

Captain Mars

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Four

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ISBN-13: 978-1523674978
ISBN-10: 1523674970

Published by Upatree Press August 2016

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CAPTAIN MARS

In the direct sequel to *Dog Dark Lamps*, things have gotten horribly complicated for socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence. On the far side of the Atlantic, GETEC Supervisor Greg Hull is either losing his mind or finding it. His reluctant colleague Kellie Rosa finds herself caught in the middle either way.

Elsewhere, after one too many heroic actions, by the book Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy struggles to convince the media that she isn't a superhero. Suddenly, everyone wants to put her in the spotlight...

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Chapter One – As One Intends

“So, what exactly was going on in that conservatory?” Thomas Campbell was disinclined to be patient with the non-gender. “Be honest! Are you screwing around behind my son's back?”

Nightingale Spence raised a pale eyebrow at the retiree. “You're not an especially balanced individual, are you?”

“That's broadly what the evaluator said on my retirement papers. Still, the job has that effect. Now let's get back to you, my dear - why were you cuddling up with that prick Moxton?”

“I don't *cuddle*. You misread the situation.”

“Are you suggesting that it was all his idea?”

“I'm *telling* you to mind your own business.”

“In other words you were fully on board with him groping you! Fuck me; Craig knows how to pick them!”

"There was no groping, cuddling, or screwing around occurring within the conservatory, Mr Campbell. Furthermore, what does knowing how to pick *them* mean?"

The veteran operative smirked. "Don't tell me that you're jealous?"

"Jealous is most assuredly a far more rational emotional state than what I'm repressing right now."

"Huh. You really do have feelings for my lad. I'll admit, that's reassuring. He tends to find himself in one-way exchanges of commitment."

"Just how many of these exchanges have there been?"

"He's an adult; I didn't bother keeping count for him!" Thomas shrugged. "You know, I've heard that *healthy* couples talk about this sort of thing before getting seriously involved with one another. Maybe you and Craig should try that - once he gets back from wherever the fuck he's pissed off to this bloody time."

"Pembleton called; she needed to video conference with him." Spence fidgeted: the chairs in the relentlessly cheerful looking waiting room weren't especially comfortable. "He promised to

see me afterwards. Why are you even here?"

"My son seemed to think that you'd appreciate the company."

"Well, I don't. Anyhow, there are plenty of medical staff available to attend to me."

"What's supposed to be wrong with you? Are you infectious?"

"Craig's just being over-protective."

Their companion nodded and pulled out a battered old photograph from his inside coat pocket. "He gets that from Eunice." He tapped the faded image with his thumb. "This is her, his mum – I took this picture nearly forty years ago: back before we had Craig. She'd have wrapped the whole bloody world up in cotton wool if she'd had the chance!"

The woman laughed back at Spence from her portrait. Her long dark hair streamed in the same breeze that had been rippling the sail behind her. "Is she still alive?"

"For reference: most people would have remarked on how pretty she is. That's considered *normal*, my dear."

The non-gender looked away: their light blue eyes fixing on the holographic display unit exhorting

mothers to avoid alcohol during pregnancy. "It's just that Craig never talks about her. Not that he mentioned you either, so perhaps it's insignificant."

"You're the only one of his lovers that's ever stood up to me, you know. It's both refreshing and fucking bloody *annoying*."

"Well, they do say that one should always attempt to start as one intends to go on, Mr Campbell."

Pluto remained better known for its methane farming and extreme winter sports than for its spiritualism. Nevertheless, the monastery at the lip of Meng-p'o had won sufficient interest amongst tourists to warrant its inclusion in the main travel guides. None of these esteemed publications made any mention of the SCO cloning vats so carefully tended by the geneticists turned monks. Presumably, breeding and training killers for hire was a very niche industry. Given the questionable legalities, it certainly wasn't one that many people encouraged their offspring to go into.

Right now, Martian Marine Corps Susan Kennedy was counting on the inhabitants preferring to exist below the radar. She sat back a little in her chair

and smiled politely at the woman sitting opposite her. "Look, I don't want to be here, Doctor Lethe. My Marines don't want to be here. You and your friends ain't keen on us staying, either. So why can't we just can the crap and identify the contractor for the SCOs who attacked Mars?"

Aged only thirty-six, Helen Lethe was both the official face of the monastery and its youngest inhabitant. Her pale grey eyes narrowed to slits as she replied. "Our customers pay highly to ensure that their privacy is maintained, Captain Kennedy. It's regrettable that someone misused those SCOs, but really – how can you prove that they weren't stolen from the original purchaser?"

Kennedy scoffed. "Oh, come on! Seriously: you want to postulate that an unknown third party stole the SCOs in question, thereby rendering your client as the victim?"

"I believe that to be more than probable as an explanation for this sorry turn of events." Lethe smiled back at her guest. It wouldn't have looked out of place in a reptile house at feeding time. "Now, since that's everything, would you care to make a donation to the monastery before leaving?"

The Marine's voice was cool as she replied. "No, I wouldn't, and we ain't leaving either. Maybe you should think harder about probable explanations."

Lethe sneered. "I don't advise threatening us, Captain. You only have five other Marines in your little ship to back you up. My fellow scientists and I have enough SCOs to make a battalion."

Kennedy leaned forward. "That's cute, but my money is on my pilot blowing the shit out of the habitat dome surrounding this place. He's a big fan of doing what seems necessary, and that gunship is *really* well armed."

Lethe spluttered. "But – but you'd die too!"

"Hey, I knew the risks when I signed up, doctor." Kennedy shrugged. "The colonists on Mars were *civilians*. That's a whole other ballgame."

Lethe hissed through her teeth and pulled a leather-backed book from the desk drawer beside her. "I'll take a look through our records, Captain."

It was Kennedy's turn to smile. "I'm real glad we were able to have this little chat. It's nice when people can discuss their problems rationally."

"I'm sorry, Cob."

Maurice Jacob Leister sat forward in his chair

and ran his hand over the young biochemical technician's tangle of mousy coloured hair. "It wasn't your fault, Ashley. Everyone understands that – even Quincy."

Jenkins tried her best to believe him. "I know, but you and Mr Dobos could have *died*. Even with what Dr Whitby uncovered about the micro drone, I don't think that I could have forgiven myself for that."

"Me neither, darling: for a start I should have been far more aware of my surroundings! Quincy can put himself on the exceptionally small list of opponents ever to have gotten the drop on me." He smiled at her. "And between us, young Oliver really does need to brush up on his medical skills. It concerns me that he didn't recognise my symptoms."

"To be fair, he's a field operative rather than any sort of a medical technician. It stands to reason that he fell for Quincy's supposed assessment."

"Well, I certainly hope that from now on he'll think to check for physical signs of electrocution."

She leant into the caress. "I think it's nice how he trusts Quincy. It would be sad to see them lose that."

"Even if it means that I end up misdiagnosed, darling?"

"It was a very temporary misdiagnosis, Cob."

Leister nodded affably; secretly delighted that she was feeling confident enough to voice her own opinions. "I expect that you're right: I'm just a tad grumpy at having let you down."

"I don't feel let down. I feel...cared for."

"I'm very glad of that, darling."

The mysterious client's name was Cyril Garfield, and he was a mercenary. Kennedy found him in one of the innumerable dive bars that choked the streets of Mars' primary settlement. A tall, thin man with even more survival instinct than he had scar tissue, Garfield was halfway out the back door by the time that she walked in the front. He might even have gotten clear if there hadn't been a pair of Marines waiting at either end of the alleyway.

As it was, the subsequent interrogation proved informative. The mercenary rolled within minutes: he had been a broker for a third party based on Earth. They hadn't paid him enough to stay quiet, and Kennedy returned to Deimos Base confident that she was now in a position to bring the person who

was really behind the recent massacre to justice.

General Gavin Palmer-Hewitt dispelled that assumption less than forty-five seconds into their video conference. His scarred face wrinkled into an even deeper scowl above the metal structure that replaced his original jaw. "Lord Lackey is off limits, Marine. He's also dead, so do us all a favour and forget what you know about his connection with the Martian event."

Kennedy nodded. "Understood, Sir, but do I at least get a hint as to why we ain't closing this thing off properly?"

Her superior officer grunted. "Horatio Lackey had too much old money for anyone above my pay grade to have wanted him bothered. Unofficially, if British Intelligence haven't been fifteen miles ahead of us this entire time then I'll eat that natty old ball cap that Woods is sporting."

"So, it's just over, Sir?"

"Affirmed, Marine: draw a line; see about arranging some shore leave for everyone up there. Fuck knows that it's been well earned."

The staff at Lancashire Century had provided Spence with gentle congratulations on the positive

outcome of the blood test, an FIL/2 application form and an appointment for a mandatory first trimester scan in two weeks' time to confirm dates. Upon their stunned return to the waiting room, Thomas had recognised the folder containing the documentation instantly. He had shouted a fair bit, but seemed happy.

Spence was still trying to fathom it. *I can't be pregnant – it's impossible!*

Thomas grumbled at his phone on the way up in the lift to find the others. "Stupid little sod never answers his phone!"

"We'll see him once we get to the recovery suite anyhow."

"I know that! I just wanted to tell him the good news ahead of arriving."

"It's not even your news to give!"

He smirked. "Ring him yourself then, why don't you?"

"Because GETEC stole my phone."

"Is that covered by your insurance?"

"In my experience, insurance is merely an expensive legal contract that thoroughly denies any and all reason to pay the policy holder any form of recompense."

