh. "Wilco, ma'am!"

Chapter Twelve – Any Six Others

It had been a week today since they'd first met, and Campbell found that he still couldn't quite decide whether Zoe's eyes counted as being greenish blue or bluish green. The exact hue seemed to shift depending on the light available. Little Primrose's were the same, although she had far fewer freckles, and her ringlets were dark as opposed to light brown. Eyes like seawater, both of them; he supposed his mother would have said, most likely whilst trying to match it with paint. The late Eunice Pembleton had been brilliant at portraiture. *I wonder what she'd make of Zoe's art.*

He wasn't altogether sure what he made of it himself. He'd brought Sam for a wander around the

local gallery that Zoe had told him was exhibiting her work. Pre-Futurist meets Neo Modern was how she had described her creations yesterday: a three-dimensional representation of humanity's war of attrition against the glories of nature! Thought provoking sculptures made from salvaged materials, to use the sharply suited gallery owner's tactful phrasing from a moment ago. "They aren't to everyone's tastes."

Campbell nodded. "It's a very personal thing, art. My mum favoured oils. I've always preferred charcoal as a medium."

The other man brightened immediately. "Oh, so you're an artist too?" He glanced again at Campbell's nondescript grey and white striped shirt and faded brown chinos; clearly contrasting them with some internal measure of expected fashion sense. "Do you have representation?"

"Not yet. Thanks to my career, it's really only ever been a hobby for me until now." Thomas had made very sure of that, but a rebellious notion was raising its head in Campbell's psyche. "Mum was the official artist in the family. She was Jane Bellamy-Gibbons' first find."

As anticipated, the gallery owner knew *exactly*

who his mother was now. "You're Eunice Pembleton's son?"

"Yes but please, call me Craig."

"It's such a pleasure to meet you, Craig. I'm Devon Kirby, by the way. Who's this little man?"

Campbell hoisted his son up onto his right hip to let Kirby greet him. "This is my son, Sam. We've just moved to Poole. We're neighbours with Zoe and her daughter."

Kirby uttered a near squeal of excitement. "Oh, how adorable – you simply must try and make sure that the two of them end up married some day! Can you imagine the combined artistic talent their children would inherit?"

"I'm not sure that talent works like that...!"

"Oh nonsense, of course it does!" Kirby waved away Campbell's protest. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be so interested in seeing your portfolio, now would I?"

The former spy chuckled. "Well, you have me there, Devon. I suppose I'll have to bring you a few pieces to look at the next time that we visit."

"Bring me in your worst, your best, and any six others." The gallery owner was busy scribbling something on the back of a flyer for an upcoming photography exhibition. "Here's my phone number

and my email, and more importantly my stylist's phone number and email because your current one is now *fired*."

Campbell was still smiling as he exited the gallery with Sam. "We probably shouldn't ever tell him that I picked this outfit, eh, Sam?"

His phone buzzed into life in his pocket: the ringtone one that he'd not dared hope to hear again anytime soon. "Spence, what a pleasant surprise, how are you?"

"Where the deuce *are* you, Mr Campbell, and why isn't it Kenmore?" The non-gender sounded more worried than annoyed, but only by a slim margin. "Do I honestly have to resort to using your ID chip to track you again?"

"Eh? Spence, I'm in Poole, with Sam."

"Well, you could have informed someone about that. Nobody I've spoken to so far had any idea of where you were. Your father asked me to pass on his regards since he can't reach you by phone."

"I blocked his number on account of him being impossible to put up with." Campbell sat down on a bench so that he could better manage holding both his son and his phone. The sooner he could ditch his walking cane the better. "If you wanted to

know where I was, you only ever needed to ring me. I've missed....!"

Spence interrupted him sharply. "Sean Patrick Miller's associates aren't done with you. Irish Intelligence sent a team across to help with curtailing their plans. We've been trying to get word to you since Saturday."

"Oh." The idea of spending the afternoon exploring the town centre suddenly lost a good deal of its appeal. "Right then – what's the plan?"

"Give me a somewhat narrower location than the entirety of Poole and I'll arrange extraction for you and Sam."

He winced. "Ah, well, that could be a little complicated. We've been living aboard my yacht at the marina, you see, and as it happens, the owner of the neighbouring vessel has been doing the same with their daughter. Sam and she have had a few play dates together. Miller's lot are coldblooded enough to go for the two of them out of spite once they find I've been warned off."

"Are you saying that you've managed to embroil a random pair of civilians in your wake?"

Campbell could readily guess at the expression that must be now on Spence's face. "I'm afraid so,

yes. I trust that you can arrange something, Housekeeping?"

"Be at your ruddy boat with whomever and whatever you're bringing with you in ninety minutes time. Don't die in the interim either."

The call ended. Tucking his phone away, Campbell limped towards the nearest rank of hover taxis. *I just hope Zoe believes me when I tell her why we all need to disappear for a while.*

Hull rapped on the door of the ANI safe house's bathroom. "It's eight fifteen, Nadimiche – you'd better get a move on if you want me to drop you off for your morning classes today."

She hurried out past him towards her room. "I'll be right there; I just need to grab my laptop!"

"Okay, I'll see you out front in the car. Don't forget that you have that presentation on undersea volcanoes this afternoon."

"Thank you!"

"No problem." It genuinely wasn't either. Gifted student or not, emotionally speaking, Nadimiche was such a young eighteen that by this stage he'd essentially started regarding her as another daughter. *One who hates the idea of babysitting –*

oh well, I guess we'll just need to look elsewhere for nanny options.

