

Too Many Fish

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Eight

E.V. GREIG

Too Many Fish
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TOO MANY FISH

In the direct sequel to *Dance Towards The Cloud*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence begins moving on with their life, albeit reluctantly. Meanwhile, a horrific biological attack takes place in Miami. With the population of the city decimated, some of the survivors make easy targets for those with predatory inclinations.

Then there's the unfortunate matter of the neo-pagan murder cult...

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Chapter One – More Than A Tad

“I could tell you that none of this is personal, but I'd be lying.” Nightingale Spence paused in their rhetoric to level their handgun and put a second bullet in their victim's spleen. “You see, you made it all too bloody personal when you sent a six man strong kill team to my home on the evening of the Tuesday before last, and a lone would-be assassin the Sunday immediately preceding that.”

The pyjama-clad middle-aged man on the floor of the derelict barn sobbed, clutching his ruined abdomen. “Sweet Jesus, look I swear to fuck I don't know what you're talking about...!”

This time the non-gender blew off the Irishman's left kneecap, not so much as blinking at the resultant agonised howl. “We both know that nobody so much as farts in your organisation

without your say-so beforehand. Those bastards came to my home with your blessing – they threatened my family; my *children*!”

He groaned, coughing and spluttering on his own blood. “I never gave my permission for anything like that; it's the God's own truth! Whoever did it was acting alone – ah, Christ, you have to believe me! Sure I'd never approve something like that; not with children and wee babies involved...!”

The bullet passed straight through his right shoulder and flattened itself against the concrete floor underneath. Spence waited until the screaming quietened back into moans before replying. “I only said *children*. If you really don't know anything about what happened, then what made you mention babies?”

A second man's voice rumbled then from the smaller entrance cut into the rusted metal door to the barn. “Because, between the pain and the fear that you've inflicted on him he's got too much adrenaline coursing through his veins to be able to think clearly.”

Spence glanced down resignedly at the assortment of vivid green targeting marks now patterning the dusty concrete floor around their

booted feet. "If you're planning on shooting me, then I suggest that you tell your snipers to shift their collective aim by more than a tad."

"Ah sure now I don't think that would go down very well with those in charge of either of us." The newcomer stepped into view: late thirties, lean and tall, with a mop of sandy hair, hazel eyes, and clad from feet to stubble-covered jaw line in the utilitarian black field uniform of Irish Intelligence. "So – would you maybe be done here? Only it's a powerful long drive back to base and I'd sooner we hit the road before the worst of the morning traffic starts."

Spence holstered their gun and laced their fingers behind the nape of their neck, scowling as they walked towards their unwanted escort. "I don't suppose Irish Intelligence plans to help me with tracking down the rest of those involved?"

The man on the floor howled at the sandy haired operative. "Keep that fucking lunatic away from me, for Christ's sake! I want to bring charges...!"

His balding head slammed backwards abruptly against the floor: body convulsing under a hail of bullets as the snipers hidden in the rafters opened fire. Spence's new companion shrugged. "Ah sure

he never would have made it as far as the hospital anyhow."

"And just how far am I likely to make it?" Spence eyed the nondescript hover car in front of them warily. "Is this one of those one way trips?"

"My instructions are to bring you in alive." The Irish operative made his way around to the driver's side. "But if it would be more of an authentic experience, then you're welcome to get in the boot?"

"I'll pass." The thin non-gender slipped into the passenger seat and glanced back towards the nascent fire that would eventually destroy the barn. "What about his car? I borrowed it to bring him out here."

"It's all taken care of. I'm Kieran Reid, by the way. So my boss tells me that we're in the same job?"

"I trust that you don't intend to end every other sentence from here on in with an inferred question mark, Mr Reid."

He chuckled as he started the engine, pulling away from the dilapidated smallholding, and out onto the mile long narrow laneway leading back to the main road. "I suppose that means that I

shouldn't ask whether or not you noticed us sneaking up on you then."

"It's been a long two weeks."

"Aye, well there's crisps and a couple of wee tins of fizzy drink there in the glove compartment if you're starved."

Spence thought back to the time that Leister had taught them how to rig up an improvised stun gun of sorts within just such a compartment, which would fire the instant someone opened it. "No thank you. I'll get something later."

"Do you fancy a sausage soda instead? We can stop at one of the local bakeries on the way – O'Keeffe's should be open by the time we're passing it, or there's always the drive-through bit for the burger place." Reid paused for a moment. "Ah now you're not thinking that you're in custody or anything stupid? Because when I said they told me to bring you in, I only meant that the ones in charge reckoned you'd done enough damage to the ecosystem as it were!"

"Does that mean that this is Ireland's idea of a cooperative venture then?"

"Aye, though you're not getting that in writing any time soon, if you take my meaning?" He

glanced sideways: winking at his passenger. "Look, that fucker got what was coming to him – he's stirred up too much bother for too many people. If it hadn't been you, then it would've been somebody, okay?"

"Okay." Spence relaxed slightly. "So tell me, Mr Reid – precisely what is a sausage soda, and how does one eat or drink it?"

Greg Hull rolled to his feet at the first hint of sound from the crib in the corner of the bedroom. Three in the morning was surely a time reserved for the parents of infants and other young human beings. Leaving his fiancée to sleep, the pyjama clad ANI agent hurried to tend to the house's youngest occupant. Still too young for her nursery, little Rayne was actually a pretty good sleeper, but God help anyone who thought that she'd deign to wait for her early morning feed upon waking! *I guess you take after me there, princess.*

She settled as soon as he lifted her: latching onto the rubber teat of the bottle almost sleepily. In truth, Hull cherished these quiet moments. He had left for the mission last month as parent to one daughter and come home halfway knowing that he'd end

up with two. It was the only practical solution really. Arranging protective custody for any child was challenging; add in the fact that Tessa required caregivers who were fluent in sign language, *and* amenable to taking on a Martian, and the list of options shrank even further. *It's just lucky that Bryce and I have enough space at home to volunteer.*

One empty bottle and a diaper change later, and Rayne was content to go back in her crib. She'd sleep through until six-thirty easily, when Bryce would get her up for the day along with Fisher. Hull would have to wrangle with Tessa: at ten days into her placement with them, the young Martian was still prone to violent tantrums. *You're really your own worst enemy, baby bird.*

The poor kid had a lot to get used to, he supposed, wryly; what with people parenting her correctly for the first time in her life, not to mention having to submit to finally getting all of her vaccinations! Then there was adjusting to simply living here on Earth, where gravity was inherently stronger than on Mars or aboard a spaceship. Little wonder that she seemed so shell-shocked. Still, she'd recover, eventually. *You're so much better off for having us as your family, Tessa. One day*

you'll understand that.

"I don't usually do that." Spence shifted a little in the passenger seat and took another sip of tea, grimacing at the aftertaste from the polystyrene cup. "Take off to another country on a murderous revenge spree, I mean. Generally I'm the one cleaning up after those sorts of situations."

"Aye, they told me as much." Reid tore open the paper wrapping for his sausage and egg soda, and glanced around at the empty car park behind the little bakery. "It's probably stress. All the years of tidying up for other people; sure, it would get to anybody eventually!"

"Are you looking for anyone in particular, or was that just a stay alive sort of check?"

He grinned. "Ah, it's nothing that serious. I'm just keeping an eye out for the traffic wardens – they're still after me for the last time that I parked in here without paying!"

"One of the many unacknowledged benefits of driving a vehicle that belongs to an Intelligence agency, I suppose. Nobody can trace you." Spence balanced the tea on the dashboard and opened their breakfast warily. "So essentially a

sausage soda is a sort of deconstructed pizza?"

"Well I suppose there's a wee bit of a similarity there. Do you not have soda bread over in England?"

"Possibly within specialist food emporiums – I've never had cause to look for it either way."

The Irish operative chuckled and took a mouthful of toasted soda: egg yolk dripping down onto his napkin as he chewed and swallowed. "I don't think that I know anyone else who uses the word emporium! Are they all as posh as you back at BIINT Headquarters?"

"I'm *not* posh." The non-gender picked off a corner of the soda and nibbled at it. "I'm merely well-educated; there's a distinct difference between the two."

"Well you sound posh to me, love."

"Don't call me that. It's misogynistic and highly unprofessional."

"Okay so." Reid shrugged happily and focused his attentions back on his food for a while. "It's all ducks and horses though."

Spence stared at him in utter bemusement. "I don't follow – ducks and horses? What does that mean?"

"Ah, you know; if it looks like one, and it sounds like one, then it's daft to expect a zebra!"

"Those are two entirely separate sayings."

"And there you go again: spoken like a true posh bird if ever I heard one!"

His passenger snorted. "Oh, go get your ruddy ears checked, you pillock!"

"Don't you mean to say *charming* pillock?" Reid tossed the remains of his breakfast onto the dashboard and angled himself slightly in his seat: twisting round to drape his left arm across the back of Spence's shoulders, his right hand stroking their thigh. "You know; with all my roguish Irish ways and so on?"

"Get your hands off me!" Spence shoved him away angrily: mashing their barely touched food across the front of his tactical gear in the process. "What the bloody Hell is wrong with you, Mr Reid? This is a retrieval op, not a blind date!"

He scowled as he wiped away the worst of the food. "Well excuse me away to fuck for wasting my time on you then, you skinny wee cock tease! And that's nine fifty that you owe me for breakfast, by the way!"

"I'll be sure to have my agency transfer the

money to your agency's coffers post haste." Spence closed their hand around the hilt of the knife strapped to their left thigh, and shifted the pitch of their words slightly. "Now I suggest that you drive us directly to the Kildare branch headquarters. I've had quite enough of your particular brand of Irish hospitality."

After living with her for two weeks, Craig Campbell had concluded that Carol Bingham simply didn't do authority, or at least not in any form that was acknowledged by adolescent boys. As such, the former spy was settling into the role of father figure to John and Phil considerably faster than might have been deemed as appropriate. It was that or let them continue to run amok. The latter wasn't sensible, especially not with his own son in the mix: at fourteen and a half months old, Sam was too fragile and impressionable!

He didn't yet have clearance to read Carol and her boys in on the truth of his erstwhile profession, or on the details of the Irish matter. That meant lying about what had happened the previous fortnight – passing off the thwarted home invasion two doors up as an ordinary burglary, and the subsequent NIT

protective detail still patrolling the area as nothing more than part of the service offered by the company behind the alarm. *Why yes, Nightingale insisted on having the very best in home security, don't you know; what with the children to think of.*

Incredibly, Carol believed him. Her naivety made him feel even worse. The poor woman knew nothing of espionage beyond the brightly skewed portrayals she had seen in films and on television. Since such things were fictional, she didn't think to look for signs of them in her life. Campbell feared learning that a whole other world of shadowy intrigue had begun to overlap her cheerful domesticity would horrify her. Half of him hoped never to need to mention it at all. The other half was busy determining the route from Poole to the east coast of Ireland by yacht, physical limitations be damned.

Chapter Two – Someone Reliable

“Daniel Moxton – I’m here to collect Nightingale Spence.” The driver held out his BIINT ID for inspection. “Are they here yet?”

The grey bearded man at the desk nodded and slid his palm across the biometric access panel. The tinted security doors to the right of the reception area glided open. “You’re looking for the break room; third on your left, just after the holographic plants. Here – do us a favour and tell her well fucking done, won’t you?”

Moxton muttered a vague affirmative and went on his way. Clearly, the concept of gender neutrality still wasn’t fully acknowledged here in darkest Kildare. *I wonder how Spence has been coping with that aspect of their trip.*

His colleague had been lying curled up on a small leatherette settee in the far corner of the

break room. They scrambled to their feet as he opened the door. "Ah, Mr Moxton, it's you, finally! What kept you anyhow? I've been here for almost four hours."

"There was a delay with the ferry service over at Holyhead – some sort of an accident with an automated lorry. We ended up not reaching Dublin until the middle of the morning rush hour, and once we were finally clear of all that, we got stuck doing five miles per hour amid what seemed like an unending river of belligerent sheep. So, how was your extremely personal and not at all officially sanctioned visit to Ireland?"

"It rained." Spence shouldered their kit bag. "Let's go before they decide to bury us both in a peat bog after all."

Moxton shrugged and held the door open. "I got the impression from the chap at the front desk that you're rather well liked here."

"Not by everyone."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

The smaller operative shook their head. "I'll tell you once we're safely in the car. I trust that you left someone reliable keeping an eye on it?"

"Yeah: Quincy." The driver eyed Spence's tensor

than usual expression while they waited for the security doors to open again. "You somehow look worse than before you left. Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't this exercise supposed to lessen the amount of stuff that you needed to worry about?"

"It did in some ways." Spence strode out through the reception area and down the front steps of the building without as much as a glance around them, and made a beeline to the car. "Hello, Quincy."

<salutationsabsenteeunit>

The trio got into the sleek dark grey hover car without further conversation; Spence slumped wearily in the back seat along with their kit, and Quincy locking into position in the front passenger footwell. Moxton waited until the tall thorn hedges surrounding the isolated Kildare base were no longer visible in his rear view mirror before asking again. "So what's got you all knotted up?"

"One of the local operatives is a randy pig with absurd ideas about his sexual prowess."

"Wait a minute, did he...?"

"No!" Spence sighed. "He made a pass, that's as far as I let things go before knocking him back. However, since apparently everyone else he's ever hit on has been desperate enough to accept his

sleazy advances, it was assumed that I must have as well. Some of the comments when we arrived at the base together were beyond lewd."

<observation – notwithintheparameters>

"Quincy's not wrong there, Housekeeping."

"I know; I'm just not used to being the target of that level of crass innuendo. Perhaps it's time that I cut my hair back a bit more. Clearly I've let my appearance slide too far into femininity these past few months."

The driver frowned. "Do you honestly think that it's up to you to manage how you present in front of misogynistic wasters?"

"You can't deny that it helps."

"I don't like it when people twist things around to shift blame onto the victim."

Spence avoided his gaze in the mirror. Their voice softened a little. "Well that's fine, but as it happens I don't consider myself a victim – just a pragmatist. Anyhow, it's done with now, and I shan't ever have to see him again, so let's agree to leave it at that."

As always, breakfast had finished by seven thirty. Ordinarily, on a weekday, Hull would already have

left for work by then, but he'd taken six month's parental leave following his return from the recent joint mission. No one at ANI had queried it: presumably hoping that he wouldn't file a grievance over just how far they had gone in maintaining the damn cover story. *At least the press didn't refuse to cover Volker's announcement of how the whole thing was staged out of necessity.*

The latter statement had sparked a fresh wave of media interest. Then a particularly keen journalist joined up the dots and identified Hull as ANI's deep cover mole within GETEC; lauding him as the unsung hero behind the mega corporation's downfall. That headline broke the day after Tessa's placement with them began. It had taken most of the week to get the spotlight redirected and the story buried. Thankfully, Children's Services seemed unconcerned – that or they bought into him being some kind of champion of the people! *I guess it's far from the worst kind of reputation to have.*

Unfortunately, all the positive publicity had done nothing to endear him to Tessa. The young Martian had arrived literally kicking her social worker, and all but immediately transferred that aggression onto her new guardians. When she wasn't physically

protesting being there, she was attempting to run away. Saunders, who was still rooming in the basement, had caught her rummaging around down there shortly after breakfast: apparently looking for something that she could use to access the house's security system. *It's just as well that all of the tools are securely locked away!*

Now Hull sat down on the edge of the couch and smiled gently at Tessa. "You need to stop acting out, baby bird. I know you're still feeling sad about what happened with Mr Waverly, and that's okay. I promise that Senior Agent Volker and I didn't report him to Children's Services out of spite. It was our responsibility as ANI agents. He hadn't looked after you properly."

"Yes he did!" Her hands moved angrily: the signing difficult to keep track of. "Dad always looked after me! He loves me!"

"He left you unvaccinated, sweetie. It's his fault that you lost your hearing. Don't worry though – now that you're safe here on Earth, the doctors can treat you properly; just like when they gave you your shots." Hull held up his tablet to show her the design specifications for the nanomolecular cochlear augmentations she would be having

implanted. "Life will be so much easier for you once you have this treatment."

She glared at him through her tears. "I don't need any stupid treatment! I'm deaf, not sick, and I don't want cybernetics!"

Her rage was understandable, given how chaotic her upbringing had been so far. Still, she needed to accept that things were different now, so when she slapped the tablet away, he dropped it and caught her hands, forming his words slowly and carefully so that she could lip read. "No, sweetie – remember: kind hands and kind words. Bryce and I have rules about that."

The silence was the worst part: watching her struggle to pull free from his grip without so much as a syllable escaping her lips was heartbreaking. It was as if she'd given up even attempting to vocalise. Hull adjusted his position to cradle Tessa safely against his chest whilst she worked through her feelings. He could at least comprehend parents with poor finances choosing food over medical treatment for their offspring. Mars' wealthiest man had no such excuse. *Meanwhile, poor Tessa is the one left hurting because of it.*

His new daughter had finally quit struggling. She

hung her head: thin shoulders slumped miserably as he set her onto her feet and studied her at arms' length. Her jet-black ringlets were coming loose from her headband and the front of his shirt had snot on it. Nothing that couldn't be put right. Just like Tessa herself. *Daddy's going to fix everything for you, baby bird, you'll see.*

Carol paused from loading up the tumble dryer to look directly at Campbell; frowning as she considered what he had just said. "Oh I'm sure John didn't do it on purpose, Craig! Accidents happen, after all."

"This was no accident!" Campbell tossed the remains of his son's bright yellow comfort blanket onto the kitchen table and scowled. "For God's sake, Carol – he stole it and set it on fire!"

"It was probably something for school – a science thing; honestly, you wouldn't believe how odd some of their homework is."

"You're right: I don't believe it." The former spy folded his arms. "I think he did it deliberately to spite me after I told him off for swearing."

She sighed. "Well, maybe you should ease off a little then! It's a lot for the boys to get used to, you

know. I mean what with you and Sam moving in with us at such short notice. They're bound to be a little bit unsettled. Anyhow, did you actually see John burn the blanket?"

"Well, no, but I found it in his room."

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. Carol rounded on him: her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You had no business going in there, Craig! Teenagers need their space. Don't you remember being his age?"

Campbell stared at her. "The door was open; I could see the corner of Sam's blanket sticking out of the waste paper bin! Oh, and yes – I remember being thirteen quite well. My dad would have hit the roof if he caught me stealing!"

"It's just an old blanket!" There were tears brimming in Carol's large dark eyes. "We can buy another one – Sam won't even notice!"

"No, we *can't* just buy another, because it's not just any old blanket, Carol! His *mum* bought it for him – it still smelled of her perfume!"

The sound of Sam's wailing echoed from upstairs, interrupting their argument. Carol turned back towards the laundry: shoulders trembling slightly. "We've woken him! Perhaps you'd best go up,

Craig – I need to get the rest of these sheets done while the boys are at school.”

“Okay.” Campbell limped off towards the downstairs hall; pausing as he reached the kitchen doorway. “I’m sorry for raising my voice, Carol. Can we sit down together and talk about it properly once I get Sam resettled? At the very least something needs doing about why the smoke alarms didn’t go off.”

“All right, Craig. I’ll put the kettle on.” Carol sighed and nodded ruefully. “I know you’re right about the danger, and I’m sure that John will be sorry once he hears that the blanket was from Sam’s mum. He’s not...I mean neither of them are bad kids, not really.”

“I never said otherwise.” Campbell smiled. “We just need to find some way to convince them to stop trying to chase me away, that’s all!”

Bryce Lenard peered at the digital clock on the oven; pretending that she was still setting the timer for the slow cooked lamb casserole, instead of merely counting down the remaining minutes until David had to leave for his mandatory citizenship assessment. It seemed almost inevitable that the

panel would grant the burly SCO permission to continue to live within mainstream society instead of in a secure facility. If that happened, then Greg wanted to hire him as their official live in nanny, instead of Kassandra. Bryce still wasn't convinced that it was likely to be much of an improvement, but she didn't want to make a fuss. *I'm sure Greg knows what he's doing anyhow. He always does.*

She had plenty of other things to focus on. Ever since Mr Leister had confirmed her record expunged, the possibility of travelling north to reunite with her family in Canada had gnawed at her. The money for Fisher's compensation loomed in the secret bank account like some all too eager conspirator. Bryce knew that it definitely qualified as being a secret bank account, for two weeks on and she *still* hadn't breathed a word of it to Greg! *I meant to tell him as soon as he got back. I just...well I got flustered, that's all. There was a lot going on, what with Kassandra acting out so much that Greg had to send her away and little Rayne coming home.*

It was too late now. He'd be upset with her for not mentioning it. Maybe he'd even think that she was planning something...what? What was so bad

about her having access to money of her own? There wasn't an actual rule about that, after all. Mostly because until now, she'd been branded as a felon, and left dependent on whoever chose to support her: first Greg, and then Marcus, and then Greg again. *Marcus was a monster – I'm lucky to be back with Greg.*

Lucky wasn't quite the same thing as happy though. Bryce sighed and tapped in the sequence to set the timer again. She certainly ought to be happy. Life was good for her here in Desdemona Falls. Greg was a great provider. They had a beautiful home together, and now three adorable kids. *One of who's even mine.* Random thoughts like that kept whispering to her lately. *Well, why shouldn't I think it? Greg could at least have asked me whether I wanted to adopt Tessa before he filled out the application!*

He hadn't asked about Rayne either, but at least the baby was technically his own flesh and blood. Bryce understood that better. She hadn't imagined that Tessa's stay with them would be anything more than temporary. Given her complicity in the secret bank account, there wasn't room left to complain. *I shouldn't think of it like that! It's against the rules,*

and Greg doesn't like it when I disagree with him. It causes an atmosphere.

