

Inherited Stealth

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Five

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Inherited Stealth
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INHERITED STEALTH

In the direct sequel to *Captain Mars*, the last thing that socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence needs is any more pressure. With two psychopathic children already in tow and a high-risk twin pregnancy to endure, crossing swords with a secret high society of assassins really shouldn't be on their to do list.

Meanwhile, Irish investigative journalist Sarah Marie Tresweld has uncovered the kind of story that defines a career. For once, GETEC Supervisor Greg Hull is too busy to concentrate on covering up for his employers...

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Chapter One – Something Regrettable

"You're not a machine, you know."

Nightingale Spence scowled at the NIT agent's sympathetic tone. "I don't need your pity, Mr Caulfield."

"Oh please, call me Byron."

"No."

He sighed. "Is it the glasses? My sunglasses; do they make you uncomfortable?"

"No. Although quite why you feel the need to keep them on indoors is beyond me."

"Allergies: my hay fever just won't seem to let up at the moment. The downside of an exceptional olfactory system, I'm afraid."

The non-gender supposed they would be unreasonable to inform the fellow of how little they cared. "Excuse me – I have things to see to."

Not easily dissuaded, Caulfield ambled along

behind them. "You always do! I honestly can't help but admire your industrious nature. So – tell me: are you worrying more about the twins, or about poor Dr Finch's killer? Don't let's pretend that you don't at least suspect the two to have some connection."

"It's been an entire week without any further bloodshed, and the forensics report has cleared Kathryn and Barnabas of any involvement, Mr Caulfield."

"There's still no other reason for anyone to have targeted Finch."

"No reason that we know of. Her housemate Karen Wilkes died in precisely the same manner. Perhaps the pair of them had gotten involved in something regrettable."

"Save the fact that there can't be that many murderers roaming the English countryside who also happen to favour the kill style of the Capoliveri Killer. You *do* remember dear Jasper, I'm sure. I mean he was your twin, after all."

Spence shrugged. "What's your point?"

"I'm sure you know what I'm intimating."

"And I already told you my answer. I'm not one of them any longer."

"Nevertheless, legally you – and *only* you – have

the power to set Lottie and I loose on that entire echelon of society." Caulfield stepped in just slightly too close behind the reluctant aristocrat. "Be honest, Feathers – isn't it long past time that you stopped living in fear of their influence?"

Spence lengthened their stride: instinctively making towards the wide, bright landing. "Don't call me Feathers, and don't crowd me."

"Running away again, eh? Just like a lost little bird seeking shelter!" He took the final three stairs in one bound. "What happens when the old money cuts down the last of your trees, Nightingale? What will you do when it's *Leister* found picked apart and bleeding to death?"

"That isn't going to happen!"

"Are you sure? They got to Dr Finch easily enough. None of us heard a thing – for pity's sake, the damn security systems may as well not have even been installed for all the good that they were!"

Spence sucked in a breath. "Cob's not a civilian. He can take care of himself!"

"What about Miss Darnell then, or Dr Jenkins? God forbid it, but what about you – what if they go after your babies?"

"Then they may take a fucking number, Mr Caulfield. In case you hadn't been informed, I already have at least one crazed stalker with an unwarranted interest in this pregnancy. Frankly, a few possibly non-existent familial threats don't add much to my concerns at this stage."

"Ah now, come on: you can't deny that your corporation should own up to having at least some measure of responsibility for this matter?"

At the far end of the holographic communications link, Greg Hull cleared his throat and smiled. "Ms Tresweld, let me assure you that GETEC has never *deliberately* released a product that melts entire bathrooms. Partial damage and the accidental shipping of allegedly hazardous substances don't count."

The Irish journalist wasn't swayed. "So you're saying that the incident wasn't planned, Supervisor Hull? That it was all just a terrible accident – an unavoidable consequence of poor management within GETEC?"

"You know, it kind of feels as if you're deliberately trying to stir up trouble here."

Tresweld grinned. "So – there's trouble there to

stir? Am I making you a wee bit edgy, Supervisor Hull?"

"No: this is hardly my first time being interviewed by an amateur. You get used to the cheap shots eventually."

She wasn't smiling quite so broadly now. "Let's get back to the subject at hand...!"

"Sorry, Sarah – we've gone way over time with this. Thanks again." Hull cut the feed. "Aaron, tell me that Legal has this mess pinned down now!"

Mellor nodded and swiped up the relevant file on his tablet. "The whole thing will be history by Tuesday at the latest, Sir."

Hull relaxed slightly. "Good work. I want the idiots responsible kept very far away from any possibility of ever repeating their little experiment."

There was another nod as Mellor tapped at the screen. "Dublin has them under lockdown for the foreseeable, Sir. Should I file transfer papers?"

Hull gestured curtly; surprised that Mellor had even asked. "Yeah; ship them out to Luna branch."

"Yes Sir. Speaking of extra-planetary concerns, the Mars situation is stabilising." Mellor proffered his tablet to Hull. "I have the field reports here for your signature."

Hull took the tablet and began scrolling through the reports in question. "I'll review them first. Still no word regarding my flash clone?"

Mellor hedged his reply nervously. "It's confirmed that he made it out of the incident at our Martian facility, Sir, but Deimos Base is proving difficult to contact. Captain Kennedy and her Marines aren't playing ball."

Hull smiled coldly. "Then I guess we'll need to write him off as collateral damage. Hit the kill switch for his cybernetics to be safe. At the very least we can retain control of our technology."

"You don't like us, do you, Aunty Val?"

"Fuck!" Spence scrambled up from attempting to empty the filter on the dishwasher. "Do *not* sneak up on me, Kathryn!"

"Why not; I'm awfully good at sneaking."

"Awfully certainly applies!"

"I knew it! You do think it!" The girl's voice sliced through the quiet of the safe house kitchen. "Barnabas and I – you think we're bad."

The non-gender scowled. "Look, I don't think that you're *bad*. I think that you're...well...damaged. That you need specialist

support."

"Like Dr Finch said we'd have?"

Spence blinked. "So, you remember her name then – she wasn't just a thing to you?"

Kathryn shrugged. "She reminded me a little bit of Mummy. Her perfume; it's the same one...well, it was. Mummy kept the bottle in the top left drawer of her dressing table. Did Dr Finch do that too?"

"I don't know, Kathryn."

"Craig would know, wouldn't he, Auntie Val?"

"Why on Earth should Craig know, Kathryn?"

"Because he's like Daddy was for Mummy, but with Dr Finch, and Daddy always knew where everything was kept."

Spence sat down quietly. "What makes you think that?"

Kathryn huffed out her version of a giggle. "I saw them kissing, of course! You know; back at Osprey House. They didn't see me, but I was watching. I *told* you I'm good at sneaking."

"That's not always something to be proud of, darling." Maurice Leister's familiar deep tone rumbled ahead of him as he entered the safe house kitchen. "Sometimes it's better to announce one's presence."

"If she'd done *that*, then I'd never have learned about Craig's little tryst!"

The older operative busied himself preparing the children's bedtime drinks. "Kathryn, it's almost nine. Be helpful: fetch your brother and Jamal-Kristof to supper, there's a good girl."

"All right, Cob." The child picked up her oversized stuffed bear by its neck and sidled out reluctantly.

Leister closed the kitchen door behind her and cleared his throat. "Now then, my little chick: what's all this about a tryst?"

"Didn't you hear all of it then?"

"No, unfortunately not – what did I miss?"

"It's Craig – according to Kathryn, he and Finch had something going on together." The non-gender's retort skittered its way around the edges of sobbing. "I mean I *know* that it probably meant nothing. It's just right now it feels as though every single time I think that it's safe to trust him there's another bloody omission!"

"I think I'll need to have a quiet word with young Mr Campbell about this."

"I don't need you to fight my battles for me."

"Well, it only seems fair that I offer, Nightingale."

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After all, it was my fault that the two of you took up with one another."

"Don't blame yourself. We'd probably have had a stab at it eventually with or without your help, old swan."

"Is it resolved yet, Larissa?"

"No, Mama. The children remain in the custody of British Intelligence despite Dr Finch's elimination."

Lady Violet Ashby scowled. "We invested a wealth of good blood in breeding those two – I want them reclaimed! What's caused the delay?"

"Valerie Lackey, Mama: she's turned up alive and working for the Government. Apparently one of the agents within National Branch has filed a custody statement on her behalf."

The matriarch of the Ashby family smirked. "As if that inbred little freemartin or her allies shall have any chance against your brother! Lionel knows how to thin a flock. You could learn much from him, child. Go and watch."

"Yes Mama."

"I didn't *plan* it, canary." Campbell dragged his fingers through his dark hair in a decidedly less than

suave manner. Somewhere in the safe house, a clock chimed midnight. "Marion fell for me: pretty much at first sight. As far as I knew at that point, you and I were already finished, so...!"

"Hey! You'd dumped *me*, not the other way around, so don't you bloody dare to give me *that* as your excuse, Craig."

"I didn't know you were pregnant...!"

"What difference would it have made?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Spence, just stop!" He growled and caught hold of the non-gender by their thin shoulders. "Do you honestly believe that I would have let you go if I'd known?"

"Take your hands *off* me."

"Christ...!" Campbell staggered backwards. "Did you just use the Voice on me...?"

"Yes." Spence glared at him. "For what it's worth, I can understand you having a fling with Finch, and possibly even you trying to avoid taking responsibility for it. But you *don't* have the right to grab me!"

"Canary...!"

"I'm not your fucking canary right now!"

"I'm sorry." Campbell sank down onto the bed, and buried his face in his palms. *What's the bloody*

point of even trying to reason with someone who doesn't want it to work?

"I...I'm sorry too. I just really don't like to be grabbed; you know that."

"I still don't know why that is."

"It's personal – I'd rather not talk about it."

"What should we talk about then?"

Spence sat down on the floor and rested their chin on Campbell's right knee. "Did you fancy her too, or were you just being polite?"

"A bit of both, I'm afraid."

"What's that like? Being able to just fall in and out of relationships?"

"Lonely."

"So is running away from them."

The field operative smiled sadly. "We never learn, do we, Nightingale?"

"Never is a bit gloomy. Still, it does seem like something that we ought to work through properly before we add babies into the mix."

In her opinion, Cassandra Shelby had developed a wholly rational interest in her new employers' relationship. Up until now, the nineteen-year-old had only heard of BDSM as handcuffs and

blindfolds: bedroom stuff. *This completely immersive lifestyle thing they're into is super intense!*

Sadly, they never let her join in. Take tonight: there they were; out at the Fig Leaf, with that prude, Kellie! What the fuck was so hot about her anyhow? Maybe it was an Anglophile thing. Why else would they pick a frigid little computer geek when one of Miami's hottest prospects was available?

Well, former prospect, at least. Somehow, Greg had made nearly all the media attention surrounding Kassie and the rest of the Fortunate Foursome stop. She wasn't complaining, but she did wonder how he'd managed it. *Probably with the same tone that convinced me to agree to accept just over minimum wage to care for his resolutely non-sleeping offspring.*

She sighed and glanced at where Fisher was studiously piling up his oversized plastic blocks. "Having fun there, little man?"

"Making house...!"

"Well, I don't think it's going to be up to code, but whatever."

The toddler pouted. "Daddy back...?"

"What, at eight in the evening? Nope, not likely,

kid." She swiped past another fashion video on her tablet. "Sorry, Fisher: for now, you're stuck with boring Auntie Kassie!"

"That's funny: I've never known hot blondes to be at all bloody boring."

"Holy shit...!" Kassie scrambled up to gawp at the black clad stranger looming in the hall doorway. "How did you get in here, mister?"

"That's not important, love." He quirked his mouth a little as he levelled his gun at her. "I'm looking for the bloke who lives here. Greg Hull – do you know him?"

"Um...no...?"

The poppy petal blue eyes were abruptly less friendly. "Are you sure about that?"

"I'm just the babysitter, I swear!"

"Is that his kid, then?"

"Yeah: his and Bryce's. They went out for dinner – I don't know when they'll be home!"

The intruder sighed and scratched at his jaw. "These fucking balaclavas are bloody itchy! Okay, where did they go for dinner?"

"They uh, they had a reservation at the Fig Leaf. It's a private club at the Bellamy."

"Do you have a contact number for them?"

"Yeah...?"

"Good – use it. Tell Hull that Britain's stopped by, and that we want our bloody boffin back."

Kassie frowned. "Britain...? Wait – you're talking about Kellie Rosa, aren't you?"

"Do you know her, then?"

"Kind of: she's who they're with tonight."

"You sound jealous. Look, if this private club is more than an hour away from here, then I *might* be persuaded to see about making your evening a good deal less fucking boring."

"Oh my God, are you *hitting* on me?"

"Hey, if you aren't interested, it's no fucking skin off my nose. Now ring Hull, and give him my message."

Chapter Two – Thirty Percent

"I can't describe what it was like when I thought that I'd never see Greg again." Bryce beamed at Rosa. "Now though, we have another chance, and it's all thanks to you!"

"That's...nice." The young technician glanced warily at the supervisor. "I do appreciate the meal, Sir."

"You're very welcome, Kellie." Hull leant forwards to refill all three of their glasses: taking the opportunity to shift his chair a little closer to Rosa as he did so.

She scrambled up. "Excuse me, please: I just need to nip to the loo!"

There were no windows in the Fig Tree's toilets, so climbing her way out of dinner wasn't an option. Rosa locked herself in one of the stalls and attempted to steady her nerves by recalibrating her brain. It did little to help. Dawdling further, she took

her time at the hand hygiene unit after exiting the stall. *Perhaps the Irish office shall announce another public relations emergency whilst I'm in here.*

"So, tell me again how you ended up tied to this armchair, mate?"

Dobos scowled at the blonde operative. "Fuck off, Darren! She caught me by surprise, that's all. It could've happened to anyone."

"Aye, I'm sure it could, Ollie." Jolley didn't bother to hide the fact that he was taking a photo. "The junior operatives are going to piss themselves when they see this!"

"You're a very fucking bad friend. I hate you, and the entirety of Wales by default."

The sound of their bickering carried as far as the first-floor landing, where Daniel Moxton opted to continue to pretend that he couldn't hear it. "Just open the door, Miss Shelby. I promise that we're not going to hurt either one of you."

"Screw you, asshole!"

The handler looked hopefully at the small robot hovering beside him. "Have you any good news about this panic room, Quincy?"

<advisory-alarmsystemstillinactive>

"Well, that's better than nothing, I suppose."

<warning-cellularcommunicationsviable>

"That's less good news. Can you, you know, jam them or something? Or redirect them back to Headquarters?"

<affirmative-working>

"Good job, Quincy. You stay here and keep doing that. Warn us if she decides to open the door. I'd better go back downstairs and see whether Dobos needs medical attention."

<statement-regardstomalesiblingunit>

Moxton offered him terse thumbs up in acknowledgement and went to check on his operatives. "Right, Quincy's standing guard outside the damn panic room. He sends his best. Dobos, how the Hell did she manage to overpower you?"

"Oh, that's easy. Do you see that standard lamp?" The red-haired man pointed to a complex arrangement of chrome bars and LED bulbs. "Well, I didn't. Not in time to duck, at least."

"Are you saying that she hit you over the head with it?"

"Not precisely." Jolley snickered. "The daft bugger only went and fucking walked into it himself!"

Moxton blinked. "Hold on, I thought you said that the girl caught you by surprise?"

"She *did*!" Dobos rubbed at his scalp and winced. "I mean, I was very fucking surprised when I woke up and found myself, sans that bloody awful balaclava thank Christ, and tied to a fucking armchair with my own paracord!"

"It's just as well that Mr Moxton thought we should come and see how you were managing, Ollie. Imagine if we'd stayed outside in the van! The little minx might have done anything to you."

Their handler was certain that he wasn't going to let either operative get out of his sight again for the foreseeable future. As it was, they had arrived just in time to stop Kassie from figuring out the safety feature on Dobos' gun. Mercifully, she had dropped the weapon during her flight upstairs with the toddler. "This situation is exactly why I prefer biometric safeties. We'd better hope that she didn't manage to tell anyone we're here before Quincy started jamming her phone."

"Why the fuck don't we want that? I thought it would be the easiest way to lure Hull in."

"Aye, don't we still need him to find Rosa?"

"No more original thinking from either of you!"

Moxton glared at them. "Hull's just as bloody likely to send in an entire GETEC tactical squad as he is to bargain with us!"

Dobos shrugged. "We can take them."

"So says the man who was caught out by a fucking inanimate object."

"He's got a fair point there, Ollie."

"I like her a lot, Greg. It just feels like she isn't exactly on our wavelength. I don't know if we should risk bringing the subject up yet. What if mentioning it scares her off completely?"

Hull sighed and nodded. "You're right, Bryce. This is still too soon for that conversation."

His fiancée smiled, tracing her index finger across the back of his hand. "Hey, don't pout, baby. It's not a total no – just a pause."

"You're always the optimistic one." He glanced towards their returning companion. "Ah, Kellie, great, you're back. We were just thinking about what to order."

Rosa blushed but allowed him to help with her chair. "Thank you, Sir."

His cell phone interrupted their conversation: Kassie. Hull tapped the button to accept. "Yes, Miss

Shelby?"

"Greg, me and Fisher are locked in the panic room! There are three guys here; they broke in, and they have guns and...!"

The call cut out. He sprang to his feet: snatching up his jacket as he moved. "Bryce, honey, I need you to settle the cheque, and then go home with Kellie to her apartment."

"What's wrong, Greg? Is Fisher all right?"

"Should I ring the police, Sir?"

For once in his career, he didn't know what to say. "I...no, don't get the cops involved, Kellie. Bryce – baby, I *think* he's okay. Kassie said that they're both in the panic room. There are three intruders, and they're armed. That's all I know. We got cut off."

Bryce went paler than ought to have been humanly possible. She followed him wordlessly, as did Rosa, and Hull sensed that dissuading them would be all but impossible. He tossed the host his credit card instead. "Armand, we've got a family emergency, I'm sorry. I'll come back for my card. Add thirty percent for our tip."

Leister gazed fondly at the mousy haired young

woman curled up beside him on the sofa. Sometimes, privately, he wondered how many years difference was, in truth, too many. That they were both consenting adults did little to remove that concern. Tender instances such as this early morning cuddle were far more helpful. Nevertheless, eventually Ashley would be ready to move on. It was simply how things went.

That was probably for the best. She wouldn't be happy in Dubai and it wasn't as if he intended to remain here in Britain forever. The Emirates were home to him now. He belonged there: in the quietude of his high-rise apartment, with its tiny balcony garden. At his age, slowing down was the only rational choice. Returning to the spy game was merely a temporary shift. It would never have occurred at all, save that Nightingale had needed him.

They still did, he supposed, given the situation with young Craig. *Heaven alone knows what the FIL Panel shall think about that!*

Sensing his tension, Jenkins snuggled closer. "What are you thinking, Cob?"

He sighed and hugged her. "I'm just a little worried about Nightingale, darling."

"Because of the FIL, you mean?"

"It's not looking good: those in charge really don't care for unconventional relationships."

"Well, there's still at least *one* way to ensure it's approved. I know it's forward of me...but perhaps we could state a vested interest...?"

"Do you mean as adoptive parents?"

The young biochemist nodded. "That's what Eric did for my mum, after Dad had to leave. It worked for them."

"Darling, that's very generous of you, but it's far too soon for us to have this sort of a conversation. We're still getting to know one another."

"But I already know the important part, Cob: that I love you and...!"

"No, Ashley." Leister hated stopping her. "Slow down: think how little time that we've actually spent together. You know that this is progressing too swiftly for it to be healthy."

"I don't care! You're all that I want, why can't that be a good thing? Unless...don't you feel the same way...?"

"I love you enough to put the brakes on *before* we crash, darling. Moreover, well – I'm really quite old. There are younger fish out there, some of them

fairly agreeable fellows."

She glared at him: blinking furiously to clear the tears from her eyes. "Oh, for goodness' sake, don't you think that I know that, Maurice? I don't want someone else, regardless of how young or old or agreeable he is. I want...you. Why can't you believe that I know my own mind?"

"Ashley, I'm seventy-one and you're twenty-six. It *matters*, darling."

"I've been with an older man before, you know. Supervisor Hull took me on as his sub when I was twenty-one. He used to joke that I was his belated fiftieth birthday present to himself."

"That's because, unlike dear Cob, Hull's an utterly evil bastard." Spence sat down on Leister's right and aimed the remote control at the television almost savagely. "Not all Doms are equal, boffin. As for the FIL, Craig and I can manage, thank you. If I decide to go ahead with it, that is. Which I still mightn't – honestly, have you *watched* some of those educational recordings? Childbirth is bloody hideous!"

"I'm sure it only looks that way, darling."

"Are you basing that notion on previously unmentioned personal experience, old swan?"

"No, but if it were that bad then we wouldn't need the likes of the FIL to keep our global population levels under control."

"Hmm. Out of curiosity, how exactly does the whole surrogacy thing work again?"

Leister chuckled. "I'm definitely not volunteering to gestate your offspring, Nightingale!"

"I could do it though!" Jenkins brightened. "If Cob doesn't mind, I mean...?"

"There you go, Cob: a willing host. All my worries are resolved."

"Be nice, little chick. Ashley, darling, Spence isn't being serious."

"Oh."

"Sorry, doctor." The non-gender sighed. "I should have been a seahorse – those little fuckers have the right idea when it comes to reproduction."

"Actually, in terms of the energy required, the act of generating eggs exerts double from the female seahorse as incubation from the males." The young biochemist paused. "Wait, go back a channel please. The news – I think they're talking about Supervisor Hull."

It was just shy of nine thirty pm, and Desdemona

Falls was drowning in blue and red light. The car had flipped over twice before it struck the side of the hover van. Rosa stood shivering next to Bryce whilst the street filled up with concerned residents, EMTs, and police officers.

The hijacker, the too thin man with the gun, who had ordered Hull to stage the accident, loomed behind the two women. "Remember what we discussed, m' bèl dam. Sipèvisè Hull was driving drunk. You begged him not to deactivate the auto-pilot feature, but he didn't listen. Trè pòv."