Sliding into the driver's seat, Hull closed his fingers around the steering wheel and took a slow, deep breath. He sensed that the key to not losing it completely right now rested on him avoiding looking at the spot on the right-hand side of the rear seat normally reserved for Rayne's travel pod. Instead, he focused on the rest of the seating arrangements. Bryce of course, would ride up front. Fisher's pod would go in the centre. Tessa, old enough for just a booster cushion, would have the seat on the left. Her APSU would be in the trunk for the duration of the drive back from the detention centre to the safe house, along with the luggage. If it didn't like that arrangement then it could damn well just make its own way there, because it sure as Hell wasn't taking Rayne's spot in the car. *Start as you mean to go on, Greg. She'll need that seat when you finally manage to fix things and bring her home. This whole mess with Susan is temporary, just like our living here is.*

He hadn't learned the truth until halfway through Saturday, when his enquiries to the court enforcers and Children's Services were answered. No, that

two wasn't a typo, and yes, Tessa's foster placement had reverted to him and Bryce, and incidentally could they congratulate him on how well both he and Bryce had followed safeguarding protocols throughout this unfortunate period? At least the latter communication had highlighted how pleased Children's Services were about that. *We're good parents. Obviously, we're the right choice for Tessa, and for Rayne.*

The passenger side door opened, interrupting his reverie. Nadimiche scrambled in next to him with her overstuffed backpack. "Thanks again for waiting for me, Greg!"

"It's fine, kiddo. Are you having breakfast on campus or do you want me to swing by somewhere along the way?"

"I *knew* I forgot something!" She facepalmed and then pulled on her seatbelt. "Um, there's a deli that doesn't take us out of our way. I should probably grab something there for my lunch too, now that I think about it."

"I already packed you a lunch." He handed over the brown paper bag. "Tuna, mayonnaise, baby spinach, and no onions, on rye bread, exactly the way you like it."

"Thanks!" She tucked it away in her backpack.
"Um, so your family – they get back today?"

"That's right. I'm collecting them later on this morning." Hull pulled on his seatbelt and checked his mirrors, wincing inwardly as he glimpsed the right-hand rear seat. "Don't worry: I won't ask you to babysit."

"Sorry. I really am crap with kids though."

"Well, I hope you can manage living alongside them at least."

As luck had it, Zoe was sitting out on the deck of the *Helter Skelter* playing house with Primrose when Campbell arrived back with Sam. He waved to her urgently. "Zoe, I need you to come over to mine right away – there's an emergency. Bring Primrose too."

The sculptor laughed, but followed his request. "It's hardly as if I'd ever leave her alone on deck anyhow, Craig! So what's going on?"

He grimaced as she stepped onto his yacht. "This may be rather hard for you to believe, Zoe, but I promise you that it's all true. I'm a retired spy for British International Intelligence, and I've just been advised this afternoon that some of my old enemies

are looking for me to get revenge. BIINT are extracting Sam and me soon, and I want you and Primrose to come with us. There's a high risk that the men involved will go after anyone connected to us."

She gawped at him, clearly too distracted by what he'd just announced to react to Primrose whacking her on the head with her beloved rag doll. "Are you serious?"

A bullet ripped in through one small pink cheek and out again through the dark brown curls; obliterating most of the doll's head as it went. Campbell dove forwards in the wake of the failed projectile, dragging Zoe and both of their toddlers along with him even as Zoe screamed and Primrose and Sam began screeching. "Get below deck!"

That had to be the priority for now. There was no sense in attempting to spot the shooter; he knew from fieldwork that such efforts would only make him a target. Bullets already riddled the deck and the wheel room, but the galley and other such spaces below deck were safe. The hull and hatches of the *Angry Canary* were far sturdier than one might have expected, and he kept a weapons' locker in his cabin, just as his mother always had. All

he needed to do was hold the line until help got here. *Spence said ninety minutes. That's half an hour tops from now.*

Pulling the hatch shut behind him, he hit the concealed switch that put the entire yacht in lockdown. The automated locks activated only moments before the first set of invading footsteps sounded above. Both toddlers were still sobbing. "Don't panic, Zoe. We're safe here, and help is on the way."

She whimpered. "Why didn't you warn me before now that you were a spy?"

"Former spy, please, and well, it's not exactly an easy subject to work into a conversation with someone you've just met."

"Stop acting as if this isn't serious!" To judge by how hard she was now pummelling his chest, light hearted had been the wrong tone to aim for. "We could have bloody *died* up there! Primrose...her doll's head...!"

He sighed and edged backwards to set Sam down in his playpen; bribing him unsuccessfully with a chocolate biscuit from the tin on the counter. "I'm sorry. As far as I knew then, this mess was already finished. I never expected them to come

after me. Besides, there was the Official Secrets Act to consider."

Zoe sank down onto one of the two cushioned storage benches that doubled up as seating for the yacht's den, cuddling Primrose even more tightly. "I just wanted to make friends with my neighbours."

"I know, and so did I." Campbell pressed another hidden control. This one electrified the entire deck. The overhead lighting in the den flickered. Muffled screams could be heard from outside, followed by several heavy thuds. "Honestly, this sort of unpleasantness doesn't go on all the time – there are generally quite a few days per year wherein my life is perfectly mundane."

She stared at him across Primrose's head: her ruined mascara tracking sooty lines over her freckles. "Really...?"

"Well, more or less. *Almost* perfectly mundane, but that still counts."

Sam, who unlike Primrose was now merely grizzling instead of outright howling, hurled the remains of his partially eaten biscuit at his father. "No biccie, Dada!"

Campbell picked his son up again, sighing inwardly as the soggy mess of crumbs on the front

of his shirt was ground further into the fabric. "Daddy's here, son. It's all right. The scary noises have all gone now."

Something told him that it was going to be a lot easier to smooth things over with his son than with Zoe and her daughter. Perhaps Spence might be able to help with that. They had that wonderful little trick with their voice. Then again, it would probably be asking too much, given how things currently were between him and them. With hindsight, even his requesting additional extractions had likely been pushing the envelope in terms of professional decorum. *No, I'd best not mention it to them. I'll just have to shift for myself instead this time.*

His phone buzzed: Moxton this time, Campbell noted, answering it. "We're all alive in here, Moxton. Mind the deck, won't you; it's electrified."