"I'm beginning to understand why my lad is so taken with you. Just to be clear though, Craig is the father, isn't he?"

"Given that I don't even believe that I'm the mother, how exactly do you expect me to be confident regarding the rest of the parentage?"

"Wait...what?" The lift had already released them both and Spence was running before the retiree managed to formulate his response. "Damn it all – get back here!"

At the far end of the corridor, Oliver Dobos had just exited the recovery suite. He watched the non-gender sprint past him into the nearest set of toilets. "Andro seems a bit rattled today."

"They're insane and pregnant, possibly with my grandchild. Is Craig here yet?"

"Uh, yeah – third door on the right." Dobos pointed and stepped aside. "He's been fired."

"What the fuck do you mean fired?"

"From what he told us, Pembleton gave him a choice between remaining employed by British Intelligence and remaining involved with Housekeeping. It seems he picked the last one - probably a fucking good choice, given what you just announced."

"No it bloody isn't! He shan't qualify for the fucking Familial Increase Licence unless he can provide proof of employment!" Thomas stormed into Room 3 of the recovery suite in search of his son. "Craig, you stupid prick – what were you thinking?"

"Dad, for the last time, I don't care if you don't like Spence!" Campbell got to his feet. "I can guess why you're angry: the result came back as positive, didn't it?"

"What the fuck are you doing losing your job before the FIL is approved? Are you trying to ensure that my grandchild ends up terminated?"

"Of course I'm not! Pembleton's just blowing smoke; she'll understand once we tell her about the pregnancy."

Leister cleared his throat in a manner which was ever so slightly too polite. "Gentlemen – what's all this about a baby? And how *precisely* does it involve Nightingale?"

Chapter Two – Big Hearted Peas

Greg Hull's impromptu houseguest wasn't any happier this morning. The supervisor drew a mental line through sleep as a solution, and decided that it was time to push. "Dr Rosa, GETEC can't help employees who insist on wallowing in their problems."

The young woman simply curled into an even smaller ball beneath the sheets. "All I want is to go home, to London, but that's not an option!"

"It's good that you've accepted that."

"Are you really so bloody unfeeling? Can't you even try to understand what happened to me yesterday?"

At least she was sitting up in bed now. "Firstly, that was the day before yesterday: I figured you needed time to rest. Secondly, the man who raped you is very dead, and he suffered."

"Is...is that true?"

"Yes."

"I...I thought that when you said he wouldn't bother me again...well, I mean I just expected that he'd been arrested!"

"After what happened downtown during this year's Valentine's event, I don't have any faith in the local authorities where sexual offences are concerned."

"Am I supposed to feel better now?"

"I'll settle for you eating something, and agreeing to consider meeting with an independent therapist once you feel up to it."

Kellie Rosa couldn't quite align the man in front of her with the person who had forced her to join GETEC. "I don't understand; how can you be the one that tries to fix this for me? Why do you even care?"

"Like I said, we're on a clock with this mess. Either I help you to be ready to go back to work in time or this gets handed off to the psych department and they...do what they do."

The technician shook her head. "That's not what I meant. Just look at everything that you put Dr Jenkins through too – you're *not* the sort of man who cares if people are hurt!"

"I'm sorry, but did we talk about this before? It feels oddly familiar." Hull frowned as Rosa cringed backwards. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Please stop toying with me, Mr Hull – we both know what happened last time!"

"So we *have* discussed this already?"

"It was only three nights ago! You can't expect me to believe that you already don't *remember*?"

He held up his hands: palms facing her, the fingers spread like some vague attempt at mimicking a kitten pouncing. "I swear it on jazz hands – whatever happened, whatever we said to one another, I don't remember it."

"But...but you know that it's familiar?"

"Yeah; like *déjà vu*, or something. Is there any chance of you filling in the blanks for me?"

Rosa folded her arms and glared at the supervisor. "Very well – what *do* you remember?"

"You came over to my place to visit – I think I called you? It was late at night."

"Yes; almost midnight. You insisted that I had to wear a dress and high heeled shoes."

He closed his eyes and thought back, pushing against the mental fog. "I'd picked up a stray at a nightclub...a teenager; playing way out of her

depth. I didn't want her to get hurt."

"I don't know anything about that – wait, was she here when I came over?"

"She was sleeping off whatever was in her system. I couldn't leave her at that place."

"So you were *protecting* her?"

"Do you really think that I'd take advantage of someone whilst they were out of their head?"

"Well, given what I thought that I knew about you, yes! I mean, you pinned me down and *spanked* me!"

Hull opened his eyes and stared at the technician. "I did *what*?"

"You put me over your knee on the sofa. I begged you to stop, and you refused – it was hideous!"

He backed away from the bed. "I don't remember any of that. I know that I stood you up against the wall downstairs and left you there until your muscles started to cramp enough that you begged me to let you sit down. After that, I think we talked about the FBT process."

"Yes, that's right. You thought that GETEC would be able to help me come to terms with having invented it. I told you what I thought of how you'd

treated Ashley Jenkins, and you reacted by humiliating me!"

"There's no way that happened...did it?"

"Oh my God – you really *don't* remember?"

"I don't think that I want to continue this conversation. My head...really hurts...!"

Rosa scrambled to her feet and hurried after him as he stumbled into the hallway. "Wait – sit down. I'll fetch the medical kit."

He slumped down against the wall. "I guess maybe FBT isn't so great, huh? It has to be that: clearly I've swapped having a faulty heart for a faulty brain!"

"We don't know that yet. Sit up and let me check your vitals."

"Am I going to die?"

"I don't know yet."

The laughter that bubbled up was verging on maniacal. "You're *really* bad at this whole bedside manner thing...!"

She slapped him. It was difficult to judge who was the more startled by that. "Pull yourself together, Mr Hull!"

"I'm finding the idea that I tried spanking you even more surreal now, you know."

"Let's just try to forget all that side of it. The process must have malfunctioned again. You're lucky: the other unsuccessful treatments ended up in a far worse state. Rapid onset neurological deterioration, resulting in coma – the only one who didn't aside from me was Dr Jenkins."

"Are there gaps in either of your memories?"

"Not in mine, aside from the hours between my last cryospace session and the abduction that led to me almost dying. Ashley's current state remains complicated by the amount of narcotics that you saw fit to inflict on her."

"I regret that I had to do that. She was one of GETEC's best biochemists."

"That reminds me: the other night, you referred to her as being a computer technician. Did she have a second job?"

"What, moonlighting as a computer tech?" Hull shook his head. "She's good with computers, but not to that level."

"Then I can only surmise that something is indeed very wrong in your new brain."

Tanya tapped on the door of the stall. "Spence? Are you okay in there?"

"I don't want to talk right now, Miss Darnell."

"That's okay: I mean I totally talk enough for both of us anyway – actually maybe even for three people. I'm sorry; I'm rambling again. I do that when I'm worried."

"Why are you worried?"

"Um...maybe it's because my kind of a friend is upset and hiding in a hospital bathroom?"

"You seem to be confusing friendship with traumatic bonding."

The teenager frowned. "I don't know what that means."

"It means that you've allocated an inappropriate level of emotional value to the two of us escaping from GETEC together."

"So basically, just like making friends at summer camp, huh?"

"What's summer camp?"

"I was going to say prison for children but something tells me you won't get the joke. Will you please come out of there?"

Spence sighed and unlocked the door. "Fine – I'm out! Now what do you want?"

"I told you already: I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine. I just needed some space."

"Oh – we figured that you were throwing up."
Tanya gestured vaguely towards Spence's abdomen. "Because...you know...?"

"Thomas has already announced it then."

"Yeah, he seems stoked. So does Craig. I guess you still aren't, huh?"

"I'm supposed to be sterile, Miss Darnell."

"Well, maybe you got better?"

"Freemartins don't *get better* – it's a genetic thing...oh, never bloody mind!"

"Aren't freemartins mutant cows?"

"Hold on a minute, since when were you an expert on cattle?"

"My mom's second cousin has a ranch. We go there every summer." The girl paused. "We used to go there, I mean – before."

"If it's any help, there's an inordinate degree of comfort to crying in the loos."

"You lost two interns and two jets on that little trip to England, Greg. The bean counters aren't happy about it. Then there's that pet SCO of yours. He's had more medical interventions than the rest of your department put together. I shouldn't need to remind you that his kind is useful because they're

expendable!"

Hull stared back at the CEO: wondering how this asshole was the one in charge of GETEC. "The SCO in question *isn't* my pet, Mr Howard. His name is David Saunders, and he's really very talented – replacing him would cost at least twice as much as repairing him. The field experience alone is invaluable."

The too perfect smile flashed back across the chiselled features. "You and me are two very big-hearted peas, aren't we, Greg? I guess we make things too personal sometimes. That's okay, as long as we get *results*."

"Dr Rosa's method has removed twenty years of physical wear and tear from me, including that ongoing heart problem. I'd call that a result."

"So, you want to trade your very self-serving act of volunteering for my not raking your ass over the coals for this little blip in England? Is that what I'm hearing from you, Greg?"

"Well, I don't know what else there is that I can offer, Mr Howard."

"I'm so glad that you asked. We need someone experienced to sort out a little situation out on Mars. It's nothing huge; just a few activists."

"You want me to go there personally?"

"Well, yes. Unless, of course, that there's some other way that you'd like to make things up to me, Greg?"

"I'll go and prep my team now, Mr Howard."

Howard groaned. "You're going to take that SCO along, aren't you?"

"He's more efficient than you give him credit for. All his lower-than-average field outcomes have been because of British Intelligence."