Bryce whimpered. "Why are you doing this? What have you done with our son?"

"It's nothing personal, dam. Your boyfriend just crossed the wrong man. This was a warning. I haven't done anything to your kid. Stick to the cover story, and maybe it'll stay that way."

A professional, sent here to teach Hull a lesson. He was getting ready to melt away into the crowd; Rosa knew that much by the tone. By what he had said, it seemed too personal to be British Intelligence. "Please – who was it? Who sent you here? Was it Nathaniel?"

The muzzle of his gun pressed even closer against the small of her back. "Ki mele a se

Nathaniel, superbe?"

"He's the one who sent *us*, you prick." Moxton's growl was barely audible over the general furore. "Now – drop the gun, or my well-hidden friends will drop you, got it?"

"Yeah, I've got it. Pa tire m'."

Rosa turned to face the two men as the weapon clattered onto the tarmac. "Mr Moxton! It's so good to see you again."

"Likewise, Dr Rosa – sorry it took us so long."

"Bloody bollocking lucky bastard!" Dobos stared out of the living room window in disbelief as the supervisor waved away the EMTs' support, elbowed his way clear of the press, and embraced his sobbing fiancée. "How the utter fuck did he manage to walk away uninjured from that crash? I mean, just look at what's left of his car! Hell, look at our van! It's just a crumpled pile of burning metal, for Christ's sake!"

"Maybe he's secretly a robot, Ollie. Or an SCO – GETEC seem to like using those."

<advisory-alternativetransportationrequired>

"Good point, Quincy. Come on, Darren, there's no way we can risk finishing the job with all of those

witnesses around. Let's crack on and catch up to Moxton and the boffin before anything else goes wrong."

The blonde sniper winced. "Ah, don't you jinx us any further now, you daft son of a...!"

"Somebody help!" Kassie came stumbling into view at the top of the stairs; Fisher hanging limp in her arms. "Please, you guys – you have to do something: he's not breathing!"

Both field operatives reacted instinctively: bounding up the staircase, Quincy hovering close behind them. Dobos snatched the toddler from Kassie and laid him on the floor of the first-floor landing. "Did he swallow something?"

"I don't know!" The girl was nearing hysteria. "I only took my eyes off him for like a few seconds, I swear!"

"Calm down, love." Jolley pulled her out of the way. "Let Quincy get a look at him. He's got a medical scanner."

<warning-blockagewithinupperoropharynx>

Dobos pried open the already bluish lips and pressed the boy's tongue down with his thumb. "Fuck's sake...got it...!" He tossed the offending piece of plastic aside and began CPR.

<advisory-respirationdetected>

"Good job, Ollie!"

The red-haired operative sat back as Fisher began to stir. "I never thought that I'd need to do that, you know. I mean they tell you that you'll be fucking glad that you can do it, but still...fuck!"

Kassie had all but collapsed beside her charge. "Oh my God, Fisher – little guy, are you okay? I'm so sorry!"

Below them, in the front hallway, the door burst open. "Police, no one move!"

Chapter Three – Decidedly Irked

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...!” Spence’s impromptu catechism grew shriller with every passing moment of the live news report. “Oh, dear God, they did *not* just steal a police helicopter!”

By now, all those present in the safe house were awake and clustered around the television. Tanya stared aghast at the broadcast. “Are they even *allowed* to do that? Won’t they get arrested? Hey, Craig, did *you* ever steal a helicopter?”

“Well, not from the MDPD.” The field operative had the grace to look embarrassed. “And all of my borrowed aircraft were entirely necessary.”

“Mine too.” Benedict closed his eyes. “It’s very tough out there in the field, Miss Darnell.”

“I don’t think you’re helping right now, Paul.” Cerise offered the spluttering non-gender another mug of tea. “Here you go, honey. Try not to worry about those crazy boys. It ain’t good for the

babies!"

"Cerise is quite right, darling."

"Are we watching the same events? They've taken *hostages*, old swan!"

"Hey, that's my best friend Kassie! Wait, what's she doing with a toddler? Is she a single mom now or something?"

Thomas nodded sagely. "I'll bet that either young Oliver or Darren is the father! They're clearly extracting that girl and her child to safety, not fucking kidnapping them."

"Oh my God, I totally missed that she was even pregnant – I am such a crap friend! Poor Kassie; coping with that all by herself. I'm going to text her."

"Right, I've contacted Lottie." Byron sat down beside Spence. "She's going to speak to our counterparts within American National Intelligence. They might still be able to smooth things over."

"Oh no: not the distress flares! Dobos, *don't* fire them directly at the press, you stupid...!" Spence groaned as a brightly coloured plume of smoke obscured the cameras' view of the two fleeing operatives. "This is precisely why I can't take a bloody holiday!"

Barnabas patted his aunt's shoulder. "There, there, Auntie Val. It isn't your fault. Right, Kathryn?"

His twin shrugged. "How should I know?"

Jamal-Kristof nudged the girl with his elbow. "You're *supposed* to say something kind, not make it worse, dummy!"

"But I *don't* know – why should I lie?"

"You just do, because it's nicer!"

"Oh."

Jenkins peered curiously over Tanya's shoulder. "Has your friend texted you back yet?"

"Nope, but we did kind of get into a fight the last time that we talked. I sure hope that she forgives me."

Behind them, Spence snarled in frustration. "Damn it all, Moxton, answer your bloody phone! Look, you need to ring Whitby or me when you get this message. Where is Dr Rosa? What the flying fuck are your so-called operatives trying to do over there, and more importantly, whose child is that?"

Hull scraped his fingernails across his scalp. "It's been more than two hours, Agent Cully! You'll excuse me if I seem a little impatient about the progress of this investigation."

The ANI operative nodded placidly. "Rest assured, Mr Hull, National Intelligence has the situation under control. That said, there are some questions about what Mrs Westlowe and her son are doing living with you."

"Bryce and I have been together since 2081, engaged in 2092. Her late husband forced her to marry him in exchange for permission to continue with her pregnancy after he had my damn memory erased! He told her that I died during the Tokyo event of 2093. She didn't have any other choice but to agree."

Cully made another note on his tablet. "Right, so there's a custody issue in play. That may prove relevant."

"For Christ's sake, there's no custody issue! Marcus Westlowe is dead, and even if he weren't he never once denied that Fisher was my son."

"I'm sure that an educated man such as you knows the boy would still be entitled to a percentage of his stepfather's estate."

"You can't seriously think that this is about who gets the inheritance? Come off it, Agent Cully: Bryce signed away both their claims as part of the marital annulment."

"It's possible that not everyone is aware of that, Mr Hull. Mr Westlowe may also have left some provision for the boy's care in the event of his demise."

"What kind of provision involves hiring someone to hi-jack a car and force the driver to crash it?" The supervisor glanced towards the door of Interview Room 2. "Look, Bryce and I have been through Hell already tonight, Agent Cully. I should be with her. Are we done here?"

"Let's go over the events once more first. You and Mrs Westlowe went out to dinner with a friend, leaving your son with a babysitter. Partway through the meal, you received a call from this girl – a Miss Cassandra Shelby. She informed you of a home invasion, and claimed to be in the panic room with Fisher."

"Yeah, are you implying that she mightn't have been telling the truth?"

"We have to consider every possibility, Mr Hull. Miss Shelby might've been coerced into placing the call. On the other hand, she may have been in league with these men."

"I don't believe that Kassie would be capable of that level of deception." Hull shook his head. "Sure,

she can be a bit naive but she's not the sort to get mixed up with child abductors!"

"Well, given her own celebrity status, maybe she was their primary target. The men who invaded your home, there's no evidence that they had any connection to the hi-jacking. In fact, despite all the press footage, we can't find anything on record about them at all, and that's damn peculiar."

It wasn't, but Hull couldn't admit to knowing that. "Do you have any good news?"

Cully pulled up a holographic image of the other man. "The guy who jumped you back at the Bellamy – we got his prints off your rear passenger door. Pierre Gophey; a freelance enforcer, originally from Haiti but he's been connected with any number of questionable people here in Florida over the past four years."

"So what...? You think that I've run afoul of some random criminal?"

"Does anyone spring to mind, Mr Hull?"

"No. I'm picky about who I get involved with."

"Okay, let's put a pin in that for now. You're in charge of some very sensitive projects at GETEC. Maybe this is more corporate in nature?"

Another clumsy attempt to probe for information

that Hull didn't possess! He slammed his left palm down against the surface of the table. "I told you – I don't know who sent him!"

His interrogator tapped again at his tablet. "Do you have an official diagnosis for those anger issues, Mr Hull?"

"Jesus wept! My little boy's been *kidnapped* along with his babysitter, some crazy asshole tried to make me kill myself in front of my fiancée, and you think that I'm demonstrating fucking anger issues?"

The other man reached for the door release. "How about I get our medic in here to check you over for abnormal stress levels?"

"How about you get your superior instead?"

Cully paused. "What's that, sir?"

"You heard me, Agent Cully. I want to talk to your superior. I'm filing an official complaint about how you've handled this entire situation."

"It's Hull's kid, so I hope Thomas wasn't putting money on his theory! Yes, Quincy has been in contact. They're hiding out in the old abandoned marine mammal park on Windley Key." Moxton winced as Spence gave their opinion of that

announcement. "Yes, of course, I'm en route there! I just needed to arrange some alternative transportation. Yes, Dr Rosa is with me: she's okay. Don't worry, Spence. Everything is back on track."

Beside him, the young technician huddled deeper into the passenger seat. She could make out just enough from the driver's earpiece to know that Housekeeping was more concerned than angry. This didn't translate to them using any softer a tone. *I suppose that it must get terribly wearing being the one who has to manage everyone else's shenanigans.*

They had left Gophy bound hand and foot under an overpass in Brickell two hours ago. Doubtless, he had soon freed himself. It hadn't been practical to bring him along, and the fellow was hardly likely to go to the authorities! No, better to let him make his own way: that would offer more of a distraction from their own flight.

"We're approaching the park now. The road's in a terrible state."

Twenty-five years of neglect would have that effect. According to the advisory signage at the main gate, the owners of the seventeen-acre park had relocated to a much larger undersea facility in

2071. Rosa peered out into the darkness at the overgrown tangle of once beloved plants and trees. *Wherever did the field operatives manage to land a helicopter in all of this?*

"So, I see you found something else to burn some of your excess money on, Paul."

Benedict peered at Cerise suspiciously over the top of his newspaper. "I'm not rich, Ms Aldermere, especially not after financing your son's short-lived interest in music."

She laughed at him as she took the opposing chair. "Yeah: because regular people can afford to waste money on printed editions! What's wrong with just reading the news online, Mr Oh So Damn Hard Done By?"

"If you must know, I happen to enjoy the feel of the pages!"

"Aw, I see – you like how it *feels*. Because it ain't as if any other guy ever said that about a bad habit, now, is it?"

The field operative glanced about in search of anyone other than his current companion. *No such luck, alas*. "How the deuce is *reading* a bad habit?"

"Hey, a tree died to make that paper."

"You sound like Craig."

"Ha! I ain't a two-timing creep though, am I?"
Cerise clicked her tongue as she set about the ritual of cleaning her gun. "That skinny little thing ought to kick his ass to the damn kerb if you ask me, honey."

"I'm not asking you! No one is! It's not anyone's business aside from the two people involved."

"Well, maybe Thomas shouldn't go around yelling about it then, the cranky old bastard."

"I'll agree with you on that. Wait, he's not bothering Spence with it is he?"

The freelancer shrugged. "He sure as Hell was, but he ain't now."

"What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me. After this long in the game, I've seen enough to be quite flexible in what I'll believe."

"Okay. You know that creepy little kid that's latched onto Jamal-Kristof like the older brother he never needed or asked for?"

"Barnabas?"

"Yeah, him – he overheard the two of them."

"Oh?"

"Little man only went and kicked the old fool in the damn nuts!"

"Barnabas stood up for Spence?"

"Hell, yeah, he did! I was looking for my baby boy and walked in just as it happened." She laughed again. "Thomas went down like a sack full of gravity!"

Benedict couldn't help but smirk. "It's been a long time coming, if you ask me, Ms Aldermere."

"No arguments there, Paul, and please – call me Cerise. So, how about the local cops: are they just going to leave this whole murder investigation hanging?"

"It looks like it."

"Damn. Guess you'll have to take care of things for yourselves then, huh?"

"It's a tad more than likely, yes."

"Well, if you need any help with it, you already know what I charge."

"You never let up, do you, Cerise?"

"I got bills to pay, Paul, not to mention a kid to feed. I'm just being pragmatic."

"You're *being* coldly mercenary. Besides, you agreed to abduct Leister not so long ago. Why should we trust you?"

"That was business. Cob ain't holding no grudge, so why are you?"

He avoided her gaze. "Perhaps I'm simply not as professionally detached in my dealings."

"Well, to be honest, I'm surprised that you're so damn worried about him, given that he's doing your daughter."

"Can we please not discuss that?"

"Whatever, baby." Cerise arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at the spy. "You have issues about sex, you know that, right?"

"It's an English thing, my dear." Benedict sprang to his feet. "Tell you what, why don't I just go pop the kettle on?"

"I don't know – how about because there's a damn hot woman sitting here wanting to get to know you better?"

"Wouldn't that be the same woman who once accepted a contract to riddle me with bullets until I was very much dead?"

"Ain't you ever going to let that go, Paul?"

"Possibly, but it's still very fresh in my thoughts. It was less than three months ago."

She threw up her hands. "Okay, fair enough. In that case, I'll have a green tea, thank you."

"You should probably avoid Thomas for the next

while, Barnabas. He's decidedly irked by your kicking him."

"But I was protecting you, Aunty Val! That's not naughty at all."

Spence sighed. "Don't fish for approval. I don't need you to protect me, understand?"

"He was shouting at you."

"Yes, he does that."

"Why?"

"Some people simply have better refined communication skills than others."

Barnabas frowned from beneath his fringe. "What does that mean?"

"It means that Thomas thinks that he can push everyone else around. Sometimes, that makes him think that shouting is the right way to get his point across."

"Oh."

"What were you and Jamal-Kristof doing spying on us anyhow?"

He toyed with the cuffs of his jumper. "Kathryn said that we wouldn't be quiet enough to slip up on you, that's all. It was just a game."

The non-gender folded their arms. "Barnabas, do I need to check you again for weapons?"

"We weren't playing slices, Aunty Val! I promise: we were only sneaking."

"I'm sure that you're bright enough not to do any more of that. Still, it might be better if you were to play outside once there's enough light."

Their nephew perked up. "Do you mean making traps, Aunty Val? I'm frightfully good at those, and at skinning!"

"Just as long as you remember the rules: no pets, no livestock, no endangered species, and no people."

"What about bad people?"

Spence frowned. "Why do you ask that?"

"I just wondered that's all: is it the same rule for bad people too?"

"No people full stop, Barnabas."

"All right, Aunty Val."

Chapter Four – Kiss It Better

Kennedy shook her head at the latest report from Deimos Base's CMO. "From the looks of this, it's a good thing that we removed your cybernetics, Yuudai."

The flash clone smiled as well as he could post surgery. "Kill switches in all the components...? Yeah...that's taking matters a little too far...even for GETEC...!"

Kennedy frowned. "Are you *sure* you don't want any more pain relief? I mean it ain't as though our medics reckon you don't need any."

He shook his head weakly. "Susan, I'm fine, really...just tired, is all."

She stroked his hair. "Your speech is kind of slurred, you know."

Yuudai leaned into her touch. "Nah, that's your hearing. All those explosions back in the facility on Mars...bound to do some long-term damage."

Kennedy smiled down at him. "Still got an answer for everything, huh?"

"You bet, Captain Mars." He winced as the Martian squeezed his shoulder. "Isn't that why you fell in love with me...?"

She smirked. "Hmm, breaking out the extra big emotional guns for this round, are we?"

Yuudai feigned confusion; batting his eyelids. "Was there some clause drafted precluding use of the L Bomb while I was under...?"

"Nope, I guess not." Kennedy chuckled and let him pull her closer. "Careful now – don't want you to pop any of your stitches!"

"I figured you could just kiss it better."

"I just can't imagine why you thought that it was a good idea to ignore the FIL mandate!" Benedict took another bit of toast. "Jamal-Kristof really hasn't a shred of paperwork to his name?"

"Well, it ain't been a problem until recently." Cerise brushed the crumbs off her lap. "Oh great, now I've got butter on my pants!"

"Don't worry: there's an all-purpose stain remover gel in one of the kitchen cabinets. Spies and assassins are us, remember?"

"You couldn't just make do with a little corn starch and vinegar like the rest of us then?" The freelancer was already halfway out of the conservatory. "Which cabinet is it?"

He hurried after her. "It's the second one on the left, under the sink: a little red and blue tin."

"Well so it is – wow, that is useful!"

"Housekeeping swears by it. Cerise, how did you get around the FIL? What about school?"

"I home school him, aside from some private tuition for his hobbies. You know – music lessons, that kind of thing."

"I think I get the general impression."

"We can't just leave them here, Mr Moxton!" Jolley looked up from bandaging his injured wrist. "The alligator might come back!"

"Darren's right: it's not the kid's fault that his fucking babysitter's a stupid fucking...!"

<metaphoricalexpletivefine>

Moxton held up his hand for quiet. "There's no way that an alligator could open that security shutter! That said we do have responsibility for their well-being, so we'd better see if we can find some other way into the building." Something that

sounded considerably larger than a bird rustled in the nearby undergrowth. "Right, let's get on with this, before whatever's watching us this time decides that it's hungry too!"

"Are you certain that there's time?" Rosa could feel her freedom from GETEC whispering away. "It's almost one in the morning already. Won't the police be tracking their helicopter?"

Dobos shook his head. "Nah, it's fine, love. We dumped the fucking transponder before we even left Miami."

They made their way around to the rear of the desolate souvenir shop. The emergency exit was the only door not equipped with a security shutter. Quincy reduced it to cinders with a single blast and glided ahead of the group into the darkened interior. Dobos followed him: keeping his torch at head height, whilst feeling for the overhead light switch. "Is it just me, or is anyone else wondering why the fucking electricity's still working here?"

"Aye, that's right weird, Ollie." The sniper shouldered his rifle as the lights flickered into life. "Come to mention it, I wonder how Miss Shelby knew that the shutters would work!"

"Oh, I texted her with that information two minutes before we released the war alligators."

They were very definitely outnumbered, and from where he stood, even despite Quincy, GETEC had the better weaponry. Moxton put his hands behind his head resignedly. "Take it easy, gents. We've lost this one. That was nicely played, Mr Hull."

"Flattery will get you one phone call to whoever authorized your operation, Daniel." The supervisor smirked as his security officers moved to cuff the field operatives and their handler. "Are you okay, Kellie?"

"I...yes...yes, I'm fine, Sir." Rosa choked back the urge to scream. "Sir, they didn't set out to abduct Fisher or Miss Shelby...!"

"Be quiet!" Hull glared at her. "You need to decide which side you're on, doctor. That's all that you have to concern yourself with right now, got it?"

"Yes Sir. I'm sorry, Sir."

"Good girl. Go wait with the rest of the technical crew. Remind Kassie to give Fisher his apple juice." He paused whilst she scuttled off. "So, are you still working for British Intelligence, or have you gone freelance, Mr Moxton?"

"No comment."

Hull shrugged. "Whatever. Okay, Mr Saunders – take them back to our Miami facility for holding. Make sure that they get that phone call. If they try anything, kill them."

"Yes Sir." The SCO paused. "Sir, what about the robot; it was booby trapped the last time – should we leave it here?"

"Oh, is this *that* robot?"

"I think so, Sir."

"Well, I guess that answers my question about who they're working for." Hull crouched to have a closer look at Quincy. "Housekeeping's little pet, huh?"

<warning-selfdestructmodeactivated>

"Are you playing hard ball with me, robot?"

<warning-threeminutecountdown>

"Wow, tough little guy, aren't you? So, your friends here – do you suppose they'll survive this self-destruct mode of yours?"

<...working...>

Hull smiled and patted the chassis. "You take your time thinking about that. Saunders, keep the prisoners within ten feet of this robot at all times."

"Yes Sir."

<advisory-powersavingmodeenabled>

"Good choice. Right people, get a move on with rounding up those war alligators. Mellor, inform ANI we successfully rescued all three hostages, but that the kidnappers got away."

"Headed for Cuba, Sir?"

"Yeah, Cuba works. We have no idea about their identities or who they were working for, and so on."

"No problem, Sir."

The bribe for the bloke at the front desk to let her in had eaten up most of Tresweld's salary for the month. She could only hope that the story would prove worth it. GETEC was far too skilful at making bad publicity go away to risk dragging her feet over investigating the scientists involved. *Sure, with my luck they'll all have disappeared already! That Greg Hull seemed like the sort to arrange shallow graves in his spare time.*

There had been something on the main news earlier involving the supervisor, but she hadn't stopped to see what it was about. Time, tide, and the next big headline, as Fergus liked to pontificate. He thought she was onto something important too.

It wasn't often that he was wrong. Judging by the sealed off laboratory before her, today was no exception. *Level 4 biohazard...employees proceed at own risk...? That's surely more than a wee bit of dodgy bleach! Dear me, Mr Hull, what have you been trying to hide?*

She couldn't open the door. Her journalism degree hadn't included a module in bypassing security codes. Instead, Tresweld peered through the tiny observation window. It was useless: the laboratory was too dark compared to the corridor outside. All she could make out was the red power indicators on the security cameras that dotted the ceiling. *Where there's a camera, there's footage. I wonder whereabouts in the building those ones feed back to?*

It was a long shot, but sure, those were always the best ones to take. Between Fergus and her ex-husband, Sarah knew she'd acquired an unhealthy level of optimism where risk taking was concerned. Still, she'd come this far. Finding the security server couldn't get her into any more bother. Besides, Craig had always said that what most people called getting in over your head was just letting

Fate play out. *That's Fate with a capital F, if you please, Sarah!*

At moments like this, she regretted their split. Maybe it was because the first anniversary of their last conversation was approaching. More likely it was down to the baby blues. Were those even still supposed to affect you three months post-partum? Perhaps it wouldn't be so daft to have a chat with her doctor. *I really can't afford to get sick with young Seamus to look after.*

Pre-pregnancy, Spence had always been more than comfortable with minimal sleep. That was no longer the case. Five and a half hours after the initial events in Miami, and just over three since the conversation with Moxton, the thin non-gender was finding it difficult to stay awake. The argument with Thomas hadn't helped. *At least Craig's managed to distract him.*

They wrinkled their nose slightly. It smelt as though the traditional full English breakfast that Leister had promised everyone else was ready. Spence's morning sickness meant that plainer food remained their menu of necessity. *You little*

parasites had better turn out to be decent human beings after all of this.