"So I can see from here, not to mention *smell*." The driver turned handler sounded as unimpressed as ever. "Spence and Quincy have the perimeter secured for now. I can't tell you who these two were off hand, since you've essentially barbequed them. If you can shut off the current, I have a tarp in the boot that I can chuck over them before you open the hatch. I wouldn't want a kid seeing this."

"Cheers, Moxton. Give it until the count of ten for the remains of the current to dissipate. I'll wait until I hear you knock before we exit. I still need to pack anyhow."

Moxton huffed. "Pretty sure that Spence said they told you to be ready when we got here."

"They did tell me that, yes, but you're also more than twenty minutes early, and frankly I'm not going anywhere without Sam's overnight bag. Toddlers don't do reasonable."

Chapter Thirteen – Nine Lives

The deli had a drive through, which simplified things. Still, Hull knew that he'd much rather make sure that his latest charge ate before leaving the house in future. Eating breakfast bagels in the car was hardly conducive to a relaxing start to the day. "I'm waking you earlier as of tomorrow, kiddo. You need to have time to eat before your shower in the mornings."

She blinked at him. "I have an alarm clock."

"I know that, but from what I've seen so far, you keep on setting it for thirty to forty minutes later than you actually need."

"Classes only started up again on Thursday! You've seen my routine for literally three mornings." The young psionic folded her arms, scowling. "If you

didn't want us to go by the deli, you could have just said so!"

Hull shook his head. "Is that attitude down to you being eighteen, or because you stayed up too late studying again?"

"What attitude? You're being weird."

"I'm *being* a responsible adult." He changed lanes as the outskirts of the InterAmerican Campus came into view. "There are only six weeks left of your freshman year. Slow down and enjoy them. Trust me; the workload will increase exponentially when you go back in the fall. I don't want you to burn out."

"So you're telling me to study less?"

"No. I'm advising you to rethink your time management. It's great that you study hard, but you need to learn how to pace yourself in order to maximise your full intellectual potential."

"Huh. That almost made sense." She wrinkled her nose a little. "My parents will say exactly the same thing once we find them, won't they?"

"It's what parents do." He pulled over into the nearest of the available parking bays. "I still can't promise you that we'll find them both alive though, kiddo."

"Yeah, well so far you haven't found them dead yet either, so I'm gonna keep hoping, okay?" She wiped at her eyes. "They wouldn't ever give up on me."

"Okay." Hull paused, spotting a pair of men wearing a familiar uniform waiting outside the entrance to the main building. "Do you happen to have any ideas about what PID's doing here?"

Nadimiche followed his gaze. "No."

"I think maybe I'd better walk you in today."

As he had suspected, the two PID agents were there in search of Nadimiche. The taller one held up his badge. "Agent Hull, I'm Agent Bell, and this is Agent Reed. We're here on behalf of PID to secure Miss Prado Wang."

Hull stepped in front of his companion. "Secure her on what grounds, agents?"

"Why, as an asset, of course." Agent Reed shrugged. "She's been flagged as being a powerful dampener. PID's research division wants to study that further. We may be able to make use of her talents."

"Oh, I see." Hull nodded slowly. "So this is you what, press ganging her? Sorry, agents, but I can't agree to that. I bought out her bail contract. She's

indentured to me for the next six months."

Agent Bell smiled. "There's no need for you to worry about being left out of pocket, Agent Hull! PID will be happy to compensate you for whatever you paid, plus any additional interim expenditure."

"Yeah, no, that doesn't work for me." The ANI agent took hold of Nadimiche's left arm. "I'm not comfortable with the moral quandary involved in reselling bail contracts. There's an argument going around that it technically counts as a form of human trafficking, you know. I wouldn't want to risk ending up on the wrong side of the law. Especially not to help a rival agency forcibly recruit someone who's barely even an adult. If any of us are going to use her talents, it'll be ANI. Goodbye, agents; Nadimiche, we're done here."

She almost stumbled as he steered her back to the car. "Hey, so wait a minute, does this mean that I can't go back to college?"

"Not until we find a foolproof way of keeping PID from attempting to snatch you, no." Hull waited until the young psionic was safely ensconced in the front passenger seat once more before getting back behind the wheel. "Sorry, kiddo. It looks as if you'll have to study remotely for a while. I'll contact

the college on your behalf and clear that with them."

"Ugh, fine!" Nadimiche scowled irritably. "But to be clear, I'm still *not* babysitting!"

Doris Weaver was indulging in one of her favourite unofficial BIINT duties: making sure that the senior boffin ate. Ideally, on such a fine Monday afternoon, she'd drag him out to one of the local beer gardens, all the better to get some fresh air. Alas, with Craig's unfortunate Irish situation, the current estimated threat level rated such an excursion as needlessly unsafe. Hence her compromise: she'd popped out alone and bought him a hamper. The tricky part was getting it back into headquarters without anyone snaffling the contents along the way. The door security team had worn deliberately mournful expressions whilst scanning it and Weaver knew that the staff at reception would be no better. *At least my fellow field operatives aren't hanging around the main lobby. I shall avoid the break room though.*

A slender figure clad in dark grey jeans and a brown hooded cardigan was arguing with one of the administrative assistants about whether she

needed an appointment to see someone working here. "I've told you like three times already! I can't call her myself, because I don't have my phone, but my friend has some kind of job with British Intelligence, and I need to talk to her! It's urgent! Do you not have that word in England or something?"

It wasn't that the young woman's voice was unfamiliar; it just oughtn't to be possible that she was here at all, given what ANI had reported. Intrigued, Weaver strode over to join the conversation, waving curtly at the BIINT employees involved. "I'll see to this, it's all but very definitely outside of what you're trained for. Someone make sure that Nathaniel receives his dinner intact."