"Failures, Greg: expensive failures – stop covering for him!"

The supervisor buffed his fingernails against the front of his uniform. "I don't cover, Mr Howard. The issue isn't with our SCOs. It's with the fact that they're facing people with abnormal capabilities. I'd lay odds that GETEC's geneticists would find some very interesting readings if they had the chance to study them."

"I'm *not* about to sign off on another expensive attempt to capture Craig Campbell. He's a damn unicorn, Greg: can't be captured by mere mortal men. Anyhow, we don't need to target him - not now."

"And why would that be?"

Howard smirked. "One of our interns is pregnant by him, and with *twins* no less! By the look on your face, I think you can guess who."

"You mean Nightingale Spence." Hull berated himself inwardly for not deleting that file from the GETEC mainframe.

"That's the one, Greg! Conception occurred *after* the start of the mother's employment with us, and by my calculations, outside of British held territories. They hadn't filed a pre-conception FIL either, so whatever way you cut it, GETEC owns those embryos *and* their mother."

Chapter Three – Running Scared

"It ain't going to kill you to take some shore leave, ma'am."

Kennedy nodded calmly. "Duly noted, Gunny – I'm still not going."

Woods folded his arms. "Are you still blaming yourself for whatever the fuck it was GETEC did to your brain, ma'am?"

"A little bit, yeah, but it's not just that." The Martian tapped at the screen of her desk computer and pulled up a recent news article. "Before I joined up, there was a guy back on Mars that my family were keen on acquiring as a son in law - Alistair Waverly. He's a big deal in mining circles, but kind of pushy."

"Uh-huh. I ain't getting how that impacts on you taking shore leave, Marine. I do know that it can't be that you're running scared from some jumped up rock farmer."

"I ended up taking out a damn non-molestation order, Gunny. Those things are pointless, but that's how pushy we're talking."

Woods frowned; perplexed. "It's been almost fifteen years since you signed up, ma'am! You've been back to Mars plenty of times before now, so what's changed?"

Kennedy sighed. "His company are hosting an event to commemorate those killed in the assault on the main colony. It coincides with our proposed leave. I know how Waverly thinks: if I show up, he'll take it as a sign that I want to see him."

Woods snorted. "So, to recap all of that - you are running scared from a jumped-up rock farmer?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Kennedy smiled ruefully. "Sorry, Woods: I just can't face his crap."

"I suppose that somebody punching him in the throat wouldn't help none either, huh?"

Kennedy shook her head firmly. "Negative, Woods: the Waverly family are as close as Mars gets to counting as old money. Ain't no damn sense in pissing them off - I don't want to see you facing a court martial, clear?"

Woods didn't look happy, but he nodded his assent. "Crystal, ma'am. I still ain't happy about it,

but you're a big girl. Something tells me that you can piss off your own rock farmers."

Kennedy smiled drily. "Without a doubt, Gunny: rock farmers, methane farmers, augmented algae farmers...yeah, I'm not real good with farmers."

"Not too sharp around monks, either, ma'am. I reckon Lethe's going to hold a grudge. Better watch your six."

"As I recall it, you're the one that had the guns trained on their dome, Gunny!"

Woods puffed out his chest. "I maintain that said guns were purely *hypothetical*, ma'am."

Kennedy grinned. "Get out of here, Marine – go and have some damn shore leave already!"

"So just let me get this straight in my head, Whitby. You want me to go to Miami, off book, and abduct Dr Rosa?"

The senior technician nodded. "It's a simple matter, Dobos. GETEC have forcibly recruited our colleague and you're going to rescue her."

"But she resigned – yeah, fuck, *allegedly* under duress, I know. Technically we haven't a fucking leg beneath any of this!"

"That's why it counts as off book. Get it wrong

and I'll deny all knowledge."

"What happens if I get it right, boffin?"

"In that unlikely event, I shall be more than happy to recommend your promotion to full operative status." Whitby finally met the other man's gaze. "And if you *really* get it right, then *perhaps* I'll consider humouring your other concern."

The blue eyes hardened. "Go fuck yourself!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" The technician blinked: stupefied by the rejection. "For pity's sake you've been dropping hints long enough about wanting to...!"

His sentence hung unfinished in the sudden quiet of the conservatory. Dobos was already gone – storming off to rejoin their companions in the dining room. The safe house was full once again: everyone aside from Weaver permitted to recuperate outside of the confines of the medical centre. Leister had spent the afternoon making Ragu Bolognese in celebration.

Moxton narrowed his eyes as the field operative took his seat at the table. "Where's Dr Whitby?"

"He's talking utter shite in the fucking conservatory. Pass the bread rolls, please."

Tanya obliged. "So did you and he have a fight or something?"

"Something, kis nő." Dobos tore a chunk from one of the rolls and liberally coated one side with butter. "I'd rather not talk about it any further."

Jenkins shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Is it anything to do with the micro drone, Mr Dobos?"

"No. It's nothing that you did, willingly or otherwise. I don't fucking blame you. Please can I eat in peace now?"

"Let him alone, all of you." Spence supposed that they still held some measure of duty to the various operatives. *Not that retiring is really an option for me now.* "Are there onions in this, Cob?"

"No onions or alcohol, darling. I adapted the recipe a tad."

"Cheers, old swan."

Benedict handed his daughter her pain medication. "Remember, two with food every six hours – doctor's orders." He raised an eyebrow at the others. "I hope everyone else is following their respective treatment plans?"

A vague rumbling of assent mingled with the clattering of plates and utensils as the meal began in earnest. Almost everyone present had suffered to

one degree or another: from scrapes and bruises, to bullet wounds, broken bones to PTSD. Spence tried not to contemplate what ill effects their pair of unexpected passengers might have accrued by this stage.

There were so many risks - exposure to alcohol, the sedative administered by Vetch, smoke inhalation during the destruction of Lackey Hall. God only knew what the long-term impact might be for the embryos. Albeit unwanted, the pregnancy was a thing now, and taking all available precautions from here on in was the least that they could do.

"So, you didn't know that Dr Jenkins' locator chip was also an explosive?" Rosa was finding it surprisingly difficult not to feel sorry for Hull. Their talking had uncovered a series of disturbing inconsistencies. From Jenkins' murder in the Caribbean months earlier, to the recent dually non-consensual spanking, there was a worrying trend appearing. *Either someone else is framing you, or your memory is failing.*

Hull shook his head. "No. I *did* send Saunders to follow Moxton's jet, but only to find out where Britain

planned to stash her. I was planning to organise a retrieval operation." *Yeah, Greg – let's call it that. There's no need to spook her...yet.*

"You didn't order him to shoot them down?"

"That's really not my style: it's a waste of resources. When we got the initial news of the jet going down over the Atlantic, everything pointed to it being an accident. I requested the flight recorder from Saunders' chopper to attempt to determine the cause, but it never arrived." He sighed and poured them both another drink. "I was suspicious about that, but all I knew for certain was that Ashley was dead. I drank a lot that month."

"You're drinking a lot now too, you know."

"Yeah; it helps me to sleep. I figured that out after Tokyo. Damn, now *that* was a mess."

"I've never met anyone who was directly involved with the Tokyo disaster before."

"My team and I were the initial responders – GETEC sent us in to assess the scale of the problem. Heart attack number two really didn't help with that. By the time I stabilised there wasn't much left to do but assign blame. They stuck me behind a desk, and put me in charge of making certain that it all went away."

"What about the rest of your team?"

"Most of them retired, but that didn't go well. Two sudden deaths; might not have been total accidents, if you know what I mean."

"I suppose that losing them must have made it that much worse for you. Did GETEC organise support – counselling, therapy?"

"The usual stuff, Dr Rosa, but it wasn't much help, given Tokyo wasn't anywhere near usual."

"That's the real reason behind all of the sound proofing, isn't it?" She nodded towards the discreetly panelled walls. "You don't sleep much, but when you do...?"

Ah, sweetheart: if you only knew! "If this ever gets out, I'll know it was you who blabbed."

"You're not as much of a monster as you let people believe you to be."

Hull chuckled at her bravado. "And you aren't stupid enough to think that I'm a nice guy. We make quite a pair, don't we?"

She avoided his gaze. "You should see about arranging some more support. I'm not qualified to help you with the issues that you're facing."

"I get that. The problem is that neither is anyone else." Another grimace of whisky punctuated his

reminiscing. "Tokyo was a beautiful place, you know. I miss it."

"Perhaps you'd feel better if you stopped covering up for the people responsible."

"How did you end up working in Intelligence with that kind of attitude?"

"My mum's aunt encouraged me to apply. She thought that I had scope."

"Horses have scope, Dr Rosa." The supervisor paused to consider where he could go with that statement. "Horses...ponies...no, never mind – you wouldn't get it."

"I don't think I want to know!"

What a waste that is! "Well, on a different note, Howard needs me on Mars to manage some PR stuff. I'll be gone for two weeks as of this Friday. Do you mind house-sitting for me?"

"It shouldn't be a problem."

"Thanks. I'll bring you back a souvenir."

"I'd rather you removed the controls that you added to my brain. As things stand you can make me do whatever you want, just by uttering the correct phrase. It bothers me."

"I guess if your contract with GETEC isn't enough to keep you then nothing is. I'll delete that bit of

coding. I only added it to avoid losing the chassis that you were stored in – Perfect10s are expensive.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that was your only motivation? You added a *nymph* mode for goodness’ sake!”