Tanya stuck her head around the bedroom door. "Hey, Spence, Cob wants to know if you're coming downstairs to eat."

"I'll be along presently, Miss Darnell."

"Okay. Can you believe Kassie ended up babysitting for Hull? I mean, what are the odds?"

"He may well have targeted her because of her connection to you. It's the sort of him."

"Yeah, he's a total creep. So, have you heard anything else from Mr Moxton yet?"

Spence's phone shrilled. "Speak of the Devil. Hello, Housekeeping?"

"We've been compromised. GETEC ambushed us on Windley Key. Dr Rosa's gone native, and the rest of us are in custody within the Miami facility. Hull's probably monitoring this conversation."

"It's just as well you rang me instead of Headquarters then, Mr Moxton. I'll arrange an extraction – we have contacts within ANI who can afford to make very big waves."

There was a click as the call diverted. Hull sounded considerably less than amused when he spoke. "Your operatives took my son, Nightingale.

That's a felony, even if they were here on official business."

"Are you sure about that, Mr Hull? From what we saw on the news, it looked more like they were trying to avoid leaving the poor boy to the vagaries of an American police SWAT team."

The supervisor hesitated. "I'm going to look into that theory. I'll get back to you later today."

"Wait – I want your word that they shan't be poisoned, maimed, blinded, deafened, vivisected, dismembered, killed, or brainwashed in the meantime."

"What are you offering in exchange?"

"I'll hold off on that investigative tsunami."

He chuckled. "You sure know how to bargain. Fine – you have my word. Primarily because it's three in the morning, and our senior interrogation officer doesn't clock on until six thirty."

"I thought that was you, Mr Hull."

"Greg."

"What?"

"You heard me, Nightingale. I want you to call me Greg from now on. Unless, that is, you think that I should start my shift early today?"

"Go fuck yourself, Greg."

"I do so enjoy our little chats. Now, you be sure to keep this line clear for me. After all, we wouldn't want to risk there being any unfortunate miscommunications between us."

Finding the server had been one thing. Accessing the data was proving to be quite another. Tresweld glanced at her watch again. It was almost eight thirty in the morning: the facility's staff would surely be trickling in by now. How much longer was this bloody download likely to take? The on-screen timer indicated that it was only sixty-two percent complete so far. *Don't panic, Sarah; sure you've got a clear run to that emergency exit.*

That portal lay directly across the corridor outside. The server itself loomed alone in a narrow, windowless room, with more coolant fans than seemed entirely necessary. This was Dublin, not the steaming depths of Borneo. Presumably, GETEC had a standard template for how they designed all of their facilities. It would certainly make moving between jobs a lot easier. *I wonder where the scientists working in that laboratory are now.*

There had been sudden, unexplained transfers of staff within GETEC for years. Non-employees

sometimes complained of losing touch with loved ones. No serious investigating, but that was about to change. There was a secret lurking here, and Tresweld intended to ferret it out. *Seventy percent...come on, computer!*

She should have brought a thermos. Why didn't they tell you that in journalism school? Bring food, a warm drink, and some plain water. After she made it to being famous, and retired to teach, she'd make a point of advising all of her students about it. Well, about that and the importance of going to the loo first. *Jesus, does your pelvic floor ever get back to how it was?*

The download shot up to eighty-two percent and then inexplicably back to seventy-nine. Computers: little wonder Fergus preferred to avoid them. Still, it was hardly as though interviewing members of staff had worked. Those who weren't too scared to talk were either uninformed of the matter or wholly responsible for it. *Bloody snotty supervisors and their smarmy little PAs – we'll soon see who the amateur really is, Mr Hull!*

Chapter Five – Open A Tin

"That's a nasty injury." Hull pointed to Jolley's right wrist. "Would you like me to have one of our medics take a look at it?"

"Nah, it's fine." The sniper shook his head, moving to stand in the corner of the cell that was furthest from the supervisor. "What've you done with the others?"

"Sorry, but that information isn't relevant to this discussion."

"Ah, okay. What is then?"

"Let's start with why you took my son."

"Well, we hadn't any other choice about it, had we? Those boyos from the MDPD are bloody trigger-happy! I mean they started shooting nearly as soon as they'd finished kicking your front door in." Jolley leant back against the wall. "Ollie just reacted, really. He grabbed your boy, and went out the window. I grabbed Miss Shelby and

followed him. Quincy managed to block most of their shots, but yeah, they winged me getting into that helicopter."

"Luckily for you, the forensics concurs." Hull had already seen the state of his house. "Still that brings us to my next question. Why weren't Fisher and Miss Shelby still safely in the panic room?"

"It was an emergency: the little lad was choking! Miss Shelby came running out onto the landing, yelling for help, so we helped."

"Fisher was choking? What was it?"

"It was just a little piece of plastic; you know what kids are like. Quincy scanned him, and luckily Ollie was able to remove it." The blonde man frowned. "Hang about – hasn't Miss Shelby already told you what happened?"

"She neglected to mention that part of the evening's events." The supervisor would have serious words with her about *that* lapse. "I suppose you think that I owe you and your colleagues a debt now, huh?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind if you let us go, mate."

"Yeah, that's not on the table, Darren."

"So, what is?"

"Let's talk about Pierre Gophy. Who hired him,

and why?"

"I've no idea who you're on about now."

"Didn't Moxton bother reading you in?"

"There wasn't any time for a chat, what with those war alligators and then your ambush."

"The war alligators were *part* of the ambush."

"Ah, right." Jolley sighed and held out his injured arm. "Is there any chance that I can still have this looked at?"

Hull smiled and moved closer. "Let me see."

"Ah...!" The sniper hissed as his interrogator peeled away the makeshift bandage. "Fuck...!"

"Try and hold still."

"Have you got medical training then...?"

"Yeah, it goes with the territory. Looks as though you have a low-grade infection – hopefully nothing that's resistant to antibiotics. Are all your shots up to date?"

"I can't remember. Medical usually keep track of all that for me...them or Whitby."

"Well, you've also lost a lot of blood. Come on: let's get you onto your bunk to rest until this can be treated."

"Cheers, Mr Hull." All the fight had gone out of Jolley. "I have to admit, after everything I've heard

about you and GETEC I wasn't expecting decent treatment."

"That's understandable." Hull felt confident that he could work with this. *Another couple of days in isolation, the right drugs, and I'll have you eating out of my hand.* "No hard feelings, Darren. I'll go and send for Dr Kenlow. Oh, and don't worry – I'll be sure to ask him to bring the extra good pain meds."

Tresweld curled herself into the smallest shape that she could: praying silently that no one else would try to climb into the vent. The situation within GETEC's Dublin facility had spiraled rapidly down from normal working day to living nightmare. It was now nine forty-nine precisely, according to her watch. The past fifty-four minutes had consisted primarily of listening helplessly to other people screaming. The fifteen before that had contained both a failed evacuation of all personnel, and what had sounded like a running gun battle.

The journalist in her had almost been curious enough to open the door of the server room and peek out. Only the soft beep of the portable drive had reminded her of just how illegal her presence

here was. Tresweld had opted to be cautious, and clambered up into one of the ceiling ducts by way of the main server itself. The door had splintered open seconds later. *Someone in Heaven must have been watching over me!*

A slurping, growling sound interrupted her thoughts. Something was down there: sniffing and scratching around the room. It reminded her of one of her late Uncle Geordie's pigs. Because surely *people* didn't make noises like that. Nor did they lurch and crawl in the way that she had glimpsed through the narrow mesh of the vent. *Aye, it's an animal; something from one of the laboratories. It's probably diseased.*

At least she had what she came for. Although, given the circumstances, it was tricky to fathom ever being able to make use of it. She closed her eyes again and thought of little Seamus, safe and sound at home with the au pair. Heidi was a lovely girl – very reliable for a student. Everyone agreed about that, even the perennially cynical Fergus. *Christ, he'll never believe the lengths that I went to for this data!*

"Well, it seems you were right about your former

colleagues' actions regarding my son and Miss Shelby, doctor." Hull slid into the cafeteria seat directly opposite Rosa. "However, they *did* originally come to Miami with the intention of retrieving you. Do you feel like discussing where that leaves us?"

She shrank back miserably: lacing her fingers even tighter around her coffee cup. "Sir, I had no idea that a team was dispatched!"

"I know that, Kellie. I was just wondering whether you were interested in going back to London with them."

The technician hesitated. "I...I was under the impression that returning to England wasn't an option at this time, Sir. I wouldn't like to renege on the terms of my contract."

"Good decision, doctor. I'll make an official note of your compliance with company policy in this matter." The supervisor smiled and nodded for the pair of security officers looming by the exit to leave. "Did you eat anything yet?"

"I had some coffee."

He scowled at her. "Caffeine isn't a balanced breakfast, Kellie. Besides, it'll only increase your stress levels – that's how stimulants work."

Rosa shrugged. "Yes, well I don't need to worry

about that: my brain is entirely synthetic, remember? Stimulants have absolutely no effect on me."

"Are you sure about that?" Hull leaned in close enough to count the striations in her wide brown eyes. "Your pupils suggest otherwise. Brain notwithstanding, I'm concerned that you might be putting the rest of your body under too much pressure."

"Honestly, Sir, I'm fine, thank you."

"I'm glad to hear that. Still, it won't hurt for you to go home early today. We don't want to risk any sleep deprivation related accidents."

"Darling, you're exhausted. Please go to bed and rest for a few hours; I'll cover for you."

Spence yawned. "I can't risk it, old swan. Hull will insist on speaking to me when he rings back."

"I suspect that he'll delay for as long as possible, little chick. You mustn't fall into the pattern of dancing to his diabolical tune."

"Cob's right." Jenkins nodded. "When I worked at the Boston facility, Hull used to contact me randomly at all sorts of hours! It's just another way for him to get inside your head."

"Yeah, Spence, I mean come on! It's been like two whole hours already. He's totally dragging things out."

"I agree, Tanya. Anyhow, does it even matter whether he rings back or not?" Campbell looked up from where he was sorting jigsaw pieces by colour with the children. "You all know what GETEC is like. We're going to have to rescue them either way."

"My money's on there having been a clue in what that bastard said about starting times." Thomas waved away the glares that his language had provoked. "Oh please – the children shan't bloody melt!"

"Momma, he said a rude word again!"

Cerise sighed. "Just ignore him, baby. It ain't his fault that he doesn't know any better."

"Actually, you might be onto something with that, Mr Campbell." Housekeeping pulled out their phone and checked the time. "It's just gone five in Florida. Hull doesn't start work until six-thirty. That's when he'll make contact again."

"Does that mean that you're allowed to rest for a little while, Aunty Val?"

"I'll sleep later, Barnabas. Now stop pocketing

the pieces of that jigsaw."

"He likes the green and blue ones." Kathryn's thin hand darted across the pile again. "I like the red bits better, because they remind me of gutting fish for dinner!"

Their aunt glanced hopefully towards the living room window. "Didn't we discuss the possibility of you three playing outside today?"

"Are you just flat out stupid?" Cerise abandoned her tea, spluttering. "There's a killer or killers on the loose and you want them to leave the house?"

"To be fair to my son's partner, whilst your own lad might be at risk, I suspect the twins would be a fine match for whoever it is."

"Dad, that's not funny."

"Well, it's just as well that I wasn't bloody joking then, isn't it? Dear old NIT certainly don't seem to be getting anywhere in solving that nasty double murder!"

Drake glowered at the older operative from behind her phone. "Byron and I rather thought that it might be prudent to see to rescuing the living before avenging the dead!"

"It's fine, darling. Everyone knows that you're both following protocol. Thomas, do stop being so

very belligerent, there's a good chap."

Benedict cleared his throat. "So where is Agent Caulfield this morning anyhow? I didn't notice him leave."

"Perhaps the killer came back again and now he's dead too."

"Kathryn!" Spence had had enough. "Go to your room, young lady!"

The girl pouted. "That's not fair! What if I'm horribly murdered whilst you're all safe down here?"

"Momma, is there a not horrible kind of getting murdered?"

"Nobody's getting murdered, baby. Kathryn, quit making a fuss and do what you're told!"

"But...!"

A shrill whistle interrupted the debate. Benedict folded his arms. "As I was saying, where is Caulfield?"

"He told me that he was going to pop over to Century and check on Weaver." Drake paused mid-text. "I trust that's an acceptable usage of NIT time and resources?"

Campbell leapt to his feet. "Of course it is! Come on, Dad: let's go recheck the alarms again."

"Aunt Val, please may I have a drink of juice

before I go upstairs to be murdered?"

Spence took a deep breath. "Very well, Kathryn. Do you want orange, raspberry, or apple?"

"I like pineapple."

"Fine, but I'll have to open a tin of rings and blend them."

Her twin hurried after them towards the kitchen. "Me too, Auntie Val – I want pineapple juice too!"

Jamal-Kristof looked up at his mother. "I'm thirsty but I don't want to die. Will you get me my juice please?"

"Sure thing, little man, but trust me: nobody's going to die." Cerise waggled her perfectly sculpted eyebrows at Leister. "Cob, you'll take care of him whilst I'm gone, right?"

"That's no trouble at all, darling."

The freelancer wandered out into the gloomy hall, wondering if she could persuade her hosts to install some better overhead lighting. *It's like this house was designed to be the main setting for a horror movie! Maybe we would be better letting the kids play outside instead. They'll probably end up deficient in Vitamin D otherwise.*

She was aware of the sudden lack of air before the pain had much of a chance to register. Her

assailant stepped clear of the alcove beside the clock: raising the stiletto to his face as if sniffing the blood that coated it. He was tall, and dressed from head to foot in black. Only his eyes and mouth were visible. "It's *never* wise to promise that which you can't ensure, Cerise."

Her punctured lung made it impossible to reply. Simply staying on her feet was challenge enough. *I have to raise the alarm!*

"We both know what has to happen next. It's time for you to join Karen and Marion." The killer smirked. "Who knows – perhaps you'll be the straw that pushes the rest of them out of this bloody safe house...!"

Cerise slumped to the floor of the hall only a few seconds after he did. The main difference was that she still had both eyes and an intact cranium. *That and you ain't dead, girl. Don't forget that part...!*

Her loyal Ruger LCR felt too heavy, so she let it fall. It settled right next to the shell casing. By now the bullet was probably lodged somewhere in the kitchen. *I sure hope it's not in Spence or either of the twins...!*

She could hear voices. Quite where they were was another matter. It was hard to tell, given how

dark it was. The echoes weren't helping either. *I don't remember it echoing so much out here before...weird...*

Maybe whoever was lifting her could investigate that. Ideally not until they'd gotten her to the damn ER though. *Good thing Cob sorted out those papers for us...!*

Did this make her a healthcare tourist? She sure hoped that it didn't. *Wouldn't like to make Paul think any less of me...jeez, could he...?*

"...her on the table...get the sealant..."

"...him, of all people...unbelievable..."

"...losing her..."

"...fuck..."

Cerise didn't have the energy to judge their language. Besides, she got the why. It was just a shame that she couldn't tell them how, after all of the pain and fuss, losing consciousness was actually kind of nice...

Chapter Six – Less Than Calm

Ninety-five minutes after the incident in Dublin began, and twenty-six minutes since the weird, not a person had entered the room beneath her, Sarah Marie Tresweld inadvertently saved the entirety of Ireland. From her perspective at the time, it was journalism: clearly, *someone* needed to alert the outside world to what was happening! *Fergus will never let me hear the end of it if I don't break this story!*

As always, her phone was set to silent. It was bizarre: cowering in a pitch-dark vent, messaging back and forth with her editor. In the films, the heroine always had plenty of witty dialogue. Working clever one-liners into her texts seemed like far too much effort right now. No, it was far more sensible to focus on streaming the content from the portable drive. *With any luck, the truth of what's going on is somewhere in there.*

Her battery wasn't looking too promising. Neither was the situation in the facility. The thing in the server room had gone, but there was too much general growling and screaming for Tresweld to think that leaving her hiding place would end well. Help would have to come to her – presuming that help was even an option. *Jesus, what if it isn't; what if this is it?*

Battery done – tell wee Seamus his Mammy luvv him pls. BTW Heidi's money is in the phone drawer. Cheers, Ferg x ☺

The screen went dark.

"In lay terms, Supervisor Hull, Dobos broke your nose with that instrument tray." Kenlow shook his head. "You were lucky, really. If he'd caught it at a different angle, then this exam could've been an autopsy."

Hull squinted at the senior medical officer. "Yeah...remind me again why he wasn't restrained...?"

"He presented as docile. How were my staff supposed to anticipate his assault? Jolley didn't try attacking anyone when he was in here!"

"Oh, that's how they get you, doctor. They lure

you into *thinking* that they'll cooperate."

Kenlow raised an eyebrow. "Maybe we should decrease the pain meds for you, Sir."

"Screw that idea. Aaron, get Saunders on security detail. Tell him to use all necessary force. I want that ginger bastard back in holding, or in a fucking body bag."

"Yes Sir." Mellor was already issuing the order. "The building's fully locked down – there's nowhere for him to go."

The supervisor wasn't feeling especially optimistic about that. "He's a British spy, trust me, he'll find *something* in the facility that we don't want him to be anywhere near!"

His PA blinked. "Like what, Sir?"

"I don't know – whatever explodes best?"

"Sir, maybe Dr Kenlow has a point about the pain medication. You do seem a little wired."

"Hey, that asshole rearranged my face with a piece of medical grade steel alloy! I'm entitled to be less than calm right now."

It occurred to Leister that Century Medical was rapidly becoming a second home from home for British Intelligence. He wondered what the staff

thought of the matter. Some of them were probably still unaware, but it was impossible to hide the truth from everyone. The surgeons who had pieced brave Weaver back together were, by necessity cleared, as were her physiotherapists. The same would be true for Cerise. It might even be the same people involved. *One can certainly hope so: they do excellent work.*

He had accompanied the freelancer here in the ambulance, leaving Paul in charge of Jamal-Kristof. The child still had no idea of his mother's brush with death. Between them, the adults in the safe house had managed to shield him from that much. Whether Kathryn and Barnabas believed the swiftly woven nonsense about a minor injury caused to Cerise by a burglar was less of a surety. *Those two have seen far too much of blood in their short lives.*

It could so easily have been little Kathryn. That awful thought wouldn't grant him peace. If the girl hadn't argued; hadn't demanded her drink first...! What hope would she have had against an experienced killer like Caulfield? How close had the traitor been to Nightingale and the twins or to the Campbells? *Too close, Maurice – traitors are always too close.*

They might never know why he had betrayed them. The knife, confirmed as the same weapon used to butcher poor Dr Finch and her flat mate, had told them nothing else. Agent Drake flatly denied any knowledge of her late partner's out of work activities. She seemed genuinely shocked, but Leister wasn't sure whether to believe her yet. *He fooled me, and I'd known him far longer. He fooled all of us. Who's to say that Lottie's any less devious?*

"Ma'am, I've just had word from Lancashire." Whitby hurried to catch up to the diminutive head of British Intelligence.

Pembleton glanced at her senior technician. "I'm on my way to a meeting. Can it wait, or do you need to read me in immediately?"

"They've identified the man who killed Finch and Wilkes, ma'am. It was Byron Caulfield. He's dead."

"Disgraceful! Did he suffer?"

"Shot through the head by his latest victim, ma'am."

"Bloody good work, whoever that was."

"Yes ma'am." The doors to the lift were looming closer by the second. "Ma'am, there's been a snag regarding Dr Rosa...!"

"Well then deal with it, for goodness' sake! You're the one in charge of that operation, Nathaniel. Bring them home – preferably alive, but home, either way."

The doors closed abruptly on their conversation. Whitby paused to watch the floors counting by as Pembleton descended to the main reception area. "I'll get right on with that then...right...okay...!"

Fiona Robinson shook her head in sympathy as he walked back past her desk. "Best mind your fingers, Dr Whitby. You're no less flammable than the rest of us."

She was right but it didn't matter. He had to try at least. The best place to start was probably in GETEC's security systems. *If those go down in the Miami facility then our operatives might just stand a shot at escaping.*

Spence jolted back from the edge of sleep: almost falling off the sofa in the process. "Wait! What if we're missing something here? Someone managed to make Dr Jenkins into an unwitting murder puppet. It might be that they've struck again – this time with Caulfield."

"If that's the case, canary, then Cerise has killed

an innocent man."

"It would still count as self-defence." Benedict glanced at the ceiling. "And please, keep your voices down. Jamal-Kristof doesn't know yet."

"Well, *that* was bloody stupid!"

"Don't start, Dad. We've got enough to worry about already without falling out over safeguarding choices."

Drake looked at Jenkins. "Is it true? Were you mind controlled, doctor?"

"Yes, but I don't remember it. Dr Whitby said that it was some sort of a microscopic drone; designed to break down into nothing after it was deactivated."

"Then the sooner we get the autopsy sorted out, the better!" The NIT operative snatched up her phone again. "I'll speak to the fellow running the mortuary at Century and see whether he's finished up yet."

"Um, am I the only one who's kind of wondering what the kids might be getting up to whilst none of us are paying them any attention?" Tanya had done some babysitting before she went to college. "Seriously, it's like dogs. Too quiet is *never* good."

"In my experience the same could be held true

of field operatives." Spence nudged Campbell pointedly with one foot. "Go on. It's your turn this time anyhow."

He clambered up. "As long as you try to get a little more rest whilst I'm gone."