"Jeez, finally!" The American spun to glare at Weaver. "I...oh, great, it's you; the toddler snatching super soldier! Well, at least you ought to know who I am. Now where's Tanya? I seriously need to see her."

The British SCO frowned. "You've changed your hair since I last saw you. Cassandra Shelby, wasn't it, from Miami?"

"Yeah, I used to have it blonde." Cassandra shuffled her feet; tugging her hood up as far as it

would go. "I'm going to go back to that, actually. I already ditched those stupid looking glasses. Can I please speak to Tanya now?"

Weaver tilted her head slightly. "Perhaps once you answer my next question."

"Ugh, fine, and that is?"

"How aren't you dead?"

"Huh? What kind of question even is that?" By now, the younger woman just looked lost. "The airport staff at Miami International managed to lose my phone while I was in quarantine and I didn't get time to replace it yet, because travelling from there to anywhere is next to freaking impossible! Seriously: I was stuck in an isolation booth from Sunday afternoon until Tuesday morning, after which I ended up having to stop off in three states before I was able to leave America. Then I had to fly to Canada, and take two trains to catch *another* plane to get to the freaking UK. It's beyond insane! Anyhow, what happened?"

"Well, it hasn't been covered on the news, because nobody wants to risk giving C.A.K.E any further notoriety, but there was a terrorist missile attack on Desdemona Falls during the early hours of last Monday morning. Everyone believed that

both you and David Saunders were killed when it hit."

The younger woman paled and sagged back against the nearest wall, almost dropping her suitcase. "Holy crap – it's a good thing I left when I did! Jeez, between the Capoliveri Killer, and the Miami outbreak, and now this, I'm like practically a cat with nine lives or something!"

"Come with me, dear." Weaver put her right arm around the young woman's shoulders; propelling her along the corridor towards the nearest interview room. "I'll get you a nice cup of tea and send word to Tanya that you're here."

"Okay. Thanks, I guess."

"Not a worry, dear. Is there anyone else that you'd like us to contact on your behalf – family, other friends?"

Kassandra gulped. "Can you let my parents know that I'm okay and totally *not* dead?"

The blonde SCO nodded kindly before leaning forwards to let the retinal scanner outside the interview room identify her. "We'll talk to them. I imagine that they'll be overjoyed to learn that you're safe."

"Thanks. So listen, there's someone else too, but

I'm not sure where he is. That's why I wanted to see Tanya; I figured if I patched things up with her then maybe she'd be able to help me find him. He's one of your old spies – Thomas Campbell? We um, we hooked up on Easter Tuesday, so like about six weeks ago tomorrow. And well...it's just...my implant app sent me an email alert last Saturday to say that there was a spike in my hormone levels and that I should *probably* do a test."

Hull glanced approvingly at his surroundings as he and Nadimiche followed the enforcement clerk along the minimum-security corridor to the suite housing his family. He was pleased that he'd opted for the so-called Premium Retrieval Package. This section of the detention centre was clearly worlds away in terms of comfort from the cramped cells housing most of the inmates. He knew that Bryce would recognize that difference and hopefully, she'd appreciate the gesture. More importantly, it ought to have made the experience a non-traumatising one for the kids. *Who knows – maybe Fisher will even be able to look back and mistake it as having been some kind of cheap hotel when he's older.*

He entered the suite alone: the enforcement clerk having departed once she'd unlocked the door, and Nadimiche opting to wait outside on the courtesy bench. There was an awkward silence at first. Then Bryce scrambled up from the couch and ran to him, flinging her arms around his neck and sobbing into his shirt. "Greg, I'm so sorry! I know I had to agree to leave you for the kids' sakes during that awful investigation, but I never should have let myself fall for all of that negativity! It was just that Cassandra had already been chipping away at us for weeks, and then everyone over in England kept twisting things and for a little while I almost started to believe them...!"

"Hey, it's okay now, baby, it's fine!" Hull hugged her tightly, kissing the top of her head. "You're back now, and that's all that really matters. I proved my innocence beyond any doubt, thanks to Volker. Children's Services have already signed off on that. They're *pleased* with how you handled the situation, and so am I. You put our kids' wellbeing first, as a good parent always should. We'll move on from here *together*, as a family, I promise."

Bryce sniffled. "What about Rayne?"

"Put simply, Susan's lying her ass off about my

having signed over custody. Those papers have what looks like my signature on them, sure, but I've got an entire department full of ANI operatives who can confirm that I was busy taking care of a high priority witness all of last Tuesday." He scowled. "I'd be prepared to bet that if anyone were to check for trace epithelial content on the papers, the forensics would match up with my older self and not me. Fun fact: the cloning technique that was involved in making this body means that his DNA shows up as being twenty years older than mine."

His fiancée rubbed at her eyes. "So...so we'll get her back, right?"

"Yeah, of course we will! I've already spoken to our legal team, and they say it's a sure thing. It's just going to take some time, that's all." Hull stepped back and began signing along with his words. "Come on. I want to see about catching up on all of the hugs I owe Fisher. I've got some for Tessa too, if she wants them."

Fisher proved fully on board with that suggestion; happily snuggling into Hull's chest when lifted, and showing off the crayon drawing that he was working on. "I drawing the big bird that I saw at the fair, Daddy! It has claws!"

Hull beamed at his son. "Wow, it sure does, buddy! This is a *great* drawing, thank you. Can I have it for my desk at work once it's done?"

"Okay, Daddy. I got to draw more first."

In contrast, the young Martian just glowered at both adults present from where she sat hunched up on the couch. Vinnie spoke up on her behalf. "If you two twisted lovebirds *really* want to make nice with her, maybe you ought to think about supporting her heritage a little! At least that English bunch had agreed to let her celebrate Pentecost this Thursday and Friday."