“Yeah, I guess that’s a fair point. Okay, first thing tomorrow morning we’ll strip your mind down to what should be there. No more unwanted extras or trigger phrases: just plain, one hundred percent Kellie Rosa.”

“Thank you, Mr Hull. That means a lot to me.”

Campbell wondered if Spence would be amenable to living aboard the *Angry Canary* year-round. He had called headquarters again after dinner. Now the six-hour distance between the safe house and London felt too close.

The non-gender rolled over beneath the quilt and rested their face against his chest. “You’ve healed well – there’s hardly even a scar.”

“I blame my very inventive surgeons for that.”

“So, what aren’t we talking about this time?”

“I’m possibly even more fired now.”

“Pembleton wasn’t pleased then.”

“She might be thinking about killing me.”

Spence groaned. "I knew telling her about the pregnancy was a bad idea!"

"Don't worry; she blames me, not you. All field operatives should be mandatorily neutered, something along those lines."

"Sorry about that."

"It's not your fault: you thought that you couldn't have children. No - I should have worn a condom."

"Craig...is that the *only* reason that you're not angry about this?"

He blinked. "What? No! Spence, I know that we didn't plan this, but *angry*? Oh, canary – sometimes I really do wish that you liked hugging!"

"What are we going to do about it?"

"You mean about your haphephobia?"

"No, the other thing: the pregnancy."

Apparently, they weren't denying it any longer. The field operative rested his chin on top of the pale hair. "I don't know how to answer that question without putting you under any pressure. What do you want to do?"

"Throw money at whoever seems the most likely to perfect time travel within our lifetime."

"Well, as reasonable as that is, what's your secondary preference?"

"Wake up."

"Okay. Does some sort of couple's counselling seem like an acceptable tertiary? Well, if Pembleton doesn't arrange to have me eaten by fire ants first."

"There's no proof that she ever actually did that, you know." Spence wriggled a little closer. "It's just one of those office myths, if you ask me - something to scare junior operatives with. Do your paperwork or we'll feed you to fire ants."

"I remain thoroughly terrified."

Chapter Four – Crazy Or Right

"Remember, never any more than ninety degrees angle – you don't want to damage the rod."

"I've got this, Greg. Stop fussing!"

"It's a good fish; I don't want you to mess up landing it."

"Jesus, Greg! Just one time, could you stop with the micromanaging? For me, baby?"

"I'm not micromanaging, Bryce. I'm advocating on the behalf of my much-abused rod."

"Ha! Was last night too much for you?"

"Cheeky."

"You love it."

"Yeah, I do."

The phantom smell of jasmine and black hemlock vanished abruptly before the staccato of his alarm clock. Hull woke alone: his hand caressing the sheet instead of soft honey blonde hair.

"Bryce...?"

She wasn't there and neither was the riverbank. It was April and Miami: not November and Okutama. Two years, five months, a couple of heart attacks, and a brand-new body later, he finally remembered her. The question was why he had ever forgotten in the first place. Last December in Boston, how had he managed to take Ashley out to dinner in *that* damn sushi bar and *not* think of Bryce? *It was our place...every Wednesday night for karaoke. We got food poisoning more times than enough, but it was our place.*

Maybe there wasn't anything so very wrong with his new brain at all. Maybe it was working properly for the first time since...since when, Tokyo? His second fucking heart attack; when he woke up alone in the ICU and *didn't* find it weird that nobody was sitting vigil for him. *Doctors said there was no next of kin...no named person to contact...no significant other in my file. There was no Bryce, and I never even fucking blinked...!*

He was blinking now, but the tears came anyhow. Memories tumbled out along with the salt: birthdays, cheesy movies, winters spent fishing in Japan, his diligence towards planning every one of

their meals from scratch. Bryce Lenard winked at him from what they had lived and he had forgotten. *How the fuck could I forget about you, baby?*

The alarm clock shattered when it hit the wall. A few flakes of plaster drifted to the floor: simple polished boards, easy to clean and deliciously cold underfoot. Suddenly all Hull could think was how much Bryce would hate them. She always loved carpets that were deep enough pile to hide her toes. The kind of flooring that held footprints. They'd once spent an hour making patterns in a rug with their feet; just him and Bryce, and a bottle of cherry soda - two pseudo empiricists with time on their hands. *Well, there's no time to spare now, Greg.*

He stumbled to the en suite and grabbed a fresh razor blade from the cabinet. His thumb slipped as he cracked the plastic mounting away from the metal. The sting distracted him from the pain of digging into the nape of his own neck: probing with clumsy digits for his transponder chip. It hit the bowl of the sink with a satisfying plink, and Hull closed both injuries with the usual emergency salve.

Rosa was still asleep when he entered the guest bedroom. The supervisor cleared his throat.

"Kellie...you need to wake up."

She pulled the quilt closer around herself as she sat up. "Is that blood on your hands?"

"Yeah, but it's all mine. Tell me, what do you know about transponder technology?" He held out his hand. The chip nestled against his palm in a small pool of gore.

"Did you remove this from *yourself*?"

"Just take my word for it, doctor: it was necessary. So, is it a standard chip or not?"

"It seems larger than one would expect. I don't recognise this component at all – it resembles a cryospace uplink, but far smaller." The technician frowned. "Is this what they used to upload your neural map into your new body?"

"No; all of that was external. This is my original ID chip from my old body: it's supposed to have the usual locator stuff, no additional uses."

"Well, I can't fathom why a basic transponder chip would need all of this."

Hull nodded. "Okay. Turn around."

"Why?"

"Because I think we need to get your chip out right now, Kellie. Something is wrong at GETEC; I mean really, scarily wrong. I can't explain – there

may not even be time. They might be on their way already."

"Mr Hull, what are you talking about?"

"I think they brainwashed me. In fact, I'm fucking positive that they did, and that chip might be how, or it might be another bomb waiting to go off, like with Ashley. I don't know for sure. What I do know is that you have one in your neck too; just like every other member of staff."

She gulped and turned away from him. "Be careful, won't you?"

"Sure." Hull worked swiftly: huffing a sigh as he pulled out nothing other than a perfectly mundane chip. "It looks okay."

"Well I'm certainly glad of that, but what do we do now? Do you really think that GETEC will send someone?"

"I don't know – fuck, maybe it's all just a paranoid delusion on my part! The thing is that I *remember* a life that I'm not living any more, and other people, you included, are convinced that I've done things that I don't remember." He tossed her the regenerative salve. "Call someone that you trust to come here and extract you. I can't stick around."

"But you expect *me* to risk it?"

"The alternative is that you tag along with me. Given that I'm either crazy or right, that's not likely to be especially safe."

She caught hold of his arm. "You said it yourself: you might be experiencing some kind of mental instability. Please – let me help you. If things are as bad as you think, then GETEC will find us before we get beyond the end of the street. If not, we can brazen it out together at work whilst we find the answers. Either way, there's no sense in panicking about it."

"Are you really suggesting that we just go to work and carry on as though nothing has happened?"

"I'm game if you are, Mr Hull."

Waverly Industries had gone a step beyond a simple memorial ceremony. The streets of the main colony surged: buildings and people alike festooned in the plumage of nothing less than sheer carnival. It was the second day of a weeklong event, at which the Marines of Deimos Base were the guests of honour. Mars couldn't thank them enough for their actions during the massacre. Every

single citizen appeared Hell bent on proving this.

After more than twenty-four hours of their frantic hospitality, Woods wished he'd followed Kennedy's example and stayed on the damn base. Instead, he was wedged in between Private Alonzo and Private Madison, watching as Corporal Davies kept a safe distance from the local gigolos on her way back from the bar to their table. "Any of you nice young ladies like to fill me in on why it is that I'm assigned to the role of fucking chaperone?"

"Don't know, Gunny." Madison belched. Her breath smelt a little too much like beer, and Woods scowled. "Sorry about that."

"I knew I should've stuck with the men."

"Hey, that's sexist, Gunny!" Alonzo wagged her finger admonishingly.

"Hell if it is; they've got better fucking table manners, Marine."

Davies seated herself opposite them and shoved the tray of snack food into the centre of the table. "Okay - I got extra hot wings, and something that might be deep fried mushrooms. Hard to say for sure; it's really loud over there."

Woods helped himself to one of the battered objects. He peered at it, then broke it open. "This is

squid. Not often you get that on the Red Planet."

"It's not often we get fucking *chicken* either, Gunny." Madison grabbed one of the wings and dunked it. "You think this is synthetic protein?"

"The menu says all real ingredients." Alonzo prodded warily at the squid. "So, is this a bird too, or more like a cow?"

"Negative, Marine: it's a cephalopod. This one's been shipped all the way from Earth and cooked to perfection." Woods grinned. "It's Captain Kennedy's favourite meal. We should see about sending some up to base for her."

Davies was disappointed. "Ain't she coming down here at all, Gunny?"

Woods shrugged. "CO's prerogative, Marine: if she wants to sit at her desk and fill out fucking paperwork instead of engaging in shore leave, there ain't a damn thing anyone can do about it."

The front window of the bar splintered inwards along with the pulped remains of at least three people. Their reactions inevitably swifter than that of the civilians around them, the Marines sprang immediately into action. Outside, the festivities were giving way to panic. Locals and visitors alike fled for their lives from the bizarre creatures looming amidst

them. Roiling tentacles supported chitin-based exoskeletons dappled with rows of crystalline ocular nodules. A sticky carpet of mucus marked the route that the warbling things had followed: along the curve of the plaza and back into an emergency underground sand shelter.