"I'll give it a try." It was almost noon, and Hull still hadn't rang back. Based on the people involved, the most likely reason was that GETEC no longer had control of the situation. Presuming, that was, that the Miami facility hadn't simply been demolished from the inside out. *Although I suspect that would almost definitely have been on the news already.*

The first thing that Leister observed was that Weaver's room rang with the inexplicable sound of songbirds. It took him a moment to spot the portable speaker on the bedside cabinet. There was a rather large picnic hamper masking it. "Well, this is impressive! I take it that it's young Nathaniel's doing, darling?"

She smiled. "Not this time, Maurice. It arrived this morning courtesy of National Branch – Byron brought it with him. He's been such a delight: keeping me company, putting up with my

completely thrashing him at chess. I'm sure he'll be glad that you're here to relieve him!"

"Byron Caulfield?" Leister struggled to rationalise what he was hearing. "Doris – do you mean that he's *here*?"

"Well, he popped to the loo a few minutes ago, but he left his jacket, so I expect that he intends to come back."

"How long has he been here?"

"All morning; he arrived shortly after nine, just as visiting hours started." The SCO paused. "Why, what's wrong?"

"I really don't know, darling. The timing is a tad improbable. Someone who looked exactly like him tried to murder Cerise this morning. He got a bullet through the head for his trouble; she's still in surgery."

"Good Lord, Maurice!"

"Excuse me; I must phone the safe house and let them know. Where there's one murderous imposter, there could well be others."

The sleek grey Cygnus Bello XII ERA collected Campbell and Benedict from Lancashire at one thirty-five. It then flew south-west back across the

Irish Sea, touching down on the roof of GETEC's Dublin facility three hundred and twenty minutes into the crisis. For the next ninety-six minutes, all that those running the combined containment effort could do was wait and hope.

Finally, the door onto the roof reopened. Of the half-dozen operatives, only two emerged from the quarantine zone: the insignia on their hermetically sealed combat suits marking them both as British. One of them cradled the asset in his arms. The other held up a vivid green flare: *mission accomplished*.

Pembleton felt the tension gnawing at her begin to ease. The usual mix of relief, sorrow, and near maternal pride took its place. "It appears that you were right to allow us to assist with this matter, Director. You have my utmost sympathies for your operatives' families."

"They knew the measure of the risk before they volunteered." Her counterpart in Kildare's voice betrayed nothing, but perhaps that was due to the filters. "The main thing's that we stopped it here. Better four souls lost than six million, may God forgive me."

Hull stared at the glassy basin where, until ten

minutes earlier, the lobby of the R&D Department for GETEC Miami had been located. "I always did have concerns over the number of windows in this facility, Mr Saunders."

"Do you suppose the Board will take this event into account for the rebuild, Sir?"

"I certainly hope so." The supervisor turned and ruffled Dobos' hair. "Kudos for trying, Oliver – you gave it your best shot. It's too bad that your little pet robot had to pay the price."

"Oh, just *fuck* off!"

"I guess it's going to take me a while to break you of that nasty language." Hull ignored the kneeling prisoner's attempts to duck aside and continued petting his head. "You earned some leniency when you saved Fisher, but I feel I should warn you that my patience has limits."

"That poor kid must've been a fucking war criminal in a fucking former life to deserve you as a dad, you fucking overbearing cu...!"

Hull's security baton was currently only set to spark, but it still had the desired effect when properly applied. "Ah, ah – limits, remember? From now on, whenever you go too far, there *will* be consequences, Oliver."

"Why don't you just fucking kill me?"

"Kill you? That would be a serious waste of raw material on my part, and pretty much a free pass for you. No, I'm going to repurpose you." This time, the field operative screamed when the baton connected. "Something tells me that it isn't actually going to take you all that long to get on board with things."

Mellor cleared his throat. "Sir, some of the other employees are watching, and I think one or two of them are about to either throw up or cry."

"Well, that's why we have the hazard tape up, Aaron. Take Saunders with you and go move them along. I need to give Oliver here a little more one to one attention."

"Where do you suppose Craig and Paul went off to in that little plane yesterday, Barnabas?"

Kathryn's twin pulled a face at her from across the kitchen table. "That wasn't a plane, silly; it was a helicopter!"

"Helicopters don't look like that!"

"They do so!"

"Nah, you guys are both wrong." Jamal-Kristof paused to decide what crayon to use next in his

drawing. "It was an Emergency Response Aircraft. They use them for mountain rescue. I saw it on TV."

"Oh." The girl brightened again. "Well, where did they go to in it?"

Barnabas snickered. "You mean where did *Craig* go – you fancy him!"

The younger boy frowned. "She can't feel like that about Mr Campbell! He's a grown-up, and she's just a little kid, like us. Besides, ain't he dating your aunty already?"

"He's supposed to be, but Kathryn thinks that she saw him first, because she's *weird*!"

"Shut up, Barnabas! You're the absolute worst brother ever, in the whole history of time and I hate you!"

"That's quite enough shouting from in here." Leister strode into the room from the direction of the conservatory. "Now I know it's been a little boring for the three of you cooped up here. The adults are feeling much the same. That's why Nightingale and I have arranged a nice surprise holiday for everyone. Tidy up those art supplies and go get your coats: we're going down to London for the May Bank Holiday weekend."

"What about Momma?"

"Cerise shall join us there, darling, but she has to stay in Preston for a little while longer so that the doctors can finish helping her to get better. I promised her that we'd take you to the zoo in the meantime. Ten days late for your birthday, but it's better than nothing."

Chapter Seven – No Soul Left

“Lionel's dead, Mama!” Larissa Ashby gulped back a sob and continued her telephone call. “I'm in the mortuary at Century Medical, in Preston. The chart says that he was shot; ugh, they've written him down as a common burglar!”

“Who killed him, child?”

“I can't find a name, but it must have been Valerie Lackey or one of her damned colleagues!”

“Calm down, Larissa! Leave it with me. See that your brother's body returns home to us intact. Don't let those wretched people keep him late for his rightful interment. I'm counting on you, daughter.”

“Yes Mama.” The youngest of the Ashby family sighed and pocketed her phone. From what she could garner, Century had scheduled her brother's remains to be re-examined for the following morning. *At least they haven't managed to*

discover his identity yet, or his gift!

She would need to find some means of transporting him. Initially, a hospital trolley would suffice; there were plenty of vehicles procurable for the journey home. Moving him from the freezer to the trolley would be the hardest part. He would be heavier in death. *People always are, once they've no soul left to buoy them up.*

There were ways to manage that. The drawer containing Lionel glided open immediately Larissa pressed the button. It took her a few attempts to adjust the trolley to the required height. *If I roll him directly onto it, then his weight shan't matter.*

"Am I interrupting?" A tall man stepped into view, smiling beneath his polarized glasses. "Byron Caulfield, British National Intelligence."

"I know who you are!" Larissa snarled and drew her knife. "Lionel should have finished you off the first time! I shan't be so merciful."

"I feel that we're on very different pages here, my dear." Caulfield spun clear of the first swipe: catching hold of the trolley as he moved. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind explaining?"

"He spared you at their flat – you and that nasty little animal that calls herself human!"

"Ah, so that's who bopped me over the head!" The NIT agent leapt to his right, dragging the trolley along with him as a barrier. "You really ought not to be so very rude about Miss Drake. She's very sensitive."

His opponent sneered. "So what if she is?"

"So I'm standing right behind you!" Drake shook her head as Larissa collapsed beneath her strike. "Perhaps I should have pulled my punch?"

"I shouldn't feel too guilty, Lottie."

The augmetric peered down at their now senseless opponent. "She can't be more than sixteen! I wonder how in the world she connects to all the rest of this horrid matter."

"I rather think that she's involved with our mystery killer. Apparently, he's called Lionel – well, he was. She was on the phone to her mother about him when I got here. We might learn something if we go through her contacts list. Caulfield tapped the mattress on the trolley. "First though, let's make completely certain that you won't need to thump her again."

Drake frowned as they secured the straps around the girl. "Say, why is it that you think it would be me that thumps her again?"

"It's simple, Lottie: because I'm the *nice* one!"

"Who decided that?"

"Oh, you know: a common consensus."

"I think we should hold a recount, Byron."

"Am I having fun yet, old swan?"

Leister passed Spence another plaster. "These things do happen with young children, darling."

"I'm sorry, Aunty Val." Barnabas sniffled into his sleeve. "I just wanted to get a better look at the lizards. I didn't mean to fall into their enclosure, honest!"

"Komodo dragons aren't something to take chances with." Spence dabbed again at the scratches on the boy's calf. "You're bloody lucky that the zoo keeper was able to distract them long enough for us to get you out!"

"He's even bloody luckier that his only injuries are from the fall off the fence!" Thomas rolled back his left sleeve. "Do you see this scar, lad? I got it during an op in Macau, from a Komodo that was half the size of the ones here in the zoo. There was an enzyme in its saliva that prevented my blood from clotting properly."

"Gosh, will I have a scar too, Aunty Val?"

"Very possibly, but that really wasn't what Mr Campbell was trying to emphasise."

Hull set down his coffee and switched off the current to the electro stimulation unit. "How are you feeling today, Oliver?"

The field operative slumped against the restraints holding him upright as the supervisor removed the rubber safety bit from between his jaws. "Like some fucking evil bastard's been fucking torturing me in a fucking automated cage for the past twenty-four fucking hours...!"

"Actually, it's a little closer to thirty now. It just turned four thirty in the afternoon. I took Bryce and Fisher out for breakfast this morning whilst the cleanup crew finished our house, and it turned into a family day out. We went to this lovely little place on Grand Avenue. They make the best pancakes in the state. Here – I brought you a doggy bag."

Dobos spat out the first morsel fed to him. "I don't want your fucking leftovers!"

"These aren't leftovers, Oliver. I ordered an extra portion." The supervisor sighed. "You must know that I won't allow you to starve. If you don't agree to eat up, then I'll have to tell Kenlow to implant a

feeding tube."

"You're fucking sick...!"

Hull lowered his stun baton and shrugged. "Last chance, Oliver."

"...fine..."

"Good boy." He ruffled the lank red hair. "That's very good. Do you want some water?"

"...okay..."

"That's a much nicer attitude. I'll have to let Nightingale know how cooperative you're being."

"Please don't do that." Dobos squinted: trying to gather his wits. "You'll ruin my reputation."

"So, you act out to impress your co-workers, is that it, Oliver?"

"Sometimes, yeah, I do."

"We call that negative attention seeking. I can see that I'll have to help you learn some better ways of interacting with others."

"Thanks a lot."

"Was that sarcasm, Oliver?"

"No!" The operative flinched away from the inactive baton; hissing as he wrenched his already aching muscles. "Shit, what do you fucking want me to say, damn it?"

"Well that's a start." Hull smiled and set the

weapon down again. "Here you go – sip it slowly. The straw will help."

"Can't I have my hands free instead?"

"Not just yet, Oliver."

"I feel you don't trust me, Mr Hull."

"You haven't earned my trust yet."

"That's fair enough, I suppose." Dobos contemplated the possibility of stabbing the straw into his captor's eye using his teeth. *I'd still be fucking trapped in this fucking cage though.*

"Do you want to earn my trust?"

"That feels like it's a trick question."

"Wow, British Intelligence really do like their operatives to be paranoid, don't they?"

"It keeps us alive longer." *Fuck, just stop fucking playing with my fucking hair!* "There are a lot of dodgy people out there, you know."

"I guess that's true, Oliver." Hull lowered the plastic bottle and held up another slice of pancake. "That's a good boy."

"I'm *not* a dog, you know."

"I find that when you break them down enough, people are still just animals at heart." The supervisor slid his hand down across Dobos' scalp and around the nape of his neck. "There are always certain

places on their bodies that react ahead of their higher brain functions."

"This is getting weird now."

"Am I scaring you, or just unsettling you?"

"You're pissing me off."

Hull tightened his grip. "Stop trying to deflect the question, Oliver. Are you scared, or just unsettled?"

"Fine, I admit it. I'm *massively* turned on."

"Crude homophobic reverse psych outs aren't going to help you here."

The captive spy smirked. "Well, they aren't getting me fucking tazerred either, are they?"

"That's a fair point, Oliver."

"Sorry." Dobos dropped his gaze. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Well, well – an apology? I think you may actually be learning a few manners."

"It's the pancakes. They taste nice...!"

"No more sarcasm. Next time I'll turn the voltage up considerably, Oliver." The baton flickered off again. "Here, have a little more water. What do you say?"

"...thanks..."

"Good boy."

"Thanks for having us over, Kellie." Bryce settled Fisher on her lap. "I just can't face being at home alone right now. Between all the mess with ANI and the local police, and then the press wanting to ask about what happened...!"

"It's quite alright, I understand." Rosa smiled kindly at her guests. "Honestly, I needed the company too! Would you like some tea?"

"No thank you. I'm sorry dinner didn't work out according to plan."

"What exactly was the plan? I got the impression that Supervisor Hull was mulling something over."

"I'm so glad that you asked!" Bryce sighed. "Really, I am – but it's not something for little ears to be around."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, really; it's fine."

Fisher continued to doze with his thumb in his mouth. His mother cuddled him a little closer. "Essentially, Greg and I both think you're very sweet, Kellie. We *like* you. That's the basis of it."

"Ah – I think I understand."

"Maybe we can talk it over properly some other time?"

Rosa shook her head. "No. Those sorts of relationships...they're not something that I want to be any part of, Bryce. Thanks all the same."

"I see. Okay, I won't mention it again."

"Thank you."

The older woman blushed. "Do me a favour: don't tell Greg that I brought it up with you? I mean, I'll talk it over with him, obviously! It's just that he's so stressed with all of this. I want to wait for the right moment."

Her host frowned. "Bryce, I don't want to intrude, but are you scared of him?"

"Scared of him? No, I love him! Why would you even ask that?"

"Well, he's a little intense at times."

"Yeah, but I like that about him. Besides, look at how hard his job is. It takes a really special kind of guy to do what Greg does."

"How's that arm doing today, Darren?"

Jolley nodded affably from his bunk. "It's well on the mend, Mr Hull. Thanks for asking. How are Mr Moxton and Ollie holding up? Is Quincy okay?"

"Actually, I just dropped off Oliver's dinner. He's settling in okay. I'll stop by Moxton next. I'm afraid

the little robot hasn't reactivated as yet. We stored him over in R&D for safekeeping." Hull held up a travel mug. "I brought you some more coffee. Cream with three sugars, yeah?"

"Cheers, that's very hospitable." The sniper took the drink in his left hand. "So when will GETEC be sending us all home then?"

"We've been in contact with British Intelligence. I'm sure you can guess how much paperwork is involved with a handover though."

"Aye, I know. Can I see the others please?"

The supervisor drew his breath in between his teeth. "Darren, I get how much that would mean to you, I really do. Unfortunately, it goes against company policy. Our insurance just wouldn't cover it. I'm sorry, buddy."

"Ah, okay. I just thought I'd ask."

"I really appreciate how reasonable you're being about this situation, Darren." For a spy, the blonde man seemed none too perceptive. Maybe it was just the drugs. "You're making my job so much easier."

"Well there's no point in kicking off, is there? I mean you're only following procedure. Like you said – there's a lot of paperwork to do."

"Okay. What are you planning, Darren?"

"Eh?"

Hull folded his arms. "I know you're playing me. There's no way any field operative would be this passive about your situation."

The sniper stared at him wide eyed. "I'm not planning anything, I swear!"

"Well, that certainly makes a change...!"

Jolley set down the now dented travel mug and knelt beside the unconscious supervisor. "I never bother planning, mate. I just wing it."

Friday May 4TH was less than three minutes away from becoming Saturday May 5TH when Spence's phone shrilled into life. "Hello?"

"It's me, Moxton. We're all okay, – ANI are flying us back to London as we speak."

"Oh, thank Christ for that! What happened?"

The handler chuckled. "Quincy pulled a fast one! He blew up the lobby of the R&D branch to hide the fact that he was planning to go trundling around in the vents, helping Whitby to deactivate the security systems in the holding area. Dobos and Jolley managed to keep Hull distracted, or at least that's the story that they're giving me."

"What about Dr Rosa?"

"She's still in the wind. We swung by her address to pick her up on our way to the extraction point but she wasn't there. It didn't seem like a good idea to risk looking for her."

"Do you really think that she's switched her loyalties over to GETEC?"

"Honestly? I can't be certain about that either way. She seemed to be emotionally traumatised the last time that I saw her."

"Damn." Spence sighed. "You know the rules surrounding even suspected defection. Either bring her home, or put her down. Those are the only two options available."

"Yeah, well there's no way that Dobos and Jolley are capable of fieldwork at the moment."

"That's not going to wash with Pembleton."

"Why do you think that I rang you instead?"

Mellor pulled up across Hull's driveway. "Do you need any help getting to the house, Sir?"

"I'll be fine, Aaron. Call me if there's any sign of our escapees, won't you?"

"No problem, Sir. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Aaron." Hull waved as the car

drove away. At almost eight pm, it had been too long a day. His head still ached from where Jolley had gotten the drop on him. *Maybe I'm just getting too long in the tooth for this line of work. At least I don't have concussion.*

Bryce met him in the front hall. "Greg, are you okay? Dr Kenlow called to say that you were on your way home."

"I'm fine, baby. It was just a bump. How are you and Fisher doing?"

"I just put him to bed. He's still wrung out from all his late-night adventures. Our protective detail drove us straight here from Kellie's place as soon as the security alert arrived."

"It's good to know that they're on the ball." The supervisor gave a brief thumbs up to the two uniformed GETEC personnel stationed outside on the porch. Then he grinned and scooped Bryce into his arms. "I booked us takeout. How does a long hot shower before dinner sound?"

"Oh, Greg, I'd love to – but Kellie's in the den waiting for us. The detail...they said they were told not to leave her home alone...?"

"Yeah, I'm the one who gave them that order." Hull snatched a kiss before calling out to their guest.

INHERITED STEALTH

"We're going to take a shower, Kellie – feel free to join us if you want!"

Bryce giggled and swatted his shoulder playfully.

"You're such a bad host!"

"Then I guess it's probably just as well that I'm perfect in all other regards."

Chapter Eight – Keeping Me Grounded

“How much longer do you suppose they'll need to keep us in quarantine, Paul?”

“I haven't the foggiest, to be honest, Craig.” Benedict shrugged, in the way that one does when bothering to sit up from a prone position seems too great an effort. “At least it's a decent set up. The beds are comfy, there are plenty of good field rations, and they let us keep our phones.”

“Yes, I suppose it's better than the usual.”

“Remember our agreement, Craig: tell me immediately if your PTSD kicks in.”

“I remember. It's not that anyhow.”

“Well then what's bothering you?”

Campbell sighed. “I didn't realise who the asset was until we found her. Sarah – she's my wife.”

“Oh Lord, *that's* the other woman?”

“It wasn't like that!”

"You know what I mean, Craig! Do you suppose that Pembleton knew when she picked you for the mission?"

"I'm not sure. There wasn't a name mentioned in the briefing; just that a local journalist had gotten caught up in the situation and managed to raise the alarm. She might have been as surprised as I was."

"Anything's possible, I suppose." The medics had placed Tresweld in a higher-level quarantine area within the hospital, citing the far greater risk of exposure. So far, at least, none of the alarms had gone off. "I'm sure that she's fine. We'd have heard word by now otherwise."

"You're probably right, Paul. Thanks for keeping me grounded."

"It's no trouble. When will you tell Spence?"

The other operative frowned. "Do you really think that it's even worth mentioning? I mean nothing's changed: I'm not about to get back together with Sarah! We've got nothing left to connect us."

"Well, that depends." Benedict finally bothered to sit up. "Are you actively trying to destroy your relationship with Spence?"

"Ah. You think keeping this back might not be

entirely sensible then?"

"Definitely not, old chap."

"Bryce told me that you turned her down."

Rosa gasped as the supervisor loomed into view behind her in the guest bedroom's floor length mirror. "You startled me, Sir!"

"Sorry." He closed the door quietly and ran his palm across the scanner to lock it. "I thought you and I were good now, Kellie; that we had an understanding? Was I wrong about that?"

"It's nothing personal, Sir. I just don't like that sort of thing."

"Polyfidelity bothers you?"

"Well...yes...? I mean it's *illegal*, Sir!"

"You're thinking of polygamy. There's no law against consensual intimate networking." Hull moved closer to the young Englishwoman. "Besides which, *robots* don't count. No matter how lifelike they might be, doctor."

"I'm fully human, you know that...!"

"Hey, don't cry. It's okay." He smiled and wiped her tears away with his thumb. "I do know, Kellie. You're human."

She closed her eyes; trembling as he touched

her face. "Then why would you say that to me?"

"Because sometimes I think you need reminding of just how vulnerable that particular social status is for you."

"I...you wouldn't...!"

"Wouldn't what, Kellie? Declare you as a machine, and then turn you over for laboratory testing? The same way that your *friends* back in England did so very readily?" Rosa whimpered incoherently as his hands closed around her shoulders. "I would never let anyone else hurt you, doctor. Don't you know that by now?"

"Please Sir, I'm sorry...!"

"It's okay, Kellie." Hull let go of the technician's shoulders and pulled her into a bear hug instead. "I forgive you."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Good girl. Now then – let's talk about your little misunderstanding with Bryce."

"Sir...?"

"You were scared that she meant polygamy, that's why you said no earlier."

"I still don't want to be a part of it, Sir."

"It's not about what you want."

"But...!"

"I *said* that I wouldn't let anyone else hurt you, doctor. You're smart enough to understand what I mean by that."

"Oh, I understand perfectly, Sir." The hug was really a cage, and the bear was getting angry. "I also know that our CEO isn't himself anymore."

Hull backed away slowly, staring at the technician. "Are you *blackmailing* me, Kellie?"

"You could say that, yes. No matter how well you think that you've cleaned the floor in the basement, I can guarantee that forensics would find some trace of Mr Howard there."

"I didn't kill him. In fact, I was on Mars, which is a pretty impressive alibi."

"Still, you covered it up for me."

"Touché, doctor. So – what do you want?"

"You'll stop pressuring me to be your bloody sex toy for a start! And you'll let Mr Moxton and his team go home unharmed too."