Bryce looked harried as she strapped Fisher into his travel pod; ducking to avoid the toddler's attempt to scribble on her face. "That's true, Greg. I almost forgot about it, sorry."

"Don't worry, baby. It's still only Monday." Hull turned his attention to Tessa. "We should be finished moving into our new house by Wednesday afternoon, baby bird. I'll take you shopping for whatever stuff you need to celebrate Pentecost once that's done."

Tessa didn't look convinced as she signed her reply. "What about Az? We were going to video chat so we could study the Torah together, and

recite the Yizkor."

"A video chat, huh?" Hull sighed. "I'll have to ask your social worker if that's appropriate before I can make any promises."

"That's still something more than nothing at least!" Vinnie elbowed the girl. "See? I told you that it couldn't hurt to just ask about it!"

Chapter Fourteen – Troll Juice

Volker was back on her feet, albeit with the aid of a cane, when a bleary-eyed Hull answered the door of the safe house to her polite knock on Monday night. "It's nearly midnight, ma'am. What are you doing here this late?"

"You were not in the office today and I needed to speak with you about a work-related matter." She handed him a memory chip and walked past him into the entrance hall. "In addition, I wished to assess your current familial situation in person."

"I'm not sure if you realise, but that last part sounds kind of nosy." Hull locked the front door again before accompanying his boss to the den.

"I was under the impression that such an assessment would be deemed as appropriate

supervisory interaction.”

“Uh, it might be, but not this late at night. Everyone’s in bed here. I was too, actually.”

Volker ignored his pointed hint and sat down on the couch. “We are preparing to send a team to Deimos Base in the wake of the Ceres matter. It shall leave on Friday afternoon. If you truly wish to reunite with your daughter then I would advise you to be part of it.”

That got his full attention. “Okay! Officially wide awake and listening to you, ma’am.”

“All of the relevant data is on the memory chip. Our primary mission is to escort the abducted scientists back to Miami. We shall also complete a full search of the C.A.K.E facility. Unofficially, we are also encouraged to observe and report on whatever we see of the Szenoldyans whilst there, including their interactions with the Marines.”

Hull nodded. “I caught the initial report from Deimos Base before I left work on Sunday evening, and I’ve seen the news coverage since then. Honestly, it all seems fantastical, and not to mention a bit too good to be true. I mean, sentient alien life, with access to planet destroying technology, and they’re talked down by one random soldier? That’s

just straight out of an old movie, ma'am! No offence to Susan, but what if she and her people have dropped the ball on things with their take?"

"You are not the only one with such concerns, Agent Hull, hence our unofficial role. It would not be prudent to risk sending diplomats or other such important civil servants at this stage."

"In other words, ANI agents count as expendable should things go wrong." Hull scowled. "Do we at least get to bring an anthropologist? This seems like a mission where one of those would be useful."

Volker nodded. "I have a degree in Cultural Anthropology."

"You also have a pre-existing injury, ma'am. Are you sure space travel is safe for that?"

"I have already been cleared to participate, Agent Hull. Our superiors believe that my psionic capabilities may prove useful in establishing further communication with the Szenoldyans."

Her choice of words reminded Hull of PID's interest in Nadimiche. An idea came to him. "Ma'am, do you suppose that we could also get clearance for an intern on this mission? Only I happen to know a very talented young dampener

who's stuck spinning her wheels at the moment thanks to PID trying to forcibly recruit her."

Campbell paused in his efforts at making breakfast to frown at the date on the digital clock on the door of the safe house refrigerator. "I say, Moxton, did you realise that it's practically the anniversary of the first time we were all stuck here?"

The handler remained seated at the kitchen table with his early morning coffee. "I know. I *also* know that you drew the short straw for making breakfast this morning."

"I'm getting to it!" Campbell scowled and began rummaging through the paltry contents of the refrigerator. "It might be easier if we had decent ingredients to work with!"

"Well, what do we have?" Moxton resigned himself once more to the peculiar incapability of field operatives and rose to his feet. "I know Spence rang ahead and had the place stocked, so there must be *something* edible in there."

"Let's see: there are salad leaves, about three litres of synthetic protein blend milk substitute, and a block of something unidentifiable that I presume to also be vegan." Campbell held the door of the

appliance open to demonstrate. "All delightfully healthy, of course, but still nothing toddlers will eat."

Moxton stared for a moment at the food, and then nodded. "Troll juice."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We'll blend it all up to make green smoothies and tell them that it's troll juice." Moxton was already on his way to the sink with the salad leaves. "Kids love that sort of thing."

Campbell shook his head. "You might be able to convince Sam and the older three to try it, but not Primrose. Zoe says that she's going through a phase of not liking anything green."

"She can have unicorn juice instead."

The former field operative blinked. "What's unicorn juice?"

"Troll juice without any salad leaves added." Moxton nodded towards the bench. "Go set up the blender. We need to work out a convincing speech about how all real princesses drink unicorn juice."

"We can't call it *that*!"

Moxton glowered at him. "They're *toddlers*. They don't have any concept of innuendo yet. Get your mind out of the gutter!"

"Ha, talk about and so said the pot! I *meant* that

she'd be upset if she thought we'd blended up a unicorn for breakfast, but now I can't forget what you just implied. I think the word juice is forever ruined for me." Campbell choked back laughter as he put the blender together. "Perhaps we can use alliteration and call it a magical mushroom mixture, or something."

"Too many drug related connotations." Moxton dropped the rinsed leaves into a colander to drain. "We'll just say it's a special potion, all the way from fairy land, as a reward for her being so brave yesterday. Tell her the fairies keep their ingredients top secret."

Spence padded barefoot into the kitchen, dressed in dull grey cotton jog bottoms and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. "Right: Ms Rusdyle is minding the smalls while Miss Hedturner wakes the older three up. We also have a small wager going on as to whether breakfast is going to occur without any of us intervening. What's all this chatter about fairies?"