Woods, cursing the fact that none of those here for shore leave had anything more than guts and a good knife, stabbed at the nearest hostile. His weapon bounced off the thing. The creatures' warbling intensified and a wave of nausea struck all four Marines. Alonzo dropped first, then Davies. Madison remained conscious but doubled over, retching uncontrollably, as Woods felt the sensation begin to leave his extremities.

Tanya scrolled through another fifty channels in search of a news report that mentioned the events at Lackey Hall. "I don't get it – how come no one's talking about the fire, or the jet falling out of the sky, or any of the rest of it?"

"There are some things that simply can't be allowed to reach the ears of the general public, darling."

"So, what'll happen to Kathryn and Barnabas?"

“Don’t worry: Osprey House is one of Britain’s finest therapy centres for children and young people. If anywhere can help them, it’s there.”

It reminded the teenager of how GETEC had liked to smooth things over, and she shivered. “Okay...whatever, I guess. Um, I’m going to go see if Spence wants to compare notes on how we got away from Mr Hull. I don’t want to mess up when your boss interrogates me.”

She wandered out of the living room and up the main staircase to the first floor of the safe house, pulling out her phone as she went to access her online storage. There were too many social media notifications beeping for attention for it to be worth trying to make sense of them without an actual computer. GETEC had somehow managed to have both of her e-mail accounts not only locked but also deleted. *I guess I’ll need to start over with a new provider.*

There were raised voices coming from the library. Dobos and Whitby were arguing again – something to do with a broken robot, and another scientist. She hurried on past the door. Nobody ever liked it when she eavesdropped, but spies might kill her. There wasn’t anything stopping them either. *It’s not*

like anybody's going to bother looking for me in middle of nowhere England.

Spence's door proved locked. A muffled grunt came from within the room, followed by the creak of a mattress. "Who's out there?"

It took her a few seconds to process why Mr Campbell was in there too. "Sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Canary, your sidekick is at the door."

"What is it, Miss Darnell?"

"I was just trying to figure out what to expect when Pendleton talks to me."

Campbell sounded like he was trying not to laugh now. "For a start, I'd suggest getting her name right: *Pembleton*."

"Sure thing, thanks." Tanya stuffed her phone back into her pocket and fled back downstairs. *Maybe I'll do a better job at making lunch!*

"...and fucking plenty of it, Gunny!"

Kennedy's voice edged into Woods' awareness. He groaned and wiped as much of the slime away from his face as he could. "Say again, ma'am?"

She recapped her statement. "Fire, Woods – those warbling bastards are vulnerable to fire! Their

slime trails went up like...well, like things that burn easily! Real pretty to see."

Woods staggered to his feet and clambered out of what he realised was a shattered cocoon. "I suppose that explains the singe marks on your uniform, ma'am."

Kennedy shrugged and dusted off some of the ash. "Eh, it'll wash off. You want to start cracking open cocoons, or do you need a minute?"

The older Marine turned away to survey the smouldering remains of the partially constructed nest. "How much of the damn colony did those things web up?"

"They didn't make it beyond this plaza."

"Thank fuck for that." His CO seemed to be running on an adrenaline high, and not the healthy kind, either. "Ma'am, how long have you been awake?"

She waved off his concern. "Oh, probably just around forty-nine hours, give or take. Hard to be sure. One of those damn warblers ate my watch!"

Chapter Five – Geographic South

Spence supposed that the whole mess would soon be out of their hands. They were too far from the expected parent figure to pass screening for the FIL: emotionally damaged, unmarried, pushing forty, and in a high-risk profession. Campbell was no worse or better a mess himself, even if Pembleton gave him his job back. *I'd be more impressed with his career sacrifice if I didn't know how much he loathes what they've made him into.*

That wasn't fair or grateful, but it was true. In the absence of a familial tradition, Craig would never have ended up here. Killing wasn't in the fellow's guts, not the way that it needed to be for this job. At his roots stood a boy who felt things too deeply, and closed his eyes during horror films. *I expect if he'd found some other constant to attach his heart to then not even Thomas' expectations would have dragged him in.*

Twenty years on, the latter remained too heavy to accept. The non-gender picked once again at the edges of the remembered argument; wondering if walking away then had *really* been such a poor decision. When one stared hard at the facts, their breaking up was sensible. *Some might posit that we should have remained apart.*

Their phone shrilled; Pembleton's office line. "Yes ma'am?"

"Do you know the difference between magnetic and geographic South, Housekeeping?"

Spence frowned. "Of course, ma'am - the former shifts according to the position of the planet, whilst the latter is relatively constant."

"Indeed, it does. It has an advantage over its Northern counterpart too. Do you know what that is?"

"The ice at the geographic North Pole floats, but that at the South has land beneath it, ma'am."

"Precisely so: a rather more certain footing. That's what you represent to him, Housekeeping – geographic South. I've tried my best to avert it, but nonetheless here we all stand on the ice."

"Are you ordering me to cool things off with him, ma'am?"

"It's too bloody late for that now, Housekeeping. The poor fellow's imprinted on you, or at least on some curious notion of what he thinks that you are."

"You don't share his view, ma'am."

"No I don't, but it doesn't matter. As I said, we're on the ice now together and you're his solid ground, even if you do shift a little. I want you to remember that, because there's something that you don't know that I feel you deserve to."

"And what's that, ma'am?"

Spence heard the familiar click of the extra secure line as it activated. "Craig *can't* be the father, Housekeeping; he's sterile, just like all SCOs. British Intelligence had him grown in a vat on Pluto to give Thomas something to live for. Neither of them knows the truth, and I'm sure that you won't shatter their illusions. Now, I suggest that you think very hard about dates, and about whomever else you've slept with recently."

"Sir, I need to discuss Mars with you." Mellor fell into step alongside Hull as soon as the supervisor entered the lobby. "There was an incident within the main colony the day before yesterday. I thought you'd want the data to review en route."

I've already forwarded the relevant files to your computer."

"Good work."

"Sir...?"

"What?"

"Be careful."

I'm really not in the mood for this, Aaron. Hull dragged up his usual polite smile. "I'm always careful, Mellor. You know that."

"I do, Sir. Still, it couldn't hurt for me to ride along and keep an eye on the paperwork."

"Don't tell me that you don't trust me to handle my own field reports."

The young administrator wouldn't meet his gaze. "Dr Kenlow found a discrepancy in your neural patterns, Sir."

"Are they assessing me for mandatory retirement?"

"I'm trying to avoid things getting to that point, Sir."

"That isn't up to you to decide." Hull wondered if the transponder he carried was giving out a different signal now that it was inside a chunk of synthetic protein instead of his neck.

Mellor whimpered. "I...I just don't want to lose

you, Sir! We thought maybe...maybe you should go for the cardio transplant...?"

"Were you and Dr Kenlow planning on arranging that for me without telling me first?"

"Yes...but...I couldn't do it. I'm sorry, Sir."

Hull's mind was elsewhere: pressing a kiss that was more teeth than tongue into the hollow beneath Bryce's jaw. He sighed. "Mellor, I will *bury* you under paperwork for the next year. Promotion is not likely to be a word that people connect with your name ever again. But first I'm taking you to Mars as my PA, so go get whatever you need for that."

Leister cornered Spence in the kitchen under the pretext of making supper. "You've been unsafely quiet all day. I took the liberty of checking your phone – here you are, by the way – and the last incoming call is from Edith, at ten o'clock this morning." He paused: hoping that his apprentice would take him to task for having meddled. No reprimand was forthcoming. Spence simply tucked the phone away and continued savagely buttering. "Darling: stop murdering the sandwiches. Tell me – what did Edith say?"

"I can't talk about it, old swan."

"Can you tell me why you can't discuss it?"

"Not really, just that it's an old secret, and now it's mine to keep."

"Is it worth keeping, darling?"

"Are any of them, really?" The knife clattered against the sink as Spence tossed it aside. "Christ, sometimes I *hate* this job...!"

He reached out and smoothed the pale hair. "I seem to recall that you wanted out of it. What's stopping you from flying, little chick?"

"You haven't called me that in years."

"I haven't had need to, darling. Even after that nasty business on Mars, you still had all of your feathers in order."

"It certainly didn't feel that way to me, Cob."

"We're pecking in circles now."

The younger operative gulped, trying, and failing to remain composed. "I can't quit; they'll never approve the FIL to someone with no proof of income, and Craig's already out of a job!"

He hugged them. It was like wrapping his arms around a bundle of sticks. Leister added that to his ever-increasing list of concerns. "Nightingale, do you want to continue with the pregnancy?"

"I...don't ask me *that*. Oh, fuck...!"

"There, there, darling – it's alright."

"But it *isn't*, Cob!"

"Well, it will be, I can promise you that much. I'm solvent enough to qualify, and I won't see you broken by a damnably unfair piece of legislation."

"I couldn't ask that of you, old swan. Besides, they don't accept retirees."

Leister sighed. "Darling, Dubai wasn't *exactly* my retirement...!"

"No, *stop*. I really don't want to know any more secrets, Cob."

"Then let me take care of you."

"Do you mean like before...?"

"Yes."

"Please."

"Glad to."

"Captain Kennedy – how does it feel to save Mars from an alien invasion?"

"Were you concerned for your own safety?"

"Is it true that you're bisexual?"

"Are you romantically involved with any of the people that you saved?"

"Captain, do you feel that Earth could have

CAPTAIN MARS

done more to assist with the situation?"

"How many of your Marines died?"

"Captain Mars...!"

Kennedy flung herself into the MMC transport right on Woods' heels and slammed the door. "Damn reporters! Why are they so interested in me anyhow? That whole thing with the warblers wasn't *that* impressive."