"Don't you want to go with them, Kellie?"

"There isn't any point." She looked away. "I don't belong there any longer, Sir. I'm just as much of a monster as you are now."

He almost laughed in her face at that, but choked it back. "You're not any kind of monster,

but we're certainly alike in other ways! Okay – you have yourself a deal, Kellie. I'll call off the search. Your former colleagues are free to go home. I guess we'd both better just hope that they're smart enough to not try coming back here again."

"How are you doing there, Nightingale?"

Spence gave up testing the restraints. "This isn't an especially comfortable chair, Mr Vetch."

"Yeah, I hadn't intended it to be."

"Let me go, *now*."

"No, that won't work this time!" He tapped the side of his headphones mockingly. "Your late brother's in-laws have been seriously handy with their generosity! Technology, cash, you name it. Fuck GETEC." He traced his thumb slowly along the pale neck, before leaning in closer for a kiss. "You know, you're actually okay looking. If your family doesn't want you, maybe I'll keep you myself...!"

It seemed an age before the former AMR technician stopped struggling. Spence continued biting down on his windpipe until fully certain that there was no pulse left beneath their teeth. The corpse slithered quietly to the floor of the hover van. "Sorry to crush your expectations."

As Bank Holiday Mondays went, today was ascending rapidly from average to worst ever. First the toaster had caught fire, prompting an emergency decamp from home to wherever was open within walking distance simply to have breakfast. Then Kathryn and Barnabas had fallen out over which of them had liked tomato sauce first. The other customers and staff in the cafe hadn't been at all impressed. That had prompted Thomas to give yet another lecture on parenting. Leister had told him, less than kindly, to shut up. Jenkins had of course, agreed with that, which made the whole thing even worse.

All three of the children had ended up crying, and the young biochemist hadn't been far off joining them. The bystanders had very definitely begun judging their group on social media. Whilst Tanya mopped up the wasted food, Spence had opted to step outside in search of a taxi to get everyone back to the flat before blood ended up spilt. Annoyingly, the late Bernard Vetch had seized his opportunity before any such transport could be found.

At least he hadn't had the chance to drive off from his spot in the blissfully quiet local car park. /

wonder how much longer it will be until Cob and the others manage to find me.

With the Lancashire safe house written off as decidedly unsafe, Moxton's team had opted to fly directly to London. The ANI jet dropped them off at New Heathrow in the small hours of Saturday morning. From then until Monday was broadly spent writing up mission reports, arguing with the new medics at Headquarters, and generally avoiding Pembleton.

The latter proved simpler than usual, as the Dublin operation was far from fully resolved. Whitby was, alas, all too very present. The senior technician's opinion of the events in Florida was grimly accurate. He had no suggestion as to how best to proceed. His advice as he stalked off to see about running diagnostics on Quincy was simple. "Don't tell Pembleton until you have to."

So far, they hadn't had to. Leister's request for urgent assistance in locating Spence was the latest excuse. Housekeeping going missing was about as far as Moxton could imagine from the definition of a welcome distraction. "So have you found anything yet, Cob?"

"No, and I've been searching for two hours now." The older man looked haggard. "They're not at home either. Thomas escorted Ashley and the others back to the flat. He rang and confirmed that they all arrived there safely."

"Good to know that we don't have any more missing people at least." The handler frowned. "It's the middle of town, on a bright summer's day. How aren't there any witnesses?"

Dobos grunted his distaste. "If you ask me, it must have been a fucking discreet kidnapper."

"Maybe Quincy's sensors will pick something up that we can't, Ollie." Jolley eyed his friend with no small amount of concern. "Are you sure you don't need to go back to Medical, mate?"

"For fuck's sake, Darren, I'm *fine*!"

<observation-data indicates otherwise>

"Alright now, that's more than enough idle chatter, darlings! It's time that we got to work on finding Nightingale."

By now, assuming that the forecast had been correct, the temperature outside the hover van was around 18° Celsius, and set to get warmer. Spence had swiftly decided against shouting for help.

Everything pointed to the vehicle having been equipped to be fully soundproof. Worse yet, a lurid yellow sticker on the inside of the rear door announced that it was also hermetically sealed. With the engine switched off, that equated to little more than an airtight oven. *Baked alive – well I suppose it's one way to go!*

Vetch was still in algor mortis, but it wouldn't be long before full rigor set in. *At least he hasn't turned into a bloody zombie. I can rule out being eaten alive.* Of course, there was a cloud attached to that positive aspect. The mere thought of how awful the smell of putrefaction would be had already triggered one bout of morning sickness. *I can't afford to waste any more fluids. God alone knows how long I'll be trapped in here.*

Their phone rang again. Sixteen unanswered calls now, and at least as many texts. Oh yes, people were undoubtedly searching. Whether or not anyone would find the bloody van in time was another matter entirely. *Dogs die like this all the time. Heatstroke, suffocation, or dehydration: pick your poison.*

The call rang out just like the fifteen before it. Then the phone made a strange sharp sort of beep,

and a familiar voice sounded from the earpiece. "I told you to keep this line clear for me, Nightingale. Making me remotely override your phone's settings just to talk to you wasn't very polite."

"Well, you'll have to forgive me for that, Mr Hull. I'm afraid that one of your erstwhile minions left me tied to an apparently inescapable chair in the back of a hermetically sealed van."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Huh. Which minion was it?"

Spence sighed. "Bernard Vetch. It seems that he went freelance. He's dead, by the way."

"I guess that saves me the effort of firing him. So, Nightingale, time for the important question. Whatever are we going to do about your unfortunate situation?"

"You could always track me using my phone, inform British Intelligence of where I am, and then never bother any of us again."

"No dice, I'm afraid. I'd miss you all too much. Besides, wherever Vetch stashed you, the GPS is scrambled. Do you know your location?"

"Yes, but I don't trust you to pass it on."

Hull's voice softened. "Nightingale, I know what

the weather's like in England right now. You're nine weeks pregnant. Even if you weren't, I wouldn't leave you to die like that. Come on now – tell me where you are. I'm your only chance right now."

"My friends shall be looking. They may very well find me any minute now."

"Then you don't have anything to lose by telling me, do you, Housekeeping?"

"I suppose not, Mr Hull."

Leister stared numbly at the charred and twisted metal in the middle of the abandoned warehouse. The skeleton of the hover van was still white hot. Its interior was barely more than ash. Whatever the accelerant had been, it burned fast and left very little in the way of organic matter behind. He found himself hoping that there wouldn't be enough for a positive identification either way. Until there was, he could still pray that the GPS coordinates which Whitby had at last found were inaccurate; that this was some stranger's grisly end and no more.

<advisory-identificationcomplete>

He closed his eyes. "Is it Nightingale?"

<affirmative>

Now Moxton was murmuring something:

probably the right thing to say, whatever it was. The fellow was good at that; he had a great deal of empathy. Not that empathy was any help in turning back the clock. *My dear, brave little chick! You deserved so much better than this. I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry.*

"Why the fuck did someone bring them all the way up from London to fucking *Birmingham* just to fucking murder them?" Dobos' voice cut through Leister's fugue. "And who the fuck even does this sort of fucking evil shit to a pregnant person? Fuck, who does it to *anyone*?"

"I don't know, Ollie. Hey Cob, are you feeling okay there?" Jolley moved towards the older operative. "Do you need to sit down?"

"No thank you, darling." Leister took out his handkerchief and dabbed the salt away from his eyes. Grief could wait. He had work to do; a killer, or perhaps killers, to find. Someone irreplaceable to avenge. "Quincy, find out who owns this vehicle. They're the first on my list of people to speak to."

<working>

"It was probably stolen." Moxton sounded hollow: as though the flames had gutted him too. "They usually are in these scenarios."

INHERITED STEALTH

"I'm fully aware of that, Daniel. It's still somewhere to start digging from. Believe you me; I won't stop until I've found whoever's responsible for all of this, and put them in the damned ground."

Chapter Nine – Can Do

“Merry Christmas, ma'am.” Woods passed the CO of Deimos Base a small brightly wrapped parcel. “I figured it was better to give it to you a few weeks early to avoid needing to visit you once you're off on maternity. Don't get too excited; it ain't much of a gift really.”

“Thanks, Woods.” Kennedy opened the top drawer on her office desk. “I picked you up a little something too.”

Woods accepted his gift gruffly. “You really shouldn't have, ma'am.”

She waved off his protest. “Yeah, I know, but they insisted on giving me an end of year bonus and I needed to find someone or something to waste it on.”

“You still miss him, don't you, ma'am?”

Kennedy nodded. “Every damn day, Woods.”

"I figured as much." The older Marine nodded sadly. "Well, if it helps, for a flash clone of a Goddamn asshole, he was an okay guy."

"That means a lot coming from you."

"Count it as being your birthday present for next year, ma'am. And for the record, I still ain't going to babysit for you once that bun you're cooking up finally pops."

Kennedy rested her left hand on her nascent bump. "Hey, all I ask is that you make sure to encourage her into the Corps as soon as she's old enough, and scare off any potential boyfriends."

Woods scowled. "I guess I can do that."

"Oliver, darling: how nice to see you!" Leister waved his unexpected guest through to the living room. "Barnabas, Kathryn, leave that game for a little while, please. We have a visitor."

"Cheers, Cob." Dobos nodded to the children. "I just thought I'd drop in with your presents whilst I'm still in London. They're sending us off again next week; Algeria or thereabouts."

Barnabas frowned. "Isn't that supposed to be a secret, Uncle Oliver? Are you allowed to tell us where you'll be working?"

"Yeah, well I like to think that I can trust you lot not to snitch to the enemy." The field operative winked. "So, are you still keeping that spreadsheet of which country's the worst one for spying in, Kathryn?"

"Yes. You were stabbed twice in Germany, and thrown off a small cliff in Spain, and then Uncle Darren was throttled in Peru."

"He was *almost* throttled, darling – a small but vital difference."

"I know the difference, Cob." The girl rubbed at the faint scar on her own neck. "If you pass out then it counts as having been throttled properly."

"Darren actually passed out then, eh?" Dobos made use of the only distraction he could spot in the conversation. "Well now, he never bothered to let on to me about that part, the sly git! Thanks for telling me, Kathryn."

"You're welcome. Please may we open our presents from him now, Cob?"

"Oh yes, let's do that!" Her brother was already tearing at the packaging around his own gift. "Uncle Oliver might not be back here again for months!"

"Go on then, darlings." Leister smiled. It was

good to see the twins acting more like their peers. They had made slow but consistent progress over the past seven months. "I'll pop mine and Ashley's underneath the tree until the day itself arrives. Help yourself to something to drink, Oliver."

"Don't mind if I do at that." The younger man wandered into the adjoining kitchen and made a show of rattling around in the cupboards until his host joined him. "Still nothing on the fucker, I'm afraid, Cob. He's managed to pull off a complete and utter disappearing act."

"Damn the luck! It's like chasing smoke through a thick fog whilst wearing a blindfold."

"At least we know his name."

"Indeed, and Violet Ashby's blood money won't sustain him forever. Eventually, our Mr Vetch shall run out of places to hide."

"You're being beyond unreasonable, Craig." Benedict tilted the phone away from his ear until the other man had finished shouting at him. "Look, just tell me where you're holed up this time, at least!"

"Why should I, Paul? It's not your business where I choose to die."

"Oh, for pity's sake, get over yourself, man! Don't you think the rest of us are grieving too? We *all* cared about Spence – you're not the only person affected by what happened! The difference is that you let it finish you."

"Fuck you! I don't need you...you've got no idea what this is like...! I wish it bloody *had* finished me, Paul, but that's the problem, isn't it? I'm still breathing, and they're not. Nightingale and our unborn children...you don't know...! That bastard took everything that mattered!"

"Craig, please, we're looking for him. We shan't stop looking. He can't hide forever. Won't you please come back to London?"

"No."

Benedict glanced at the framed photograph on his desk. "Cerise and Jamal-Kristof would love to have you at our house for Christmas. You could even visit Leister and the twins. Kathryn keeps asking when you'll do that."

"Tell her the bloody truth then: never! Moreover, whilst you're at it, you can give Dad the same message."

"I refuse to enable your ghosting them, so no. One of us has to be a responsible human being."

"You're a supercilious shit, Paul."

"At least you're still able to pronounce words of more than one syllable. What should I tell Sarah, by the way? She rang again yesterday. Seamus' first birthday isn't all that far away now, you know."

"That's not until the end of January. I suppose I might be somewhere near Dublin by then."

"Don't you think that you should contact her sooner? If not for your own sake, then at least for the boy, Craig – he deserves to know who his father is."

"I'll think about it."

"That's good to hear." Today was certainly going better than their last few phone calls had. "Pembleton sends you her best regards."

"Should I care?"

"Now, that's a little bit harsh. She didn't know what was going to happen to Spence any more than the rest of us did...!"

Campbell hung up.

"I really do wish that you wouldn't keep on doing that." Benedict sighed and set down his phone. According to his watch, he had just spent yet another lunchtime reaching out to someone who obviously much preferred drowning. Perhaps

Weaver was right, and they would have to send someone after the poor fellow. *I wonder who would be willing to take on that assignment.*

"Maurice, I did it! I got the job at National!"

Jenkins' enthusiasm all but radiated down the phone, and Leister decided that no, he really wasn't too old for a victory dance. "Ashley, that's simply fabulous news! Congratulations, darling. Have you told Paul yet?"

"His number was busy, but I'll try again once we've talked. I just wanted to thank you for encouraging me to apply."

"Oh, you know me: I wasn't about to risk our Intelligence Services missing out on such a fine young mind."

She laughed at his honesty. "Shall we go out this evening for dinner to celebrate? I know the children would like that."

"Dinner sounds simply perfect, darling. I'll book us all a table at Magdalena's immediately."

"Hello again, Feathers." Caulfield doffed his hat to the pale grey headstone. "I wanted to tell you how the Ashby matter is proceeding."

He often visited graves of an evening. It was easier to talk to their occupants with six feet of soil and a sturdy casket in the way. The silence rang very loud in his ears though. He went home deafened by it every time, and drank to let the world of the still living back in again. Spence's final resting place was no different.

"Should I still call you Spence? Valerie Lackey – how in the world did you decide on Nightingale Spence from that beginning?"

No one seemed to know the answer to that, not even Leister. The non-gender had taken the truth away with them. It was remarkable how often that occurred with matters of death.

"We found the bones that they were hiding. Once we started looking properly, it was inevitable. The Ashby family, and all the rest of them – I don't question why you flew away."

Yes, he owed them an apology for having expected their help. That was a fair reason for him to come here. He had pushed them to speak out: tried to frighten them into being bait. If only he had known then just how very deep it had all run. Well, the beggars remained horseless, so wishing wasn't going to help anyone.

"I am sorry, Feathers."

They had never seemed particularly unforgiving. He hoped that hadn't changed along the way to here. If it had, then so be it. People did sometimes change their habits.

"It's over, finally. There shan't be any more lost to them. Not strangers, and not those children either. Barnabas and Kathryn are safe now, I promise."

The same was less true of Craig, or indeed the rest of those that had gathered in the old dairy farm. It was an unsafe profession. Caulfield couldn't alter that fact. True, perhaps he ought to have discouraged Tanya from joining it. Nevertheless, as Leister said, the girl had great potential. One really shouldn't waste that.

"Well, you wouldn't have wasted it anyway, would you, Feathers?"

No, of course they wouldn't. Spence had been a consummate professional. Their file confirmed what everyone who knew and trusted them believed. They had been the glue. Now everything else had to tolerate lying in parts.

"We haven't found Vetch yet. I'm sorry the situation in Lancashire drove you to hide where he could reach you."

It was usually the last thing that you expected that got you. Everyone in this business knew it. Nobody ever found a way around it being true. That was one of life's inevitable knives to the back. You just couldn't win forever.

"I'd best be off. There's something odd brewing in Yorkshire. Lottie wants us to get an early start to the journey there. I'll let you know what we find."

He paused and blew the headstone a kiss.

"Goodbye, Feathers."

"Kellie, you made it!" Bryce hugged the younger woman. "Come on in – I just finished putting the final decorations on our tree!"

"The house looks very festive." Rosa followed her into the den. "Gosh, that's a big tree! It must have taken you hours to do that by yourself."

"Yeah, well Greg had to work away again, so I needed something to do with my day." The blonde woman smiled. "Fisher helped, didn't you, baby?"

"Sparkles...!" The toddler appeared to have been rolling in glitter. "Sparkle tree pretty, Mommy!"

"Oh dear: how will you ever manage to get all of this out of his hair?" GETEC's new head of Neurocybertronic Interfacing knelt to examine

Fisher. "I think there's some glue mixed through part of it too, by the way."

"It's syrup!" Bryce was in the kitchen making coffee, and toasting cinnamon rolls. "He tried wearing his breakfast today!"

"Ah, how...sweet...?"

"You get used to it when you're a mom."

"I'll take your word for it."

Fisher beamed at her, and then emptied what transpired to be an entire tub of yet more glitter over both of them. "Sparkle doctor!"

Rosa grimaced, and got to her feet. "Bryce? Would it be alright if I used your loo to get cleaned up before lunch?"

"Ollie's always bloody right, you know." Jolley frowned at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. "I mean he called it months ago!"

Tanya hopped past behind him: trying to put her jeans back on whilst simultaneously tying back her hair. "Huh? Can you maybe be just a little bit less vague, Darren?"

The field operative smiled. "Sorry, I mean about us, love! He knew how I felt about you before I did. It's almost as if he's psychic!"

"Yeah, well, psychic or not, he's still in my bad books for not handing in his report on time. So is Cob for organising this last minute get together at Magdalena's without warning any of us in advance! I literally have nothing to wear to it."

"Those jeans are nice."

"These aren't party jeans, Darren. They're everyday jeans."

"What's the difference?"

She groaned. "Ugh, only about two extra zeros at the end of the price?"

He smiled and pecked her on the cheek. "Ah, you look bloody gorgeous, Tanya! Anyhow, it's no bother. I'll just nip down to the hotel gift shop and buy you one of those posh frocks with the sequins all over them."

"Darren, no: remember what Mr Moxton said about not wasting your money!"

"Spending it on you isn't wasting it, love!"

The young handler in training shook her head. "Sweetie, you're way too generous."

"Cob would say I should buy you the dress."

"He's on a higher pay grade."

"He picked the restaurant."

"I actually can't think of an argument for that."

Okay, yes, thank you. Get me the pink one please.

Oh, and you'll need a different shirt!"

Jolley blinked. "What's wrong with this one?"

"Dude, it's got *stuff* on it!"

"It's just a little bit of lipstick."

"New shirt, Darren, or I swear I'll never undo your tie with my teeth again."

"Yes ma'am!"

"So, how's our extra special guest doing today, Miss Armstrong?"

The technician rolled her eyes and pulled up the latest readings on the main screen. "She's still hiding out in the caves by the beach."

"I really expected that we'd be further along in the integration process by now." Hull frowned at the data stream. "Wait a second – are you *still* ignoring their gender preference?"

"Considering that *she's* almost as big as a house now, if *she* didn't want to be counted as female, perhaps *she* shouldn't have got it on without any protection in the first place!"

"We've talked about this before, Miss Armstrong. That kind of attitude really doesn't belong in a team environment." He moved to the observation

platform and activated the long-range scanner. "Take your break: I'll keep an eye on the readings for a while."

"That's if there's even anything to watch."

Maybe he was expecting too much of Armstrong. Living here in the bunker twenty-four seven, with no outside contact and only the local fauna for entertainment. It would get to most people eventually. That was precisely why she was there: to keep the other occupant of the island from going mad with loneliness. *Talk about an exercise in irony, Greg.*

Nightingale Spence coped with solitude just fine. Two hundred- and ten-days' worth of essentially self-imposed isolation had done nothing to change this. At this rate, the only way Hull would be able to bring them indoors to monitor the birth properly, would be with sedation and a net. At forty weeks, they were right on the edge of going over term. That was all but unheard of within twin pregnancies. There might be complications. *Yeah, better start working out the safest dosage for use during late pregnancy.*

Chapter Ten – Along The Way

Always assuming that they hadn't accidentally lost count somewhere along the way, Spence currently believed it to be the first Tuesday in December. Tuesdays were foraging days, and so they were busy foraging. Having a set routine was vital when surviving isolation. It created an illusion of control over one's situation. Of course, the tricky part was to *believe* in that illusion.

The lizards were small, somewhat terminally stupid creatures, and tasted surprisingly like salted pork. As far as sources of protein went, well, at least it was easier than fishing. Besides which, anything that meant not having to accept the rations left out next to the bunker was by default excellent fare. Spence found it bad enough relying on Hull for clothing; trusting him not to drug the food was a

step too far.

That was one positive about the island. Wherever in the world this was, the supervisor only seemed able to visit once every ten days. Spence had counted twenty-one such trips so far. Until yesterday, the all-too secure jet had never stayed for more than twelve hours. It appeared that their captor was breaking his routine this time. Either that or his assistant had finally snapped and killed him with one of her shoes.

Alice Armstrong was surprisingly unpleasant company. The first eight days of Spence's captivity had proven that much. For reasons that remained unclear, the young Englishwoman considered them enemies. Perhaps Hull had brainwashed her. At any rate, determining that the bunker was nothing beyond a poorly gilded cage, the non-gender had opted to move out.

One could hardly term it as much else: they remained a prisoner. The island was inescapable by water without a motorised boat; the tidal patterns saw to that, and the sharks waited for anyone foolish or desperate enough to try. There were no shipping or sailing routes within view of it either. Signal fires therefore went unseen, but Spence had

soon found a much better use for those flames.

The limestone caves by the beach were also rich in malachite. Of course, the smelting process alone had taken weeks to complete. Mixing up enough clay to create the pottery kiln had been the first step. Then charcoal, gathered from the seemingly pointless fires left on the sand. It would have drawn attention if they gave up lighting those, so there was a double purpose.

Ore, heat, reducing agent, and flux – all that had remained to add was time and effort. The former had needed spending; the latter had always come naturally to the non-gender. With the raw copper finally coaxed into a rather more useful form, constructing the primitive spark-gap transmitter had been easy. More importantly, it gave them something to do at night.