The blonde woman pressed the tip of her tongue against the backs of her upper teeth. No: lucky and happy definitely weren't the same. Still, she'd take what she had over being Marcus' punching bag every single time. At least Greg had never beaten her. He'd been so patient training her up; teaching her how to behave. *I should be grateful. She was grateful. Then again, grateful isn't the same thing as happy either, is it?*

Chapter Three – Whatever Happens

"What the devil were you thinking, Housekeeping?" Pembleton glared from across the desk at her recently arrived operative. "Assuming the role of self-appointed executioner is the sort of testosterone ridden lunacy that I expect from our field operatives, *not* from you!"

Spence shrugged. "To be honest I thought that all things being equal, I might as well go out on a bang, ma'am."

"And what does that mean?" The ageing spymistress narrowed her grey eyes. "I trust that you don't intend to resign out of pique?"

"I don't see that I have any real choice in the matter, ma'am. Between poor Miss Hedturner taking a more than well-deserved holiday and Mr Campbell's torrid little affair, I'm currently the sole caregiver for four children."

Their employer frowned. "Surely you can source other childcare until she gets back? Who's had them for the past fortnight anyhow?"

"Leister, ma'am, but he'll need to get home to London at some point. Besides which, an au pair won't be enough without a stay-at-home parent in the house as well. I'd need an actual nanny to live in and I can't afford to pay anyone full time on my salary."

"I see." Pembleton leaned back in her chair pensively. "And how do you plan to support yourself and your brood?"

The thin non-gender sighed. "The house belongs to my niece and nephew outright, and I'm their legal guardian, so we're sure of a roof over our collective heads at least. As for other costs, I garnered some collateral from what was left of my parent's estate after the assorted legal outgoings and compensation for their victims' loved ones. It's not a huge amount, but I've crunched the numbers and between that and my pension there should be enough to get by on. And of course once the children are all in school I'll look for part time employment."

"I have a better solution: we'll increase your

salary to meet the costs of a live in nanny and boarding school fees for the older pair." Pembleton tapped a few keys on her computer. "On second thoughts, make that boarding school fees for all four, and you can save the difference until it's needed for them. Pick out a decent replacement car too – just charge it to your expense account. Mr Moxton shall be your driver in the interim."

"That's very generous of you, ma'am."

"Oh, I can assure you that it's wholly pragmatic. I honestly don't want the bother of finding someone else to take on the role of Housekeeping just because my nephew can't control his baser urges."

Spence pulled back one of the three visitor's chairs and sat down opposite the elderly woman. "I'm halfway surprised to hear you call him that; what with the Pluto matter, ma'am."

"I thought you'd assumed me to be lying about that?"

"Blame the late Dr Lethe for reusing the genetic material once too often not to be spotted, ma'am. She brought walking proof along with her on her final excursion."

Pembleton smiled drily. "And you were careful to leave any mention of said proof out of your report –

are you regretting that now, Housekeeping?"

"No more than I do the rest of it, ma'am."

"Men often have that effect. Still, I did try to warn you not to fall prey to it. I suppose that you've learned the hard way."

The non-gender ignored the barb. "If you're still feeling generous, ma'am, then there's one more favour that I'd like to beg."

"Is it expensive?"

"No." Spence folded their hands carefully in their lap; attempting to keep from clenching their fists nervously. "I need access to the data that I streamed back from GETEC's old space station; specifically the medical files, ma'am."

"Should I prepare for news of some stupidly inventive biological weapon or is it personal?"

"The latter, ma'am – I have some doubts on the veracity of Agent Hull's version of events."

The implications of those doubts rattled dangerously around the silence of the office. Pembleton nodded slowly. "I'll have Whitby send you the relevant files. You'd do well to broach it with Leister too. He worries about you anyhow; he might as well have something a tad more specific to focus on."

"Yes ma'am."

Fisher looked up sharply from the holographic puzzle playing on the tray of his highchair just as Bryce was about to take the finished casserole out of the oven for Saunders' celebratory dinner. "Mommy, there are scary people outside! I not like them, Mommy. They have angry thoughts in their heads – they not nice people, Mommy."

Bryce scooped him up and hurried into her fiancé's home office. "Greg, Fisher just told me that he thinks there are scary people outside."

The ANI operative frowned and set down his tablet: Rayne still dozing against his chest in her sling. "Okay, let's all go take a look."

They got as far as the hallway between the office and the front door before Tessa found them. She huddled between them, signing frantically. "People are going crazy and attacking each other all over the city – I saw it on the news just now! You guys will protect me though, right?"

Hull nodded and stroked her hair, before signing his reply. "Of course we will, baby bird." He kissed the top of his son's head and squeezed his fiancée's hand briefly. "Bryce, I need you to help

me to get the kids upstairs to the panic room, and then stay in there with them while I assess the situation. Whatever happens, I love you, baby."

She gulped. "Greg, what's happening?"

He shook his head and strode over to the control panel for the house's security system; double checking that all of the locks were active and keying in the additional code to polarise all of the adaptive glazing so that no one outside could see into the property. "I'm not sure yet, and I'm not investigating any further until I know that my family are safe. Where's David gotten to anyhow?"

Bryce led the way upstairs with Fisher, Tessa close behind her. "He must still be down in the basement – I told him that I'd call him when dinner was ready."

The houseline shrilled abruptly, rousing Rayne from her nap. Hull sighed and shouted for Saunders' attention. "David, get up here right now and answer the phone! We've got a probable city wide emergency situation in progress."

It took him just under four minutes to finish shepherding his family into the panic room. Most of that was untangling himself from Rayne's sling in order to place her in the travel cot with Fisher.

Hurrying back downstairs, he nodded to Saunders.
"Who is it?"

The burly SCO handed him the receiver. "It's Agent Cully, Sir. He says it's urgent."

Hull grimaced as something thudded against the darkened glass of the front door. "Talk to me, Mike – what's happening?"

"It's a Level Four biological event, Agent Hull. If you still have access to that stealth jet, then you should make use of it to evacuate immediately. Otherwise, get all of your family indoors, batten down the hatches and stay put." Cully's voice was strained. There were shots echoing in the background, as well as what Hull thought sounded like distant screaming. "Someone deliberately released a dozen infected people in the middle of the Civic Center. Whatever they have, it spreads fast, but only via the transfer of bodily fluids – saliva, blood; I'm sure you remember the DGB Protocols?"

"Don't get bitten, got it." The screech of brakes came from the street outside, causing Hull to activate the house's soundproofing. "Yeah, I can access the jet remotely from here. What's the situation with you?"

"I'm at the office. The building's been overrun

but some of us managed to get to the roof. Senior Agent Volker's visiting her son over in England this week, so Senior Agent Dewitt's temporarily in charge. He's organized a military chopper to pick us up – we'll make for the regional ANI quarantine unit up in New Tallahassee."

"Okay, we'll see you there. Take care, Mike." Ending the call, Hull gestured for Saunders to accompany him back upstairs to the panic room. Hoping to avoid scaring Tessa any further, he spoke quickly, without signing. "Bryce, that was Agent Cully – there's an uncontained Level Four biological event occurring within Miami. We're evacuating to New Tallahassee, effective immediately. I'll contact Deimos Base once we get there and have them let Susan know that this weekend doesn't suit for contact. It's short notice but I'm sure she'll understand."

Bryce stared at him. "But Greg, if it's Level Four then how will we get there? Don't they usually close the roads for those situations?"

"We're going by air. The hover jet will be here to pick us up in about thirty minutes; we'll have to board it via the landing window. I need to pilot it here remotely, so I'll be busy but David will watch

the kids while you pack."

She followed him back out onto the landing. "Thank goodness that Aaron's safely back in Boston! Should we try to find Kassandra too, Greg? I know she's a brat, but from what she used to say about her parents working away from home all the time, I don't think she has anybody else looking out for her."

"You're nicer than she deserves, baby. Okay, we'll see how things go regarding extraction. I'll call her and tell her to try and get someplace safe in the meantime." He pulled her close for a hug. "Go double check that our emergency evacuation kit has enough of the right clothes in it, and pack any toys or personal items that can't be replaced. I'll be in my office."

"Okay, Greg."

In the end, he and Saunders plucked Kassandra from the roof of her family home, along with another scantily clad young woman, and a few hastily packed suitcases. Below them, the other two dozen guests at what had clearly begun as a Spring break pool party were still rampaging, as were the intruders who had bitten them. The security systems in the Shelby's neighbourhood weren't as

sophisticated as those back in Desdemona Falls. Hull could already tell that casualties here would be much higher. "You're just lucky that there was room on the jet for a couple of extra passengers, ladies."

Kassandra flung herself into his arms as the rear hatch cycled shut: knocking him off balance a little. "Thank you so much for this, Greg!"

"Don't mention it." He stroked her still naturally brown coloured hair approvingly, nodding for Saunders to go and take over from the autopilot. "So who's your friend?"

"She's my little cousin from Wyoming: Callista Meadows. She just turned eighteen like a week ago and I'm – well, I was showing her around Miami ahead of her moving here for college this fall." Kassandra glanced at her younger relative. "Callista, this is the guy that I told you about; the one I used to babysit for."

The slender auburn haired survivor blushed as she shook hands with him. "Um, thanks."

"You're welcome, Miss Meadows." Hull savoured the fact that his aviator shades hid his gaze. The teenager was already just as attractive as her cousin was – possibly even more so, thanks to her obvious shyness. *Wait; is that seriously a purity*

wristband? An eighteen-year-old virgin and she's all alone in the big city! Did I die and somehow not notice? "Sorry your visit isn't going so well. I promise that Miami's generally a great place to live."

"Yeah, I figured it was pretty cool from what Kassie's always saying on social media." Callista mumbled her reply: her vivid green eyes now fixed on her own toes. "It's hard to tell for sure though, since I ain't seen very much of it so far."

"Well, we'll have to correct that as soon as possible." Hull forced himself to stop fantasising about what he could do to her. If the children hadn't been in the adjacent passenger area of the jet with Bryce, things might have been different, but they were, and as such he was prioritising accordingly. Family always came first. "When did you get here?"

"Her flight got in yesterday afternoon." Cassandra pressed up even closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. Hull had to admit that it felt good; having such an attractive young woman openly lusting after him like this. Perhaps he wouldn't let Saunders have her after all. "It was totally last minute – she basically just showed up at my door with her bags. I still can't believe that Aunt

Shannon agreed to let her out of the house, let alone apply to college! Seriously, Callista, I thought she'd want to keep on homeschooling you until you were at least thirty or something."

The ANI agent frowned. "Do your parents actually know that you're in Florida, Miss Meadows?"

His question dialled up Callista's blushing. She shrugged, hugging herself as if she suddenly regretted her choice of outfit. "I'm eighteen. I don't need their permission to take a trip across state lines. Mom just worries too much and then Daddy takes her side because it's easier than arguing."

Kassandra squealed. "Oh my God, did you literally run away from home?"

Her cousin huffed. "Hey, I was gonna text them later today! It's not my fault that everything blew up around us first!"

She really was just too perfect, right down to her naivety. Feigning what he deemed to be a socially acceptable degree of resignation, Hull sighed. "Oh well. At least you played it safe and stayed with family instead of dropping off the map completely. That was the right choice. There are some questionable people out there, even at the best of

times. Given what's going on, I'm sure your parents will just be glad to hear that you're okay. They'll forgive you eventually."

Chapter Four – Still Seething

Carol reached for a box of cornflakes. "All I'm saying is that you can't put all of the blame onto Craig. You're the one who was too busy gallivanting off with your career to bother taking care of your family. He's only human; he can't help it that he got lonely! I mean honestly, what were you thinking, expecting him to just step up and look after four kids that aren't even his? It's completely unreasonable."

Spence's thin fingers clenched the handle of their hover trolley. "Yet somehow it's different with your two? After all, they aren't his either, are they? That's assuming that you even know who their father is to begin with."

"That's rich coming from you...!"

The Thursday morning alarm clock woke Spence before their fist could connect with the florist's

sanctimonious face. Still seething, the non-gender rolled over and swatted the mute button. The springs in the brand new divan clicked beneath the movement: yet another unintentional reminder of how things were different now. The freshly refurnished bedroom held no hint of Campbell. *Cob meant well, I know. Why do I even miss having the cheating bastard's scent in my bed?*

Apparently, murdering one's way through two weeks' worth of very bad people wasn't a foolproof means of getting over losing your relationship. To be fair, Leister had warned as much, even while he was helping Spence to pack. Ireland had been a distraction, not a solution, and the problem with distractions was that they inevitably ended. *Time to get back to reality I suppose. I can't hide from it forever.*

Phil stared groggily at the strange man helping himself to coffee in their kitchen. The boy was reasonably sure that burglars didn't usually do that sort of thing, which probably meant that he didn't need to be too frightened by whatever was going on. "Excuse me please but I think you're in the wrong house, sir."

The grey haired intruder turned to study him. "I'm here to see my son – Craig Campbell. Is he not up yet?"

"I don't think so." Phil wasn't in the habit of monitoring the assorted and generally anonymous to him grown-ups who visited his mother. "It's very early."

"Nonsense: it's already gone half past six! Anyhow, it's a school day and you're up, so at least one of the adults ought to be too, don't you reckon, lad?"

"Mum doesn't like early starts. My name's Philip, by the way. Everyone calls me Phil though." He supposed that it was up to him to host for now. "What's your name?"

"Thomas." The old man opened the fridge and took out the milk. "So you're accustomed to taking care of yourself then, eh?"

Phil shrugged and wandered over to the larder in search of cereal. "Sometimes, yeah – I'm eleven after all. I can make my own breakfast."

Thomas chuckled. "I'm sure you can, lad! Still, what would you have done if I'd been a burglar?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'd run back upstairs and just yell for Mum to ring the police or

something." Sloshing milk over his cornflakes, the boy nodded towards the door to the downstairs hallway. "We'd best go wait in the living room for now. Try not to be too noisy though. Like I said, it's very early."

They sat down on opposite ends of the largest sofa: Thomas with his coffee, Phil with his already soggy cereal. The retiree raised his eyebrows as his young host immediately grabbed the remote and flicked through half a dozen channels on the oversized television until reaching a garishly coloured cartoon. "You watch cartoons with the sound turned off?"

"Yeah, my big brother John makes fun of me for liking them, so it's easier to do it in the mornings before he wakes up, but I have to be quiet. It's okay though – there are subtitles."

"Your brother sounds like he's a bit of an arse wipe to me, lad."

Phil gulped back the cereal he was chewing and snorted at that description. "He really *is*, but Mum doesn't allow swearing. We have a jar."

"Sod that. I'm on a pension."

Their conversation petered out as the opening credits of the latest episode of *Captain Mars*

finished. Setting down his mug, Thomas pulled out his phone and texted his son. *I'm downstairs. WTF aren't you up yet?*

As he had suspected, the reply was almost instant. *Because I was hoping you'd leave. I don't need any more lectures, Dad ☹️It's my life!*

Thomas rolled his eyes as he typed. *Well, stop bugging it up and I'll stop intervening! FFS, why pick a florist?*

His son seemed aggrieved by that. *WTF can't you just be happy for me? How did you even find out about Carol?*

An old bird told me. He's pissed off at you screwing around behind Spence's skinny back.

Tell Leister it's none of his business, Dad!

You tell him and I'll watch. That way I can help you to pick up your damn teeth afterwards.

The images on the television changed then, and a dour faced journalist appeared, apparently reporting live from a medical centre in Miami. A brief scan of the subtitles informed Thomas that he'd been beyond lucky in leaving for England when he had. "You'd best go up and wake your mum, lad. I don't think they'll put the cartoons back on any time soon."

Moxton was already in the kitchen when Spence entered it. He nodded from his spot at the hob. "The kettle's just boiled if you need a brew. I told Leister last night that I'd sort breakfast. He looked as if he needed an extra half an hour in bed."

"Yes, I was thinking that too. Thanks for convincing him." The non-gender eyed the contents of the frying pan sceptically. "Is that prawn toast?"

"No – French toast coated with ground up cornflakes. My parents always make it this way. It adds texture; stops it going soggy."

"Not particularly French though."

"Neither are my parents." Moxton flipped the first batch of little triangles of fried bread over onto their opposite sides to finish cooking. "How'd you sleep?"

"Reasonably well, all things considered. The smalls woke me a few times, but they settled down again easily enough. What about you?"

"Not too badly, thanks." He transferred another batch of French toast to the now empty pan. The hot oil hissed as the egg and cereal coated bread landed. "The guest beds are actually quite comfortable, or at least mine is."

Spence sat down at the table with their tea. "I'll get the children up once I've drank this. Should we see if Cob will agree to have his breakfast in bed, or might that be pushing things?"

"You know him better than I do, so I'll defer to your judgement." Their colleague paused to answer his phone. "Morning, Oliver, so how's the new school working out for Brett? Slow down, what do you mean outbreak? No, I haven't checked the news yet today. Oh. Well, why can't ANI arrange transport for her? Right, okay then. Yes, I know it's bloody risky. Ha, well she's your ex-girlfriend, mate; you can tell her that if you want! Look, I'm sure she knows what she's doing. Don't be ridiculous; you know full well that I'd be worried too! Yeah. It's fine. As soon as possible, I promise. Okay, bye, bye...uh-huh...uh-huh. Bye."

Spence was already keying in the number on their phone as he hung up. "What should I tell Headquarters you'll need?"

"Transportation to New Tallahassee and back; Senior Agent Volker needs to get to the ANI quarantine centre there. It seems that someone's released a Level Four biological weapon over in Miami. DGB Protocols are in place. You can

imagine what Oliver thinks about her going back there." Moxton lifted the frying pan onto one of the inactive rings and switched off the cooker. "I'd better go see whether Quincy has finished recharging: we'll need to get going as soon as possible. I *think* there's enough French toast here for the rest of you."

"Don't worry, I'm sure I can manage to mash up a few extra cornflakes if need be."

Having arrived together, Hull and his party underwent their medical assessment as a group. Thanks to the exacting quarantine procedures, it was almost two am before they reached their assigned quarters on Level 9 of the building's south wing. Apart from Saunders, the adults were exhausted, Rayne and Fisher were already fast asleep in their respective travel pods, and Tessa was drowsing on her feet as they opened the front door. Housing within ANI's New Tallahassee facility proved basic, with the evacuated operatives and their families billeted in cramped high-rise apartments with plain gray tiled floors, even plainer white painted walls, and no cooking facilities.

At the farthest end of the dwelling from the front

door, a miniscule bathroom offered up a single shower, sink, and toilet. A brief search revealed three bedrooms, each furnished identically with a set of steel framed double bunks positioned along one wall, and storage lockers opposite them. Clear plastic wrapped packages of hospital issue bed linen and pillows sat on top of each of the bare mattresses.

Hull sighed. "Well, it's not great, but it's only temporary, and at least we're well clear of the chaos in Miami. Bryce, you and I will take this bedroom. We can co-sleep with Fisher and Rayne on the lower bunk, and they can have their travel pods for daytime naps. Tessa should be able to manage the ladder. Kassandra, you, and your cousin will be next door, and David, you'll take the third room. We'll make up all of the beds now and grab a few hours sleep. The rest of our unpacking can wait."

The most complicated aspect of their sleeping preparations proved to be sharing the bathroom. Hull made a mental note to organise a rota. If before bed teeth cleaning were this awkward, then showering would only be worse. Tucking Tessa into her bunk afterwards, he frowned as the young

Martian's thumb drifted up to her mouth. "We'll have to train you out of doing that, baby bird. It's a bad habit for a kid your age. Bryce, remind me to grab a few sachets of Tabasco sauce or similar from the cafeteria at breakfast. I just noticed that Tessa's sucking her thumb."

His fiancée seemed upset. "Can't we at least wait until this is over and we're all safely home again, Greg? I mean she's been so scared already with everything that's going on – it just doesn't seem fair for either of us to put her under any more stress."

"It's for her own good, baby. She's eleven years old; the other students will make fun of her if they find out that she still sucks her thumb." Hull knew how cruel kids could be. "That's assuming that any of the mainstream schools in our area will even accept her to begin with. She's so intellectually bright that I can't believe how far behind she is in some ways. Waverly should have sorted this out years ago!"

"I don't...please...please, Greg, just leave her alone for now. You're expecting too much from her, and it isn't fair!" The blonde woman's voice hitched a little. Eyes downcast, she wrapped her

arms tightly around her chest. It reminded Hull of the earliest stage of their relationship; before he'd gotten through to her. "I'm sorry, Greg, but I just don't agree with that kind of parenting! Force feeding a child Tabasco sauce as punishment...!"

"Whoa, Bryce – what are you talking about?" Hull stared anxiously at her. "Oh no, sweetie, that wasn't what I meant at all! I'm just going to put a little on each of her *thumbs* during the day, to help her break the habit, that's all. Jesus, no wonder you were upset. What put that horrible notion in your head anyhow?"