Woods frowned at his tablet. "Ma'am, if I'm reading this right, some damn idiot back in the recruitment office has signed off on the press branding you Captain Mars!"

Campbell followed Leister into the conservatory. "What's this about, Cob?"

"Your employment issues, darling – they don't approve FIL requests easily these days."

The field operative scowled. "I have savings; enough for at least a year, and that's allowing for London rents! We're solvent, it's fine, and I fully intend to find a...!"

Leister interrupted him. "Hold up – we have extra ears, it seems. Tanya, darling, is there something that you need?"

The teenager sat up from where she was lying

curled on the settee. "Um...actually, I was here first, guys. Can't you go and argue somewhere else?"

It was so unexpected a response that both men simply nodded and obeyed. Campbell paused in the doorway and glanced back towards the girl. "Has Pembleton called to debrief you yet?"

She shook her head. "Dr Whitby said he's supposed to escort me to London so that she can talk to me in person."

Campbell raised an eyebrow. "Hmm. Well, given all that's happened, how would you like to have a bodyguard?"

Tanya grinned. "You mean so you can say that you've got a job? Sure, that'd be great!"

"There you are, Cob: I'm employed again."

"Fabulous, darling – but how is the young lady going to pay you?"

Campbell sighed. "I'll admit that my plan still has some details needing resolved."

"Perhaps I can help you." The older man rolled his shoulders back, the tension crackling out of them. "Tanya, would you be horribly offended if I were to offer to pay for your living expenses?"

She shook her head. "Of course not; that would mean I could pay my bodyguard, so win-win."

Rosa frowned at the data in front of her. "Dr Kenlow, look here: this spike is obviously part of a pre-existing recurrent neurological event."

The senior medic tapped the screen to zoom in. "Any long-term disorder would have shown up during Supervisor Hull's regular medicals."

"Surely you don't mean to infer that we ought to ignore medical fact in favour of an assumption of human infallibility?"

"I don't know how things are done within British Intelligence, but GETEC is very thorough in its employee healthcare policy."

"I've spent the past three years analysing neural mapping techniques. I know bloody pre-existing when I see it!"

He blinked at her: his slightly too long hair ghosting across his brows. "Alright, I'll pull Supervisor Hull's medical logs and see who compiled them. Perhaps you're right about humans not being infallible."

Chapter Six – Too Much On My Mind

Moxton watched from the living room window as the hover car pulled away from the safe house. "I'm surprised that Craig decided to tag along with them, all things considered."

"He's working as Miss Darnell's bodyguard."

"So I heard." The handler turned to study the non-gender. "Are you okay about being left?"

"I'm fine. Anyhow, they shan't be gone too long. It's just a weekend stay in London. How's your arm?"

"Not too bad, actually, but I've got another scar for my collection." He sat down beside them. "This sofa's seen it's day."

"It's an antique."

"Just like your Dom, eh?"

"Don't dig a hole that you can't climb out of, Mr Moxton."

"I'm throwing down a rope, that's all,

Housekeeping. It's up to you whether or not you make use of it."

"Frankly I have too much on my mind as it is to be arsed wasting energy on your posturing."

Their pulse was butterfly sharp beneath his fingers as his hand closed around their thin wrist. "Spence - you need to put yourself first for once. This isn't an op. You can't just write it up and go home afterwards. Kids change everything."

"And how would an Ace like you know *that*?"

"I'll assume that's the hormones sniping."

Spence tugged away from him. "Stop pushing."

"Don't be like that." Moxton followed the smaller operative out into the hall. "Come on - we both know that you need...!"

"Cob was looking for you, andro." Dobos' stare belied his casual tone as he stepped into view. "He's in the kitchen; having a debate with Dr Jenkins about the fucking coffee pot."

"I expect the filter needs changing again. Excuse me, gentlemen."

The field operative scratched at the copper stubble of his jaw. "Harassing the bloody clean-up crew? I thought you were fucking better than that, Moxton."

His handler ignored the barb. "I'm worried about them, Oliver."

"So am I, after witnessing that little chat!"

Dobos wasn't as thuggish as he pretended, but he didn't properly understand the Scene. Moxton sighed. "How's Quincy doing?"

"He's up and running again. Whitby wanted to leave him offline for a bit longer, but I said I wasn't fucking standing for it."

"You *do* realise that you can't keep throwing your weight around with the head technician?"

"Like you were doing with andro? Standing up for a mate isn't fucking throwing my weight around!" Nevertheless, the poppy petal blue gaze dropped. "Anyway, it doesn't fucking matter: they're never going to approve me. Everybody knows that."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Oliver. As much as it pains me to admit, you're less of a disaster than initially thought."

"It doesn't look anything like me!" Kennedy tossed the plastic figurine aside. "What the Hell are they thinking? Action figures and God damn comic books? The recruitment office must be on some

strong damn shit, Gunny!"

Woods opened the nearest comic in morbid curiosity. He blinked at the contents. "Well...it's...it's sure real colourful, ma'am. There's lots of bold primary shades."

"You ain't obliged to be positive about it, Woods." The CO of Deimos Base scowled. "I can't believe someone signed off on this garbage!"

Woods smirked. "At least they didn't give you a cape, ma'am."

"Don't even joke about that, Woods!" Kennedy gestured angrily at the comics. "They're seriously calling me Captain Mars!"

Woods shrugged. "This is what happens when people go around acting fucking heroic, ma'am."

She glowered at him. "Yeah, well have you any ideas as to how we stop this circus from crashing my damn career?"

He shook his head. "Afraid not, ma'am – reckon you'll need to sit tight and just ignore it as best as you can. The more fuss you make, the harder the damn vultures will bite."

Kennedy groaned and put her head in her hands. "Remind me *never* to save anyone from aliens ever again!"

"So, you wear taupe too, then?" Jenkins eyed Spence warily across her coffee.

"Yes, when the season permits it." The non-gender smiled. "It's been years since I heard anyone use colours to discuss preferences!"

"Total and utter power exchange is a bit of a mouthful, darling." Leister's gentle rejoinder was an admonishment nonetheless.

"Sorry, old swan. Sorry to you too, Ashley – that was rude. To be fair, I think I've forgotten how to play nicely."

The young biochemist relaxed somewhat. "That makes two of us!"

"It seems that we have quite a few things in common." Spence reached for a second biscuit from the plate on the centre of the kitchen table. "May I ask what Hull did to you?"

"It's more what he denied: think psychological edge play. He has this way of finding people's weak spots and pressing."

"I suspect that I know what you mean."

Pembleton had far more to say to Campbell than she did to Tanya, so the teenager accepted

Whitby's offer of a tour of his department. The two spent a fascinating ninety minutes observing some of the newer robots whilst they were tested. She was hoping to go sightseeing with Campbell afterwards. The expression on the field operative's face as he caught up to them put her off asking.

Whitby raised an eyebrow. "Are you still in line for the firing squad?"

"Just get me the damned safe house on the secure line, boffin. I need to talk to Spence right now." Campbell's knuckles whitened around the handset. "Come on; pick up the phone!"

"Housekeeping here, standing by."

"Canary, I know what Pembleton told you, and it's a lie! There's no one else – I'd been single for six months before you found me in Strasbourg."

At the far end of the line, Spence sank onto the nearest armchair: the latest deceit settling like a well-fed cat across the shoulders of the conversation. "You've spoken to her then?"

"Yes, at length. Apparently, she's changed her mind about us. We're ideally matched, I'm hired again, and you're to take all of the leave that you need with full pay."

"Quite a reversal – got any notion as to why?"

"I'm afraid I only got the usual smoke in that regard: something about new information having come to light." Campbell paused as his mobile phone chirped. "Hold on – I just got a text."

"Don't tell me that those orang-utans have stayed in contact?"

He chuckled as he opened the message. "I'm afraid not! Spence, I have to go: Pembleton doesn't want me tying up the secure line with personal calls. I'll see you when we get back."

Whitby and Tanya grinned at him as he hung up. "I assume that you'll need someone legally permitted to drive within the UK to transport you from here to there?"

"By way of Osprey House, if you don't mind, boffin. I promised to check in with Dr Finch at her Monday morning clinic."

The circumstances surrounding Kathryn and Barnabas Lackey offered the sort of case study that could make one's career. There were undoubtedly those that would regard the twins as nothing more than an experiment. As such, Dr Marion Finch was leery of involving too many people in their rehabilitation. She hoped to see the children

progress to being functioning members of society.

Her other motivation was far less professional: namely remaining on good terms with the thoroughly delicious Craig Campbell. "He's bloody yummy, Karen!"

"You say that about all of them. Are you sure you aren't just desperate, Marion?"

"You're always so cynical!"

Karen Wilkes sniffed. "Sorry – it's just my boring common sense kicking in again. I'm sure your new bloke really is as perfect as you say."

"He is perfect, but sadly he's not mine. Oh well – I can dream!"

"Yeah, there's nothing wrong with dreaming."

The late April rains were in full cry outside, and the tall clock in the main hall was chiming midnight as Moxton followed Spence upstairs. "What's the news from London?"

"Surprisingly positive: Craig got his job back and I'm approved for full maternity pay."

"That's a bit of good news. Listen, I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have pushed things so hard. You were right to draw the line when you did."

Spence nodded; hoping that was the end of the

matter. "We all make mistakes, Mr Moxton."

"So – will you stick at the job after the birth?"

"I thought I might wait until then to decide."

He ducked past and held open the bedroom door. "No sense in rushing that type of decision."