Yes, today was almost definitely the first Tuesday of December 2096. It was also going to be their eighty-seventh night of transmitting. Perhaps it might even be the first where someone heard. That would be nice. If that potential listener transpired to be fluent in Morse code, then so much the better. It would certainly make conversing with them simpler.

"Good morning, sleepy head." Bryce smiled shyly at Rosa from across the remaining half-bottle of Château Haut-Brion. "So, I guess with your relative immunity to alcohol, we can't blame last night on the wine?"

"No, that would be silly. Besides, I think we both knew what we wanted from the outset." The young head of department paused and glanced at the bedside clock. "Gracious, it's almost nine am! Does Fisher generally sleep in this late?"

"Oh no, he's been wide awake since first light!" The older woman chuckled. "Luckily, I'm getting pretty good at stealth childcare."

"Wait, so you've been up all this time too? Really, Bryce, you ought to have woken me up sooner! I wouldn't have minded."

"To be honest, I was kind of scared to wake you in case you regretted what happened."

Rosa hesitated. "Do you regret it?"

"Not at all, but I wish that I did." Bryce looked down at her feet. "Greg's just been so caught up with work lately, you know...?"

"Yes; we're all very busy at the moment, what with the annual review coming up. Don't worry, Bryce. I'm sure that things shall pick up between

you both again once that's done."

Campbell eyed the laminated card that was still pinned to the wheel of the *Angry Canary*. He had left New Bangkok three weeks earlier, just after Loi Krathong, when the weather began to change. It was probably time to clear away at least some of the assorted stuff that had piled up during the voyage so far. An out-of-date Thai visitor's charter was as good a point to start as anything else was.

Ten minutes into his vague attempt at tidying, his ears began to ring. Half a glass of vodka later, he realised that the sound was coming from the emergency communications panel. Specifically, the legacy unit, as his mother had always called it. Outside of the immediate aftermath of WWII, that means of communication hadn't seen general usage in well over a century and a half now. Intrigued despite himself, he listened harder.

All stations: distress. Over.

It was important, or at least the signaller thought that it was. They were most likely either an eccentric recluse or else someone working in Intelligence. He supposed that either one of those possibilities could prove to be an interesting diversion.

INHERITED STEALTH

Calling any station. This is young lady. I say again. All stations: distress. Over.

The somewhat dusty transmitter piped back into life surprisingly easily. Campbell smiled and tapped out a greeting. *Good evening young lady. This is old man. Go ahead. Over.*

Confirm old man. Emergency here. I say again. Emergency. Over.

Received as transmitted. Be seeing you soon young lady. Best regards. Over.

Thanks, old man. See you later. Over and out.

The backtracking of such communications involved the use of a far more modern device. Fortunately, for the mystery damsel, Campbell had one installed. Otherwise, he would have had to involve the nearest authorities. That might take the better part of a week to arrange out here - hardly an ideal timeframe for responding to a midnight emergency!

"How in the world did you manage to make all of this, Nightingale?" Hull gazed around in open amazement at the mass of crudely constructed wiring lining the cave. "Where did you even find the necessary materials?"

Spence squirmed. "Untie me and I'll draw you a bloody diagram!"

"Sorry, but you're far too tricky to catch. I don't feel confident that we could do it twice." The supervisor glanced at his assistant. "Miss Armstrong, have you finished calibrating the hover stretcher yet?"

"It's all set, Sir."

"Good work. Let's get going – I want to have Nightingale safely back inside the bunker before it's too late to set up an epidural."

"For fuck's sake, you unmitigated bastard, I don't want any of your help...!"

"Calm down, Nightingale." Hull settled the GA mask into place over Spence's face. "Deep breaths, that's right. Trust me, you'll soon change your mind about having company around you once labour starts."

Armstrong glanced back towards the cave as they left. "Do you suppose she – sorry, *they* managed to contact anyone?"

"I doubt it: almost no one in the world uses spark-gap transmission-based communications anymore. All the same, I want you to keep a closer watch on our security grid from now on. The last thing we

need is to end up raided by pirates or something."

"Sir, I don't know where you are right now, but you need to come home immediately." Rosa shifted Fisher around onto her hip, wincing as the boy grabbed another handful of her hair. "I stopped by your house to have lunch with Bryce, and she's not here. The front door was hanging wide open and Fisher was halfway down the driveway! Something must have happened. Please, ring me back when you get this message."

She tucked the phone back into her pocket and carried the toddler into the den. Mellor was on his way with a security team; they would be here soon. Until then, Fisher was her responsibility. "Wherever has Mummy gotten to, young man?"

"Sparkles fall down!" Her charge gesticulated eagerly towards the fallen Christmas tree. "Mommy cry at the big men!"

The overturned furniture removed all confusion. It had been a burglary, or possibly even a deliberate abduction. Rosa backed carefully out of the room. "Let's go back outside to ring Mr Mellor and see where the nice security people are!"

"Sparkle doctor help Mommy?"

"Yes Fisher."

"Mommy makes tomato hoops!"

The technician nodded. "We'll get you your spaghetti soon, dear."

"Not want s'getti! Want tomato hoops!"

She didn't have an answer for that. Mercifully, the sleek GETEC transport was already pulling into the driveway. "Thank goodness you're here! It looks as if someone took Bryce – I found signs of a struggle, and Fisher was talking about seeing some big men. He said his mother was crying."

"Want hoops now!" The toddler's screeching drowned out Mellor's initial reply. "Sparkle doctor makes tomato hoops!"

"Maybe you should get him some food, doctor." The young administrator signalled for the others to get to work. "We'll see about locating Ms Lenard. Does Supervisor Hull know about the situation yet?"

"I couldn't seem to reach him; the call went straight to voicemail."

Mellor frowned. "Maybe he's in a meeting?"

"Hoops...!"

"Yes, yes, we'll get you the nice tomato hoops now, Fisher!" Rosa wondered how Bryce coped with this day in, day out. "So – where does Mummy

keep them? Are they in the kitchen?"

"Not want kitchen hoops! Want Mommy...!"

Rosa grimaced. It appeared that Friday was going to be a very long day.

Far above the sailcloth, a thin skein of cloud ghosted clear of the waning moon. Campbell raised his binoculars and peered again at the little island that, according to all official maps, did not exist. His eventual destination had transpired to be precisely nine hundred and twelve nautical miles east of Madagascar. Even given the fact that he had taken the bare minimum of rest along the way, it had still been a five-day voyage at just shy of hull speed. *That's an impressive range for a simple legacy unit.*

There had been no subsequent transmissions from his mystery damsel. Had it been a hoax? Worse yet, was he simply too late? Perhaps the emergency had needed immediate measures. For all he knew right now, the sender could be dead. What would he find on that island? *Well, there's really only one sure way of knowing, I suppose.*

He would have to use the dinghy: the rocky shallows around the island would gut *Angry Canary*.

That meant prepping the littler craft ahead of whatever might occur on shore. The usual kit would probably do, well, that and his gun. Additional medical supplies were only sensible too. He knew *that* from bitter experience. *Never leave home without the bloody glue, as Spence used to say.*

The shoreline, when he reached it, was fine pale sand beneath the warm salt water. It swallowed his feet to the ankles at every step. The dry stuff beyond the tide line was just as hungry, and the former operative staggered his way to the top of the beach. There was no sign of human habitation. *Perhaps she's further inland.*

The digital display on Hull's watch showed ten thirty am as he scrambled from his car and raced into the house. "Aaron, what do we know? Has there been a ransom demanded? Do we have any proof of life?"

"Sir, there's been nothing at all so far."

"There has to be *something*!" The supervisor had been driving flat out for the past two hours, and the flight prior to that had taken him half a day. "Damn it all, Aaron, it's been fourteen hours since you called me! Don't dare try and tell me that there's

nothing; you know how critical the first day is in any abduction!"

"Sir, we've been investigating non-stop ever since Dr Rosa discovered Bryce to be missing. That was twenty hours ago now, and all the evidence suggests that she was taken well before that." Mellor paused to let that sink in. "I'm sorry, but I think that we're already past the initial twenty-four-hour line."

Hull shook his head. "Then look harder! Get more people on this – Hell, get fucking ANI on it too! Aren't they supposed to oversee these sorts of crimes? I don't care how you do it, but I want Bryce found, and I want the identities of each and every one of the bastards responsible for taking her."

"Yes Sir."

"Good. Now where's Fisher? I want to see him – is he here?"

"He's upstairs in the nursery, Sir. Dr Rosa is taking care of him. He seems to like her."

Hull nodded and went in search of his son. It made sense that he was used to Kellie by now. Bryce had been quietly chipping away at her boundaries for months, and that had involved spending plenty of time together socially. In fact, his

fiancée's second to last text to him had confirmed that she and the young technician were sleeping together. The one after that had been far less exciting: a reminder to pick up some more groceries on his way home from the island.

I can't lose you again, Bryce. You're my soul mate. Who else would ever understand the past seven months the way you have?

Rosa looked up as he entered the nursery. "Welcome home, Sir. Has there been any news about Bryce yet?"

"None so far, Kellie, but they're working on it. Thanks for stepping in with Fisher until I got back."

The toddler squealed happily as Hull scooped him up for a cuddle. "Daddy here now!"

"That's right, champ. So, do you want some apple juice?"

"No apple – want hoops, Daddy!"

"Oh, sliced tomato, huh? That's a good, healthy choice, Fisher. Okay, let's go downstairs and fix up a plate for you."

Chapter Eleven – Very Much Not

Campbell peered down at the electronic lock on the door of the bunker. He had reached the island at a little after eleven pm on Sunday night, and now the first rays of Monday morning were stretching into life. *Five and a half hours just to get here from the beach: Paul may have a point about my fitness levels.*

Oh well, it hardly mattered. One didn't need to be in peak physical condition to blow up a ruddy door. The resultant satisfying bang proved that. He let the initial cloud of smoke and debris begin to clear before he entered. "Hello, is there an amateur radio broadcaster in here?"

"Jesus Christ, what did you do to the door?" The woman stumbling along the corridor seemed less than pleased with him. "And who the bloody heavens are you?"

"Sorry; you said in your broadcast that you had an emergency here." Campbell scratched at his beard. "You are young lady, aren't you?"

"Eh? I'm not following any of this, sorry."

"Young lady – the call sign...? Wasn't that you with the legacy transmission?"

She shook her head. "I haven't sent any transmissions. Sorry; you must have the wrong island!"

"Oh. Well, this is embarrassing. I'm Craig Campbell, by the way – skipper of the *Angry Canary*. I expect we'll need to exchange insurance details."

His inadvertent host had gone pale. "Keep away from me! I've got a stun rod and I know how to use it, you mad bastard spy!"

"How did you know that I used to be a spy?"

"Because she works for GETEC, Craig – you're still regarded as one of their very most wanted."

Campbell spun towards the second voice: all but forgetting the woman who was still backing away from him. "Canary...is that really you?"

"Who else would it be, you twit?" Spence rested their weight against the frame of the portable drip that they had been dragging. "Anyhow, what the

bloody Hades kept you? Hull's been holding me prisoner here for months...!"

He was too overwhelmed with joy to pay much heed to their squeak of protest as he hugged them. "Spence, you're not dead! It's a miracle – an early Christmas miracle!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Craig, it's not a bloody miracle; it's an evil GETEC plot! Well, at least it was until you got here. I take it this means that *you're* old man?"

"I'm whoever you want me to be, canary."

"Ugh, that's enough of your saccharine reunion!" Armstrong levelled the experimental pistol that she had been working on in her spare time. "So, you *did* manage to reach someone then. Well, I suppose it lets me test this gun. Say goodbye to Mr Campbell, Nightingale, and then go back to your room. Supervisor Hull probably wouldn't be too happy with me if I shot you...!"

With hindsight, the now unconscious technician had made herself the primary threat the instant that she aimed. Spence sighed and hobbled over to where Campbell had ended up. "As I was saying, old man, I'm very much *not* deceased."

"And your chaperone – who is she?"

"Alice Armstrong: one of Hull's minions. I'll explain properly later, Craig."

He looked down at their still rounded abdomen.
"What about the pregnancy?"

"Oh, that. Yes, I'm afraid that you missed most of it, including the sheer horror that is birth. Don't tell Hull that I said this, but epidurals and elective caesareans are now my two favourite medical inventions."

"So, our babies are here too?"

"Assuming that they haven't scuttled off whilst my back was turned, yes. They're in their cribs. It's this way, follow me. By the way, what did you mean by *used* to be a spy?"

"Did you really think that I'd just roll over and let you go running back to him, Bryce?" Marcus Westlowe raised the belt again as he spoke. "How hard do I need to beat you to put some sense in that pretty blonde head of yours?"

Bryce choked back her sobs. She knew all too well that he'd hit her even harder if she made any noise. *Greg will find me...he'll come home, he'll find out about this, and then he'll start looking...!*

"I bet you thought I was dead, didn't you?" The

attorney spat. "What – did Greg tell you that his pet SCO dealt with me when he burned down my fucking house? I liked that house, bitch! More to the point, I knew where all the exits were. Oh yeah, baby girl, I got out alive! That's a damn sight more than you're going to do."

This time the buckle connected with her back, instead of the strap. Only terror of what Marcus did to noisy subs kept her from screaming. *Hurry, Greg...please baby, please come find me soon...!*

"This had better be important, boffin." Dobos glowered across the laboratory at the senior technician. "I thought our next assignment wasn't until Tuesday?"

"Aye, Ollie's got a fair point there."

<advisory-rechargecycleperiodvital>

Moxton shushed his operatives. "What's going on, Whitby? Has Pembleton moved things up, or was it the other side's fault?"

"Neither actually, gentlemen." Whitby activated the larger of his communication screens. "Go ahead, Campbell – we're ready."

"Cheers, Whitby." The former operative grinned into the camera of his phone. "He's called you in to

help with an emergency extraction. Four others and me: we're on a small unrecorded island located midway between Madagascar and Thailand."

"What happened to your boat?" Moxton couldn't make out who it was standing behind Campbell. "Why can't you just sail out?"

"I simply haven't got enough nappies on board to last us for the whole of the voyage."

The handler blinked. "Did you say *nappies*?"

"What the fuck do you need fucking nappies for anyhow, you sad bastard?" Dobos ignored the look that Moxton levelled at him. "By the way, when's the last fucking time that you shaved?"

"Too bloody long ago by far, by the looks of him, Mr Dobos." Spence stepped forwards to wave over Campbell's shoulder. "Before anyone says it again, no, I'm *not* dead."

"Fuck me! Andro's only fucking managed to come back from the fucking grave!"

"Jesus!" Jolley snatched out his own phone. "Tanya's not going to believe me when I tell her about this!"

<salutationspossiblezombieunit>

"How is this possible?" Moxton turned and looked almost plaintively at Whitby for an

explanation. "We *found* a body! There was DNA!"

"Yes, well it wasn't Spence." The younger man shrugged. "Look, I don't know all of the details yet. Just go bring them all home safely and we'll figure things out properly from there."

"We are now fifty-five hours post abduction, everyone. There has been neither ransom demand, nor indeed any other communication from those responsible. It seems increasingly likely that this is either the work of a professional trafficking ring abducting to order, or else a homicide."

ANI Agent Mike Cully wished yet again that his new team leader was more of a people person. Senior Agent Laine Volker had taken over the Miami field office less than eight weeks earlier. The best in her chosen field, she nonetheless appeared to have missed acquiring even a basic level of human empathy. "Ma'am, the front desk called. Ms Lenard's fiancé and son are on their way up here."

Volker nodded. "Yes; I have decided to interview Mr Hull for myself. Arrange temporary care for the child, Agent Cully."

"Uh, okay then...?" That really *hadn't* been what he'd meant. *Jeez, this guy's going to think that I go*

out of my way just to piss him off! I hope he doesn't file another complaint about me.

As it happened, Hull strode past Cully without as much as a nod. "I'm looking for Senior Agent Volker – is that you?"

"Yes. I appreciate your punctuality, Mr Hull. I have several questions relating to this case. Leave your son with Agent Cully and follow me to Interview Room 2."

"No." The supervisor shook his head and cradled Fisher a little closer against his shoulder. "We can discuss this wherever you want to, but I'm not letting him out of my sight. Whatever it is that you need to know, you'll have to phrase it in age-appropriate terms."

Volker's smooth features remained utterly impassive. "Very well: I shall moderate my queries accordingly. This way, please."

More than seven months later, the overhead lighting panel in Interview Room 2 was still missing a couple of bulbs. Hull wondered briefly whether ANI had funding issues. "So, what is it that you want, Senior Agent Volker?"

"Did you terminate your fiancée's vital functions, or arrange for someone else to do so?"

"No, of course I didn't! I love Bryce; I would never harm her...!"

"Refrain from extraneous justifications. Do you know of anyone else who has actual reason to harm your fiancée, or who may simply be inclined to do so?"

"No." It was as if a machine was interrogating him. *At least there's no risk of Fisher understanding what she's saying.* "The only person that springs to mind is Marcus Westlowe, but he died earlier this year when his mansion burned down."

Volker raised an elegantly sculpted brow. Her eyes were a peculiar shade of light grey: almost colourless. It was unnerving. "Would it surprise you to learn that he survived?"

"Westlowe's still alive?" Hull's gut lurched as what that could mean sank in. "Oh my God – please tell me that you've already got people on that? Senior Agent Volker, that man is a monster! Bryce was terrified of him: she only ever married him in the first place to ensure that the FIL application for Fisher was approved."

"Our forensic accountants have already connected Mr Westlowe with the man who hijacked your vehicle back in April of this year." The

ANI operative activated the holographic display on the centre of the table. "Pierre Gophy received one million dollars for that contract. I believe it feasible that someone willing and able to arrange that could well go further in enacting his revenge fantasy."

Fisher batted curiously at the semi-transparent images. "Look, Daddy – people clouds!"

"Mr Hull, I sense that you are distressed and confused by the information that I have provided. Do you require additional support?"

"Huh?" He twitched back from his reverie. "Wait; are you some kind of a psionic or something?"

Volker inclined her head slightly. "As is clearly indicated on my personnel file, I am a Level 12. Do you take issue with this?"

"Can you use it to find Bryce?"

"That is not relevant, Mr Hull. Rest assured that ANI is pursuing all available lines of investigation. This concludes our interview: please make your way out of the building in a safe and timely manner. We shall contact you as and when necessary."

"Now, hold on a minute. I feel that you being a Level 12 is extremely relevant, Special Agent Volker. I mean with those kinds of abilities, there must be

something outside normal measures that you can do to help?"

Beneath the flickering lights, Volker's long red hair seemed to glow. "In accordance with federal law, I am prohibited from providing assistance of that kind. Goodbye, Mr Hull."

Fisher waved enthusiastically at the ANI operative. "Bye, cloud people lady!"

The supervisor moved to block the door. "Please, I'm begging you – surely you can at least try to find her?"

"It is understandable that you would make such a request. However, my acceding to it would be an illegal use of psionic capability."

"Couldn't you do it off the official books or something then? I don't know – say that you had a dream about the case?"

Volker shook her head. "ANI does not investigate based on dreams, Mr Hull. That would be a waste of our time and resources."

"I'm finding it very difficult to accept that a Level 12 psionic can't do anything to speed up this investigation."

"Nonetheless, that is the law. I am forbidden to use my psionic abilities whilst undertaking my duties

as a federal employee."

Well then, I guess you won't be able to report this either, you closed off emotionless bitch! I promise, if Bryce is hurt or worse because you wouldn't help us, then your life won't be worth living – I'll see to that personally.

She didn't even blink. "Have a peaceful day, Mr Hull. Do remember to drive safely."

Kennedy hadn't lived in Miami for all that long before being recalled from her undercover operation. Still, it was either here or Boston, and on balance, she much preferred the Floridian climate. "I guess I should look into visiting a few other places on Earth too though, huh Yuudai?"

She had brought the plain steel urn with her on her return to the planet. Technically, Earth had been Yuudai's home. Scattering his ashes there felt like the right thing to do. Getting a permit to go through with it sure hadn't been easy though! "You know, there was a moment when I kind of expected the clerk to announce that there was also a trial by combat requirement."

Outside of the rental car, the sun was setting over the glassy surface of the Everglades. Rays of

brilliant red and purple light painted the urn. The Martian woman smiled sadly and undid her seatbelt. It was time to quit procrastinating and finish this. "Okay, Yuudai – let's go and pick a nice spot before the alligators get too active."

In the interest of the local wildlife, the trail leading away from the parking area was unlit. Kennedy picked her way carefully along it. Her Marine training had prepared her for far more challenging environments, and as such, she made good time: easily covering four miles in well below the average civilian timeframe. *Well, they didn't declare me a damn superhero for nothing!*

Ahead of her, something crashed through the undergrowth to the left side of the trail. Kennedy tensed, readying her plasma pistol in case of a rogue alligator. She really hoped that she wouldn't have to kill anything. The paperwork for that kind of thing would be horrendous. *Don't be dumb, whatever you are.*

"Where do you think you're going now, Bryce?" A man's voice echoed up from the water's edge. "Quit trying to get away, bitch – the alligators are getting impatient!"

"Somebody help me!" A half-naked blonde

woman stumbled into view: her hands bound behind her back. "Please...please stop him...he's going to kill me...!"

"Not on my watch he ain't!" Kennedy scowled and set down the urn. "Wait here, ma'am. I'll take care of this."

Chapter Twelve – Buckled In

Leister was waiting for them on the roof of British International Intelligence Headquarters when the CB XII ERA finally touched down. “Nightingale, darling – I can hardly believe that it's really you!”

“It's me, old swan.” Spence nestled into his chest: glad of the physical closeness for once. “Don't worry; Quincy has already confirmed that I'm definitely *not* a robot or a shape shifter.”

<advisory-flashcloningstillapossibility>

“Don't worry, little bro'.” Dobos seated himself on the ramp and rolled up a cigarette. “There's probably a fucking test for that too.”

Moxton and Jolley were the next to disembark. The woman they were frog marching off for interrogation snarled at Spence as she passed. “Unlike you, I'll *never* betray my employers!”

“Don't mind Miss Armstrong; she's with GETEC.”