Bryce gulped as he pulled her in close for a hug. "I thought...I mean my parents used to...oh, Greg, thinking about that side of things, I don't know why I was even missing them...!"

"I don't either." Hull sighed. "Come on, Bryce, be smart about this. It's been sixteen years, during which they've never once reached out to you. They didn't even bother *trying* to pay your bail! I thought you'd accepted that they weren't going to be part of our life. What's gotten into you, baby? Why are you acting so unsettled?"

A sleepy sounding hiccup came from the direction of their son's travel pod. "Daddy making

Mommy scared! I not like that, Daddy!"

Bryce hurried over and unbuckled the toddler's safety harness to scoop him up. "It's okay, Fisher. Daddy and Mommy were just talking, sweetie."

"Okay, Mommy." He cuddled into her: craning his neck to stare balefully at Hull. "I still see you, Daddy."

Hull smiled indulgently back at him. "I know you do, Fisher. I'm glad that you care about Mommy."

The boy yawned. "Daddy, you not make Mommy scared again. That not nice and I get very cross at you!"

"Mommy isn't really scared of me, Fisher; she's just very tired after our busy day. Isn't that right, Bryce?"

"No. I...I mean yes, but there's something else too." She sniffled. "A man came to see me while you were working away in space, Greg. He said he was from British Intelligence. They set up a bank account as compensation for Fisher and put me in charge of it. I *told* him that I'm not supposed to have access to those sorts of things, but he wouldn't listen – he swore my record was clear! I didn't mean not to tell you about it. I...it's...it just happened...!"

“Oh, Bryce, angel, it's okay!” Hull gathered her into his arms again along with their son. “Don't cry, baby. That creep was just trying to mess with you – probably some kind of a sting operation to put you back in jail and let them apply for custody of Fisher. They must want him for his psionic potential. Don't worry though: I'll keep you safe. I'll keep all of our family safe, that's a promise. Come on – let's go to bed.”

Chapter Five – Where You Left Them

Cradling a still drowsy Sam against his chest with one arm, Campbell stormed out of the Bingham family's front door as best as he could whilst using a walking cane. "I can't believe you just bloody outed me to Carol and her boys as a spy, Dad!"

His father sauntered after him, smirking despite, or more probably because of, the emotional havoc that his announcement had caused. "Ex-spy, lad – I was very specific about that. I can't see why she was so upset about it."

"Maybe it had something to do with how you inferred that I was using her as a cover to hide from my enemies!"

"Aren't you?"

"No!" Campbell sighed miserably. "I...I really can't stress this enough: Carol and I have something *meaningful* happening between us,

Dad. I've finally found the one; someone I can relate to, build a life with, and you simply had to go and be utterly horrible to her! Less than half an hour into your very first encounter with her as well; I think that's a new record."

"Oh for fuck's sake, give over!" Thomas was no longer smirking. "Your bloody one is still two doors along from here where you left them holding both babies while you ran off to try and catch syphilis from the local bike! You're just damned lucky that I got here as soon as I did, lad."

"Carol's not the local anything!" His son glared at him. "You have no business interfering in my life, Dad. You cut Spence and me off the moment that you heard the twins weren't mine, don't think that I've forgotten that! Where have you been all these months anyhow?"

"If you must know, I bought the house opposite Greg Hull. I was planning to take his life apart from the ground up; make him pay for what he's put our people through. Then Leister contacted me to say that the Irish were after you and you'd fucked up things with Spence. So here I am to try and talk some bloody sense into you."

"Well, now you can stop trying, and go find

something else to do with your day. Spence and I are finished. Leister's aware of that. Hell, he's the one who threw me out in the first place!" Campbell paused as he closed up the front gate behind his father. "I suppose if nothing else, it got you clear of Miami. I'm glad of that. Awful situation – do you suppose it was terrorism?"

"Aye, I'd think that or one of those damnable corporations again. Young Oliver's better half will have her hands full either way. Perhaps the bastard hiding behind her skirts will get eaten."

Even with the Miami evacuees eating in three shifts, the New Tallahassee facility's cafeteria was still operating at maximum capacity over breakfast on Thursday morning. As luck would have it, there wasn't enough space in the elevators afterwards for everyone. Hull nodded to Bryce. "Okay. You and Kassandra go ahead; take the kids back up to our quarters before they get cranky. David and I will take the stairs."

Callista piped up immediately. "Um, sorry but what about me?"

"Oh wow, yeah that's right!" Hull feigned embarrassment. "I almost forgot about you there,

Miss Meadows, sorry about that. Why don't you come with David and me? We really shouldn't risk overcrowding the elevator."

"Yeah, I guess not. See you upstairs, Kassie." She followed the two men into the stairwell. "So um, I guess whoever designed this building wasn't exactly planning on ever having so many people staying here at once, huh?"

He smiled at her. "Just between us, I don't think they anticipated a quarantine situation where *nobody* involved needed to be confined to the observation suites."

"Is that what the living areas here really are – observation suites, like in a hospital?"

"No." Hull pointed to the map displayed on the wall. "Remember the unit we were in yesterday when we first arrived? Well, that's for observation, and it's way over in the east wing, next to the main infirmary. You can't actually access either of those areas directly from this part of the building. That long windowless corridor we came through after we got the all clear is a special feature called a quarantine corridor. It's in place for extra safety. Even the ventilation systems are separate. It's a very sensible design all round."

"Wow, a lecture on architecture?" The teenager sighed. "Sorry, that was rude. It's just this really ain't how I pictured my Spring break vacation going, you know? I figured that staying with Kassie would be *fun*; that we'd go out to a few clubs and stuff."

Hull shook his head. "Not that you'd wind up as an extra in a real life zombie movie, huh?" He stepped up right behind Callista and cupped her waist with his hands to pull her backwards: pressing her snugly against his lap as they reached the landing for Level 4. "I understand how you must feel, Miss Meadows."

She baulked and swatted at his hands, laughing uncomfortably. "Uh, what the heck are you doing, Greg?"

"Think of it as an object lesson in growing up." He hung on to her; resisting the opportunity to grind against the seat of her faded denim shorts. "You're a very attractive young woman, Callista. Do you mind if I call you that?"

"Um, no, that's okay, I guess. And uh thanks for the compliment and everything, but you've already got a girlfriend...?"

"Bryce won't say no to me showing you a good time. I don't hear you saying no either."

Callista squirmed as he wrapped his arms around her waist. "David's like right over there. I mean he can see us if he turns round. I'm um, pretty sure he can hear us too."

The ANI operative chuckled and pulled his startled companion into the shadows beneath the next set of stairs, well out of sight of any security cameras. "That's still not a no, sweetheart. David doesn't mind what we do. Last chance: if you don't want this, then you'd better speak up now. Otherwise, I'm *definitely* going to want to take things further."

She squeaked as he spun her around to face him: backing her up against the wall. "But it ain't decent carrying on like this in public! We'll get in trouble...!"

"Relax, sweetheart, it'll be fine." Hull ducked his head and nuzzled her neck; pressing a kiss just behind her right ear. "Don't be shy. Nobody minds two consenting adults making out a little. Why else would we be taking the stairs?"

"My parents are gonna kill me if they ever find out about this – I'm supposed to wait for whoever buys out my dowry!"

"You probably shouldn't mention it to them then."

I wouldn't want to get you in trouble." He smiled and wrapped his right hand around the back of her head, winding his fingers through her long auburn hair. "Come on, haven't you ever done *anything* like this before? Maybe messed around a little with a boy back home?"

"No...?"

"Well, that's certainly a refreshing change. Most other girls your age don't bother taking their purity bands seriously." He traced his left index finger across her lips. "You're something very special, Callista. I'd really love the chance to show you what I mean by that. Do you suppose your parents might...!"

A low, ragged sounding growl echoed up from the base of the stairwell. Instincts forged out of surviving a career within GETEC kicked in: whatever, whoever might be down there, fifty-two steps wasn't far enough away. Hull and Saunders bolted wordlessly up the remaining five flights of stairs and scrambled through the door onto Level 9, dragging Callista with them. The burly SCO slammed his palm against the switch for the emergency seal. "This Level secured, Sir!"

"Nice work, David." Hull was already keying in

the security code for their dwelling's entrance. "Get inside, before the whole place locks down."

Bryce met them in the apartment's hallway. "Greg, what's happening?"

He shook his head, pausing to catch his breath now that the emergency shutters had rolled down behind them. "There's a probable biological situation in the stairwell. Don't worry, baby, I'm sure it'll soon be contained."

There was someone outside in the third floor corridor, clawing at the oak effect door of Waverly Industry Miami's conference suite. Triple checking the security panel, billionaire industrialist Robert Waverly shuddered at the sound, hoping that it really was only one infected this time, and not a mob of them. "You know, just between us, I'm beginning to regret not getting a custodial sentence for this whole mess with Tessa, Az. I hear that prisons are really secure buildings, you know?"

At the opposite end of the room, his business partner and fellow technophile, tawny furred feline augmetric Ari Zahn, continued taking methodical inventory of the mini bar. "Yeah, but they don't have alcohol – well, not good alcohol. I mean, sure,

there's probably bootleg stuff smuggled in, even here on Earth, but frankly this situation demands something extra special. Also, I'm pretty sure your still possibly not entirely ex-girlfriend would be seriously pissed to hear you talking like that, Bob."

"I think Susan would probably be more concerned about the homicidal mobs roaming this city, Az."

"Hey, I figure that they teach people to multitask in the MMC." Zahn settled on pouring a tall glass of neat vodka. He gulped down his drink as the clawing sound intensified. "Do you suppose the local authorities are any closer to resolving the situation yet?"

"I certainly hope so." Waverly pulled out his tablet and swiped anxiously at the screen. "According to the latest news, the advice is still to remain indoors and wait for further instructions."

"Huh, well that sounds like perfectly good advice to me, Bob. Any chance that you'll remind me why it is that we haven't been following it so far?"

"We have followed it, well, most of the time. It's not as though we could just hide in here while our employees were in danger, Az!"

The senior engineer of Waverly Industries pulled a

sour face: lips curling back to reveal sharp fangs. "Those two idiots chose to go outside; they were perfectly safe until then!"

"Yeah, well now they're perfectly safe again, aren't they?" At this, Waverly nodded towards the pair of apprentice technicians cowering together in the corner of the room. "They just wanted to get home to their loved ones, Az. It *wasn't* a deliberate act of corporate terrorism."

"Whatever, buddy." Zahn sniffed disdainfully. "I still think we should dock their pay."

"Luckily for them, there's no such thing as a 'My Bosses Risked Their Lives Saving Mine' deduction." Waverly tapped again at the screen. "On a related note, I *think* I've figured out a safe route from here to the helipad. We just need to get past the infected person outside this door."

"What happened to remain indoors and wait? I seriously thought that we were just this moment talking about sticking with that option, Bob." The lanky augmetric sighed and shouldered his oversized energy rifle, nodding for Waverly to open the door and stand well back. "For the record, it's my preferred option: as in the option that I *want* to go with. Not that anyone cares about that."

"I totally care, Az!" Mars' wealthiest man grimaced as the unfortunate infected sprang past him, straight into the beam of Zahn's weapon. "But we need to get out of here and find Tessa. I don't trust Agent Hull to keep her safe, and even if he does, she's bound to be terrified by what's going on. We have to rescue her. Nice shot, by the way."

"Thanks." Zahn stepped over the now unconscious victim of the biohazard and edged warily into the corridor. "Okay, it looks clear out here. Do you want to grab the terminally stupid twosome over there or should we just leave them behind in case our new friend Scratchy McBiteyface here wakes up in need of brains to munch on?"

"Don't be so mean, Az." Waverly gestured to what he hoped weren't going to turn out to be their only surviving employees. Surely, this weird disease would have a cure. "Um, so Kenny, Dolores, if you'd like to follow us, we're going up to the roof now. There's a helicopter that we can use to escape. Again, I'm really sorry that your first week with us is going so um, horrifically wrong. I hope it won't put you off working for our company. Oh, and Az, we need to stop off at all the other floors first to check

on the status of the rest of the staff."

His partner groaned and led the way along the corridor towards the elevator. "Can't we just remember them fondly, Bob?"

Dolores and Kenny both nodded vigorously. Waverly shook his head. "No. Besides, if we can access the computer terminal in the showroom then I can activate all of the unsold APSUs and instruct them to help contain the outbreak."

Zahn blinked. "Bob, the showroom is down on the ground floor. You know – further away from the helipad, closer to certain doom?"

"Well I can't access that terminal remotely, Az. It's a closed system for security reasons, you know that!"

"Yeah, and I *told* you when we set up shop here that that was a stupid idea, Bob." The bigger Martian paused to stun another infected that had lurched into view. "Although to be fair, I didn't anticipate pseudo-zombies."

"I'm not sure if they count as zombies when they're still alive, Az." Waverly looked to Dolores and Kenny for their input. "What do you think?"

Dolores Ross, a tall African-American woman in her mid-twenties, with electric blue cornrows,

pointed wordlessly out of the nearest window at the chaos on the streets below. Kenny Hathaway, slightly younger than her, bespectacled, stocky and red bearded, merely stuttered unintelligibly as he scurried past Zahn into the waiting elevator.

The augmetric shrugged. "I'm counting that as tacit agreement for my use of the term 'pseudo-zombie'."

Chapter Six – Equivalent

Spence peeled back the lid of a third tin of mixed beans, tensing reflexively at the sound of the metal bending. Jenkins had promised Leister that she would be here by five pm at the absolute latest. The kitchen clock stated that it was already four thirty, but the potatoes had been in the oven for their allotted half an hour already and hopefully the chilli wouldn't take too long to throw together. Really, how complicated could tinned beans and a packet of flavoured powder be to heat through? No, the hard part would be fielding Thomas' inevitable disappointment at the lack of meat on the menu. *Perhaps it will put him off randomly inviting himself to visit in the future.*

It wasn't as if the cantankerous retiree had any particular reason to be here *now* either. In Spence's opinion, nine and a half hours was more than

enough time for Thomas to finish denouncing his son's behaviour and piss off back to bloody Scotland, or to Florida, for that matter. Although thinking about it, the latter option wasn't especially sensible. *Someone really should find the person behind that biohazard. At least it isn't up to me to manage this time, and long may that situation continue.*

The non-gender dragged a long-handled spoon through the mixture in the saucepan in front of them. The powdered seasoning was clumping and sticking to the top layer of beans. So far, it didn't look anything like the image on the packet. Determined to not to resort to ordering takeaway, Spence opened the fridge and reached for the tomato sauce. One could hide most savoury culinary mishaps with a generous dollop of that. *Does that make the stuff equivalent to high explosives?*

The stairwell incident this morning had been a hoax; thank crap. There never had been any biohazard, just a couple of unsupervised preteen boys with access to video footage of the carnage in Miami, and lacking the sense *not* to prank people

with it. How they'd managed to avoid being spotted by Agent Hull and his companions was anyone's guess.

It was probably just as well though. Truthfully, Mike Cully wasn't in any hurry to inform his colleague of the details. Sure, the boys deserved to be disciplined for their behaviour, but Cully simply didn't trust Hull enough to read him in. There was something off about the guy: the kind of intangible *something* that's ever so slightly out of view of the rulebook. Providing him with the names of the pranksters felt like too dangerous an idea.

That was why Cully had saddled himself with full responsibility for the investigation. Senior Agent Dewitt wanted the whole thing done and dusted by the time Volker got here. Having spent the past two hours on it – determining what had really happened, tracking down the two responsible, and interviewing them with their respective parents present – Cully was content that the kids weren't going to be let off easily. This just left him with the paperwork, including the witness statements from Hull, Saunders, and Miss Meadows.

He hadn't anticipated that the latter would disclose an attempted sexual assault. Suddenly, the

rulebook had a very clear view indeed of just what it was that might be *off* with Agent Hull.

The chilli could actually have been deemed as reasonable, the thoroughly unbaked potatoes far less so. Spence had called the oven a few choice names upon discovering that. It was just as well that there was plenty of microwavable rice in the cupboard. Dinner salvaged, just about. *God help us if Miss Hedturner decides not to come back.*

Thomas had been worryingly polite so far. He hadn't even remarked on the absence of meat at dinner, and was now stacking the dishwasher. Spence eyed him suspiciously, as they handed over the cutlery. "You aren't thinking of staying here on any sort of a permanent basis, Mr Campbell?"

He snorted. "Don't worry; I know when I'm not welcome! No, I'll be on my way soon enough. I just wanted to do something to balance my lad's treatment of you, that's all."

"It's fine."

"Bollocks to *that*, Spence." The retiree sighed and straightened up, closing the door of the machine. "He chose bloody poorly."

Spence glanced towards the muted sounds of

conversation coming from the living room. Leister and Jenkins seemed to be managing well with the children. "Well, since we have the privacy to discuss it properly now, why do you even give a damn either way? It's not as though the babies are his."

"The next one could have been."

"Ha, if you think I've any intention of enduring that nightmare again, you're off your head!" The non-gender shuddered as they recalled their pregnancy. "Anyhow, you still have Seamus. I'm sure that he'll enjoy being an only grandchild."

"You don't think that she'll stick with Craig then – that florist of his." Thomas smirked. "I tried to warn him about that myself earlier, you know! Told him that he should have appreciated what he had with you; that people like us rarely find anyone to match. He didn't want to hear it."

"None of that is my business...!"

"Shut up and take the damn compliment! I know what you did over the past fortnight. It was bloody impressive wetwork. My lad's not just a fool, he's lucky that you don't want *him* dead."

Two sets of footsteps thudded along the carpeted hallway before Spence could answer him. Kathryn and Barnabas came pelting into the

kitchen, shouting across one another for their aunt's attention. The thin non-gender held up their hands for quiet. "Shush, both of you! Take a breath first. Now, what's going on?"

Barnabas was grinning as he answered. "Cob and Aunty Ashley are having a baby all of their own, Aunty Val!"

His sister elbowed him. "No, they only said that they *hoped* that they'd have one – it's still too soon to make announcements. Cob said so."

The boy scowled. "That's only for people who aren't close to them! They said it was okay to tell Aunty Val and Uncle Thomas."

"Since when am I counted as their uncle?" Thomas raised an eyebrow at Spence. "I hadn't realised that I'd made the inner circle."

Spence shook their head; halfway surprised, halfway irked at not having spotted how Jenkins' behaviour added up before now. "It's news to me too, Mr Campbell. From what I can gather, it frees you up to become an apple seller."

"Eh?" He stared after his host as they exited the kitchen. Then he looked back at the children. "What the devil did your aunt mean just now? Was that some sort of coded message?"

Kathryn shrugged. "I don't know!"

"It's just something to do with an old song lyric, I think." Barnabas had turned his attention to the fruit bowl. "Hey, who ate all the grapes?"

It was a nine and a half hour flight from England to Florida. Volker spent most of it closeted in the jet's miniscule office space, juggling calls and other communications from various concerned parties. With Moxton busy at the controls, Dobos and Quincy did their combined best to occupy themselves. There were far too many news reports available regarding the crisis in Miami. Each seemed worse than the last. By the time that the jet touched down, Dobos was halfway set on dragging Laine straight back to the UK with them. Quincy, however, sensibly pointed out that her reaction to any such behaviour was likely to involve literal fire.

A grimfaced Cully met them on the airstrip outside of the New Tallahassee facility. "Welcome back, ma'am. The quarantine is going smoothly so far, but I'm afraid that we have an unrelated internal matter to resolve."

Volker studied the tablet that he handed her for

several minutes before she replied. "Very well, Agent Cully. I shall attend to this immediately. Where is Agent Hull now?"

"I left all three parties involved in their respective interview rooms, ma'am. It seemed prudent not to risk them interacting."

Afterwards, Dobos would recall how professionally impassive Laine's voice was as she read out the details of the accusation and all potential charges. He would admire, albeit retrospectively, the cool efficiency of his ex-girlfriend and her agents. His opinion of Agent Cully in particular would include the descriptor of *fucking redoubtable*, especially given the level of support that the ANI agent offered to the victim herself – some random American girl; a cousin of Tanya's old friend. *No fucking victim blaming there, at least, despite how little the security cameras caught before Hull managed to drag her out of sight of them!*

At the time, however, the British field operative was much too busy tamping down his personal feelings to dwell on such niceties. Those selfsame bloody cameras were the crux of it. There was plenty of security footage showing Hull and his

companions on their way up the stairwell. The issue lay in interpreting it. Where the girl claimed an attempted assault, Hull insisted that he had merely been flirting with an attractive young woman. He claimed that not only had nothing at all untoward happened, but also that she hadn't rejected his advances. Saunders backed him up, virtually word for word. Since the footage was too ambiguous to disprove either side's version, it all boiled down to status: highly regarded government agent versus troubled teenaged runaway. *Case fucking closed, yeah, of course it fucking is – how could I have ever hoped otherwise?*

He debated pulling Laine aside to tell her the whole truth of his personal experience with Hull. Would it make a difference? After all, the bastard had still been ANI's mole back then. Unwitting or not, his role had earned him a free pass for any questionable activities during his time with GETEC. Chances were that opening up about – about what had happened in that bathroom – wouldn't do anything aside from earning Dobos some form of mandatory psychiatric assessment. Worst-case scenario, it might end up affecting his own career more than it did Hull's! He could even lose access

to Brett. *Do I really want to risk sticking my fucking neck out for the sake of some random girl's reputation?*

Her own cousin had already thrown her under the bus. Dobos couldn't help but judge Cassandra for that. Even if it turned out that Callista really was as unreliable as she described her, it was bloody poor form from a family member. He couldn't imagine Tanya ever doing that, so it was hardly a cultural difference either. Still, in Cassandra's defence, maybe Hull had brainwashed her. That would explain the seriously fucked up emotions Dobos kept picking up from her. *Well, it's that or she was born wired up fucking wrong, but then what does that make me? Can you die from too much hypocrisy, or does it only leave you wishing that you fucking could?*

Dobos decided that he wasn't about to risk finding out either way. Shoving both hands into the pockets of his jacket, he stepped into the middle of the New Tallahassee facility's command centre and cleared his throat to draw the ANI operatives' collective attention. "Laine, hold on – there's something important that you need to know about Agent Hull's history before you finish signing off on

this mess. I...I want to provide an official statement."