Campbell pointed at the blender. "Moxton came up with a brilliant solution to our food problems. We're making vegan smoothies."

Moxton nodded. "We're trying to think up fun

names for them to tempt Sam and Primrose. Do you think the older three will be okay with drinking them as is? I know you packed formula for the babies."

Spence stared at the two men, before opening the nearest upper cabinet and pulling out a packet of toaster waffles. "I *think* I just won that wager. There are a dozen eggs in the pottery hen on the sideboard. Do feel free to check the rest of the cabinets for other options. Mr Dobos should be back from his patrol of the perimeter sometime in the next ten minutes, so either save him some of that coffee or put another pot on. I'm going to go and check whether Quincy has finished recharging yet."

The reassuring drabness of sickbay blurred into view around Kennedy as she awoke. Grimacing at how dry her mouth felt, she wriggled into a sitting position on the gurney. "Ugh...anybody here who'd care to report as to what in the heck I've missed? Is Private Keller okay?"

"Keller's fine, ma'am; he walked out of here under his own steam an hour ago. Field medic did a good job." Lance Corporal Janie Barrows, Deimos Base's Chief Medical Officer, handed her a plastic

tumbler of water. "You'll need to drink this, ma'am. As to what all you've missed, for starters, it's Tuesday now."

"I guess that explains the unfortunate tube situation." Kennedy sipped gratefully at her water. "Any chance that you ain't recording my little nap as a coma, doc'?"

Barrows was busy checking one of the monitors. "You were unconscious and non-responsive long enough to require a nutrient drip and catheterising, ma'am. What do you think my report says?"

"Okay then, moving on. What else happened?"

"Well, those aliens you made peace with handed over all seven of the surviving inhabitants of the C.A.K.E facility." The medic ticked something off on Kennedy's chart, before snapping on a pair of latex gloves. "Of course, they're all claiming that they were kidnapped – Woods said to tell you that ANI's sending a team to help with processing them."

"Good to know. I take it that we ain't had any further hostilities with the Szenoldyans?"

"Not that I've heard about so far. Apparently, the diplomats are going out of their minds about meeting them." Barrows shook her head and

detached the drip from the cannula on the back of Kennedy's right hand. "Okay: I'm leaving the rest in place for now in case you relapse, ma'am. I'll go let Woods know that you're back with us before he runs out of excuses to keep hovering outside my sickbay. Oh, and on a related note, he hasn't set that baby down since you handed her off to him. Maybe you can order him to get some rest now."

Woods was somehow both scowling and smirking as he handed Ellie to Kennedy. "Christmas special, ma'am, you mark my words."

"I ain't following, Woods." Kennedy nuzzled her daughter's scalp fondly. "How about you, Ellie – do you know what he's talking about?"

The older Marine snorted. "I'm talking about the goons running the *Captain Mars* franchise, ma'am. They're going to market what happened on Ceres for every last cent."

Kennedy groaned. "It's only May now! Surely, it'll all have blown over and been forgotten before December gets here?"

"Did you miss the part wherein you discovered a new sentient species *and* saved the entire human race from attempted annihilation, ma'am?"

"I was hoping that maybe people higher up the

damn food chain than me would want to step in and scoop up all of the credit for both those things, Woods."

He shook his head. "Not a chance, Marine. You went and played hero again, and it's sticking to your record like muck to a mud flap!"

"Maybe I can spin things in my report so as Alonzo gets most of the credit."

"Alonzo ain't got time for that, ma'am. She's too busy auctioning off unworn socks to the gullible but creepy. On a related note, some of your fans are weird."

"Yeah, some of them are." Kennedy thought about Phil's reaction to learning the truth behind his favourite superhero. "Not all of them though; there's probably hope for the kids, at least."

The wall panel that linked sickbay to the base's internal communication channel lit up abruptly. Alonzo's face appeared on screen. "Doc's got you flagged as fit for desk related duties, ma'am, so I figured you'd want read in immediately. That big bug you uh, talked to, back on Ceres? His people have figured out how to use the video communications system there, but he's asking permission to switch to their own version of

holographic projection instead. He wants to talk to you about something they've found in one of C.A.K.E's lab rooms. Apparently, it looks as if there might be more abductees being held there in stasis."

Kennedy nodded. "Okay, Private. Patch the signal through to the emitters here in sickbay."

"Yes ma'am."

The next ten minutes were a mixed bag in terms of officially approved diplomatic methods. Kennedy and Woods were both more than impressed with the quality of Szenoldyan holographic communications. The projected image of their contact within the alien species could readily have passed as the real thing. Well, aside from his being able to pass through solid objects, of course, but as it transpired even *that* aspect proved fortuitous. The unforeseen presence of an almost eight-foot-high insectoid in sickbay gave Barrows such a shock when she came in to check on her patient, that Woods wanted to use it in future base wide training exercises. "Going forwards, every Marine on Deimos Base ought to be expected to have a reaction time equal to or better than that of the CMO! Besides, you have to admit that that was

a damned inventive use for a fold-up chair, ma'am."

The Szenoldyan agreed with him. "Your females so far have all been impressively aggressive specimens, Captain. You should be proud of them."

"I am." Inwardly, Kennedy just hoped that Barrows would be less pissed off by the time she came back to do her next check. "Still, right now I think we should focus on what your people have found. You say these other humans appear to be in stasis chambers?"

"Yes." The alien inclined his head. "We had wondered if perhaps it was how your species house their young until maturity, but the presence of your own nymph would appear to preclude this."

Kennedy glanced down at her sleeping daughter and then stared back at the projection. "Wait – there are *kids* over there?"

"Our drones have concluded that fifty percent of the occupied chambers contain juvenile specimens. The remainder are adults."

Woods had quit smiling. "I reckon we'd better send word about this to Earth so that ANI knows to send appropriate personnel along for the retrieval, ma'am."