The non-gender tugged impatiently at their mentor's sleeve. "Come on – Craig dozed off during the flight back. I left him buckled in along with the babies."

"I must say, Nightingale, between these two little chicks and the older twins, you've gathered quite the watch." Leister beamed at the scene aboard the ERA. "Congratulations to you both – and welcome home."

"I owe you for this, Captain Kennedy." Hull peered through the courtesy blind on the door of Bryce's hospital room. His fiancée was sleeping peacefully now after receiving treatment for the injuries sustained during her ordeal. "I don't say that lightly. You want something, just name it – I'll find a way to make it happen."

"That's very generous of you, Sir." Kennedy took another sip of her soda. "Still, I only did what anyone would have in the circumstances."

"Don't belittle your actions. Bryce already told the cops how you went toe to toe with Westlowe and his goons. It was above and beyond, and you know that."

"I'm a Marine." The Martian woman shrugged.

"It goes with the territory."

The supervisor sighed and rubbed futilely at the tension in the nape of his neck. "So, what brings you back to Earth? Did you and my rogue flash clone finally run out of alien monstrosities to butt heads with?"

"Yuudai passed away in October. I brought his ashes back here to scatter them."

"Since when do clones have funerals?"

She glared at him. "Hey! Clone or not, he was a good person. Have some respect for the dead."

Hull frowned. "Wait – were the two of you actually *close* or something, Kennedy?"

"It doesn't matter now. He's dead."

"Wow. My extra self had a social life."

"Despite GETEC's best efforts to wipe him out remotely, yeah, he did. He also gave us a lot of dirt on your corporation and its tactics."

"Should I be expecting a personal visit from Military Intelligence?"

Kennedy shook her head. "Ironically, those in command have decided that they like GETEC's weapons too much to worry about the skeletons in its filing cabinets."

"I guess we got lucky there."

"Yeah, you did. Don't count on it lasting."

He smiled at her. "I've always believed in living for the moment."

So *did Yuudai*. "Well, it's late, so I'm going to head back home now."

"Do you need a ride there?"

"Nope, the cops dropped my rental car off outside of the hospital. All the best to Bryce – she seems like a nice lady."

Pembleton scrolled down through Spence's report of the events on the island. "According to my operative, you were not merely actively involved in maintaining their captivity, Miss Armstrong. You also tried to prolong it by thwarting the rescue effort. I could very probably add charges of attempted wounding with grievous intent too. You're facing an extensive prison sentence, and that's assuming that we don't decide to class your actions as treasonous."

Thirty-six hours in custody had weakened Armstrong's resolve considerably. She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve and sniffled before replying. "Please, I was only following the orders given to me by my supervisor!"

"That shan't matter during your sentencing. You spent seven months aiding and abetting the psychological torture of a British agent."

"But he told me that Spence worked for GETEC now! The island was supposed to be part of a research project into social conditioning. I had no reason to disbelieve that information."

"I suppose that stupidity and inherent sociopathic traits might fall under mental incapacity." Pembleton switched off her tablet and gestured to the uniformed prison officers by the door of the interrogation room. "Take Miss Armstrong back to her cell. I want her transferred post haste to our secure mental health unit at Bromley, for further assessment."

A degree of exposition was a useful tool in this job. The rumoured horrors at the non-existent Bromley unit were widely circulated. Evidently, Armstrong had heard about at least some of them. "No! Please, don't send me there! I'll talk, I'll tell you everything that I know, I promise, Lady Pembleton – just don't send me to Bromley!"

The spymistress sighed and retook her seat. "Very well then, I suppose that I can spare a little more of my time."

"Aunty Val, since you're not really dead, does that mean that we have to live with you now instead of with Cob and Aunty Ashley?"

Not for the first time, Spence wondered if they would ever be able to read Kathryn's mood correctly. "I expect so, yes, given that legally speaking I'm your only remaining blood relative who isn't in prison for multiple murder."

The girl pouted. "But I like my room here!"

"Well, it's hardly as though we're leaving immediately. My old flat was sold months ago."

Barnabas nodded. "Yes, we know. Cob said that he put the money into trust for us to go to university."

"Education is important." Spence supposed that this was a reasonable use of the funds, even though it did complicate their finding enough of a deposit for a new place to live. "Why don't we think about the sort of house that we need as a family? Do either of you want to live somewhere with a garden?"

Kathryn scowled. "How about just wanting to go on living somewhere without any stupid babies?"

"She didn't mean that, Aunty Val!"

"Yes I did!"

"No you didn't!"

"Stop that bloody bickering right now, the pair of you!" Their aunt groaned as the baby monitor crackled back into life once again. "Right – I'm going to go and settle them. You two stay here and have a browse of the estate agents online."

Barnabas glared at his twin. "Why'd you have to kick off again, Kathryn? You know we can't stay here forever anyhow!"

"That's not true! Cob likes having us here."

"Aunty Ashley doesn't though. At least, not since you put her best pair of shoes in the food waste bin!"

"I already told you, that wasn't me!" The girl scrambled up from the sofa and hurled the tablet at her sibling. "Why doesn't anyone believe me?"

"Well, it wasn't me either!"

"Maybe Cob did it then – maybe he thought they were horrid looking!"

"He wouldn't have let you get the blame though." The boy frowned. "Do you suppose it was a burglar?"

"Don't be stupid, Barnabas. What sort of a burglar leaves all of the valuables behind?"

"It was only a suggestion!"

Kathryn wandered out onto the penthouse's terrace and gazed wistfully at the river below. "I hope we can at least stay here in Battersea. If we don't move too far away, we might still be allowed to visit."

"Aunty Val's old flat was in Nine Elms Lane. That's not awfully far from here."

"I suppose not. Chelsea Bridge is much nicer than there was though."

"That's because Cob has more money than Aunty Val does." Her brother tapped at one of the listings. "Here, look at this one on Brynmaer Road – it's a proper house, and it's got lots of bedrooms!"

"But that's on the other side of the park! No, it's too far away. Find somewhere closer."

"Come back indoors and help me look then!"

"Son of a damned gun...!" Kennedy set her hot chocolate aside and stared balefully at the settings panel of her new apartment's media centre. "Why do I even need a virtual reality option on my damn television?"

According to the fellow from the Corps Liaison Office, the feature came as standard now for all

pre-furnished contemporary housing on Earth. In Kennedy's opinion, that was score one for Mars. At least on the Red Planet, people could watch the damn evening news without feeling as though they were taking part in it. "How in God's name do I deactivate this stupid thing?"

A life-sized hologram of the nation's favourite weatherman was presently tap dancing his way across a stylised map of North America. Presumably, it made more sense with the audio turned on, but that would just add to the general annoyance. At least for now, her unwanted guests were silent ones. "I wonder what the range is on that transmitter – wouldn't want to wake up and find the breakfast cereal mascot staring at me from the foot of the bed!"

With that in mind, watching horror films was definitely out. Score yet another point against settling permanently on Earth. To be fair, she did have a baby on board now. Maybe it was about time to give up on all things not family friendly. That seemed the responsible choice. It wouldn't be forever, after all. Just until her daughter was old enough to enjoy them with her. "I sure hope you grow up to be at least a little more techno savvy

than me, kiddo."

At six months along, her bump had been a hindrance in the recent altercation. Despite assurances from the doctors at New Jackson that the baby was fine, the Martian had still gone to her own obstetrician. Marine baby, Marine medic: it was simple logic, really, even if Miami VA attending physician Major Carla Berkeley *had* spent more time on the dressing down than on the examination. *Captain Mars or not, you're here on maternity leave, so no more unnecessary risk taking, Marine!*

The doorbell interrupted her reverie. "Just a minute, I'll be right there!"

She had ordered the pizza, but it wasn't the expected delivery person. Hull proffered the box with a smirk. "Should you really be eating this kind of crap in your condition, Captain Mars?"

"That advert promised me a reliable and fast delivery of my meal. It didn't mention any risk of visitation from former employers." She snatched her dinner away from him. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to make sure that you were living somewhere nice. It took me the better part of four hours to track you using the agreement for your

rental car."

"If that's a subtle hint for an invite, then you're out of luck. I ain't in the mood to entertain visitors."

He shifted his weight: edging forwards just enough to block the door from closing. "So – whose is it, or don't you know?"

"Get your ass the fuck out of my doorway, before I call the cops."

"Ah, come on. You worked for GETEC long enough to know that I can find out without your permission anyhow, Kennedy."

"Oh, I'm pretty damn sure that you've already gone right ahead and done that. It still doesn't mean that I have to play along."

"Is that a fact, huh?" The supervisor paused and stared past her for a moment. "Not to go off topic, but are you having some technical difficulties? Only your VR unit is giving off sparks."

"God damn that machine!" Kennedy dropped the pizza and hurried back indoors to grab the fire extinguisher. "Who came up with this lousy technology anyhow?"

Hull followed her into the apartment; retrieving the pizza and kicking the front door closed behind him. "Relax; it's probably just a faulty driver. I can

look at it if you want?"

"Hey!" The Martian woman glanced angrily over her shoulder at him as she finished putting out the fire. "What I *want* is for you to get out of here right now, mister! I wasn't kidding about calling the cops."

"Go ahead; you know where the phone is." He sat down on the couch and placed the pizza on the coffee table in front of him. "Is this pepperoni?"

"Is this how you say thank you?"

"I'm trying to be nice, but you're not exactly making it easy for me, Susan."

"Stop it!" She threw down the empty canister. "You don't get to talk to me as though you're him!"

"I say that I do, Susan." He patted the empty cushion next to him. "Come on over here and sit down. Let's talk about my clone."

"Shouldn't you be with Bryce?"

"What makes you think that I'm not? With modern RCS technology, a man can be very flexible with his time."

Kennedy blinked. "So you're an RCS?"

"Well, I figured that's what you were into. Was I wrong, Susan?"

"As it happens, yeah, you were." She drew her

plasma pistol and levelled it at his head. "Dead wrong, Mr Hull."

"Easy, Marine: a homicide isn't going to look very good on your record. Especially not if you want to retain custody of that baby...!"

The first shot killed the RCS outright; the second and third were just to clean up the remains. If the fourth one happened to take out the home entertainment centre, well that was a happy coincidence. The lettings agency could see about replacing it before the next tenant moved in. *There ain't no way in Hell that I'm having the damn thing reinstalled whilst I live here!*

Chapter Thirteen – All Wrapped Up

Hull peeled away the RCS piloting harness and stepped clear of the booth; smiling quietly at Kennedy's rebuff. *How about that, she finally broke free of that damned conditioning!*

It was after office hours in GETEC Miami, and by now, the building was virtually empty of personnel. Only the janitorial team was still present: taking advantage of the lull to decorate ahead of the upcoming holiday season. That unfortunate Thanksgiving incident with the mutated turkey appeared forgiven, if not entirely forgotten. *Aaron did a nice job handling the fallout. He's really earned his annual bonus.*

The young administrator had started hinting that he wanted to move beyond the role of PA again. Hull was running low on reasons to keep blocking him. Maybe steering him towards training as a

supervisor in his own right would be the best compromise. It would be nice to have a protégé to hand off to someday. *I certainly don't want to have to keep on cloning myself indefinitely!*

The elevator doors parted in front of him, and a trio of heavily armed men spilled out into the corridor. They had surrounded him before he could react. "On your knees, and keep quiet!"

Hull obeyed, wondering why it was that this time of year always seemed to bring out the worst in some people. *This is exactly why I prefer to avoid going to the office parties: all it takes is one asshole with a grudge to ruin the evening for everyone.*

A fourth figure emerged from the elevator: the cloned replacement for GETEC's obnoxious young CEO. The triumphant sneer on its face as one of the men secured Hull's wrists behind him suggested that something had gone badly awry with the AI. "Hello, Greg! Did you have fun running things whilst I was gone?"

"I don't know what you mean, Mr Howard." It was starting to look horribly less likely that this was merely a rogue AI. "Were you on vacation again? I hadn't noticed."

"Oh, Greg – always so dedicated to maintaining

your little cover stories! That's what I'm going to miss the most about you. You're a consummate professional, aren't you, buddy?"

"Well, one of us has to be...!"

The impossibly real Carson Howard wagged a finger at the man whose booted foot had just cracked at least one of their prisoner's ribs. "Hey now, be careful! I told you: I've got big plans for this guy."

"Sorry Sir."

"That's okay. So, Greg, I understand that you and Kellie are real good friends now. Well, we'll see if she still likes you so much after I'm done teaching her another lesson wearing *your* face! This time I'll do a *lot* more than just spank her."

"Dr Rosa's been through more than enough already." The supervisor strained against his cuffs. "If you push her too far, she'll snap. You don't want to jeopardise her research, do you?"

"I'm pretty sure that R&D has enough data by now to continue developing the field of FBT without her, Greg. Besides, that's the beauty of robots – if need be, I'll have her rebooted!"

"She's *not* a robot, damn it!"

Howard chuckled. "Why, sure she is, Greg! A

walking wonder of modern technology, all wrapped up in a damn fine pair of legs! I'm only surprised that you haven't gotten around to tapping that yet."

"Fuck you, Howard."

"Wait your turn, Greg! First, I'm going to fuck Kellie, then Bryce, and then that cute babysitter, the ex-celebrity college girl, whatever her name was again." He crouched and cupped Hull's face between his hands. "I'm going to take those ladies apart using your body. Next, I'll let you back into your own brain and watch while you try to pick up the pieces. *Then* I'll fuck you."

"And what makes you think that my first reaction won't just be to kill you?"

"Oh, we've got conditioning methods to prevent that kind of unwanted behaviour, Greg! You know that. Then again, maybe you *don't* remember everything just yet."

"What are you insinuating, Howard? For that matter, how are you even here? I thought you were dead."

The younger man kissed him before deigning to reply. "Aw, you mean that RCS that Kellie stabbed at your place? That wasn't me, Greg! It sure was

funny watching the two of you trying to cover for each other though! I take it all those mysterious flights to Thailand on my personal jet were connected to your little puppet show?"

"Yeah, you got me there. Flash clones don't tend to be very social creatures. I had to spend your money somehow." At least he could still keep Nightingale's survival hidden. *You're not getting your hands on them or their babies, you shit!* "Your accountant would have gotten suspicious otherwise."

"Well played, Greg. Still, what else could I expect from one of ANI's best deep cover operatives?"

Hull blinked. "What?"

"Well, will you look at this guy; he still doesn't remember!" Howard bounced to his feet and clapped. "You poor bastard: all of that preparation and training, and it still didn't save you! Damn, but our recruitment branch is *efficient!*"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

The CEO grinned. "ANI sent you in as their mole more than thirty years ago. See, they figured that you were unbreakable; that you had some kind of a genetic abnormality that precludes being brainwashed. I guess someone involved in training

you forgot to carry the one or something though, because here we are, aren't we, Greg?"

"Thirty-one years, six months, twelve days, fourteen minutes, and six seconds ago, to be precise." Senior Agent Volker's perfectly level tone cut smoothly through the revelations. "I must insist you surrender now, Mr Howard."

He raised his hand, signalling for his men not to open fire. "And just who might you be, sweetheart?"

"My apologies: I am Senior Agent Laine Volker – current head of operations for the ANI Miami field office."

Hull stared past the red-haired woman, wondering where in God's name her back up was. *Please tell me that you didn't come here alone?*

I am uncertain how my misleading you on this subject would be of help, Agent Hull.

Oh, so now you're okay about using your psionics whilst undertaking your federal duties?

This is the only logical means by which to conduct our discussion safely, Agent Hull.

Why are you calling me that? Wait – is Howard telling the truth? Am I a mole for ANI?

Yes.

You're saying that the past thirty-one and a half years were all lies. Why has no one contacted me sooner about this?

That is complicated.

You bastards forgot about me, didn't you?

...

Oh, God damn it, Volker...!

I am here now, Agent Hull.

Yeah – with no back up! Great work; how exactly do you plan on arresting them?

Howard had finally finished laughing at both ANI operatives. "Okay, this has been fun, but it's time to go! Take Greg and his new friend down to the Neurocybertronic Interfacing lab. She can watch us swop minds. I guess Kellie won't be the first one on my list after all!"

Volker shook her head. "It is most unfortunate that your men decided you were not paying them sufficiently, Mr Howard."

"Sir, what's going on?" The man who had kicked Hull tried and failed not to aim his gun at the CEO. His companions were already firing: their faces contorted with fear and confusion. "Oh my God, what's happening?"

"Merely that which inevitably happens

whenever there is discord amongst violent criminals." The Level 12 stepped carefully over the bodies and knelt to free her bemused colleague. "That is what the reports shall indicate on this matter. Are we agreed, Agent Hull?"

He nodded. "Absolutely, Senior Agent Volker – what a very *unfortunate* twist in this complicated situation."

"It's certainly worrisome." Leister peered again at the coldly worded letter that had arrived with the early morning post. "Whatever were they thinking: demanding that you put Kathryn and Barnabas in school immediately? Why, they're simply not ready for that yet! One always likes to think that those professionals responsible for the well-being of the next generation aren't so bloody stupid."

"That's genuinely *never* been my personal experience of Children's Services, old swan."

"Well, not to worry, darling. You're not alone this time, nor are you a runaway child. We'll soon clear the matter up between us."

"I'm scared, Cob." Spence curled in closer against his side. "What if we can't clear it up, and

they actually do turn up with permission to take all four of them away?"

He sighed and settled his left arm around the thin shoulders. "In that highly unlikely scenario, I like to hope that we'd manage to utilise non-lethal force only. Either way, I promise you that there's no Earthly power that shall ever divide our little nest."

"I'm sorry...!" His protégé hiccupped their way into actual sobbing. "Christ, I'm a bloody wreck, aren't I...? I oughtn't to lean on you so much. It can't be helping matters."

The older spy frowned. "Darling, whatever do you mean by that?"

"You and Ashley; I know she's feeling edged out already. I don't want to make things worse."

"Nonsense, my little chick – Ashley doesn't feel anything of the sort! She loves having you and the children here with us."

The non-gender shook their head. "No, Cob, she's sick and tired of it! She told me so just before she left for work today; whilst you were in the shower."

"I see. Well, I shall need to talk about that with her privately then. Don't give it another thought, darling."

"This is her home too, old swan."

"She shares my *bed*, not my damned mortgage! Perhaps it's time that I reminded her of that fact."

He was a surprisingly fierce old bird when his feathers were ruffled. Spence had almost forgotten the glint from his talons. The sudden reminder raised a thrill of relief and guilt in their gut. "I mean it, you know. I don't want to ruin what you two have together."

"Don't manage me, darling. I'm not a bloody field operative." The arm tightened then into a proper hug. "And you're not Housekeeping right now either! Edith shall have my hide if she reckons that I've infringed on your maternity leave, and rightly so too."

"I sense a sudden and unseemly abundance of metaphorical cotton wool in my immediate future." Spence squirmed half-heartedly against the embrace: thoroughly enjoying the reassuring lack of control. "Promise me that you shan't throw it under the train?"

"What, the wool?"

"No, the rest of it; with Ashley – you know, the stuff that matters."

"Oh dear, that settles it. I'm simply going to have

to continue to hug you mercilessly until you give up and stop meddling."

"Well, my niece and nephew may still be safely tucked up asleep in their beds but I can make no assurances that the babies shan't randomly interrupt us. They do like to waken early, old swan."

Leister kissed the top of the pale hair fondly. "Babies, children, and much adored family pets are *always* permitted to interrupt. So – have you heard from Craig yet?"

"No. He said he'd ring me once he'd sorted whatever it is that he went back to Dublin about." Spence wriggled down until their chin rested snugly on Leister's forearm; lacing their fingers around his wrist and elbow. "This is nice."

"I'm glad that you're roosting comfortably."

A soft thud emanated from the direction of Barnabas' room. Play ceased immediately. "And on that note, what shall we have for breakfast, old swan?"

"I'll pop the frying pan on, darling."

The eggs had halfway cooked by the time that the boy emerged. He shuffled down the open tread stairwell into the main sitting area, still wearing his pyjamas. "Aunty Val, Cob, I don't feel well...!"

Their post-partum body protesting at the too-soon exertion, Spence nonetheless caught him before he could hit the floor. "Barnabas – can you hear me, Barnabas? Cob, he's feverish!"

"I'll ring for an ambulance. Keep on trying to rouse him in the meantime."

The little terraced house in Ringsend was almost exactly as Campbell remembered it: with the same cracked yellow vase of faded silk lilies on the bare stone hearth, and every spare bit of wall covered with shelves filled with books. Heidi the currently tea making au pair was new, of course. She seemed very capable. Perhaps he should ask what agency had supplied her. *Spence could probably do with a bit of help with our two!*

His firstborn, the lengthily titled Seamus Aiden Malachi Tresweld-Campbell, crawled past him again, in dogged pursuit of the battered cleaning robot. The field operative smiled and crouched down to interact with the baby. "Hello, Seamus. How are you doing, son?"

The boy flumped back into a sitting position and gawped at him. "Gah...?"

"Gah indeed, Seamus." It was a fair enough

assessment of their lives. "I wonder when your Mum will be home."

Heidi re-emerged from the kitchen with the standard tray of Irish hospitality. "Sarah said to tell you that she is working late all this week. I've made up the spare room for you, Mr Campbell."

"Please, call me Craig; everyone does."

She beamed at him as they took their seats on the sofa. "It is good to have you here, Craig! Babies need their fathers too, and not just the mother loves."

"Thank you, Miss er...?"

"Hedturner, but to you it is just Heidi. Always using the first name with the family – jam?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"With your soda bread; do you like it, Craig?"

"Oh I see! Yes please, Heidi."

"Ah, you have the sugary tooth, like Sarah! She loves this jam best, so I make it especially."

"Are you here studying catering?"

"Yes; with the international scholarship at the Traditional Foods Institute." She paused to wipe Seamus' mouth. "The baby, he is drooling all the time at this age; not because of my talking of food!"

"If he's anything like me, then that might not be the case!" Campbell decided that another piece of toasted soda was entirely reasonable.

"A healthy appetite is good though, Craig. Especially for the physical work – you are with the armed services, yes?"