Mindful of the two pairs of younger eyes currently present in the sitting room with him, Maurice Jacob Leister picked up the remote control from the coffee table in front of the sofa and switched off the television before the nine pm news report on the Miami crisis could get any more graphic. "I think that's quite enough of that, darlings. Now, who wants a warm drink before bedtime?"

Barnabas scrambled up from his chair. "I'll make it, Cob! Auntie Val said that we should try doing stuff like that for ourselves sometimes to make sure we know how."

His twin made no move to follow him to the kitchen. Instead, the pale haired girl curled her legs up beneath her and snuggled deeper into her chair. "So why didn't Auntie Ashley and Uncle Thomas stay here too tonight, Cob?"

"Ashley has to work tomorrow, darling. It's easier for her to commute from home. As for Thomas, I rather expect he wants to get back home to Kenmore ahead of the weekend traffic."

"Oh. Well, what about Auntie Val?" Kathryn

gestured towards the ceiling. "Is that why they went to bed when the babies did – because they have work tomorrow?"

Leister shook his head. "No, they're just a little tired still from their trip to Ireland, that's all. They shan't have to go back to work until the start of May."

She frowned at his reply. "That's only twelve more days now. Will the new nanny already be here by then? What if we only have Heidi – do you suppose she'll cope with looking after all four of us? What if it's too much for her and she leaves and goes and gets another job instead?"

"It's all arranged, don't worry, darling. Heidi shall be back either way, but I'll stay too until the new nanny arrives." He paused to let her consider that information. "You don't need to worry about any of this, Kathryn. It's not your responsibility."

"But what if those other men come back, Cob?" She gulped. "You know; the ones who burned the cars because of Craig and tried to break in to get to him and Sam! What if...what if they don't realise that he's gone to live with Carol, so then they come back but they burn the house instead next time?"

Leister had been expecting this conversation,

and was mainly concerned that it hadn't happened sooner. "Darling, those men shan't ever come back. Nightingale has seen to it that they're gone for good. I won't divulge the minutiae, but rest assured that your aunt has made utterly certain that none of young Mr Campbell's surviving enemies will dare show their faces here again."

"Okay." The girl sniffled, rubbing her eyes dry on the corner of her sleeve. "Cob...?"

"Yes darling?"

"Can I have a hug please?"

"Of course, darling – come here." He stood up, ignoring his aching joints, as Kathryn flung herself into his arms. "Everything is going to be all right, I promise. Now, let's dry the rest of these tears, and then we'll go and help Barnabas with the hot chocolate."

Chapter Seven – Left On Tuesday

By now, his fifth attempt at calling, Martian Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Archibald Woods was pretty much out of patience with the people staffing the helpline for the Miami crisis. "No, you listen up, son – my CO left on Tuesday to get to Miami for scheduled contact with her infant daughter. That means that by now, she's definitely somewhere on the ground down there, and almost certainly outside of the spaceport. No, I don't want to donate funds at this time! Yes, of course I know it's an emergency, that's why I'm calling! I need you to try and help me narrow down MMC Captain Susan Kennedy's damn location to less than the entirety of Florida!"

The volunteer hung up. Apparently, even mildly harsh language was an automatic end of conversation.

"God damn it!" Woods gave himself a few moments to blue up the air in his office before punching in the communication code for Earth again. The by now familiar automated message played, followed by the first few bars of an unrecognisable instrumental piece repeating on loop. Every sixty seconds, the recording thanked him for being patient, prompted him to donate, and then started the music over. "So help me, ma'am, if you ain't already dead or mutated, I'm halfway damn inclined to space you when you finally get your sorry ass back up here!"

Hull was drowning when he woke up. Clawing, sluggishly at first, then frantically, at the tubing that was no longer sustaining him, he lurched forwards into a sitting position as the cryonic storage pod cycled open. The ice-cold slurry of once life saving chemicals sloshed ahead of him, rendering the tiled floor treacherously slippery beneath his bare feet. Wheezing and retching, he staggered clear of his inadvertent near-coffin, and slumped none too gently against the nearest solid object. "Ouch!"

His slowly returning senses informed him that the object in question was a wall and that, for some

reason, the room that it belonged to was in darkness. "Ugh...since when do we leave patients to defrost unaided in the Goddamn *dark*, people? Seriously, do you assholes want another lawsuit against GETEC? Because...because I sure as Hell don't, and I'm...at least I was the guy who makes those things go away. Hey, wait...so, am I still doing that? Did it...the treatment...the FBT...did it work? How long was I under anyhow? Hello? Is there anybody there?"

No one answered. It was really starting to look as though the Health & Safety protocols at GETEC had deteriorated even further while Hull was frozen. "Okay, no, this is so not good enough. There's supposed to be a team on call 24/7 in the cryonic storage bay! Where the actual *fuck* is everyone?"

Collecting himself, he hobbled back to his pod and fished around in the remaining puddle of fluids for the watertight briefcase that Mellor had packed for him just in case. There it was – a cell phone, complete with a battery powered portable charging device, a towel and change of clothing, and the standard emergency kit. "Thank crap for your preparedness, Aaron. I owe you a drink once this is all sorted."

The phone had charged fully by the time that he finished dressing. Hull peeled open one of the two jumbo-sized energy bars and ate half of it before dialling Mellor's number. "Hey, Aaron, it's me – Supervisor Hull. I just finished defrosting. Thanks for the kit, by the way; it's proving invaluable so far...!"

"Sir, is that really you?" Mellor's voice cracked as he interrupted Hull. "Oh my God, of course; the power outages must have affected our old facility! Sir, are you okay?"

"Well, I've had better days, but all my limbs appear to work, and I'm not seeing any evidence of forced organ donation, so that's a start."

"Sir, I need to read you in on what's happened. You've been frozen for a year. The good news is that your FBT worked, but Miami's in the middle of a citywide crisis right now. Someone released a Level Four biohazard in the middle of the Civic Center. DGB Protocols apply."

Hull felt the all-too familiar drop in the pit of his stomach. "Was it us?"

"No, Sir. GETEC isn't in a position to make those kinds of errors anymore. Let me explain."

Zahn peered down over the parapet

surrounding the roof of Waverly Industries Miami. "Well, there they go, Bob – one mega swarm of tiny robotic solutions. You want to hang out here for a while and watch them stun infected, or should we get on with evacuating our remaining staff members to the nearest CDC designated safe zone?"

His partner shrugged and set down the jury-rigged tablet that he had managed to wirelessly link with the showroom terminal. "Here's probably just as safe anyhow, Az. I'm pretty sure I see smoke coming from one or two of the safe zone locations."

The augmetric nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right. Oh well, at least we didn't suffer very many casualties here in the end." Glancing at the nearby huddle of surviving employees, he lowered his voice slightly. "It's too bad about Kenny though."

"Yeah, poor kid almost made it. Another ten minutes and the APSUs would have been active. If only he'd stuck with us instead of hiding out in that bathroom." Waverly sighed. "I kind of feel responsible."

"Don't talk like that, Bob. You know how much our insurers hate it when we try and admit any responsibility for things."

"Something tells me that everyone's premiums will be going up after this, Az." The other Martian yawned and sat down slowly against the parapet. The effects of having been awake since six am the previous morning were catching up. "I'm going to try and snatch a little shuteye while we wait to hear back from Vinnie."

"Okay, buddy. I'll wake you once he reports in. That was a seriously impressive replacement chassis you picked out for his program this time."

"I figured he deserved an upgrade after losing his original chassis. Besides, you know how much Tessa loves dinosaurs. It'll be an extra cool surprise for her when she sees him again."

Hull glared down at the bedraggled woman on the floor of his – hey, he hadn't signed away the title deeds to his new self after all – home's guest bathroom. "Get in the damn shower cubicle, Kennedy. I didn't spend the last three hours getting back here alive just for you to accidentally contaminate the place!"

Kennedy coughed up some more of the briny water from the nearby Desdemona Falls marina. She was exhausted. Hull had spotted her by

chance, and dragged her out before the local wildlife found her. "Huh...you've...ugh...you look like you've put a few years back on since the week before last, Agent Hull...!"

He ignored that and busied himself with the settings on the shower. "So what made you decide to go swimming at this hour? Don't you know better than to go near the water in Florida in the evenings? Aren't Level Four biohazards dangerous enough for the great Captain Mars?"

"Ah, screw you...!" Another bout of coughing interrupted her nascent tirade. "You...you can be a real jerk sometimes...!"

"It's starting to sound as if Mellor was right about some of the stuff I've missed." Hull didn't have the energy to bother smirking at her. "Let's get a few things clear between us, Kennedy. I'm the *original* me – as in the one who had himself frozen and put through FBT last year, *not* the one whose flash clone hooked up with you. He's already been evacuated; Aaron told me earlier that all of ANI Miami's surviving personnel and their families are being housed at the New Tallahassee facility. Your daughter's there too. She's safe."

"Thank God!" The Martian blinked, wiping away

traces of silt and God knew what else from her face. "So, you're the original Hull? I guess that explains why you look...different."

Hull glowered at her. "You were just about to say *old* there, weren't you?"

"Older than your replacement body anyhow...!" She yelped as the towel flicked against her right eyebrow. "Hey, watch it!"

"Be nice to your host. He's cranky."

Kennedy scowled and clambered to her feet. "You *do* know that talking about yourself in the third person is pretentious?"

"I just survived the Miami apocalypse." Hull refolded the towel and set it on top of the vanity unit next to the shower cubicle. "I'm cashing in my right to pretentiousness."

"Yeah, well, quit trying to take my eye out." She folded her arms across her chest. The movement stretched the already tattered fabric of her shirt. "Do you mind clearing out while I get cleaned up?"

"No problem. I'll go fix us something to eat. You can try to come up with a reason why you were in the water. I'm sure it'll make sense."

"It did at the time." Kennedy watched as the bathroom door closed behind her rescuer. Stripping

off the remains of her clothing, she limped into the cubicle. He'd dragged her out of the water not a moment too soon: exhaustion having terminally weighted her limbs. She owed him for it. *And ain't that just the latest in a long day's worth of crappy things to tolerate?*

The water was closer to being steam. It felt incredible against her skin: relentlessly sloughing away the layers of saltwater, filth, and other people's blood. That last one at least probably should have kept her on dry land. Hull was going to think that she'd been crazy to risk the swim all the way from Rickenbacker Causeway to Coconut Grove, but then again, it hadn't been him stuck behind the wheel of a burning hover car with infected people closing in on all sides. *I got here, that's the main thing.*

Except it wasn't the main thing at all. Ellie was all that mattered, and her host had already confirmed that she wasn't here. Kennedy bit back a frustrated sob as she stepped clear of the shower. She should have guessed that ANI would evacuate its personnel and their families! Her baby was miles away, in some ultra safe ANI facility along with the bastard who stole her. *I should have just saved*

myself the effort and stayed put in the damn spaceport.

The current – or maybe that ought to be original – bastard had left her some fresh clothes laid out beneath the towel. From the look of them, they belonged to Bryce. Matching red lace bra and panties, a bright yellow sundress and cream woollen cardigan with three-quarter length sleeves: overall, about as far from Kennedy's usual style as was possible. Grimacing at the idea of borrowing another woman's underwear, she towelled off briskly and dressed. *It's still better than nothing. At least we're around the same size.*

There weren't any shoes, so she padded out of the bathroom barefoot and headed back downstairs. Hull waved to her from the kitchen, where he was plating up. "Nice timing – the curry's just ready. Do you mind grabbing cutlery from the drawer over there? Assuming nothing's changed, it's in the second one down."

"Yeah, sure, no problem." She grabbed a couple of forks and followed him over to the kitchen table. "Thanks for not leaving me to drown, by the way."

"I'm sure you would have done the same for

me." Hull passed the Marine her plate. "It's the heroic way, after all."

"I ain't a hero."

"Tell *that* to whoever it is that keeps on making kids' cartoons about the alter-ego that you don't have. Do they at least pay you for using your likeness?"

Kennedy groaned. "How do you even *know* about those? I thought you said that you were on ice for the past year!"

"It was a long drive from GETEC Miami to here. I must have passed by at least a dozen *Captain Mars* themed billboards. Besides, Mellor filled me in on how you and the clone of my clone saved Mars together."

"Oh." Not wanting to join in on that topic, Kennedy turned her attention to her food. "This is actually a surprisingly good curry. I haven't had coconut and aubergine cooked together before – never would have thought they made sense."

"Maybe I'll just leave Intelligence work to my replacement and go into catering instead." Hull waited vindictively for his guest to take another mouthful. "I knew you'd suit that colour. It really brings out your eyes."

She almost spat out the food, but managed to listen to her stomach in time. "Very funny – are you deliberately trying to make me choke?"

Hull tutted. "No, of course not; you just happen to suit yellow. It's funny how few people seem to believe that they will."

"Okay. I don't know about you, but I can do without any of this awkward dinner conversation shit. Pass the carbs."

Hull shrugged and proffered the breadbasket. "Please yourself. I seem to recall you pestering me over food once – something about wanting to get to know me better?"

"That was different." Kennedy snatched a chunk of freshly buttered baguette and dipped it into her curry. "I wasn't really myself back then."

"Yeah, the imprinting thing, I remember wondering about how to help you fix that. Good to see that you've gotten over it." He smiled and raised his wine glass. "Here's to somehow living through the random machinations of scientists!"

"Cheers, I guess." The Martian ignored her wine. "I hear that you weren't fully you either. Top secret undercover agent crap, wasn't it?"

"I honestly don't remember yet. Presumably ANI

will get around to restoring my mind at some point."

"What makes you think they'll bother trying? They already have the FBT version of you on their books. Maybe he won't want you coming back." Kennedy paused to let that sink in. "He sure didn't seem keen on Yuudai."

"It's not up to him. I'm the one who ANI originally employed." Hull stared pointedly at the untouched wine in his guest's glass until it became clear that she wasn't going to offer an explanation. *I guess she isn't a drinker.* "So, the flash clone of my younger self decided to go by our middle name, huh? That's interesting."

"He wanted to be his own person."

"Yeah, that's a risk with clones. Sometimes they can't accept their state of being."

Kennedy slammed down her fork. "Yuudai was different, damn it! He was a *person*; not some Goddamn tool for GETEC to use and then throw away afterwards! He deserved better!"

Hull blinked. "You really loved him, didn't you?"

"I...yeah...I did." She wiped at her eyes with her napkin, ignoring Hull's pained look. "I still do. Our baby – Ellie – she's all I have left of him now. She was born prematurely; the doctors said that her

DNA was broken because of how Yuudai had a shortened lifespan built into him. Your other self donated his genetic material for treatment, but then he took me to court and got custody. This was going to be my first weekend contact."

Hull schooled his features into a sympathetic expression. "Well the FBT must have affected his personality, because I don't approve of separating mothers and infants! I'll see to it that you get her back, Susan, that's a promise."

Chapter Eight – Lingering Echoes

Moxton handed Dobos another cup of coffee. "How are you feeling, Oliver?"

The younger man scratched at the stubble that was steadily taking over his jaw line. "I'm okay. It's been a long fucking two hours though."

Quincy beeped from where he was still recharging in the corner of the New Tallahassee facility interview room. <correction – twohoursfourteenminutesandsevensecondsmalesiblingunit>

"Cheers, little bro'." Dobos leaned back in his chair, cupping his beverage in both hands. "So is there any word back yet on whether they'll charge the fucker with anything?"

His handler sat down at the opposite side of the table with his own drink. "Volker says that it isn't up to her. Just between us, I think that's ex-girlfriend

speech for she'd like to string him up."

"Nah, Laine's too professional to ever let it get personal!" The field operative's poppy petal blue eyes flickered a little. "She won't tolerate having a sexual predator on her team though. Even if ANI's Internal Affairs decide not to give a shit about what he's done, there's no fucking way that she'll ignore it. Would she?"

"You know her better than either of us does, Oliver." Moxton eyed him worriedly. "You know we believe you regardless?"

"Yeah, and you can stop fucking fussing any time now, thanks all the bloody same. I'm not made of glass all of a fucking sudden, just because I admitted to what happened!" He glowered at Moxton: daring the man to care. "It was one fucking time. I'm over it. I just didn't want to leave that girl's reputation in the fucking shit, that's all."

"Right, that's it." Upending his own cup, Moxton tossed the remainder of the by now lukewarm tea onto the nylon carpeted floor, before setting the empty container in the middle of the table. "See this cup? I'm repurposing it as a swear jar, effective immediately. The rate is set at one pound per expletive. Now, either you can keep on with your

attempts at alienating everyone around you, and probably end up bankrupt before we leave this room, or you can let us help you. It's entirely your choice, mate."

<suggestion – take the help males sibling unit>

"You have an odd way of defining *choice*, Moxton." Dobos hunched his shoulders irritably. "Look, I told you already: I'm over it! Just let well enough alone, can't you? There's nothing to be done about it now anyhow."

His handler snorted. "Has it occurred to you yet that if ANI or BIINT decide to pursue charges, then whoever ends up as Hull's legal representative isn't going to accept your being over it as an excuse not to testify?"

"I suppose I thought I'd worry about that as and when it happened." The younger man closed his eyes wearily and sipped at his coffee. "Besides, let's not kid ourselves, eh? How likely is it really that he'll face charges?"

"Point taken – still, I'd rather be prepared for it in advance. That way we can support you. It's what friends do in these situations." He held up his hand before Dobos could interrupt. "It's *also* a means of increasing the likelihood of that bastard doing time

if he does end up tried."

<reminder – swearjarprotocolsengaged>

The door of the interview room opened abruptly. Agent Cully looked in at them; his expression somewhere between anxious and apologetic. "Senior Agent Volker sent me to advise you that you're clear to leave whenever you'd like to. Since there aren't going to be any charges brought against Agent Hull, she thought it might be prudent for you not to stick around."

Moxton and Quincy halfheartedly expected Dobos to kick off at that. Instead, the field operative frowned at Cully. "That doesn't really sound like something Laine would say."

"I'm paraphrasing." Cully's face tightened. "Look, off the record, it might be better if we just walk and talk. Volker isn't sure how long she can drag out the paperwork for Hull's release, and there's something important that she needs you to do in the meantime."

Hull peered through the early morning gloom at the soft glow of the alarm clock on the bedside table and smiled as he reflected on how well last night had gone for him. The lingering echoes of the

previous year's forced imprinting session had already softened the Martian woman towards him. Promising to reunite her with her daughter had been enough to do the rest. It turned out that the famous Captain Mars was quite the lay. *To think, I could have had her umpteen times last year if I'd wanted! I wonder why my new body never got around to doing that and yet his flash clone did.*

Well, he certainly had her now. With that in mind, Hull shifted back onto his left hand side to study his new plaything. She was still asleep; curled up naked beneath the sheets, her chin length mop of dark curls a tangled mess against the pillow. It had felt damn good yanking back on it, especially when she yelped. His few vague recollections of Bryce Lenard hinted at his fiancée being a submissive woman with a meek, obedient attitude. *Did I make you that way, or was it already in your nature? Do you ever push back, even a little? Do I let you?*

He supposed that he would find out soon enough. It wasn't as if he were about to just nod and smile as his new body went on with living what was really *his* life! No, something would have to give in the situation. Maybe there was a way to merge both of his consciousnesses. That, or eliminate the

new him. Of course, the latter approach would leave Hull with the same damn heart problem that had driven him to attempt the FBT in the first place. *Yeah, on balance, that merging thing sounds good enough to me.*

In the meantime, the quarantine was still in place. He and Kennedy weren't going anywhere for the foreseeable future. Fucking her repeatedly was certainly one way to pass the time. Depending on how long they remained trapped here alone, he *might* even get in her head enough to make her believe that she loved him. *That could prove entertaining. Who knows, maybe I'll even let you keep your career. Having a pet celebrity soldier could be fun.*

Kassandra scrambled up from the painfully functional sofa and ran to greet Hull as he and Saunders finally re-entered their temporary home. Behind her, the wall clock read five am. "Greg, you're back! Are you okay? I'm so, so sorry about Callista freaking out and...!"

He shrugged her off. "Where's Bryce?"

The young woman wrung her hands nervously as she answered. "Um, I'm not sure. She took the kids

out yesterday evening and didn't come back. I thought maybe they were with you...?"

Hull's gut lurched. "What time did she leave and where did she say they'd be headed to?"