“Agreed, Gunny – let’s just be sure of the numbers involved first. Given the journey times that are involved, we wouldn’t want them to end up needing to send back to Earth for a bigger transport vessel.”

Chapter Fifteen – If You Did

Campbell stared out of the window of the bedroom assigned to him and his son, enjoying the feel of the summer sunlight through the glass. Below, the nondescript BIINT vehicle carrying Tanya, Jolley, and the pair of Irish operatives whom they were escorting had just pulled up outside the front door of the safe house. The driver's face bore the usual stoic blankness of such professionals. Exiting the front passenger door, the female Irish operative looked little better. Her male colleague was beaming and chatting with Tanya as he helped her out of the back seat. Jolley, sliding out on the car's opposite side, was quite openly laughing. *It looks as if relations with the Kildare lot are going smoothly, anyhow.*

Behind him, Sam continued to ignore his supposed need for an afternoon nap; instead wobbling happily in what were undoubtedly increasingly dizzy loops of the room. "Careful, son – mind you don't trip on the rug."

At worst, the boy would fall over. Since such an event was, in Campbell's opinion, an inevitable part of learning to walk, the former spy wasn't worried. He'd already checked off the list of potential hazards. There were no sharp corners anywhere at his son's head height, the carpet was thick enough to prevent injury, and there was a safety gate fitted across the bedroom doorway. In fact, it was far better to learn about gravity and so forth in this sort of environment than it would be outside. *Sam can't hurt himself playing in here. I might as well let him enjoy getting to grips with toddling.*

For some reason, Zoe didn't share this approach to parenting, and had flounced off back downstairs with Primrose; muttering angrily about stupid men, lazy au pairs, and the importance of routine. Well, he'd grant her that first part, but it was hardly fair to cast aspersions on poor Heidi! Moreover, come to think of it, he didn't recall enforced naps having

been discussed during their stay as neighbours at the marina either. *We didn't have an audience then, of course. It's really starting to look as though she's a far better hypocrite than she is an artist.*

He supposed that was uncharitable of him. It was hardly Zoe's fault she and her daughter had been caught up in all of this. Then again, it wasn't really Campbell's fault either. No – the only ones at fault there were Miller's lot, with their sick determination for revenge. One might have thought that they would have given up by now, what with their ringleader dead, and then Spence's resultant vendetta. *At least the latter seems to have kicked Irish Intelligence into gear.*

Sam gave an excited sounding squawk then. "Ka! Dada, Ka!"

Campbell turned around as his son toddled towards the doorway. Kathryn was standing just outside the safety gate, her thin arms wrapped tightly around the oversized teddy bear he'd bought for her last April. The realisation of how much had occurred since then brought him up sharply. *I didn't just betray Spence. I betrayed the kids too. I left them – oh Christ, I left them twice, actually; for all that Kathryn here kept calling it my*

having taken an extra-long time to come home from where I'd gone whilst we all thought that Spence and the babies were dead.

He'd thought that his world had ended. Instead, he'd lived through losing them, gotten them back through the thinnest of chances, and then he'd thrown all of it away – and for what, sex? Albeit copious amounts of it during the phase when the affair was still an illicit matter, cobbled together from stolen moments and desperation, well, at least on *his* side. With hindsight, Vasnetsova had simply been following the standard honey trap script. How on Earth hadn't he recognised it for that at the time? *No, more importantly, why should I ever even have needed to recognise it? It shouldn't take having suspicions of espionage to remind one not to bloody well cheat on one's partner!*

Kathryn was still standing there: frowning at Sam, who had flumped down onto his bottom beside the base of the safety gate, in that boneless seeming way of the very young. "He tried to say my name."

"Of course he did. He knows you." Campbell walked as quickly as he could to the doorway. "You're practically his big sister."

She blinked. "But you *left*, and now Aunty Val

doesn't want to let you come back."

"I don't blame them." Campbell bent and lifted his son away from the gate so that the girl could enter. "I still need to do a lot of apologising for what I did, Kathryn. I betrayed everyone's trust in me, and Spence is absolutely and utterly right not to just let that go."

"Oh." Kathryn wandered over to the window with her bear. "Will you ever make things okay again, Craig?"

He set Sam down in his travel cot and handed him a toy truck. "I'm certainly going to *try*. Do you mind staying here and keeping an eye on Sam whilst I start?"

The girl shot across the room and hugged him. "I'll babysit him forever and ever if you like, just as long as you fix everything back to how it was so that we can all go home! Auntie Val's downstairs."

Kennedy tamped down on her visceral reaction to the conversation she was enduring. The problem with talking to ANI via video link like this was that it had created an opportunity for Hull to insist on talking to her afterwards. *Goddamn asshole had to be in the office when we reported our latest news.*

Oh well, I guess my luck had to run out sometime.

The asshole in question had just spent a solid five minutes listing reasons for Kennedy not to retain custody of her daughter. At least he seemed to be winding down a little now, thank crap. "Nobody's ever going to trust you over me when it comes to looking after her, Susan."

"That figures. Terrans always do like to emphasise how superior you are compared to Martians."

Hull shrugged. "Hey, there's no point in arguing with the system, Susan. Earth is always going to be ranked above the Red Planet, and ditto our respective populations; that's just how things are. Fair or not, I would have expected you of all people to grasp that by now. Or have you banged your head and forgotten which of us the Family Courts awarded custody to?"

"I ain't forgotten anything." Kennedy didn't quite bother to smile. "Go right ahead and keep underestimating me. I double damn well *dare* you."