"I suppose you might call it that."

"Don't worry: Sarah has told me the rules. We are not to mention the job too much." The girl sighed. "The anger still towards the English and the soldiers here, it is very sad...!"

"Oh, Heidi, don't cry!" He patted her shoulder consolingly, before realising his mistake. "Sorry, I've got flour and jam all over your cardigan!"

It occurred to him then that between the delays to his plane journey and all this fuss, he had completely forgotten to switch his phone back on. *I must be sure to do that soon, in case anyone needs to reach me.*

Chapter Fourteen – More Of A Mule

“So how are things at National?” Whitby looked up from his sandwiches. “Is your new job everything that you'd hoped?”

Jenkins nodded happily. “It's so nice to finally work somewhere that doesn't actively seek to imprison their staff!”

“Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I do fantasise about having a special room to store our field operatives in between ops. Anyhow, I wanted to pick your brain about something. Armstrong's statement mentions the late Mr Vetch bragging about having tested a prototype micro drone whilst he was stationed at GETEC Preston.”

“You mean near the safe house?”

“Yes, and more importantly the date lines up with the time that you went a bit funny. I suspect we've found who was behind it.”

The younger technician shuddered. “So, it was

GETEC again! Do you know how to detect them now, or block them?"

"I took the liberty of hacking their Preston facility's main server to see what other information I could glean. It appears that GETEC originally developed this technology in Prague. Of course, we both know what became of everyone there. Still, it got me thinking: if Professor Foncette used a micro drone to poison Paul, then that could account for what happened to all the electronics in his apartment."

"That does make sense, except that Niall wasn't involved with those kinds of research. He and poor Anya both specialised in genetic based biochemical studies."

Whitby shrugged and took a sip of his coffee. "No, I know what his field was, but what if he had help from someone else; an accomplice, say."

"Niall didn't have very many friends, at least not to my knowledge. That's why he was so obsessed with Anya. She was one of the few people that bothered to spend any time with him outside of work."

"And look where *that* kindness got her. So there's no one else that you can think of?"

"Sorry, no, but that doesn't mean you're wrong. It's a shame that all of the records for Prague were purged after the event. There's no way to identify whoever invented the drones."

"Well, on the bright side, they shan't ever make anything else. I might still have another dig and see whether GETEC Preston has anything on file about them."

"Craig, I don't know why you aren't answering your phone, but at this point the only acceptable excuses are that you're dead or incapacitated!" Spence glanced yet again at the clock on the living room wall. "Barnabas is in surgery at New Thames Central Children's Medical right now; his appendix ruptured this morning. Cob went with him in the ambulance so that I could stay with Kathryn and the babies. We're waiting for word on how things are progressing. Ring me when you get this message."

Their niece sat curled up on the living room sofa, staring vacantly at the inactive television. "He's going to die, isn't he, Aunty Val?"

"What?"

"Barnabas. The hospital; it's where you go to die."

That's what Nana and Granddad said happened to Mummy."

Spence scowled and strode over to sit beside the girl. "Kathryn, listen to me. Your grandparents lied to you about that. Hospitals take care of people who are sick or injured. Yes, *sometimes* those people can't be helped, and they might die, but certainly not all the time. Barnabas stands a very good chance – he's young and healthy, and the doctors shall do everything they can for him."

"What if it isn't enough though?" Kathryn's pale blue eyes were already red rimmed with grief. "Aunty Val, what if he *does* die? Would he really have to be properly dead, forever? or would he just be missing? You know – like you and the babies were?"

The non-gender laughed hollowly. "I've really let you down, haven't I, Kathryn? I'm sorry."

"Sorry for not being dead?"

"No, not that part, at least. I'm just starting to wonder whether I'm doing a very good job looking after you and your brother."

Kathryn frowned pensively. "Well, I suppose that I *would* much rather live with Cob! But Barnabas likes you, Aunty Val."

"I appreciate your honesty. I'm a tad surprised that you don't want to live with Craig."

"He doesn't like us anymore, because we were fighting and that's how you got taken away. That's why he never visited: because we ruined everything!"

"That's not it, Kathryn." Spence hesitated and then held out their arms. "Do you want a hug?"

"Not particularly. Hugs are for people that are weak and wrong in their thinking, like Mummy and Dr Finch."

"Your grandparents taught you that bloody rule, didn't they?"

"Them and Daddy, yes. I remember all my lessons, honestly, I do, Aunty Val! I'm a good girl. I'm strong, like Craig is, so he shan't be cross at me forever, shall he?"

"He's not cross at you at all, and I'll prove that the next time that I speak to him."

"Do you promise?"

"Cross my heart and stab someone else if I don't keep my word."

The girl edged a little bit closer. "You know all the rules too then?"

"Yes. Most of them are utterly ridiculous, and the

rest aren't fit to be lived down to."

"Aunty Val!" The child's eyes widened almost to saucers. "You can't say things like that; you'll get put in the cellar with the rats and the spiders!"

Spence raised an eyebrow. "Do you see a cellar here, Kathryn? Moreover, do you really think that I'm afraid of rats or spiders?"

"No...?"

"Good. Now – let's tidy up the breakfast things, and then we can see about making a nice get well soon card for Barnabas."

Hull stared out the windscreen at the dozens of ANI vehicles streaming into the darkening parking lot around them. By now, every facility in the United States was facing the same, and by tomorrow, the fallout would be global. It was the end of an era for everyone connected to GETEC. "So what happens next, Senior Agent Volker?" He picked yet another brittle segment off the rim of the now empty plastifoam coffee cup he was holding. "For the rest of the personnel, I mean. Actually, for me too – where exactly does this leave all of us?"

Anyone else might have granted him a little sympathy. "You shall return with me to the Miami

field office and submit to ANI for post operation debriefing and rehabilitation. Our assessors shall consider the others on a case-by-case basis. It is likely to take some time to process the data gathered by your transponder across the past thirty-one and a half years."

He smiled ruefully. "So *that's* what the extra component was! Kellie and I were concerned that it was a mind control device."

"An understandable theorem; given the circumstances. However, no, it was merely the most proficient means of broadcasting back to us from within GETEC without detection. Mr Howard's activities were based around the standard chips."

"So, I was more of a mule than a mole, huh? Good play, all things considered – no risk of my blabbing to the enemy if I don't know what's really going on."

"It is my understanding that you were deemed as fully loyal to ANI. The concern was with GETEC's methods of conditioning, not with you, Agent Hull."

"That concern proved pretty valid, didn't it?"

"Unfortunately, yes, it did."

The deep cover agent closed his fist abruptly around what was left of the cup. "Yeah well, I'm still

hurt that I was forgotten about!"

"That is the complicated part." Volker tapped at the screen of her tablet. "By necessity, your mission was beyond the clearance level of most of ANI's operatives. Only a handful of people ever knew the truth."

"So?"

"The precise term used by ANI for this sort of mission is Citizenship Approved. It was essentially a permanent assignment. As long as your transponder continued to broadcast, no attempt at contact or extraction was permitted."

"ANI was waiting for the power cell to fail?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes: the device was powered by your own bioelectrical field. When you removed it, the ANI computer gathering the data automatically issued an alert. At first, you were presumed deceased, until the incident with Pierre Gophy. It took some time to arrange an investigation, let alone an extraction."

Hull shook his head. "I'm kind of surprised that ANI approved that at all. Surely it would've been easier to disavow me than to bother rescuing me?"

"What makes you suppose that I had official approval for my course of action?"

"Well, for one thing, you don't seem the type not to follow procedure. No offence meant."

"None was taken, Agent Hull." A faint hint of emotion showed at the corners of Volker's eyes and mouth, but only for an instant. "My interview with you regarding your fiancée's abduction was the deciding factor in my actions."

"You liked what you saw in my brain?"

"No. Nevertheless, your son has a strong emotional connection to you. I place great importance on fostering and maintaining positive familial structures for young psionics."

"Wait, Fisher?" His ruined coffee cup rattled quietly against the floor of the hover car. "My son is a psionic?"

"Yes; most likely inherited from you. At the time of your assignment, there was still very little understanding of such capabilities. The supposed genetic abnormality that Mr Howard told you ANI had detected is in fact a latent psionic node."

"Someone's feeling better today." Spence glanced up from the sofa towards where Barnabas was happily pacing the length of the penthouse terrace. Five days post appendectomy, the boy

was under strict instructions to remain as active as was comfortable for him. "He's going to wear out the decking at this rate, old swan!"

"Nonsense, darling: why, he's only doing what the doctors told him to do."

"Are you sure that you don't mind us staying here until he's fully recovered? I mean it *could* still be as far off as the end of February."

"There's plenty of room for everyone, Nightingale. Especially now that Ashley has found a flat of her own."

"I don't feel particularly good about that decision, Cob. She was in absolute bits about it when she left yesterday."

Leister scowled. "Well, I'm certainly not prepared to have her living here any longer – not after how damnably two faced she's been about you and the children!"

The afternoon news interrupted their debate. Spence scrambled up at the initial announcement. "Bloody Hell – GETEC is being officially dismantled under the International Interests Act!" A steady montage of solemn faced experts and eager journalists filled the screen, as confirmation rolled in from around the world. "I can't believe it! What the

devil did ANI manage to do that none of the rest of us did?"

"One thing is certain: it must have been Intelligence related, given how cagey they're being about the details."

"Pembleton shan't know whether to spit feathers or break open the champagne."

Kathryn appeared at the top of the stairs. "Aunty Val, the babies have woken up again!"

"Thank you, Kathryn, I'll be right up." The non-gender paused and looked at their mentor. "Cob, with all of this going on, you *must* check on Ashley. Promise me that you'll at least ring and talk to her?"

"Oh, very well, darling." Leister sighed and went in search of his keys. "I'll pop round now and see how she's doing."

Campbell stared in mute horror at the number of missed calls and unanswered messages on his phone. From the looks of it, Spence and the others had given up trying to reach him by the Friday after his arrival in Dublin. Either that or his phone's memory had simply run out. *They'll never believe me when I tell them that I couldn't get any signal!*

He scarcely believed it himself. Still, it had

happened. According to Sarah, the issue was due to poor network coverage. Apparently, that was a common problem in Ireland, to the extent that important calls were invariably placed using landlines, or at a pinch, satellite phones. *It's certainly lucky that her messages to Fergus made it through. But then again, Sarah always did make her own luck.*

The events of the May operation felt like someone else's life to him now. He couldn't imagine ever returning to that line of work. There were four very important reasons to change career – six, if Kathryn and Barnabas would still speak to him. Either way, Campbell had finished risking life and limb for other people's secrets. *I suppose Aunt Edith shall disown me for that, if she hasn't already. Dad will too, more than likely.*

He had fewer savings now than he had had the last time that he considered retirement. From the looks of things so far, the divorce would reduce them yet further. Sarah wasn't willing to give him up, so there would be years of litigation before the marriage could be officially dissolved. Then there was the child support for Seamus, and that *definitely* needed backdating, despite all of Sarah's

objections. *He's my son too! I don't understand why she doesn't want to let me help to provide for him.*

She had threatened to refuse access. That hurt, but ultimately Campbell wouldn't push. What he was legally entitled to and what was fair to his estranged wife weren't particularly equivalent things. He only hoped they could find some middle ground, for Seamus' sake. From memory, growing up largely fatherless wasn't the end of the world, but it was pretty rotten to be the child whose parents didn't speak to one another. *It's strange how you remember the silences more than the rows.*

At least he had signal now; one of many advantages that his hotel suite had over Sarah's spare room. Moreover, she *had* thrown him out. That was the largest issue, really. How were they supposed to work things out amicably if she wouldn't engage with him? *No bloody wonder solicitors have so much work available to them, if people refuse even to try!*

Chapter Fifteen – That Old Knack

The little studio flat in Camden was not at all as Leister recalled it, and nor was Jenkins. Across the intervening twenty-four hours, both had somehow acquired a vulgar amount of cheap leather and garish paint. His erstwhile sub was also strung out – on alcohol alone or more remained to be confirmed.

The reek of the former substance preceded her out the front door when she answered his knock. “Yeah...? Wha' do ya' wan...?”

He blinked, and then strode past her: employing that old knack of breathing without smelling. “What the deuce has gone on here?”

“Hey...! Ya' can' jus' come in like tha...!” Jenkins stumbled after him: halfway giggling and halfway not. “She broke up with ya', or maybe – maybe it wa' the other way roun...?”

“I'm sorry, darling – could you elaborate on that

last bit for me?"

"Ashleee...! She ain' goin' ou' wit' ya' anymore...!"

Leister nodded affably. "I see."

"Good, 'cos she ain' even here...! She's gone away, ya' kno...?"

Oh, this is bad! "And who might you be?"

His host tittered. "Ma' name's Brooke...!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Brooke. What a pretty young lady you are."

"Aw, tha's nice of ya'...! An' after ever'thin' tha' ah did to break ya' an' her up...!"

"I'm sure that you did it out of love, my dear. Besides, you're so much more interesting a person, aren't you?"

She nodded, drooling a little, and toying lazily with the end of his tie. "So many people don' see tha' abou' meee...!"

"Well, I can *definitely* see it, Brooke. In fact, I'd rather like to see a little more of it. Could you turn around for me? Good girl, that's right: just like *that*...!"

The young woman, whoever she was or believed herself to be, crumpled under the nerve pinch. Leister sighed. Paul was going to be even less

happy with him now. "I'd best get you to medical and see whether it's possible to discover what's really going on."

Be discreet, they said! Don't let anyone know what you do for a bloody living, they said! Campbell ducked behind the ornate marble bulk of the Macready Arms' front desk. The mirror on the wall behind it splintered under a staccato of high velocity rounds. *I've got to love how no one mentioned the possibility of there being an all out war between a pair of restaurateurs!*

People were screaming and dying all around him, in equal measure. The bodies of staff, guests, and a few but nowhere near enough of the attackers lay strewn about the lobby. So far, the hotel's security had managed to keep the carnage contained to that area. With any luck, the Gardaí were already en route. He sincerely doubted that he had been alone in phoning them. God alone knew how they would handle this nightmare. *Do rival caterers with access to semi-automatic weapons count as terrorists, or would it just be civil unrest?*

There was another hotel guest sharing his hiding

place. From the look of her, she had no prior experience of gun related violence. He offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Craig Campbell, how do you do?"

The woman whimpered and made herself even smaller in response. Her long woollen coat shifted as she moved, and Campbell glimpsed a tiny, bulbous headed little dog cowering in her arms. It stared back at him through a pair of huge, bulging eyes: ears pinned flat to its skull. The source of the small, warmish puddle that he knelt in was suddenly clear.

One of the shooters stepped into view at the side of the desk. Campbell took the fellow's gun and broke his neck in a single instinctual movement. The woman with the dog gasped, and clutched her pet. "Oh...!"

"Don't worry, ma'am; I'm positive help's on the way by now!" He finished readying the weapon and nodded politely. "Just excuse me for a few minutes, please!"

The enemy were, as Spence would describe it, woefully unprepared for what then erupted from behind the desk. Employed on the basis that they would face civilians, or at the most a handful of private security types, they reacted too slowly. An

opponent who ignored the bullets in his shoulder and upper thigh to continue with his charge was beyond their scope. That same opponent in close combat could only ever result in one outcome.

Silence covered the wake of the combat. Discarding the now empty gun, Campbell sat down on the fourth step up from the bottom of the main stairwell to examine his injuries. *None of these should need an actual doctor. I'll slip away now before it's too late to manage it.*

"I can't begin to apologise enough, Paul. I should never have told her to move out."

"Well whatever else does happen, one thing is bloody certain: she shan't ever move back in with you!" Benedict was too worried about his daughter to be charitable. "Just look at her, for God's sake! She adored you, Leister – practically worshipped the ground you walked on! Look at what your rejection did to her!"

The older man sighed. "Paul, as sorry as I am, I don't think that it's quite that simple! You didn't hear what she said; how she said it. The phrasing, the intonation – even given the state she was in, it wasn't Ashley. It was definitely someone else."

"So, you think it's a repeat of the incident in the safe house?"

"I don't see any other answer. Besides, if someone has been controlling her using that damned micro drone technology, then it explains the duplicity. All of the shifts in behaviour towards Spence and the children – Ashley denied having any knowledge of them occurring! That makes perfect sense now, given how her memory was affected last time."

Benedict shook his head. "And what if it isn't that? What if Ashley has suffered a mental breakdown or if the FBT is failing?"

"If there had been anything there to spot in that regard, it would have flagged up during NIT's recruitment procedures, darling. Whatever is doing this can't be long term or inherent. And that only leaves the micro drones."

"Cob *might* be right, honey." Cerise finally finished texting bedtime instructions to the babysitter and slipped her arm around Benedict's waist. "I mean, think about that weird prank. Sure, *someone* put those shoes in the trash, but I don't buy it having been Kathryn or Barnabas. If those two had wanted to get back at Ashley, they'd be a

damn sight more direct about it!"

"Guys, don't worry: the doctors will figure it out either way." Tanya nodded towards the approaching senior medic. "Is there any news yet, Dr Knock?"

The man cast a wary eye over all those present in the visitor's room before replying. "Well, she's stable, and we've managed to prevent any permanent damage to her organs. It's going to take some time for the toxins to disperse fully. I recommend that we keep her here at Headquarters for observation for at least seventy-two hours."

"That's fine by me, doctor." Benedict reached carefully for the offered chart. "Do you have any idea of what triggered this episode?"

"Actually, yes, but it's very bad." Knock edged backwards slightly before continuing. "The neurological analysis is back...!"

"I knew it!" Leister sprang to his feet. "It was another of those bloody micro drones!"

"Cob, honey, take it down a notch; you're freaking the guy out." The freelancer smiled apologetically at Knock. "You were saying, doc'?"

"The neurological analysis proves beyond any

question that Dr Jenkins has been the target of a sustained psionic intrusion. To judge by the event patterning, the attacker was already familiar with her mind. That means that it's extremely unlikely that this was a one-off intrusion. In my expert opinion, whoever they are, they've done this to her before."

Hull gazed fondly around the dining table at the faces of his guests, and wondered yet again how he could ever hope to keep them all safe during this witch-hunt. To her credit, Volker had permitted him limited contact with other local GETEC personnel during his initial debriefing and rehabilitation. That small act of compassion had enabled him to gather those whom he considered *his*, under the pretext of ensuring that his family had others to support them in his absence.

Kellie, Russell, Aaron, and David: it was a pittance against the overall numbers of staff, but Volker's generosity had limits. Besides, he and Bryce only had so much space to house people. Adding Kassie as a live-in au pair had taken them to maximum hosting capacity. *I stashed Howard's jet at a non-GETEC owned airfield. Maybe we should*

consider using it to relocate to the island with Alice and Nightingale.

He wondered again how the babies were doing. By now, they were eleven days old. It was hard to fathom that things could change so damn much in under a fortnight! Although, in hindsight, the medical team out on the space station *had* needed less than half that time to undo the crude genetic tampering found during their examination of the non-gender. It seemed that someone had put considerable effort into rendering them infertile, and well before puberty too. *What kind of monster does that to a child?*

Bryce smiled at him from the opposite seat. "Greg, honey, can you pass the mashed potatoes please?"

"Sure, baby."

It would all work out somehow: things always did. He would go back to ANI, and ultimately GETEC was too important to the general world economy to risk eliminating it. Those at the top of the food chain understood that, even if the zealots beneath them didn't. There were already rumblings coming from various military quarters over the validity of the petition granted by the International Interests Act.

Sure, things would change, but maybe that wasn't so bad. A little change could be healthy. Nothing in nature stopped evolving without regretting it. *Just look at the damn dinosaurs.*

"Still nothing from Craig, honey?" Cerise handed Spence their tea with a cluck of sympathy. "Look – I know everyone else is busy at the moment, so if you want me to head on over to Ireland and kick his ass for you, just say the word."

"Don't tempt me, Ms Aldermere."

The freelancer shrugged. "He'd deserve it!"

"I hope you're right about that." Spence gestured at the muted television. "There was an incident yesterday in Dublin. A shooting at a hotel; no one's claimed responsibility yet, but according to survivors a dark-haired man with an English accent was the one who stopped it."

"So, you reckon he's too busy playing hero to pick up his phone?"

"If it was him, then he took at least one bullet, and very probably more. Craig hates hospitals – I'm concerned that he might be bleeding out somewhere alone, or worse...!"

The doorbell shrilled insistently: as if someone

were leaning on it instead of merely pressing once. Spence growled and headed upstairs to tend to their now wailing infants. Cerise set down her mug and hurried towards the front hall of Leister's penthouse. "Okay, okay! I'm coming!"

Campbell had obviously slept in his clothes, if he'd bothered to sleep at all. He limped past her with a vague nod of recognition, and sank to his knees on the hall rug. "Didn't have signal...then my phone got shot...!"

"Jesus, Craig, you have got to start being more careful, baby!" She shut the door and knelt beside him. "Okay, now tell me: where *don't* it hurt like a bitch?"

"That's a short list...!"

"I'm going to guess that Spence was right about it being you at that hotel. Let me get a look at your injuries, you damn fool."

He winced as she peeled his heavy black pea coat open. "Careful...! Mind out that you don't wake him."

"Oh my Lord...!" Cerise scrambled back to her feet and ran to the base of the stairs. "Spence, you need to get down here! Craig's turned up, and uh...well...he's brought company!"

Jamal-Kristof appeared instead. "Momma, Spence says can it wait until the babies are settled again?"

"Little man, tell Aunty Spence that it's urgent. Besides, I'm sure that Kathryn and Barnabas won't mind helping out with their little cousins."

"Okay, Momma."

"Good boy. You make sure to stay up there with them too."

The freelancer stood by, gnawing anxiously at her knuckle until Spence arrived. "What's wrong?"

"I really think you'd better come and take a look for yourself, honey."

Campbell was sitting up a little more steadily now. He smiled ruefully as they entered the hall. "Sorry I missed all your phone calls, canary...!"

Spence froze. "Craig, what have you *done*?"

"Oh, sorry – this is Sam...!" The injured spy winced and held up the sleeping baby. "It's short for Seamus Aiden Malachi. He's my son."

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.