"Um, I think it was a little after six thirty? I was in the shower, sorry." Cassandra held up a thick manila envelope. "This came for you last night – Agent Marcy dropped it off when she collected Callista's things. I still can't believe what she...!"

Ignoring her ranting about her spoilt brat of a cousin, Hull sprinted to the empty bedroom that he had shared with Bryce and the children, tearing open the package with shaking hands. His family's missing luggage confirmed what the paperwork claimed: Bryce had taken all three children and left him. According to the temporary restraining order, he wasn't allowed within fifty feet of any of them. Neither was Saunders. *Someone has been very fucking thorough with this, probably the same damn someone who turned Bryce against me!*

He was going to kill whoever it was. It would be slow, and as inventive as was possible. First, however, he needed to locate his family. Bryce wasn't capable of living independently. She'd realize that all too soon, he was sure. Unfortunately,

by then the assholes that had encouraged her to leave him would undoubtedly be long gone, without so much as a backwards glance. His poor angel would be all alone out there. *Don't worry, baby, I'm not going to get mad with you over this, because none of it's really your doing. I'll come and find you and our kids, and then we'll work past it together – as a family.*

Leister breathed easier at the Friday morning radio news' announcement regarding the successful containment of the biohazard in Miami. The thought of such horror occurring here in England had kept him from sleeping properly the night before. *Who the deuce was behind it? Well, hopefully whoever it was, they'll be caught soon.*

He hummed quietly as he busied himself with loading the breakfast things into the dishwasher. Nightingale had already left in a taxi for their appointment to view one of the local nurseries, and had two further meetings scheduled later today in search of schools for the older twins. Leister would have to find time apart from his babysitting duties to contact Darren and Tanya. The poor girl had been distraught at the news of the outbreak.

Although thanks to her career with BIINT she was now an officially recognised citizen of the UK, Miami would always be dear to her: it was her birthplace. She had friends there, and extended family, even if visiting them still felt like too high a risk. *There must be some way of checking on them for her. The official helpline certainly hasn't been of much use in that regard!*

Cerise and Jamal-Kristof were following the situation too, according to Ashley. Her father had taken emergency leave to support them both. In truth, Leister was rather less worried for the freelancer and her son than he was for Tanya. He knew from experience that Paul Benedict could and would carry those dependent upon him through worse events. Young Mr Jolley was another matter entirely. *The fellow means well, and he does try, but it shan't do for Tanya to suffer any undue stress, not after her recent bout of ill health.*

His phone buzzed softly, distracting him from the radio and his thoughts. "Hello?"

"It's me, Moxton. We've just landed at Hurn."

"Ah, Daniel, it's splendid to hear your voice, darling! How is everyone?"

"We didn't lose anyone to the biohazard. I'm

sure you're caught up to the news?"

"Yes darling: they've just finished a charming human interest piece with that Waverly fellow. I must say, it was certainly an inventive use of those little – what are they called again? APSUs, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I think that's it. They're some sort of robotic mothers' help units." Moxton paused, and Leister heard him ask Dobos to check on their passengers. "Listen, Cob, there's been an unexpected turn of events. Volker wants British Intelligence to help Hull's family to hide from him. We were sort of hoping that Spence might have enough room available until we can source somewhere more permanent."

Leister somehow managed to keep his tone completely neutral as he replied. "Daniel, I can't promise that Nightingale shall be entirely happy about this. Still, given the circumstances, I'm sure that they won't begrudge our guests the space. The circumstances are exceptional, aren't they?"

"Absolutely, yeah."

"Good. Well, you see to getting them here, and I'll do what I can to make room for the three of them."

"Four."

"Oh, so you brought the au pair too?"

"No; she's too attached to Hull to risk involving her. But it turns out that he'd also taken custody of a Martian foster kid – you'll never guess who *her* family is, by the way."

The events of Spence's recent off planet assignment sprang immediately to Leister's mind. He recalled what his protégé had said about the outcome. "That wouldn't be young Tessa Waverly, by any chance, darling?"

"Okay, fine, so you're obviously better informed than ought to be humanly possible. Anyhow, we'll see you this afternoon – assuming traffic's normal, we should be there for about two o'clock."

"Drive safe, Daniel."

According to the security camera, there was a small robot dinosaur at the front door. Kennedy blinked for a moment, rubbed her eyes, and then looked again. The metallic creature was still there. In fact, it appeared to be trying to reach the doorbell. Backing slowly away from the bank of monitors, Kennedy turned and exited the panic room; glad to be back in her own clothing now that

it was fully laundered and once again wearable. Jogging downstairs, she glanced around for any sign of her host. "Hey, Greg – have you seen what's outside?"

Hull emerged from the kitchen, dusting off his hands. "What is it? This pasta isn't going to make itself you know. If you want to eat Italian tonight then I need to prep the ingredients."

"Firstly, it's barely six in the morning. We have plenty of time to arrange dinner. Secondly, who even makes fresh pasta? There's probably a crap ton of it stored in the pantry already."

He glowered at her. "Neither I, nor my clone, would use dried pasta outside of any situation that required surviving on MREs. Now, what were you yelling about just now?"

"There's a robot trying to reach the doorbell. I ain't sure whether to think it's cute or get ready to shoot it. And what the heck's wrong with dried pasta anyhow?"

"I feel like the word *philistine* would be very appropriate right now." Abandoning his apron, Hull led the way to his office. "Let's take a look at our visitor on the cameras – huh, some sort of animatronic reptile. That's unusual."

"If you ask me, it looks like a really small T-Rex." The Martian swatted at Hull's arm. "Also, no I'm not, thank you very much! Philistines don't appreciate art. Last time I checked, there's no artistic merit in spaghetti. Maybe try using a dictionary next time you insult someone."

"Kind hands, Susan." He ignored her eye roll. "So which of us gets to go and see what it wants?"

"Hey, it's your house. I'm just crashing here while I wait for the apocalypse to finish."

"To judge by the early morning news reports, it already has. Besides, I'm not the one who's allegedly a superhero."

"Yeah, I'm really trying not to encourage those rumours." Kennedy mock saluted him before drawing her plasma pistol. "I've only got half a clip left. You take point and I'll cover you."

Hoping that nothing that intended to kill them would have any interest in using the doorbell, Hull made his way to the front door. There didn't appear to be any infected people in the immediate area, so he risked depolarising the glass before reaching for the communication panel on the wall. "Hey there, little guy. Can we help you with something?"

TOO MANY FISH

The robot peered up at them from its side of the door. Its metal tail swished. "Yeah – I'm here to find Tessa Waverly. Her old man sent me to keep her safe; I'm an APSU. The name's Vinnie; Captain Mars there knew me in my old chassis. Some asshole who looked like you but younger did too."

Chapter Nine – Latest In Line

Nursing their mid-morning coffee, Spence gazed out of the kitchen window at the family of robins hopping across the overgrown lawn behind their home, and wondered idly whether one could use holographic projectors to make the outside of a house look like a shoe. It seemed wholly appropriate. *Just because there happen to be seven bedrooms, doesn't mean that I want to cram them all full of people or small robots!*

On the bright side, the situation wasn't wholly without respite. Mr Waverly would collect Tessa and her APSU sometime later today. He'd been rather vague when it came to arranging an exact time for his arrival, which was hardly a shining example of his parenting. Nonetheless, the past two weeks following the Miami crisis had seen him lauded highly enough that Children's Services had

begrudgingly granted him monthly visitation rights with the girl, albeit supervised by a social worker. Meanwhile, Captain Kennedy was only an hour's drive away from arriving for today's contact with Ellie-Rayne, according to her latest message. *Now all I need to do is find someone else to look after Ms Lenard and her son for the afternoon, and then perhaps I can pretend to have a proper May Bank holiday weekend along with the rest of the nation.*

The latter guests were far too potentially valuable to risk losing track of them. Well, that and it seemed unlikely that Bryce would cope alone just yet. By Spence's calculations, the blonde woman had lived longer as property than she had as a normal person. Worse yet, she had been only twenty-one when she first lost her freedom – still of an age for her brain to have adapted to survive the new way of life Hull had foisted upon her. *There simply isn't a swift way to put that sort of thing right.*

That still didn't justify the presumption that Spence would be happy to look after her. The non-gender was in fact thoroughly disgruntled about the arrangement, which was in danger of becoming all too permanent if yesterday's meeting with Pembleton were anything to go by.

Apparently, the grey haired head of British International Intelligence regarded it as a doubly effective solution. Bryce would have someone to monitor her attempted reintegration into normal society, and Spence would have no need to bother hiring an actual nanny. *A professional who most likely wouldn't come complete with two additional under threes and a mutinous pre-teen. As though poor Ms Lenard even possesses the temperament required to cope with Kathryn and Barnabas!*

The problem with that argument was that really, very few people did. It remained Spence's opinion that Osprey House ought not to have released the older twins in the first place. That had been yet another instance of field operative charm and lack of responsibility in action. Not that Mr Campbell would ever admit culpability. He and the other operatives never did. *No wonder Mr Whitby's department and I spend so much bloody time scrambling to cover for them.*

It was slowly becoming less painful to think of their by now undeniably ex-lover. Campbell's daily shows of public affection for the damnable Bingham woman and her offspring certainly expedited the process of moving on. In fact, by

now, Spence's main feeling about the whole sordid matter was a sense of mild disdain. The fellow had flung himself into his new life without as much as a backwards glance! Clearly, his alleged love for Spence had been perfunctory at best. *I suppose now I know how the late Ms Tresweld must have felt. At least he didn't go so far as to marry me. You'd best take care, Carol – no doubt you're just the latest in line.*

Miss Hedturner had voiced the latter sentiment almost as soon as she returned from her holiday on the previous Sunday. Determined to support Spence and the children through their anticipated collective grief, she had spent the subsequent four and a half days baking things that might have earned her a place in any top class patisserie in the world. At least Ms Lenard was able to join in safely with *that* activity. Quite how the two of them expected the household to manage to eat all of their produce was another matter. *Although I'll confess that I've definitely had worse concerns than how to use up two and a half kilograms of freshly baked pastries before someone hands me even more.*

Byron Caulfield peered morosely at his reflection in the wardrobe mirror, and tried to think of a tactful way to voice his concerns. There was no question: the newly gifted shirt he wore was ghastly. "I don't think the post modernistic look is quite me, Lottie. This colour doesn't suit...well...anyone, to be honest. It's *lurid*."

"It's salmon, Byron." Drake tossed her colleague a brightly patterned tie from where she sat cross-legged on the foot of his bed. "All the young chaps are wearing shades of it this season."

"Well, perhaps that's the problem – I'm not exactly in the young age category any longer."

"Nonsense; you're scarcely past forty."

"I'll be forty-four next month." He sighed and set down the tie on his bedside cabinet. "Why exactly are you trying to make me over anyhow?"

The augmetric smiled. "It's for your blind date, of course!"

"My *what*?"

"Don't fuss, Byron. It's tonight at six, by the way. Leister and I have everything arranged. You just need to show up where we tell you to."

Caulfield raised an eyebrow speculatively. "Is it refundable?"

"What, the restaurant?"

"No, this damn shirt – there's simply no way that I'm wearing it, Lottie. But I don't like to imagine you out of pocket on my account."

"Oh, don't worry about that; I used your card anyhow. Honestly, I think it looks lovely on you." She shrugged. "Still, never mind, I'm sure the shop will be happy to exchange it for something that you like better."

Bryce looked up from where she was playing on the rug with Fisher and smiled shyly at her host as the non-gender entered the front sitting room with their own infants. "I hope you don't mind my leaving Tessa and the older twins with Heidi and Vinnie. Ellie-Rayne's down for a nap, but Fisher's been cranky this morning, so I figured he needed a little one to one time."

"It's fine, Ms Lenard." Spence deposited both babies in the oversized playpen and sank onto the sofa beside it to keep watch out of the window. They nodded towards the small pink lace covered bassinet in the corner of the room. "Captain Kennedy should be here soon, by the way. Is there anything that you'd like to discuss with her before

she takes Ellie-Rayne out for the day? You know; details about her routine, that sort of thing?"

The blonde woman handed Fisher another plastic building block to add to his haphazard tower. "Yeah, I printed out a schedule for her last night. It's in Ellie-Rayne's changing bag."

"That's very practical. Did you make anything similar for Tessa and Mr Waverly's excursion?"

"No, sorry, I didn't think it would matter."

Spence reflected on how little time Bryce had spent alone with the girl over the past two weeks. "I almost get the impression that you aren't particularly fond of her."

"I guess not." Bryce coloured slightly at the admission. "Is that so bad of me, Spence? I mean, it's not that I don't care what happens to her! I just don't...well...Greg never really gave me much time to think about things before he brought her home. To be honest, I'm not all that sure how to interact with her. You've seen how she gets when something doesn't go her way!"

"She's eleven, Ms Lenard, and living with what was an utterly avoidable disability. I'd say she has every right to chuck the occasional tantrum. Especially given how much disruption she's

endured recently."

"You kind of remind me of Greg when you say that. He's always talking about the value of therapeutic parenting and stuff."

Spence scowled. "Have you ever heard the one about the stopped clock, Ms Lenard?"

Their guest flinched. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to offend you...maybe...maybe I should just take Fisher back upstairs for a while and...!"

"Don't be silly. I'm not *angry* at you. I merely wanted to point out that Agent Hull's overall behaviour far outweighs whatever remotely positive traits he may occasionally demonstrate."

Fisher patted his mother's hand. "It okay, Mommy, don't be sad. Daddy not making Mommy scared again."

The non-gender blinked. "I have to ask, Ms Lenard, does he often make those sorts of remarks about Agent Hull?"

"No!" Bryce looked horrified. "Just what kind of home environment do you think we had?"

"Well, thus far I've presumed that it was the kind wherein you needed to enlist support from two separate Intelligence agencies in order to successfully leave." Spence softened their tone a

little before continuing. "Children can be remarkably astute, can't they?"

Bryce sniffled, nodding. "Yeah, I guess so. Greg and I...we kind of had a disagreement on our first night at the New Tallahassee facility. Fisher sensed how I was feeling. He's psionic, you know? Anyway, he got mad at Greg over it. I guess maybe just now he could sense me being scared again and it reminded him of that."

"That makes perfect sense, Ms Lenard. Your son is clearly very bonded to you." Spence knew when to stop pushing. "It's a credit to your mothering of him."

"Thanks, I really needed that compliment today." The blonde woman wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. If she had worn mascara, it would have been in streaks by now. "I keep second guessing myself for walking out on Greg without waiting to hear his version of things."

"Ms Lenard, I suggest that whenever such doubts next begin to trouble you that you take however much time may be required to reflect in depth on precisely why it is that we can't discuss *anyone's* version of those things in front of Fisher. I suspect that it may grant you clarity."

The back to business as normal background noise in ANI's Miami field office was doing little to help with Hull's stress levels as he walked through the building. As he'd suspected it might, Cassandra's initial training was proving challenging. Almost having to take his original body to court to reclaim his home and retain control of his identity hadn't been too great an experience either. Thankfully, the older him had opted to settle privately. For some unfathomable reason, his only stipulation was insisting that from now on Susan was to have equal custody of their infant daughter whenever she wasn't busy working off planet.

That last one had proven to be a better deal than either Hull might have expected. It meant, of course, that the Martian woman had every right to spend time with Rayne. However, since the fine print of their joint custody agreement stated that neither parent was permitted to deny the other contact, BIINT couldn't simply make Bryce and the kids vanish either. There was still the problem of the temporary restraining order, but Hull knew the system well enough to anticipate that the latter arrangement held little value. He had already filed

all of the necessary papers to have his fiancée and the children returned to their home. *Someone's definitely tampered with the digital records, but there's still plenty of hard copy.*

He dragged his attention back to the situation at hand: namely, his impending meeting with Volker. The senior agent owed him an explanation for the stunt she'd pulled with his family back in New Tallahassee. Hull hoped that for her sake it was a damn good one, because right now he was toying with going over her head and filing a formal grievance for professional misconduct. *Never mind what's going on in her ex-boyfriend's head for him to make that kind of crap up about me, none of what I did while working for GETEC is admissible as evidence of anything in the first place, and she damn well knows that, even if Mike Cully somehow managed to miss the memo!*

The more he thought about that, the more it bothered him. Volker had never indicated before that her personal feelings influenced her work. Quite the contrary: the woman presented as icily self-controlled. By every account, with her in charge, the debacle surrounding Dobos and Callista's respective testimonies should never have

spun out into such far-reaching consequences. *For that matter, shouldn't someone as professional as Volker have immediately removed herself from the investigation the second that it involved the father of her son?*

Hull's instincts began rattling. Nodding politely to the administrative assistant staffing the desk outside, he strode into Volker's private office and closed the door behind him. "Let's cut straight to it, ma'am – why aren't you following normal protocol?"

The red haired woman gazed at him from where she sat; her pale grey eyes inscrutable. Then she smirked. "Ah was wondering when you'd finally see through my act, Greg!"

He groaned and palmed the security panel to lock the room. "Jesus, Brooke! You can't keep doing this – wait, scratch that, how did you even manage it this time? I thought Volker burned out your nodes, and anyway, the last I heard, PID still had you enrolled in rehab over at Miami Psi!"

The bodyjacker cackled. The unbridled wave of emotion didn't look right with Volker's face. "Aw, she didn't do as good a job as she thought she did, and then ah missed a couple of rounds of my treatment thanks to all of that fuss with the

biohazards! Most of the staff on shift when it started decided to evacuate, and the rest were stuck pulling triple shifts to cover for them. Nobody had time to make sure that us inmates took our suppressants like we were meant to."

"So you possessed Senior Agent Volker, huh?"

"Nah, she ain't possessed this time, Greg. Ah flat out swapped bodies with her instead! Let's see how *she* likes being locked up and drugged all the damn time by those fucking perverts."

By the sounds of things, his boss was in serious trouble. Hull took a deep breath. "Brooke, if the PID staff employed at Miami Psi are mistreating their patients, then that's not okay, and I can promise you that ANI will deal with them."

She scowled. "Oh yeah, sure you will; just like how you promised to come and visit me there, huh, or how about the way that you stood by when this bitch locked me up in the first place? You betrayed me, Greg!"

"Is that why you helped split up my family?"

Brooke giggled. "Maybe...?"

He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. An invisible pulse of anti-psionic energy swept the room. "Then don't bother asking me to switch this

off any time soon." Ignoring Brooke's agonised howling as she collapsed, Hull opened the door and yelled for assistance. "Senior Agent Volker's consciousness has been forcibly expelled from her body by a bodyjacker! We need to dig out the portable neural mapping gear and get a team over to Miami Psi immediately."

Chapter Ten – First Names

Spence shook their head while perusing the menu. It had been a while since they had last needed to read Italian for social reasons. An evening out in what purported to be Bournemouth's finest Tuscan inspired eatery was as good a reason to start as any. "As delicious as this menu looks, Mr Caulfield, I still can't quite fathom them ordering you into a two and a half hour drive. What's even more surprising is that you went along with it when you didn't even know who they'd set you up with."

Caulfield smiled. "Well, the last part took me via the New Forest, so that was lovely anyhow. Besides, Miss Drake assures me that I can count my fuel costs as part of my expenses for the evening. It's to be Leister's treat, in case you weren't aware."

"Hmm, well in that case, I may just go for the

extra nice wine."

"Wines plural – after all, we surely can't be expected to drink the same one with every course, now can we? Oh, and please do call me Byron. We're on a blind date; I'm positive there's something in the etiquette about first names being considered mandatory for those."

"I much prefer that people call me Spence."

"Why is that anyhow, if you don't mind my asking?" The NIT operative peered thoughtfully at the wine list. "More importantly, have you any thoughts on which of these might be best with the cozze al forno?"

"We'll want the Vernaccia di San Gimignano." The non-gender ignored the preceding question. "I'll join you with the mussels to start; they do a sharing platter as well as individual portions."

The dry white proved exquisite, as did the dish that it accompanied. After careful debate, the impromptu couple opted for a bottle of Morellino di Scansano with their main courses, Caulfield following Spence's advice and requesting pici instead of his usual tagliatelle. "Pici con polpette di cervo in vinaigrette al pomodoro, please – hmm, am I pronouncing that even half right, Spence?"

"Close enough, Byron." Spence pointed out the dish on the menu to the possibly still teenaged and very definitely not Italian speaking waiter. "And I'll have the pici con cinghiale e funghi porcini, thank you."

"Right you are, so that's a four and a six, with Tuscan style pasta, got it." The young man beamed and strutted off towards the kitchens to place their order.

Caulfield sighed. "Ordering by the numbers, I'll have to be sure to remember that one in future! So, is there much difference between pici and tagliatelle?"

"Pici's more like very thick spaghetti, with a grainy sort of surface texture. Don't worry, it's nicer than it sounds, you'll see."

"I take it that you've spent time in Tuscany?"

The non-gender shook their head. "Not anywhere near as much as I'd prefer. I often think that it would be a nice place to retire to."

"Not really a fan of Bournemouth then?"

"It wouldn't have been my first choice of residence." Spence took a small sip of their wine. "Take Wednesday night, for example – I swear there was some sort of secretive bonfire themed

celebration being held by one or other of the neighbours! Everyone that I've asked about it so far denies having any knowledge, but I know I heard chanting when I was up with the younger twins, and the sheets I'd left out on the line were reeking of smoke in the morning."