With that, she cut the video feed. There was honestly only so far that even Martian stoicism could take you before you ended up cussing someone out, and Barrows wouldn't be happy if her blood pressure spiked. Besides, that kind of

tantrum wouldn't look good in court if they pulled up the video as evidence: something that Hull seemed to have momentarily forgotten just now. *Remain the more clearly stable adult, Marine. Just remember that you're not the one whose house got blown to bits either.*

"You should have eaten him." The Szenoldyan flexed his raptorial forelimbs almost lazily, displaying the deceptively delicate looking comb-like serrations fringing the undersides of tibia and femur. "I say that as a fellow male."

Kennedy sighed. "I keep telling you, humans don't eat one another!"

"I still don't see the reasoning behind that."

"Well, for one thing, we don't have the same kind of anatomy as your species does. Our jaws don't open wide enough to encompass someone else's skull, and we ain't capable of decapitating much of anything with our teeth either."

Her companion tilted his head as though perplexed by this revelation. "How is it that any of you are alive?"

It looked as if it was time for another round of holographic interspecies diplomacy. *Huh – it's funny how they never bother showing that side of my job*

in any of the damn cartoons.

Campbell found Spence alone in the conservatory; finishing a phone call. The non-gender tucked their mobile away as he joined them. "That was Agent Caulfield. NIT successfully captured a trio of named threats posing as golfers on the course behind Latimer Hill this morning. It seems that the late Mr Miller's surviving associates aren't wholly sure of which house you were living in."

"I'd be glad of that if only I didn't know what passes as that lot's idea of a reasonable process of elimination." Campbell shut the door leading back into the house. "Can we talk about us please, Spence?"

Spence shrugged. "Didn't we already finish doing that back in that damnable greenhouse, Mr Campbell?"

"No. At least, not to any degree that would satisfy Kathryn."

"She's changed tactics then. I suppose I ought to have anticipated that she'd try something other than nagging me now that we're all stuck here together."

The former spy decided this was tacit permission to keep talking. "I miss what we had as a family before I mucked everything up. I was the one primarily at fault; I know that, but...!"

Spence bolted. The thin glass forming the exterior door of the conservatory rattled in its frame as they slammed it behind them.

<advisory – wrongdialogueoptionselected>
Quincy glided out into view from beneath the coffee table. <opinion – notcoolbro>

"Please do piss off, Quincy." Campbell opened the door to give the little robot access into the rear hall of the house. "I need to be alone with my thoughts for a bit."

In the end, it was well over an hour before he dared approach Spence again. This time, the non-gender was in the kitchen, heating up formula in the microwave. They glared at him as he entered. "I had Miss Hedturner bring your son down to the front sitting room with the other smalls. In future, don't rope any of my charges in as babysitter."

Campbell nodded. "I won't."

"You may inform Ms Rusdyle that as your girlfriend, the same thing applies to her."

"Zoe's just a friend, Spence." He hoped that was

still the case anyhow. "I'm ah, not her *type*, even assuming that the terrorist issue doesn't cause her to cut all contact with me."

"Oh." Spence mulled over that bit of information. "Well, lesbian or not, she can still find her own *au pair*."

"I'll let her know." Campbell took a deep breath. "It was a honey trap and I fell for it. That's what I was trying to say earlier; that I was tricked, but that it's no excuse, since I shouldn't have let myself even notice that there was bait being dangled to begin with. That's what I meant when I said *primarily*. I wasn't trying to wriggle out of accepting blame."

The sudden beep of the microwave caught Spence's attention. When they turned back from removing the jug of formula, Campbell was halfway out of the door. The non-gender hesitated for a moment, and then called after him. "Mr Campbell, wait! There's something I need to ask – if Vasnetsova had kept her nerve back at New Royal, say she'd bluffed and claimed that she was who she said. Would you have taken her side over mine?"

He shook his head immediately; his jaw set in a stern line. "No, though I don't doubt that I'd have

wanted to stand by her – I mean, at the time I did feel for Carol...well, who I thought was Carol, anyhow. Still, it wouldn't have mattered. You'd accused her outright and I know you don't make those sorts of errors. Even if you did, and she had been who she pretended, the best way to prove her innocence would have been to follow procedure and take her in."

"I just about followed the thread of that." Spence set the jug down on the bench. "I'm glad I asked you. I'd worried that if she *had* bluffed, then you might have accused me of making it all up out of jealousy."

Campbell's eyes softened. "Oh, Spence, no: never that! You're not that sort of person."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

He smiled. "I mean that I know I can always trust you. All of the field operatives do. It's why you're so good as Housekeeping. You're honest."

"And you aren't." Spence locked eyes with him then. "You lie all of the time, even to yourself. It's why you were such a bloody successful spy – that, and your evident talent for abruptly moving on."

Campbell held his ground along with his temper. "You know that's all part of the job. They train us to

compartmentalise."

"It requires a particular sort of mindset to begin with though. We both know *that*."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying we're two of a kind, Housekeeping?"

"You're doing the suave on demand thing again. It never fails to bemuse me how anyone ever falls for it." Spence opened the nearest of the two freshly sterilised bottles and poured in a measure of the now completed formula. "For what it's worth, I miss what we had too. I like to think we might even have managed to grow something real out of it if we'd only had enough time spared to us between Tresweld and Vasnetsova. Perhaps you'd have spotted what she was up to if you hadn't still been grieving."

"Perhaps I might have done." Campbell found his gaze once again drawn to the little clock on the refrigerator door. "That first time with Vasnetsova...it was exactly four years to the day from when I met Sarah."

"I know. That's why Miller staged his assassination attempt when he did: it was the anniversary of the start of Operation White Ferret. I read the file on my way over to Ireland. You did a good job with it,

Craig."

He felt a little of the tension between them bleed away with the use of his first name. "Does this mean that we're heading back towards being on decent terms with one another, canary?"

Spence sighed, but didn't rebuke him for the nickname. "What do *you* think?"

"I think it's long past being my turn to do feeds for Jacamar and Honeyguide." Campbell nodded at the bottles. "If you don't mind carrying those through for me, I'd like to see what we can grow together out of a fresh start."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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