"Indeed. Well, goodnight."

"Sweet dreams, Spence. Remember, I'm right next door if you need anything."

Now that he had remembered her, Bryce was all that Hull could think about. The day and a half long voyage from Earth to Mars proved the ideal opportunity to do just that. He spent sixteen hours straight trawling through every available social media option for some inkling of where his absentee fiancée might be. One four-hour long power nap, a shower, and a synthetic protein shake later he was back at it.

During his absence, the auto-search program had acquired not only an address, but also a change of name: Mrs Bryce Westlowe. She was a trophy wife of two years, with a twenty-month-old son and a secondary pre-conception FIL pending approval. The husband, Marcus, had gotten somewhat greyer since Hull had last seen him, but

the supervisor was more concerned with the strained expression around Bryce's eyes in her photographs. Contacting her would be his first priority upon returning from this mission. *What's he done to you, baby?*

Hull zoomed in on the most recent image of Bryce and her son. One thing was certain: Fisher wasn't Marcus' offspring. The dates clinched it. Clearly, Westlowe had stomped over more than one line that should have been sacrosanct. It seemed that the attorney was a very special sort of bastard indeed. Still, it took one to see it, and so forth. *Plenty of people would regard this situation as karmic, Greg.*

The only bright side was that Hull now had a likely candidate for who had arranged his amnesia. Westlowe held a majority interest in GETEC's shares. Paying off one or other of the medics involved would have been second nature to him. *I guess it's time to remind him that he's not untouchable.*

Kathryn hugged her stuffed bear to her chest and stared from the side of her left eye up at the underside of the narrow bed. She had propped open the door of the wardrobe enough to serve as

a distraction to anyone entering the room. The mattress was too soft: it would be a hindrance if she needed to jump up quickly. *Soft bed, soft target – that's what Granddad said.*

Dr Finch had told her that nobody would come in without knocking first. That was a nice idea, but Kathryn knew better. Barnabas never knocked – especially not when he was playing slices. She didn't believe for one second that her twin would ever stop playing that game. He liked being the best at things too much for that, and he was always quicker at slices. *Just like I'm best at hiding.*

She gulped and tried to ignore the cramp in her right foot. The bear was warm and smelled a little bit of Craig's aftershave. He had promised that he would come and visit them. Perhaps if Kathryn stayed the best at hiding, she wouldn't have any new cuts to hide from him. Grown-ups went off children quickly, in her experience. It was easy to make them want rid of you. Except for Mummy, but she'd been wrong in her thinking, so that hardly counted. *I miss Mummy.*

That sort of thought was what got her punished. She ought to stop having them. People would think she was wrong in her thinking too otherwise. Kathryn

CAPTAIN MARS

didn't want that. She wanted to be strong; like Craig. *He's not wrong in his thinking: how else could he have seen off Nana?*

Chapter Seven – Easily And Horribly

This time the warblers had emerged in the middle of one of the planet's water refineries. Kennedy and Squad 2 had spent four hours driving the creatures back into their tunnels with flamethrowers. It had been the better part of a day before the area was secure again. In the interim period, and despite considerable effort to the contrary on Kennedy's part, the press had managed to corner their reluctant MMC darling.

Like it or not, Captain Mars wasn't going to escape her title any time soon. Woods did his best to hide his amusement, chiefly to avoid damaging morale. He had seen the recruitment office pull off worse stunts, but that had been of small comfort to his unfortunate CO. Kennedy was taking the situation very personally.

Right now, she was taking out her frustrations on

the base's firing range. "At least we might get funding towards a decent plasma weapon."

Woods nodded approvingly. "Way to half-fill that damn glass, ma'am."

She huffed. "Yeah, well, I figure positive thinking's got to be better than drowning my worries in synthetic booze, Gunny."

Woods shook his head disapprovingly. "How many times do I need to say it? That's what the good drinks locker is for, Marine."

Kennedy chuckled and set the rifle aside. "Don't tell the press, but I ain't got much of a tolerance for alcohol. It gets me kind of woozy."

"Sweet Saint Mary and a pound of mutton, ma'am – you mean to say that Captain Mars is a *lightweight*?" Woods clasped his hands to his face in exaggerated horror. "Say it ain't so!"

Kennedy patted his shoulder. "I'm afraid so, Gunny. Sorry to disappoint."

Woods feigned wiping away a tear. "My inner fan-freak is fucking heartbroken at the revelation, ma'am. He may never recover."

That made her laugh. "Well, it sure ain't the first time that I've done that to a fellow, Woods. Just be glad he didn't shell out for a ring!"

"Luckily for all involved, he's a one hundred percent confirmed bachelor, ma'am."

Kennedy smiled thinly. "Reckon we ought to steer this away from those kinds of details, Marine. We wouldn't want to end up back in sensitivity training again."

Woods frowned. "Didn't they say we were both banned for life after the last time?"

"Huh, good point." Kennedy looked thoughtful. "Damn, I guess that means we get a free pass to be politically unacceptable."

"The recruitment office sure won't like that, ma'am. Maybe that's your get-out option from all of this role model crap."

"Aw, they'd airbrush it out somehow."

Mellor kept his gaze fixed on the screen of his tablet and tried to ignore the sounds of the interrogation going on less than three metres behind him. The en-suite offered a windowless space tiled from floor to ceiling, but the door back into the communal area of their hotel suite wasn't especially soundproof. He wondered if the activist even knew anything important. *Saunders certainly thinks so.*

It was another ten minutes before the SCO emerged. "Do we have any psychotropic drugs?"

"I'm not authorised to hand those out, you know that." The administrator snuck a glance at Saunders' hands and wished that he hadn't. "Wait until Supervisor Hull gets here, okay?"

"But he's been in that meeting with the PR people for hours!" The taller man scowled. "She keeps insisting that she doesn't know anything!"

"Well, maybe she doesn't?"

If Hull hadn't arrived at that precise moment, he sensed that his PA wouldn't have survived. As it was, the supervisor caught Saunders' fist. "That's *enough*, David."

"Sir – he was sympathising with the asset!"

"What asset?"

"SCO Saunders managed to acquire one of the activists, Sir." Mellor pointed towards the bathroom. "Professor Erin Dermott, thirty-two, an Environmental Sciences lecturer from Mars Collegiate."

"God damn it...!" Hull hurried into the smaller room and knelt beside the woman cowering in the shower cubicle. "Professor Dermott, can you open your eyes?"

The bruised lids parted to reveal the vivid copper

colouration that was currently popular in synthetic ocular implants. "You corporate *bastards*...!"

"Don't worry, Sir: I made sure to use the jammers." The SCO sounded proud of having taken the initiative. "She's not able to broadcast – just record."

It was Mars; people died here easily and horribly every other day. All Hull needed to deal with this was 10cc's of JG-X14 for neural wiping, and a 15C scalpel to dig out the implants. Then they could dump what remained of her at the edge of the main colony and let the sand finish the job. He pulled his sidearm and fired twice instead. *I might as well test these new bullets.*

The impact slammed Saunders backwards into the wall of the en-suite. He slumped to the floor with a dull grunt of surprise.

Mellor ducked down behind the couch. "Sir – what are you doing?"

I'm making a positive first impression on our new contact, of course, isn't it obvious, Aaron? Hull winked at the younger man. *Ah, good – you've figured it out!*

Dermott remained baffled as he scooped her up. "I thought you were one of them...?"

"I'm not paid to torture people, and I wouldn't want to be." *Seriously, it's a vocation, not a career.* "Now let's get out of here – you need medical attention."

Doris Weaver would be fifty-seven years old if she survived to see July again. It bothered her to think that she had spent so very long a time engaged in lying, killing, and staying separate. Still, that was how it went. Spies flew alone over the darkest and brightest tides alike.

They bloody *had* to. How else could they do what was required? Be discreet, and stay discrete, as Pembleton liked to remind them all. It was – presumably – far easier to impose that standard than to submit to it. After all, the spymistress hadn't been the one sliced apart and left to bleed out slowly as bait! Getting past that sort of horror wasn't in any of the training manuals which Weaver recalled having studied.

Undoubtedly, the medics would declare PTSD or some other clever acronym to explain away the invisible scars. They'd write it up as such on her notes. Not that Weaver had a cat's chance of ever seeing *those*! Next of kin only: patients mustn't

concern themselves, and so forth. SCOs didn't have next of kin, but Nathaniel would check for her, which made it just about bearable.

"So how come Spence keeps on calling herself a freemartin?"

Whitby frowned. "I wasn't aware that *they* did anything of the sort, Miss Darnell."

"Ugh, seriously – do we have to do the gender-neutral crap?"

"Yes: it's called respecting the individual. Now, what do you mean by freemartin?"

They sat in the hover car in one of the parking bays outside of Osprey House, waiting for Campbell. Partway through Tanya's account of the events in the badger sanctuary, an alarm began to shrill. "What's happening?"

"I'm not certain yet, Miss Darnell. Bitter experience tells me it will be field operative related in some way."

Sure enough, Campbell emerged with a shivering Kathryn cradled in his arms and a scowling Barnabas trailing behind. The spy made his way straight to the hover car: smiling in that far too conciliatory fashion. "Terribly sorry, Whitby, but I'm

afraid that we'll need to bring the twins back to the safe house. They simply *aren't* getting the support that they need here."

"You're right – the neural map shows evidence of what could be an ongoing issue. I've managed to trace the initial event." Kenlow pulled up yet another chart. "This was taken shortly after Supervisor Hull's second coronary event."