"Chanting?" Caulfield frowned. "That is odd. Although to be fair, no civilised human being leaves washing out overnight to get darked on."

"That's *not* a word."

"It almost was once; there was even some talk of adding it to the dictionary just before World War III started."

"One might wonder whether there's any connection between those two things."

Caulfield chuckled. "Setting aside the grammar, what about the chanting you heard? Did you recognise the language used?"

"I think it may have been Latin, but I can't be completely sure. The nursery window was only open a crack, and my two were feeling especially chatty. By the time I managed to get them settled down again, whatever was going on seemed to have finished. As I say, the neighbours claim to know nothing, and of course the NIT security

operation ended on Monday, so there aren't any other witnesses to help me fill in the blanks."

"What about the rest of your household?"

"They all slept through it. As far as I can tell, the rest of the windows in the house were shut and of course Miss Waverly is stone deaf anyhow." Spence scowled slightly at that. "She claims not to want nanomolecular cochlear implantations."

Their dinner companion clicked his tongue sympathetically. "I take it that she's been overruled there?"

"Absolutely, although looking back, I could have done with a glass or two of this wine before breaking *that* news to her."

"It *is* good wine."

Neither of them was accustomed to talking much besides shop, Spence supposed, casting about for another topic of conversation. "You haven't said much about yourself, Byron. Isn't that another stipulation of a blind date?"

He beamed at them from beneath his sunglasses. "What would you like to know?"

"I suppose that most of it's classified?"

"Yes, but as luck would have it, you've got high enough clearance."

"Alright – why do you suppose that our mutual friends set us up together?" The pale blue eyes narrowed. "And don't let's waste any more time on pretending that they aren't a band of scheming, conniving matchmakers."

Caulfield hesitated for a moment. "Well, I don't want to appear forward, but I fear it *might* have something to do with this thoroughly silly crush that I have on you."

"Ah. I was afraid it might be something along those lines." Spence fiddled absently with the cuff of their sleeve. "You deserve to know upfront that I'm not looking for another serious relationship; not now, and very probably not ever again, if I'm wholly honest. I don't...well, I just don't want to invest emotionally. And I can't be bothered with the hassle of owing someone regular physical intimacy either."

"I see."

Whatever Spence might have replied was interrupted by the return of the waiter with their mains. The non-gender switched back instantly to the topic of Tuscan dining; waxing almost lyrical about the food culture in that region compared to here in England until the young man was once

again out of earshot of their table. "Getting back on topic, it would be nothing meaningful, and I can't promise that we'd even go as far as full sex because between my issues, my ever increasing mob of dependents, and both of our jobs, there might never be the right circumstances for that sort of thing."

"Well, what if we just agreed to see how things go, eh? You never know, it might all balance out nicely enough in the end. And at the very least, I'm an excellent babysitter."

"Are you really?"

"Yes, actually: seven nieces and four nephews. I'm a very involved uncle when I'm not working. So, even if you and I don't quite click, you can still rely on me to watch the assorted smalls and less than smalls on occasion."

Spence almost smiled back at him then. "I appreciate that, thank you."

"You're welcome."

Hull waited just inside the doorway of Miami Psi's grimly clinical medical unit for the ANI team to finish checking Volker and Brooke's respective vitals post consciousness transfer. In the interests of safety, the

latter's body had undergone heavy sedation before the procedure. "I hate to bring it up, Senior Agent Volker, but it's starting to feel as if every time I meet with you in your office, you turn out to be possessed."

She met his stare unblinkingly. "One might also infer that another common factor in these situations is your presence, Agent Hull."

"What, so you're saying I'm a jinx, ma'am?"

"No. You simply have the misfortune of having gained the attentions of a sociopathic bodyjacker; one whom it appears will use anyone connected to you in order to further their goal of gaining your undivided affections. Now – kindly inform me of what exactly has occurred during my enforced absence."

"Well, let's see. The CDC and ANI joint taskforce successfully contained the biohazard with the assistance of the local law enforcement and emergency services, and Robert Waverly and those parental support units of his. We're still looking at a twelve percent mortality rate for the overall Miami population at the time of the attack, but it could have been much worse. So far, there aren't any leads on the identity of the perpetrators. Oh, and

regarding what you just theorised about Dr Rawlings, yeah, she and Agent Cully essentially tag teamed with your ex-boyfriend and his agency to destroy my family. I've spent most of the past two weeks scrambling to contest their meddling."

Volker's brow furrowed ever so slightly. "Has the taskforce compiled the data from all of the cameras that were present in the area of the initial event?"

"You'd need to check with Agent Anderson. Also, did you hear *any* of what I said about my family situation?"

"Agent Hull, the last thing that I recall discussing with Agent Cully was which of the New Tallahassee facility's interview rooms would be best equipped for Oliver to give his statement in, and which agent should take it from him. I am afraid that anything beyond that moment remains unknown to me. However, I cannot imagine that any of it shall outweigh the importance of identifying and apprehending those responsible for deliberately unleashing a Level Four biohazard in the middle of Miami. Therefore, I would advise that you either attempt to better prioritise your concerns, or else return to your previously arranged period of leave

so that you may focus upon your personal life."

Hull shook his head, smiling at Volker's foiled intent to remove herself from the investigation before anyone took Dobos' statement. It seemed that he'd been right all along about her level of professionalism. "It's good to have the real you back in charge, ma'am. I'll tell Agent Anderson to prepare for a debriefing. So – what about the situation here; is it as bad as Dr Rawlings implied, or was that just a sob story?"

The senior ANI agent nodded. "There were several concerning breaches of expected protocol that I observed during my displacement. I recommend a full investigation of this facility and its staff. In the interim, we shall post an ANI safeguarding team in order to protect the rights and general wellbeing of the inmates."

Having paid, as always, in advance for the journey, Spence slipped quietly out of the hover taxi and nodded their thanks to the driver. The May Bank holiday weekend seemed set for mild weather if tonight's temperature was any indicator. It made for a pleasant midnight stroll along the street to the end of their driveway. Still smiling, half from the wine

and half from the company, the non-gender reflected upon their date with Caulfield. *I could certainly choose far worse as a means of moving on from Craig.*

Closing the front gate behind them, Spence paused warily. The downstairs lights were all still on in the house. It wasn't like either of the other adults living there to willingly sit up past eleven, which probably meant that something was wrong. Still, surely anything seriously worrisome would have resulted in a text at the very least to let Spence know ahead of their return home. *Perhaps one or other of the assorted smalls is a bit colicky. I doubt that burglars or assassins would have the lights on.*

Tipsy or not, doubtful still didn't equal impossible, and so they drew the slim knife hidden in the sole of their left shoe just in case. Hiding it inside the sleeve of their jacket, Spence unlocked the door and entered the front hall. The soft murmuring of familiar female voices came from the nearby front sitting room, revealing that Miss Hedturner and Ms Lenard were both in there. The women sounded anxious but not actively in danger. Setting down their slim evening bag, Spence opened the door of the sitting room. "Why are you both still awake? I trust

that you haven't decided to impose a curfew for me?"

Bryce looked up tearful eyed from her armchair. "There's a letter here from BIINT Headquarters; it came while you were out. They've agreed to send us back to live with Greg...but...but I...!"

"She doesn't *want* to go back to him!" Heidi was already on her feet, showing Spence the thick sheaf of very official looking papers. "Surely there is something you can be doing, yes?"

Spence peered closely at the wording. "Oh, for Christ's sake, this is just interdepartmental politicking at its absolute damnedest! Court appointed enforcers, indeed, what rot! Wait – *Pembleton* has already signed off on it?"

Heidi frowned. "Why does it matter if she signed? Mr Leister; he already has been telling Bryce that she is cleared, yes? So, that is enough, and no one is making her to leave us? That man cannot truly own her!"

"These papers say otherwise, Miss Hedturner." The thin non-gender scowled and pulled out their phone. "Don't panic yet. I'll speak to Cob and see what we can do about it."

Chapter Eleven – By Train

“We came by train, old swan, all ten of us – well, eleven if one counts Miss Waverly's robotic companion. I suppose we ought to, given how many heads he turns.” Spence grimaced at the memory of this morning's journey to London. “Needless to say, I intend to drive back. Mr Moxton assures me that he's sourced a big enough vehicle. I'm going to nip round to his and collect it this afternoon after my meeting with Pembleton.”

Leister raised an eyebrow as he closed the front door of the penthouse behind the last of the Bournemouth party. “She called you in on a Saturday, darling?”

“No, as a matter of fact I demanded it after yesterday's ridiculous letter. She can't expect me to accept Ms Lenard as my official nanny one day and then blithely hand her off to a band of random enforcers the next, it doesn't work like that when

children are involved; they get very confused by those sorts of changes. Anyhow, I hoped that you and Dr Jenkins could entertain my household whilst I see to all of that."

"You're absolutely right, darling; if you ask me, the arrangement is beyond treacherous." He shook his head. "We'll be happy to host. Actually, young Darren rang earlier to say that he and Tanya would probably pop in too. It's perfect timing: Ashley was just saying to me the other day that she wanted to borrow a few extra pairs of hands to help with decorating the nursery. That flat pack furniture is the Devil's own thing."

Usually, Volker liked to begin her day with a run, but spending the past fortnight trapped in Dr Rawlings' body had taken too heavy a toll on her. This morning, as the alarm clock on the table to the left of her bed flashed six-thirty am, the red haired woman simply rolled over onto her right hand side and sighed. She would, she had already decided, spend all of Saturday resting; renewing the connections between her mind and body. Tomorrow was soon enough to review all of the information on what she had missed, and the day

after that would suffice for her return to work.

Agent Hull had said last night that Anderson would schedule her report for Monday too, Volker recalled. Perhaps by then there would be some lead on who had unleashed the biohazard. Not that now was the time to try to think about anything so serious. No, it was vital that she rest; that she avoided any further strain for at least twenty-four hours following the transfer of consciousnesses. The medical staff had placed great emphasis on that. There was no logic in defying their instructions.

Somehow, Volker doubted that Agent Hull would enable her to overexert herself anyhow. He had already confiscated her phone before helping her to bed the previous evening. The gesture had reminded Volker a little of her father; whose approach to parenting often involved such measures, especially during her teenaged years. She supposed that both men meant well enough. Her father had done so to encourage her to focus on her schooling, and obviously, Agent Hull had the backing of medical science for his reasoning.

It was reassuring to know that whatever brief unpleasantness had occurred at the New Tallahassee facility, her agent now had full

clearance to return to his duties. As she had anticipated, based on his original ANI file, Agent Hull was proving to be an invaluable asset. His own ability to set aside the usual emotional responses which so impeded most people also meant that he was less inclined than the other agents were to challenge her decisions at inopportune moments. One ought never to fail to appreciate the difference that even an instant of hesitation could make, especially in the field.

Still, perhaps she should take the time to discuss with him what had happened during her enforced absence. He had seemed genuinely troubled over the matter. Moreover, it would not do to have Fisher's emotional development needlessly disrupted because of some unfortunate spat between his parents. The young psionic held immense potential; it would be remiss of Volker not to shelter him whilst he grew into having full control of it.

She was disappointed in Agent Cully for his alleged role in the separation, but then again Dr Rawlings' manipulative capabilities had likely been to blame there. Doubtless, the bodyjacker had once again determined to isolate Agent Hull, the

better to attempt seducing him. The real question lay in how she had managed to involve Oliver with the scheme. What possible reasoning did he have behind his blatant hatred of Agent Hull? Surely, by now, it could no longer merely be a grudge over his brief incarceration at GETEC's Miami facility last year. Oliver would not be so very petty. She hoped not, anyhow.

They had grown apart over the intervening years, Volker reflected. There had been a time when the two of them shared everything together. Back then, she would not have needed any official statement to tell her what he was thinking and feeling. He, in turn, would have identified Dr Rawlings' subterfuge immediately. How things had changed. Doubtless, her father would approve of it. He had never liked Oliver.

Volker, conversely, had liked the brooding Englishman very much. She still did, of course, but things were different now. There was no point in denying that fact. He had his life, as much as she had hers. If she wanted to know the content of his official statement, then she would have to read it. Technically, taking such an action counted as a breach of protocol, given their personal

involvement with one another, and as such, she would refrain from ever doing so. The rules were in place for a reason, not merely when they proved convenient. If Oliver wanted her to know the details, he would tell her.

There was a nasty pattern forming to their meetings with Pembleton, Spence reflected whilst on their way down to visit Whitby afterwards. It almost seemed that whatever outcome one might have hoped for, the opposite would occur. Arguing against surrendering Ms Lenard and the children had proven hopeless: there was paperwork, and that was that, as far as the head of BIINT was concerned. Apparently, everyone should just be relieved that nobody across the pond was interested in who had altered the digital records. *If Pembleton intended that remark as a warning, she can bloody well repeat it to Cob herself!*

The wall clock in the senior technician's laboratory showed as two fifteen when Spence entered. The boffin in question was up to his elbows in a tangle of wiring and nodded vaguely towards the tablet on his desk. "It's all on that, Housekeeping. I've keyed it to your biometrics, so

feel free to take it away with you. Sorry it's taken so long to finish compiling."

"Cheers, boffin." The non-gender tapped at the screen and pulled up the menu for the data package. At least Pembleton hadn't gone back on this agreement. For better or worse, whatever remaining secrets there were relating to what had been done to them on GETEC's space station were finally about to unfurl. "How's Dr Rosa?"

"Much better than she was, thanks for asking. We've been working together on the base coding of the neural map for Leister's FBT. She's starting her move back to full time hours this week. I'll let her know that you stopped by."

"I'll try and make time for a coffee with both of you before my next venture into the field." Spence paused, peering more closely at the wording of the BIINT file. "Whitby – are you aware that this is flagged as an ARAM file?"

"What?"

Realising that he couldn't hear them properly over the hiss of his soldering iron, Spence pinned on a flatly neutral expression and tucked the tablet away in their satchel. Doubtless, someone in admin would eventually pay dearly for not having properly

redacted *that* particular section! "Never mind, boffin; it's nothing urgent. I'd best get going; I still need to see Mr Moxton."

"Ah, yes, that's today as well, isn't it? Horrid business, if you ask me." Whitby set down his tools and reached for a schematic. "Dobos' tribunal, I mean. Has Moxton arranged for you to give evidence?"

Spence blinked. "No. I hadn't even heard that there was one being held – wait, is it to do with the matter in New Tallahassee?"

"Somewhat, but I gather that it's really more because of what Dobos' statement there has revealed about what he left out of last May's mission debrief. There are concerns over whether or not we can rely on him to keep BIINT fully and honestly apprised of his activities while in the field."

"Shit." The non-gender sighed. "Where's it taking place, Whitby? I'll go along; it's only right."

"They're holding it at three fifteen in Victory Plaza – Room Six. I only heard about it myself this morning. It's all a bit rushed, really, or else I'm sure that Moxton would have spoken to you already."

"Volker residence, may I ask who's calling?"

Agent Hull's voice echoed quietly from the downstairs hallway as Volker finished dressing and emerged from her bedroom. It had just gone noon, she noted, approaching the top of the stairs as her impromptu carer resumed speaking. "I'm afraid that she's not available to talk right now – can I take a message? No, I assure you that I'm not on any kinds of narcotics, why would you ask that? Yes, this is her home number. No. No, I told you already, she's not available. Well, that's your prerogative. Uh-huh, okay, yes, I'll be sure to pass that on. Well, why wouldn't I? Oh, don't be ridiculous! Yes, she's alive. No. That's still classified. Okay, thanks for calling. Goodbye."

"Who was that?" Volker made her way slowly down the stairs, leaning heavily on the banister.

Hull took her elbow gently as she reached the hallway. "It's nothing that can't wait until Monday, ma'am. You know how some people can be about demanding other people's time."

She frowned. "I believe that you have just avoided answering the question that I actually asked you, Agent Hull. Who was calling me, and what did they want?"

He shook his head firmly. "I promised ANI

medical that I'd make sure that you rested this weekend, ma'am. That means no working, not even from home."

"So it was work related."

"Yeah, but nothing urgent; it was just a request for a reference." He led her into the den. "I took the liberty of putting a few pillows and a throw on the couch for you. After everything that's happened, you deserve a little pampering."

Volker might have debated that, but her legs were proving less than stable beneath her. She sank onto the makeshift bed quiescently and let him tuck her in. "I trust that this is not infringing upon the resolution of your own situation?"

"It's okay, ma'am. There's nothing else for me to do now except wait for the court appointed enforcement team to locate my family and escort them safely home. If I'm being honest, I kind of need something to distract me anyhow."

"I see."

Hull smiled at her. "I've got some homemade ramen heating through on the stove for our lunch. Don't worry, it's vegan."

"That is considerate of you, Agent Hull. You have my thanks for all of this."

"Yeah, well, don't let it go to your head, but you're one of the better people that I've worked for over the years, ma'am. It suits me to ensure that you make a full recovery."

Spence shoved their phone back into their satchel with an angry growl and waited for Dobos to emerge from the men's loos in the lobby of Victory Plaza. What the blazes was going on in Miami; had ANI assigned Hull as Volker's personal bloody secretary? Not that the latter excuse would have gone any way towards explaining why he was answering her landline, or why her mobile had been ringing out. *Something else to worry about, just what I really don't need!*

They had hoped to beg Volker to send some sort of a character reference for Dobos, or better yet that the woman would agree to visit him in person. Christ knew that the fellow needed all of the support that he could find now. The tribunal – no, the farce, because let's call it what it was – had not gone at all well for him. It might have been at least a little better had he been able to present any form of proper defence, but as it was, not even Moxton had been present. Dobos himself had only received

the summons to attend an hour beforehand. *Whoever called for this was clearly making sure that he wouldn't stand a chance of winning.*

Thank Heaven for Whitby. At least, Spence supposed, Dobos hadn't ended up entirely alone in there. It had been obvious throughout to the non-gender that their presence beside the field operative had ruffled a few feathers. That was more evidence of it being an unfair hearing. For some reason, those in charge were deliberately managing BIINT's most proactive field operative out of his job. *Why on Earth didn't Pembleton read anyone in on this?*

The lack of action by the spymistress didn't bode well. Either the impossible had occurred and Pembleton knew nothing about the tribunal, or she knew but saw no cause to bother protecting her operative. Then again, there was a third possible explanation: what if she simply wanted the fellow gone? Had he finally burnt down one too many listed buildings or some such? *It would have to be something along those lines – she wouldn't ditch him over a single omission!*

The ARAM file on the tablet in their satchel gnawed at Spence's thoughts then. Why would the

data package from GETEC's space station have won that particular label? Asset Recruitment Assessment Materials – who had BIINT been interested in back then? Had Pembleton perhaps considered recruiting Captain Kennedy for her attempts at infiltration? No, that couldn't be it; the Martian woman was just a clever soldier, not a true spy. *Still, if not Kennedy, then who was it, and why wasn't I read in on the matter at the time?*

Dobos emerged from the toilets just as the answer occurred to Spence. "Hey, are you doing okay there, andro? You've gone a funny fucking looking colour."

Spence sagged backwards against the cool marble wall of the bustling lobby, wrapping their arms around them. "It was him, of bloody course it was! Who else could it ever have been? Christ, how stupid of me!"

"Eh? Sorry, Housekeeping, but I don't follow."

The non-gender gulped. "Pembleton's been building an ARAM file about Hull. I think...no, scratch *think*, for in fact I'm bloody sure of it...she's getting rid of you so that she can move to recruit him to work for BIINT."

Chapter Twelve – Matter Of Urgency

It was fast approaching six pm, and Bank holiday weekend or not, from what Spence could see of it so far, the Saturday evening crowd at **unDer** was just the same as it always was. Making their way downstairs to the main bar, the non-gender approached one of the sharply suited house Doms: a tall, somewhat sallow faced man, most likely in his early forties, with a deliberately unruly looking mop of longish curly black hair. "Excuse me please, Sir, but I need to speak with Mr Bogomolov. It's a matter of urgency."

They had pitched their tone a tad too well. The man looked them over critically, his dark brown eyes fixing on their obvious lack of collar. "Perhaps I can see to you instead. What is it that you think you need?" His leather-gloved hands were already roving across Spence's thin frame. "Poor thing –

haven't you got anyone to keep a check on whether you're fed regularly at least?"

Spence sighed. "Don't presume to know what I need, Sir. I'm not here on a social visit, and I know for a fact that your employer takes a very dim view of staff that can't follow instructions."

The Dom snorted but backed up a half step anyhow. His hands stayed put on their shoulders, squeezing lightly. "Sparky little switch, aren't you? I don't quite recall your name."

"I didn't give it." There really wasn't time for them to take the fellow up on his advances, which, to judge by the tone of things so far, was a terrible waste of an opportunity. "Just tell him that a fellow allotment keeper is here to discuss gardening implements. I'll wait over at the bar for my summons."

They were halfway through a delectably dry martini by the time that the man returned to fetch them. "Mr Bogomolov will see you now."

"Thank you, Sir." It didn't hurt to be polite, after all. "Please accept my apologies for the misunderstanding – perhaps some other time?"

"Maybe so; we'll see." He shrugged and led the way to Zima's office, shepherding Spence past the

other patrons. "It's just through that door – enjoy your discussion."

Knowing that in this scenario, *maybe* equalled *never going to happen*, Spence nodded and opened the heavy wooden door in front of them. "Good evening, Mr Bogomolov. It's been a while. My niece and nephew enjoyed the holographic puzzle you sent for their birthday, by the way."

The Russian smiled at them from behind his desk. "I am glad to hear that, Solovei. Please, come in, and sit down. So – my good friend Anton tells me that you are here wanting to discuss about the tools of gardening with me?"

"It's along those lines, yes." The non-gender took the chair furthest away from where their host's dog lay gnawing on what looked like a haunch of venison. "A gardener that I know is having a few problems with proving her identity."

"Oh?" Zima reached for the heavy crystal decanter to his left. "This gardener – does she merely need to prove her name so that she can buy plants, or is it for showing purposes?"

"I suspect a little of both, really. She has an apprentice as well, and he's facing a similar difficulty. I thought that perhaps you might know

someone who could help them."

"I am sure that such help may be arranged for them." He poured out two equal measures of deep red cognac, and passed Spence their glass before continuing. "Still, horticultural circles can be very expensive places. The entrance fees are best to be paid up fully in advance, you understand me, yes?"

"There shan't be any problems there."

"That is good. Well, I can start the papers for them both right now, if you'd like to wait?"

Spence nodded, cradling their drink whilst it warmed. "Thank you, Mr Bogomolov."

"Solovei, I think that there shall be the special fee for this matter. From now on, you are to call me *Zima*, as all of my friends do, I *insist*."

"Very well – Zima."

"Good!" The nightclub owner appeared far too pleased with their concession. "So – is it true what the gossips are whispering about your little holiday in Ireland?"

"The soil there is a tad heavy in places. I blame all of the rain that they have." It was still much too soon even to smell the cognac, let alone drink it. "There's something else that I thought you might be able to help me with."

"More gardening problems, or do you want Anton's phone number?"

"Neither, but you're not too far off the mark with the latter. There's a ginger haired fellow brooding in the upstairs lounge of your establishment right now who could *really* do with having his mind taken off a few things. Here seemed like the safest place to bring him."

Hull had jetlag. Right now, yawning his way through the inevitable series of checks so beloved of all airports, the familiar mix of dull headache and vague irritation towards humanity was really the only thing that he was sure of as real. Day, time, weather conditions – those were details for future him to worry about. With any luck, future him wouldn't turn out to be another clone. Adapting to living as the older of two versions of the same man was tricky enough already. *Yeah, definitely no more cloning for us, Greg, after all, there are only so many jobs available in our line of work.*

With that in mind, and observing the early morning sun still rising outside over London's Docklands, he guessed that it was now May 5TH, or at least he hoped so, given that he had an

interview scheduled with the head of BIINT for this afternoon. Not arriving until the day after probably wouldn't go down so well. From what he had heard of her, Lady Edith Pembleton didn't accept severe turbulence mid-flight as an excuse for lateness. Still, she had seemed very keen on finally meeting him when they had talked on the phone. *Maybe she'll even consider cutting me a little slack.*

Kathryn scowled across the breakfast table at her aunt. "I don't want to go to the stupid golf course for a stupid fair!"

"It's not a fair; it's an official NWI event." Spence wiped semi-encrusted baby rice from Jacamar and Honeyguide's respective faces and thought longingly of their life before children. "Everyone else in the house wants to go, so you'll just have to make the best of it."

"I hate making the best of things!" The girl threw down her spoon. Soggy cornflakes splattered over the tablecloth. "Why can't I just stay home and read by myself?"

Her brother nodded. "Oh yes, please, Auntie Val! Please say she can stay behind – we'll have so much more fun without her moaning about

everything...!"

"Don't hurl things at your brother!" Spence snatched Kathryn's mercifully empty cup out of the air before it could collide with its intended target and glared at both of the older twins. "Barnabas, stop trying to annoy your sister. It's considered cruel and irresponsible to leave children alone at home, and anyhow, I don't want to have to bury any would-be burglars on a Sunday. Besides, Miss Hedturner has entered one of her cakes into the baking contest. We owe it to her to be there to cheer when she wipes the floor with the other entrants."

The young au pair blushed from where she was busy feeding Ellie-Rayne her bottle. "Thank you, but it is not known yet who is winning, Spence!"

Fisher had apparently grown bored with quietly eating his thinly sliced organic apple, and piped up from his booster seat. "Mommy winning! She best at being Mommy!" Opinion given, the toddler leaned forwards and snatched a handful of his mother's scrambled eggs. "I like these too, Mommy?"

"Yes, Fisher, of course you do!" Bryce knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth when it came to encouraging her son to try new foods.

"Scrambled eggs are super tasty, aren't they, everybody?"

"I choose to assume that the correct answer is yes." Spence gulped down the remains of their morning coffee and twisted in their chair to engage with Tessa. "Mr Waverly said that he, Captain Kennedy, and Mr Zahn shall meet us outside the entrance to the main NWI tent at two o'clock. They're going to watch the May Queen's parade with us. Do you and Vinnie want to invite them all back here for their dinner afterwards?"

The Martian girl nodded, and hurried off to find her APSU to tell him the good news. Spence sighed and hoped that their final houseguest would prove as easy to please. "Miss Hedturner, if you and Ms Lenard don't mind managing things here, I think that it's time for me to go and wake Mr Dobos. We can't have him missing breakfast."

"Welcome, one and all, to the 2097 Bournemouth NWI Grand Annual May Bank Holiday Family Fun Day!" The announcer, a wizened little woman in yellow tweed with an enormous green handbag, beamed down from her podium at the assembled crowd, before launching into a detailed

account of which stall had been sponsored by what business.

At the far side of the pavilion, Drake shifted her weight in her chair and elbowed Caulfield. "Care to tell me why I'm here instead of taking that lovely trip to Edinburgh that I'd planned?"

"I needed a second pair of eyes, Lottie."

"Hmm, need I point out that my trip was both planned *and* paid for in advance, Byron?"

He smiled jovially and offered her share of his candyfloss. "A little bird told me that they overheard a spot of mysterious chanting on May Eve. Where it gets really interesting is that nobody else they've spoken to will admit to knowing anything about it."

The augmetric groaned quietly. "Byron, I love you dearly, but nevertheless I swear that if this ends up with our being burned alive or fed to bees, I shall never let you hear the end of it!"

"I'm reasonably sure that those sorts of things only ever happen on remote islands."

"Nothing about this is reasonable." Drake bounced to her feet and dragged her partner along with her towards the nearest stall. "Let's just get it over with as quickly as possible. Perhaps I'll still

be able to make the second day of my trip."

Dobos was beginning to suspect that Spence had dragged him back to Bournemouth the previous night purely to use him for child wrangling. Not that he really minded. It was actually rather nice, hanging out together like this as a sort of unofficial family group. Perhaps he should arrange to bring Brett and Scooter for a visit over the summer. *He and the older twins always seem to get along well enough.*

It was a pity that the same couldn't be said of some of the adults attending today's event. It had barely gone one o'clock and already there had been four separate punch-ups in the beer tent alone. That was nothing though, when compared to the lengths to which some of the competitors in the baking contest were willing to resort. Heidi had been so unnerved that she'd withdrawn her entry. *It's bloody shameful what some people will stoop to just for a poxy rosette! At least we got to eat the cake, I suppose.*

In hindsight, triple chocolate gateau, however fucking delicious, probably wasn't the most sensible lunch. Dobos felt a tiny bit guilty for not steering the

three eleven year olds towards the sandwiches instead, but justified it as being a special treat. Besides, the APSU hadn't stopped him, and it was programmed to protect kids. That said, he definitely shouldn't have let Fisher have share, even if Bryce's reaction when she and Spence returned to their picnic spot from browsing the stalls had been priceless. *Lesson learnt, Oliver – next time, listen to what his mum tells you about sugar being a bad idea!*

Lunch over, the toddler, was now seated on Dobos' shoulders while the group explored the various attractions, and had taken to pointing out everything that caught his attention by screeching excitedly. "Uncle Ollie, look: bird! I like bird!"

"That's nice, mate." The almost definitely soon to become ex-field operative winced as his passenger yanked on his ears. "Ouch! Okay, okay, fine – I'll take you over to see the flipping bird! Here, Bryce, I'm just taking Fisher to look at the falconry display."

"Okay, Oliver." The blonde woman hurried after him. "Remember, Fisher, we don't touch the bird!"

Spence looked at the older three children. "Why don't you three go with them? I'm sure that Vinnie shan't mind supervising you whilst Miss Hedturner

and I take care of the smalls."

The little robot squawked indignantly as he waddled off after his charges. "Oh yeah, sure – just leave the APSU to do all of the work why don't you? Typical lazy human parenting...!"

"Just between us, Miss Hedturner, I'm honestly surprised that those machines are proving so popular." The non-gender glanced again at their watch. "Well, the remainder of the Martian contingent shan't be here for another hour. Shall we grab that empty bench by the hover-go-round and see if we can persuade these three to take a nap until then?"

Heidi nodded. "Yes, that is sounding very good to me! Perhaps the music from the ride will help to be soothing them a little."

"We can but hope, Miss Hedturner."

Chapter Thirteen – Better Version

Hull exited BIINT headquarters at two forty-five pm with a spring in his step and an impressive advance in his bank account. If there had been a real estate agency open on a Sunday, he could have started house hunting immediately! As it was, he headed back towards his hotel. Things were definitely looking up. A new job, a budding FWB relationship with Susan, and no more GETEC related stress – yeah, he could get used to this kind of luck. *My young clone is welcome to the ANI gig. BIINT pays better anyhow.*

Try as he might, he still wasn't especially clear about who Bryce Lenard was. That bothered him, especially since Susan had explained about Fisher. Surely he ought to remember the woman if they had a kid together? Then again, apparently Marcus Westlowe had gone to some extreme lengths to

split them up. Presumably, whatever conditioning had been involved was still affecting Hull's brain. He'd need to look into that. It wouldn't do to have it sneak up on him. *Besides, I want to meet her, whoever she turns out to be. A fiancée and a kid are a much bigger deal to walk away from than a house and a job.*

Pembleton had said that Bryce and his clone were having some relationship problems. It seemed that BIINT had ended up housing the woman in the interim. Maybe that was something that he could use to his advantage. After all, he was here in England already, whereas the new guy was still back in Miami; fighting his way through a bunch of red tape that didn't apply to his predecessor. Court appointed enforcers were hardly the most romantic of gestures. *Yeah, I'll soon win you round to wanting to let me get to know you and Fisher again, Bryce. I'm obviously the better version.*

Still carrying Fisher on his shoulders, Dobos gently kicked his host's foot as the final stage of the May Queen's parade drew level with where their group was standing. "I've been meaning to ask you, andro – why don't you look into sending Kathryn

and Barnabas off to board at Caldecott Academy? Brett's really enjoying it there."

"I think Cob mentioned it too, actually; while I was prepping for Ireland." Spence nodded pensively. "I suppose it shan't hurt to consider it as an option. What are the fees like?"

"The same as the other decent live-in places." The red haired man smiled. "More importantly, it's set up for kids whose parents are people in your line of work."

"I'm sure you mean *our* line of work, Mr Dobos. You haven't been completely fired yet."

"No offence, but if she who must not be queried is really planning on hiring that fu – hiring who we reckon she's planning on hiring, then I'll walk of my own accord. Add assorted French words of your choosing."

A familiar dark skinned man in even darker sunglasses joined them then. "Don't tell me that you're fluent in French as well as Italian?"

Spence shrugged. "I dabble, Byron. What are you doing back in Bournemouth so soon?"

"I persuaded Lottie to help me investigate that mysterious chanting you overheard." Caulfield edged closer and lowered his voice. "You were

right to be concerned – we've dug up a few scraps of information on certain activities relating to the local NWI that don't exactly gel with the trappings of a civilised society."

The thin non-gender groaned. "Typical! Just how bad is it?"

"Nothing world threatening, but I'd advise against letting the children out of your sight around any of the traditionally marked pagan dates." The NIT operative paused to doff his hat politely to Kathryn as she sidled up to them. "Hello, Kathryn – enjoying the fun day?"

"No." The girl tugged impatiently at her aunt's sleeve. "The stupid parade's finishing, Aunty Vall! You *promised* we'd go home after it."

"All right, all right, we're going! I'll walk with Tessa and our other Martian guests. You and Barnabas help Miss Hedturner and Ms Lenard with the prams." Spence nodded to the other adults in their group. "NIT has uncovered some questionable activity here in Bournemouth. Don't let *any* of the children wander off on our way home. Vinnie, it might be an idea for you to keep your weapons primed. Mr Dobos, can you manage carrying Fisher like that?"

"Yeah, he's grand, aren't you, mate?"

“Want more choccy cake!”

Caulfield chuckled. “It looks as if you’ve got plenty of help, so I’d best go and find Lottie. We’ll pop round to your house later, Feathers.”

The nickname rankled; really, it always had, but then so had *canary* at first, and Spence had gotten used to the latter. The difference was that now, in the wake of Campbell’s betrayal, the non-gender was sorely disinclined to tolerate being re-titled to suit another’s whim. They shook their head. “Actually, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not have any more visitors to the house today, Mr Caulfield. I’m sure that NIT can manage whatever additional security measures are needed without making it a social call.”

It was a short walk home from the golf course even when taking the proper footpath around and past the local park, as opposed to the shortcut that led straight across the neatly maintained turf of the course to the rear gates of the stately back gardens of Latimer Hill. Of course, since the lawn-cutting robot belonging to Number 12 had been broken since long before they moved in, Spence knew that stately was no longer an apt descriptor for the garden behind their family’s home. The

savage, acre sized tangle of rough looking grass and opportunistic nettles really did need attending to – something else that Campbell had promised, but not delivered. *I wonder whether he's any more helpful to his bloody florist than he was to me.*

They weren't over him at all. The realisation stung, even more so when the scrawny figure of Philip Bingham came into view waiting forlornly on the front doorstep of Number 12. Spence scowled. "What are you doing hanging around here?"

The boy went white, then scarlet, and then something between the two with an added hint of green. "I...um...well, I saw you all together at the fun day...at the parade bit, I mean. You...she's Captain Mars!" He shuffled towards Kennedy and held up a brightly printed comic book wrapped in clear plastic. If not for the vivid colours used, the cover would have been positively Lovecraftian. "I know, because they put your real photo in all of the comics on the letters section! So...so anyway, I um...I sort of slipped off and came back home early to get my special edition copy of *Warbler Strike!* to see if maybe you might sign it for me...?"

Kennedy looked down pointedly at her infant daughter, who was sound asleep in her arms. "I kind

of have my hands full right now, kid. Besides, it ain't polite to doorstep people. Next time you want an autograph from someone, try going to one of their official signings, or put in a written request to their marketing team."

Spence thought the boy might actually start crying at that. Caulfield's warning about unattended children still raw in their thoughts, they gestured curtly to Phil. "You can come in and play with the older three for a while if you'd like. I'll let your mother know where you are. I'm sure she's worried by now."

He nodded dolefully, staring at his feet. "Okay, thanks, Ms Spence. I'd like to stay and play. You don't need to bother with Mum though – she doesn't mind me doing my own thing."

"She ought to." The non-gender opened the front door and led the way into the house. "Dinner's not until six, so if anyone's hungry before then, just look in the fridge or the fruit bowl for snacks."

Volker set down her tablet and leaned back in her armchair. The pertinent facts of all that had transpired at the New Tallahassee facility had proven difficult reading. Only a lifetime spent

controlling her emotions enabled her to maintain sufficient objectivity to safely converse with her agent about the allegations Oliver had made against him. Drawing in a deep breath, she called out to Hull. "Agent Hull – if you are not too busy in the kitchen then I would appreciate your clarification on a number of matters."

He joined her moments later, dusting off his hands on a tea towel. "I hope you haven't been working too hard, ma'am. Remember, the medics told you to go slowly."

The hands of the antique carriage clock inherited from her late mother's side of the family ticked softly past eleven thirty am whilst Volker considered her reply. "I must insist that you fully explain what occurred between you and Oliver during his incarceration within GETEC Miami last May."

Hull's face tightened. "Well, for a start, I *didn't* rape him. I don't know why he's claiming otherwise either – maybe he...!"

"Kindly desist from theorising and answer factually to the best of your ability." She pressed down the roiling urge to think of fire. "What did you do to him?"

"I interrogated him. It wasn't pretty, but there was nothing illegal involved. Just the standard isolation and pressure methods approved for reconditioning assets."

"You deny having forcibly pleased him?"

Her agent snorted. "You know what, if you're really so damn set on knowing all of the facts, then go right ahead and use your psionics to check my memories! Case closed or not, I've got nothing to hide from you, ma'am."

Volker hesitated briefly before nodding her assent. "Very well – that is precisely what we shall do. Not because I believe that either of you are lying, but rather that it is far from improbable that both of you are being used as pawns in someone else's scheme. If that should be the case, then the sooner that the truth is revealed, the better it shall be for everyone."

If nothing else, Phil supposed as he held out his plate for Ms Spence to add some peas to the portion of shepherd's pie, it was nice not to have to put up with John over dinner. His big brother usually found some way of spoiling mealtimes. Besides, eating at the same table as the real Captain Mars

was probably the most exciting thing that would happen to him in his life. *It's a shame she won't sign my comic.*

His host frowned at him. "Are you sure that your mother shan't be wondering where you are? I tried to get her on the phone earlier, but no one picked up."

Phil shook his head, eager to get to his place at the dining table. "It's fine, honest – I texted her to say I was invited to stay for dinner. Craig's taking them all out for Chinese food on his boat."

"That does sound like his idea of a balanced Sunday dinner." Spence supposed there wasn't any point interrogating the boy further. "All right, off you go and sit down with the rest. Don't pester Captain Kennedy."

He scurried off with his dinner. Dobos passed him in the kitchen doorway; looking for Spence. "Do you mind if you and I eat out here instead, andro? I could do with bouncing a few thoughts about away from the civvies."

"I'm not sure that many of them really count as part of that particular category, but all right. Let's sit at the breakfast bar."

"Cheers." He pulled out the stool next to

Spence's and perched on it, setting his plate beside him on the bench. "So, that friend of yours from the club yesterday, do you suppose he's hiring at the moment?"

"Possibly, although I hadn't thought that you'd fancy the life of a sub for hire."

"Ha, I hadn't realised that the snow outside was red! No, not that stuff. I meant his other business – the merc side of things."

"I refuse to enable your jumping ship so bloody readily." Spence prodded their food half-heartedly with their fork. "Didn't you enjoy yourself then?"

"A macska rúgjon meg!" Dobos sighed. "Look, the drinks were good, and the company was nice, but I haven't time to get wrapped up in all of that szorgoskodott. And for what it's worth, I'm not jumping; I'm flailing about for a fucking lifeline after being pushed overboard."

"She might not hire him at all you know."

"And if she does, what then, eh? Are you going to sit there and tell me that you'll keep on with the job as if nothing's changed?"

"Point taken." The non-gender traced a vague crescent shape in the potato topping of their shepherd's pie. "Perhaps you're not the only one

who'll need options. Although in that case, I should probably try and avoid telling you where to find all the good jobs."

"Maybe we could team up – you know, start our own mercenary faction."

"We'd need more than just us two for a proper shot at that, Mr Dobos."

"Yeah, that's why I was thinking of asking Zima about it. Anyhow, we'd likely not be the only ones pissed off enough to walk. I doubt that Moxton would stick around, for one, and he's fairly handy."

"As long as he refrains from bringing me home any more waifs and strays, then fine, he can be on our strictly hypothetical list. So, who else do you have in mind?"

"Darren, definitely, and Tanya; they've got too many morals between them to work alongside that piece of shit. And I'm not up for leaving Quincy behind." Dobos paused to gulp down some of his dinner. "This is bloody good, you know. Do you suppose we could persuade Heidi to join?"

"Well, she's very good with knives thanks to all the cooking that she does, and she did run over a couple of Irish terrorists with their own car once. I suppose she *might* have the required skill set."

Spence took a grudging mouthful before continuing. "I like to think that Cob would be with us in spirit, even if he didn't walk. Perhaps he and Mr Benedict could keep an eye on things from the inside."

"Shit, andro, we'd be well set if we were really planning on doing this, wouldn't we?"

"Yes, Mr Dobos, I rather think that we would at that. Just as well that it's all strictly hypothetical."

Chapter Fourteen – Degree Of Risk

It was almost one in the afternoon by the time that Volker finished preparing her agent. Hull remained sceptical as to whether they had really needed to meditate for so long first. "Not that the scented candles aren't fun, ma'am, but sitting cross-legged on a wooden floor for the better part of two hours isn't exactly comfortable. I still don't see why you can't just look in my head and get it over with."

"Memory working is an extremely delicate process, Agent Hull. If the subject is not correctly prepared, then there is an increased risk of permanent neurological damage."

"You know, the way you phrased that, it kind of sounds like there's some degree of risk either way." Hull eyed his companion warily. "Should I be signing some sort of waiver for this?"

"Not unless you require me to leave a paper trail for PID to follow. As you know, this technique is far from being regarded as legal within the United States."

"It's fine, ma'am. You really do need to learn how to recognise a joke when you hear one. It would massively improve your social skills."

She ignored his attempt at levity. "I believe that it is time to begin. Try to focus solely upon the memories that we are here to examine."

"Okay, but like I said, I've got nothing to hide from you. Feel free to look at whatever you like...!" The room peeled away abruptly and they were standing in a once familiar corridor. "Whoa! This looks like GETEC Miami's holding area. Are we really here or...?"

"It is a psionic construct based on your memory of that place, nothing more."

"Oh." Hull tried not to wonder what might happen if he thought about the wrong memory. The sensation of water lapping around his calves confirmed his theory. "Sorry – I think this is more to do with my memories of Okutama. Bryce and I used to spend a lot of time here."

"I would appreciate it if you could attempt to

remain focused, Agent Hull."

"Okay." The river vanished and the corridor returned. "Oh look, we're back! That was easy."

The senior ANI agent stared at him. "I am concerned that you are not taking this matter seriously, Agent Hull."

"I am! Still, come on, ma'am – you have to admit that this is kind of fun."

"We are doing this to determine why Oliver has accused you of first having raped him, and then forced him to orgasm."

Hull scowled. "I didn't do *any* of that. There's a line where interrogation is concerned, Senior Agent Volker. I might sometimes push things pretty damn close to it, sure, but I *never* cross it."

"Then presumably your memory shall reveal what really happened." Volker's avatar moved forwards through the remembered image and opened the door of the interrogation room. For a long moment, the dull hum of the electro stimulation unit rang in both their minds. "That machine was used to interrogate Oliver?"

"Yeah – don't worry, I was very careful with the voltage. He would've been uncomfortable, but there was no risk of death."

She nodded. "Everything is becoming clear. Show me what you remember of the incident within the bathroom area."

The memory rippled: transporting them into a small, windowless, tiled room. Hull and Volker watched as the shade of Dobos tried and failed to toilet independently, before his captor moved to help him. The British operative had been sobbing by the end, Hull recalled. Try as he might, he still didn't understand why. "See? I took care of him, that's all – toilet, sponge bath, fresh clothing. There's absolutely nothing untoward here, regardless of how humiliating he may have found it at the time, ma'am."

Volker's already pale grey eyes blazed almost silver for an instant. Then she gasped and staggered backwards. The memory shattered around them; spilling them both back into the meditation circle. "He was not reacting to what you were doing to him, Agent Hull. He was reacting to what he had accidentally absorbed from your mind. That is what traumatised him."

"I don't follow, ma'am."

The psionic drew in a deep breath. "The electro stimulation unit must have weakened his usual

empathic shields. When you assisted him in the bathroom, there was an accidental telepathic connection formed. It did not last long, but even a few seconds would have been enough."

Hull stared at her. "Just what are you trying to imply right now? Are you saying that he looked in my mind without meaning to?"

"Yes. However, there is more to it than that. Oliver accidentally absorbed one of your memories into his own consciousness. I believe that he remains unaware of having done so. From his perspective, the memory truly is his."

"Okay, well accidents happen, I guess. But I still don't get what any of that has to do with his recent accusations."

She surprised him then, by leaning forwards to clasp his hands gently in hers. "Agent Hull, Oliver was not the victim of the sexual assault that he described. You were."

"I...I what...?"

"I cannot ascertain the precise details without first examining the original memory. For that, we shall need to involve Oliver. I am sure that he will be willing to assist us once I explain the matter to him. However, the fact remains that, at some point in

your life, you were overpowered and forced to engage in..."

"Okay!" Hull yanked his hands free and scrambled upright. "That's enough information for now! I uh, I need some water, excuse me."

"I do not understand." Volker rose to her feet and followed him through to the kitchen. "You told me that you had nothing that you wished to hide from me."

He poured himself a tall glass of water from the dispenser on the front of the refrigerator. "Yeah, well that was earlier. I've changed my mind, okay?"

"Is it because of the nature of the memory that you had misplaced?"

"It's because I'm a normal person with feelings, ma'am!" Hull gulped back the water and fought to steady his voice. "Don't you have any comprehension of what a revelation like does to someone on an emotional and mental level?"

"My apologies, Agent Hull; I had supposed that you possessed higher than usual emotional control."

He set down his glass and stared at her. As usual, the urge to reach out and deliberately muss up that

perfectly arranged red hair nagged at him. "You really don't understand how we regular people tick at all, do you Laine?"

She raised an eyebrow at the familiarity. "I am not certain that such informal language could be construed as wholly appropriate between us."

"Yeah, well chalk it up as being due to stress or something." No, of course she didn't understand. For all of her power and intellect, there was innocence to how she thought. It was similar to the way that an endangered venomous snake saw nothing wrong with biting the environmentalists trying to save it if they got within reach of its fangs. "I think I should go."

"You have just endured an emotionally challenging event. I would think that you would be better to remain and take my support."

Hull tried not to laugh. "Sorry, but right now you and I are on very different pages in this conversation! Thanks anyhow, ma'am. I'll be fine, I'm sure. And at least now my name is wholly cleared, right?"

"Yes. I shall contact Oliver to inform him of what we have discovered. Do you need me to speak with your fiancée about it on your behalf?"

"Well, it couldn't hurt, I suppose. Thanks." Hull's baser instincts tugged at him again. "I'll see you at work tomorrow, okay?"

"Indeed." Volker was already busy on her tablet. "Goodbye until then, Agent Hull."

He stared at the early afternoon sunlight tracing shadows across the sleek contours of her body. As usual, the psionic wore a form-fitting garment that matched the grey of her eyes. Equally as usual, it might just as well have been spray painted directly onto her pale skin. "Do you have *any* idea of what it feels like for me whenever you walk into sight?"

That caught her attention. She turned to face him again; a faint frown between her eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, sorry, just...forget I mentioned it." If he didn't put some distance between them right now, he just knew that he'd try kissing her. *She'd probably incinerate me!* "Like I said, I'll see you tomorrow, ma'am."

Dobos chuckled as he put his phone away again. "It's not often that Laine pocket dials someone! She must have decided to take a chance on that new style of handset after all – I

told her there's such a thing as too much sensitivity in touch screens!"

Spence glanced back at him over their shoulder as they finished loading the dishwasher. "Are you certain that it's not another random emergency?"

"Nah, if she were up to her neck in zombies, then she'd have yelled as much." The man's poppy petal blue eyes crinkled slightly at the corners. "Although it's more likely that the zombies would be the ones doing the yelling: Laine's pretty mean in a fight."

"I expect having the ability to incinerate one's foes with a single thought would help with that." Dismissing their renewed concerns regarding Volker's inability to come to the phone yesterday, the non-gender kicked the door of the machine shut and keyed in the time required. Moxton had already promised to follow things up with Agent Cully; there was no point in distressing Dobos any further now. "Well, that's the dishes sorted. Seven o'clock – where on Earth is young Mr Bingham's mother? And *don't* say yachting, you know perfectly well what I mean."

"Yeah, they're a right pair, aren't they?" Dobos shook his head. "Is it too soon to say that you had a

lucky escape, andro? Only if you ask me, Craig's turning out to be a complete and utter wanker."

"Hmm, well strictly between us, I'm pretending not to still be at the stage where I miss having him around as *my* complete and utter wanker."

"Okay, so still too fucking soon then, got it."

The doorbell shrilled, followed shortly afterwards by Kennedy's soft drawl as she answered it. "Oh hey, Campbell, come on in – we were wondering when you'd get here. Phil, your dad's here to collect you!"

Nobody had told the Marine about the finer social intricacies of things here in Bournemouth, Dobos realised, watching as Spence's face twisted. "Ah, fuck it. Come here, andro, it's okay." He shoved the kitchen door closed angrily, ensuring that whatever explanation Campbell or the others provided to Kennedy went unheard by those in the kitchen, and pulled the non-gender into a tight bear hug. "There, there, mate. It's okay. Never fucking worry about him, he's not bloody worth it. You deserve better."

Spence's reaction to the Martian woman's gaff was eerily quiet, but nonetheless snot ridden. "It's...not...fucking...fair...!" Their words came out

muffled by Dobos' shirt. "She...he...it's not bloody fair! I fucking saw him first...!"

Dobos sighed. "Andro, that makes *no* fucking sense, but okay. Do you want me to go round and piss on their sofa the next time they're all out?"

"Don't bloody tempt me...!"

"Are you sure, mate?" He smoothed their hair a little. "It falls under my remit as a friend to enact petty and inventive revenge in these situations."

"No, it's okay, thanks." Spence sighed and pulled away from him, rubbing their eyes dry on their sleeve. "And if word of this pathetic display ever gets out, I shall shoot you."

Dobos smirked. "Out of a fucking cannon, and into a wall, eh?"

"Precisely."

Things went more smoothly for the remainder of the evening. Even Waverly and Zahn's departure was managed calmly; Tessa now reassured that her new guardian wouldn't prevent her from seeing them. By eight, the only people still in the house who weren't resident there were Dobos and Kennedy. The latter was making the most of her remaining time on Earth, and had decided to stay until after Ellie-Rayne was safely in bed. That

achieved, the Martian woman returned to the front sitting room to make her goodbyes. "Okay, well, I guess that's it. I'll be in touch to schedule my next visit. And sorry, again, Spence – I shouldn't have assumed what I did earlier."

"It's fine, Captain Kennedy." The non-gender stood and walked with their departing guest to the front door. "Do you intend to reapply for an Earth based posting?"

"I thought about it, but honestly I'd miss Deimos Base too much. Besides, Ellie's in good hands here, and Greg's seen to it that I won't be blocked from having access to her."

"He's changed his tune."

Kennedy frowned. "Oh, that's right! I forgot you probably don't know about that yet – no, I mean the original Greg. You know; the one from before the FBT, the one who that asshole back in Miami is cloned from."

"Wait – so are you saying there are now two of them roaming around out there?"

"You make it sound like a bad thing, but yeah; Greg's back. He texted me earlier to say that he's officially moving to London for work." The Martian opened the front door just as the man they were

discussing raised his hand to knock. "Oh! Speak of the Devil, huh, Greg? It looks as if you have another visitor, Spence."

Spence snarled and went for their knife; freezing mid-strike as they spotted Phil cowering beneath Hull's left arm. "What's going on here?"

Hull ignored the knife and swept in, shepherding the boy along with him. "I drove over to visit Bryce and our son. This kid ran out in front of me as I pulled up outside your driveway. He says a bunch of people in cloaks broke in and snatched his family."

Chapter Fifteen – Just To Be Safe

Campbell shifted position as best as he could, straining against the cold steel of the manacles binding him to the wall of the chine. It was a futile effort. Whoever these people were, they certainly had decent equipment. Was there some sort of secret evil boffin collective that supplied such things? Ha – a cheap copy of Whitby, dressed in a cloak and hood, and who spent their days making chains and sacrificial daggers! *Ugh, whatever they used on those darts back at the house is still doing funny stuff to my brain...buck up, man...!*

He could hear them chanting. It sounded like they were gathered at the top of the narrow path that he'd been dragged down earlier. Was that proper Latin, or just a bunch of made-up nonsense? Did it matter? The linguistic skill level of his captors would hardly be likely to affect the outcome here.

The tide would come in on its own schedule regardless. If Campbell didn't find a way to free himself and the others before then, all three of them would drown. *At least Sam isn't down here with us.*

That wasn't wholly comforting. He had no way of knowing what those maniacs would do with his son. What if...no, no he couldn't afford to think like that; not now! He had to stay positive, for Carol and John's sakes, if not his own. The two were chained to the opposite wall, and still unconscious. *They're depending on me, and so is Sam. I have to figure a way out of this.*

Something was missing. No – wait, not something, but rather someone...Phil! The younger boy had gotten clear of the attack, ducking between the legs of one of their assailants and running. That was the last thing that Campbell remembered seeing before the dart bit into his neck. So Phil wasn't here, which hopefully meant that he'd raise the alarm. *Maybe he even went straight to Spence, maybe there's a BIINT strike team on their way here right now to stop all of this!*

"Thankfully, Mr Campbell still has his BIINT ID locator chip. Whoever's behind all of this clearly

doesn't know about that or else they'd have removed it." Drake pointed to the glowing dot on the screen of her tablet. "We're close – it looks as though he's somewhere along the northern side of the peninsula."

Spence yanked the steering wheel to the left. Their newly purchased hover vehicle glided smoothly over the shadowy landscape of Hengistbury Head. "I see something over there that looks suspiciously like a bonfire of some kind!"

"So do I, Housekeeping." Caulfield leaned forwards between the front seats to get a better look at his colleague's screen. "Yes, we're definitely going the right way. Has everyone got their weapons ready?"

The clicking of multiple safeties answered his query. In total, there were six people in the minivan: Spence, Kennedy, Dobos, Hull, Drake, and Caulfield himself. If the research that he and Drake had carried out earlier today were correct, then they would be outnumbered ten to one by the local cultists. Not the nicest odds, but needs must. They couldn't chance waiting for back up to get here from the base at Hurn. *It'll already be a miracle if there's anyone still alive to save.*

He corrected himself almost immediately as Spence floored the accelerator. It would be miraculous if anyone on board survived long enough to attempt a rescue. "Slow down, Feathers!"

"Don't call me that!"

There wasn't time to argue further. The cultists loomed into view amid the shadows cast by their bonfire, and Spence kept right on going. In the front passenger seat, Drake yelped as the first body collided with the windscreen. "I thought it was only BLINT's field operatives who drove like this!"

The non-gender deliberately drove over another two cultists. "I believe in using every available resource, Miss Drake!"

Seated to either side of Caulfield, Kennedy and Dobos appeared unfazed. Hull, who was in the row behind them muttered unintelligibly as he rolled down his window to open fire. "I guess this is that famous British ingenuity people keep telling me about!"

Caulfield winced, no longer concerned about the odds. "Yes, well don't feel obliged to enable too much of it, Mr Hull! It's best kept for emergencies only."

It was little better than a massacre. Anyone not mown down became someone to shoot, and none of the rescue party aimed to wound. Some of the less enthusiastic cultists broke away from the circle of carnage and ran, screaming in terror, to where they had parked their own vehicles. Dobos' choice of secondary weapon tonight suddenly made perfect sense: a single shell from the thermoplastic grenade launcher obliterating them along with their only chance of escape.

The minivan rolled to a halt beside what looked like a stone altar. Spence was the first one out; making a beeline for the flower bedecked slab and the small figure abandoned on top of it. "I've got Seamus, he seems unharmed!"

Dobos took up position flanking them, at the front of the minivan. "I don't see the other three – we'd better start asking some questions of these fuckers."

Most of their companions set to work doing precisely that: corralling the handful of surviving cultists for an impromptu interrogation. Drake hung back, studying her tablet. "Hold on! I think I've found Mr Campbell, at least." The hiss and boom of the incoming tide punctuated her words. "There,

between those two rocks – according to the local records, there's a way down the chine. Campbell's locator chip indicates that he's at shore level."

Kennedy sprinted off, with Dobos close behind her. Glancing about at their options, Spence settled on Caulfield. "Here – you take care of Seamus! Miss Drake, cover them. Mr Hull, you're on containment duty. Don't let any of these maniacs wander off."

Snatching their emergency field kit from the back of the minivan, Spence dialled up the power on their head torch and ran to the top of the hidden pathway. Below them, the lights belonging to Kennedy and Dobos bobbed back into view. The Martian waved urgently. "We found them! They're alive, but we'll need bolt cutters – those assholes left them chained to the rocks down here, and the tide's coming in fast!"

"All right, I have a laser saw in my kit!" Spence half ran and half slid down the narrow trail through the chine. The tide surged forwards and back, already tugging at the lower legs of all those present. "I hear some thoroughly untrained civilian cultists got the drop on you, Mr Campbell. You must be losing your alleged edge."

He crooked the corners of his mouth up in a wry

smile. "Now really, Housekeeping, anyone can have an off day, especially when facing so many opponents at once! Honestly, is there any need to be so catty about it?"

Dobos snorted. "Actually, yeah, mate, there fucking well is! Or have you conveniently forgotten how much of an unmitigated cu...!"

Kennedy's palm connected sharply with the side of his head. "Can the derogatory language, buddy, and make yourself helpful. We need to rig up safety lines for everyone down here before the water gets too deep."

It wasn't an easy rescue process, by anyone's standards. Still, Spence couldn't help thinking afterwards, in the warmth of the triage unit at New Royal Bournemouth Medical Centre, that Carol had made a ridiculous amount of fuss about it. The blonde woman and her son only regained consciousness after the safety lines were in place, so it was hardly as if they were even at any risk of the tide sweeping them away! *Most people would simply be happy to be alive, bloody entitled good for bloody nothing florist!*

Somehow, the thin non-gender had ended up once again supporting Campbell past his hospital

related PTSD. Caulfield and Drake had remained at Hengistbury Head with the NIT strike team to organise the initial clean-up operation there. Hull was briefing Pembleton via the medical centre's holographic video link. Dobos and Kennedy, already given the all clear along with Spence, had gone back to Number 12 to check on Heidi and the others. Since Carol apparently remained traumatised, that left Spence holding things together, and not to mention literally holding Seamus. The boy was still grizzling unhappily into their shoulder by the time that his father finally limped back into view from the x ray department.

Campbell was still riding the familiar wave of post combat adrenaline. He took the uncomfortable plastic seat next to Spence with a surly smirk on his face. "Ruddy doctors – I *told* them nothing was broken! Anyhow, they've given me the all clear to leave. Where are Carol and John?"

"They're keeping them both in overnight for observation, just to be safe, what with the darts and so forth." Spence handed Seamus over to his father. "Carol insisted on them providing a private room for her and John."

"Well, it's a terrible shock for both of them. Phil

too – I say, is he all right? Dobos said earlier that he raised the alarm. I'd hoped that he'd manage something."

Spence nodded. "He appears to be a bright enough sort of child. I dare say he takes after his father there."

"Steady on, Spence." Campbell looked disapproving. "For your information, Carol's ex-husband is in prison for domestic violence. He's a very bad lot. She and the boys went through a rough time with him."

"Oh." The non-gender found that they didn't have any sympathy left to spare for any of the Bingham family. "Well, I'm glad to hear that you're clear to go home. No offence, but I'd rather not have to take care of any additional children for the night."

He chuckled. "But Sam loves you!"

"So did his father, once upon a bloody time." Spence scrambled up before Campbell could respond. "I'll go and arrange transport home. Mr Moxton should be at mine by now; he was coming from London. I expect that you'll want some time to visit with Carol and John first?"

"Yes, thank you, Spence. That would help."

Cradling his son close to his chest, Campbell leaned back in the chair and sighed as his companion hurried off. He still couldn't quite wrap his thoughts around the idea of BIINT having hired Hull. What on Earth had been rattling through Pembleton's brain for her to take someone like that on? As for installing him in the role of supporting staff for the field operatives, well, there weren't words! Perhaps it was all some convoluted scheme to make sure that he suffered a terrible accident. *There are cheaper ways to kill someone. I suppose I should be glad that it's Spence who's here with us, and not him.*

The non-gender had company when they came back from making their phone call. A tall, dark suited man, with fierce hazel eyes strode beside them. "Mr Campbell, this is Zima Bogomolov. He's a friend of mine, from London."

Campbell shook hands politely. "Pleased to meet you. What brings you here?"

The Russian shrugged. "I was dropping off some papers for Solovei at their home, but they were not present. Since the content is private, I thought it best to come here instead and deliver them in person."

Spence hugged the oversized manila envelope to their chest. "I rang the house. Mr Moxton shall be here in an hour. Shall we go up and let Carol and John know? Zima has volunteered to keep me company whilst you nip in to say goodnight."

If Campbell even noticed the feigned cheeriness to their tone, he didn't comment on it. "All right, let's go."

The ride up to the second floor wards was miserably silent. Zima waited until Campbell had closed the door of Room 6 behind him and the toddler before commenting on it. "All is very much not right between the two of you, Solovei."

"It's disgustingly simple, really, Zima." Spence nodded towards the blatantly joyous reunion that was visible through the window of Room 6. "He ditched me for her, that's all of it."

"Ah, I see." The nightclub owner curled his lip and peered through the glass. "He has curious taste for a British agent then, this Mr Campbell."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

Zima shrugged. "Everyone has heard of the infamous Craig Campbell – how should I not have recognised him?"

"No, I thought you were talking about her."

Spence sighed and shook their head. "Ignore me, please. Apparently, I'm desperate enough to scratch around for straws which aren't even there."

"I do not follow your speaking. Forgive me, please; English, it is not my fifth language." He paused then, narrowing his eyes. "I still am surprised that such a pillar of British Intelligence should have chosen such a woman as his lover. Do they not teach men better in your agency?"

"What are you talking about? Is there a tradition in Russia about spies avoiding florists?"

"Ha!" Zima threw back his head and all but roared at that. "So today she is the flower arranger, eh? Well, it is a change, I suppose."

"It's a change from what?" Spence stared at the Russian, instinct roiling in their gut. "Do you know her?"

"Not on the intimate level. I make a policy not to sleep with such dangerous women as Magdalena Vasnetsova, the so-called Breaker of the Innocent." He blinked at Spence's obvious confusion. "She is one of Europe's most skilled recruiters of child operatives; a foul trade, in my view. You did not know of her identity?"

"No!"

"Oh. Well, now it is out. Perhaps we should be telling it to Mr Campbell also, yes?"

The non-gender was already reaching for the door handle of Room 6. A sharp grin had begun taking root on their face. "Yes, I rather think that we should at that. I'm sure that he'll find it to be quite fascinating news."

E.V. GREIG

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.