Rosa nodded. "So, it would have been post Tokyo. Might we be looking at stress induced psychosis?"

"More probably amnesia – there's a considerable risk factor associated with the medication that he was prescribed."

"And after the FBT process he didn't need the medication, so his new brain was never exposed to it!"

"Indeed." The senior medic preened. "It's big stuff, you know. If we're right, then I don't like to hazard how our psych department will take the news!"

"Perhaps we'd best collate some more data to support our research."

"Actually, I think you two deserve a break."

They turned to face their unexpected guest. Kenlow blinked. "Mr Howard – I wasn't aware that you were intending to visit my department today, sir!"

The CEO flashed his usual hungry smile. "I find spot inspections help to encourage a regular level of productivity, Russell. Moreover, they make it easier to know who *really* pulls their weight. You two bright little bulbs certainly belong on the promotion list, by the way!"

Rosa took an instinctive step backwards even as she murmured her thanks. To judge by his expression, Kenlow shared her discomfiture. *I wonder if Mr Howard even realises how predatory he seems. It's probably not deliberate.*

She believed herself even less when the CEO followed her back to her desk whilst she packed up. "So, Kellie – how are you enjoying working for GETEC?"

"I...it's fine, thank you, sir."

"What, just *fine*?" Howard feigned a pout, and laughed at Rosa's stammered attempt to apologise. "I'm sorry, Kellie! You have to excuse my sense of humour. It isn't every day that I get to entertain such a delicate English rose."

"Oh...right! Well, thank you. Anyhow, I really must dash, sir." To Rosa's consternation, there was no one else present in the laboratory. Kenlow had already made good his exit.

Her employer smiled. "You've been working almost round the clock since Friday. How do Monday night margaritas with the boss sound to you, Kellie?"

"I'm not sure that it's appropriate, sir."

"Screw being appropriate: I own your ass! Now, grab your coat, and let's get going."

GETEC's Lancashire facility wasn't a patch on Miami, but Bernard Vetch had a talent for making the best of things. He reminded himself of this as he tried to make sense of Alice Armstrong's almost illegible scrawl. For ten hours a day, it was just the two of them cooped up in their windowless office, ticking off one damn box after another. "You think R&D will send us anything juicy to play with this week, Allie?"

The Englishwoman smirked. "What – like that imaginary micro drone that you *claim* to have flight tested?"

Vetch scowled. "Hey, I've got the file right here

on my computer! You want to review it, be my guest."

Armstrong rolled her eyes. "Nah, you're alright, Bernie. I promised Supervisor Hull that I wouldn't encourage your nonsense."

"You shouldn't trust that guy, Allie."

"Let me guess – he's lying, he set you up, and everything wrong with the world is his fault."

"Well, yeah...exactly that. Okay, maybe not the whole world part, but the rest of it."

She blinked at him, her eyes owl dark behind the prototype HUD visor. "I'm not being funny, but have you ever even *heard* of narcissism?"

Thomas had arrived back at the safe house too late for breakfast and too early for lunch. This had somehow translated into Spence having brunch alone with him whilst they waited for Craig to arrive. The non-gender was beginning to suspect that some sort of conspiracy was in place. "Everyone's determined to make me eat."

Campbell senior was his usual blunt self. "You're almost anorexic: we're concerned for the baby's well-being. Here – take another pancake."

"I had six of them for breakfast already!"

"Did you eat them yourself or feed them to that little robot?"

"Quincy doesn't eat." Spence pushed the plate away and leaned back in the chair. "I'm not anorexic – I've always been skinny; it's just how I'm put together."

"That's what they always say! I'm not falling for it: eat your pancakes. When's my lad due back, anyhow?"

"Whitby assures us that they'll be here by three."

"Well, that gives us a few hours to chat, doesn't it?" The retiree studied his companion. "You aren't what I'd have picked as a daughter-in-law. I like women with curves."

"Fuck off."

He smirked. "That's what you bring to the mix though – balls! Hardly surprising, given your relatives. Quite the asylum's worth! Even Edith's rattled."

"You've spoken with her?"

"Oh, we're old friends – although, she never *did* forgive me for screwing her sister."

Chapter Eight – The New Believer

"Everybody, this is Greg. He's going to be our inside man with GETEC."

Hull feigned the required blend of affable and perturbed. Professor Dermott wasn't as high up in the activist food chain as they had thought. It would take him some time to identify the real power around here. "It's nice to be here, but I'm still kind of confused about the mission, Erin."

The others gathered in the room – and damn it, none of them looked more than sixteen – snickered at his response. *Yeah, that's right: everybody laugh at the new believer. I wonder if your parents know what you've been doing.*

Dermott laced hands with him. "Come on guys, be nice. Remember: we were all new once. Don't worry, Greg. Everything will make sense once you've met Her."

Karen Wilkes left her home in the pitiless silence of an ambulance with no reason to hurry. The combination of home invasion and murder equated to a matter for the National Intelligence Team. Its operatives, observing the lack of press coverage through the cynical filter common to spies, concluded this to be extremely suspicious.

"If you ask me, Miss Drake, *someone* is throwing dirt over the grave before the coffin has even reached the funeral parlour." Caulfield examined his injury in the van's rear-view mirror again. "That casts significant doubt on this having been a simple burglary gone wrong."

The other NIT agent frowned. "How on Earth did you manage to knock yourself out anyhow?"

"Whilst you were busy out here running the background checks, a tall sort of chap, dressed all in black dropped out of the roof space and bopped me over the head. I'd hazard that he was involved with what happened here."

"Speaking of here, the late Ms Wilkes' flatmate appears to have had a narrow escape. She was covering overnight shifts at Osprey House. Dr Marion Finch – she's providing International with specialist

assistance up at the old dairy farm."

"Ah, now that sounds like it may prove important, Lottie. We'll need to interview her."

Dermott wouldn't stop screaming, so Hull closed the door behind him to muffle the sound whilst he answered the Martian Defence Force's barrage of questions. What happened? How did the warbler get into the building? Why was a representative from GETEC present? Did he know any of the cultists personally?

The supervisor kept his responses as accurate as was safe. It was an attempted mass sacrifice. The thing was already nesting in the damn basement. Professor Dermott had invited him over after he intervened to protect her from an overzealous GETEC security officer who found her trespassing. No, he'd never met any of them before tonight.

They let him go eventually. He picked his way clear of the scene and tried not to think about how close the teenagers had come to leaving here in body bags. Dermott's wails still echoed: mourning the charred remains of the alien that had become a deity to her. Something deep in Hull's gut told him not to try to find out the details behind how this

bizarre relationship between human and warbler had occurred.

Mellor and Saunders were waiting in the hotel suite. The young administrator set to work on his tablet immediately. "What about Professor Dermott, Sir? Her ocular implants...?"

"It's been handled." Hull dug around in his pocket, and tossed the entire gooey mess into the waste disposal unit. "No one will believe anything that she says."

"What about the rest of the activists, Sir?"

"They won't pose any further threat to GETEC's interests, Aaron."

"How can you be certain, Sir?"

"They're just a bunch of misguided kids." Hull wasn't sure when his voice had gotten so brittle. He sat down abruptly on the couch and closed his eyes. "Right now they're scared out of their minds. The warbler in Dermott's basement almost killed them. Crazy bitch was worshipping it: she'd convinced her students to join in."

Saunders regretted missing the action. "Sir – are you injured?"

"No; just wrung out, that's all. Mellor, make a note that sonic nullification technology is effective

versus the Martian warblers' cry, but that our current plasma grenades only work if the creatures ingest them. I want our R&D department here working round the clock on whatever the Marines out at Deimos Base need to eradicate those things."

"There you go, Kellie: another frozen virgin for you, and top-shelf for me."

"Thank you." Rosa picked at what remained of her birria. Somehow, Monday night margaritas with the boss had translated to four hours and counting dining out at a Mexican restaurant in Brickell. The food was admittedly wonderful, but it did little to soothe her nerves.

Across the table, Howard scraped up the final mouthful of his cabrito en sangre. "Best goat I've eaten this side of the border! You ever visited Mexico?"

"No."

"I've been boring you all evening with my views, Kellie. Come on – give me something about GETEC's newest star!"

"It's all in my file, Mr Howard."

"You don't like men very much."

That again: he'd inferred as much in the limousine that had ferried them here. "I told you, sir: I'm just a little tired after my shift."

"Oh – no, that's what it says in your file. Not comfortable around the opposite sex!" He laughed. "I guess recent events didn't help with that, huh?"

"I...you...that isn't funny, and you oughtn't joke about it, sir!"

"That's one of the perks of being the boss, Kellie."

The technician fumed silently. She had endured dinners and lunches with various unlikeable individuals over the course of her career so far. None had stooped to this level. Only the fact that Howard's patronage was the one thing between her and worse choked back her retort. Howard was unbearably right: he was the one in control here.

"Your file also writes you up as being a pacifist, but I'm not too sure if I believe that. Right now, you look like you'd like to stab me in the face with your fork." Howard leaned forwards. "I wonder what else they got wrong."

"Sir, I don't like these insinuations. I'd appreciate it if you'd desist."

"I'm starting to think British women are all the

same; just layer after layer of prudery; waiting to be peeled away." His right hand settled greedily atop her left wrist. "First Dr Jenkins, now you."

"What...what are you *talking* about?"

The CEO's grin broadened. "I've got a small confession to make, Kellie. Do you remember when our mutual friend put you across his knee and broke that pert little ass in? Well, I guess you might say that he wasn't really himself that night. Not that it was the only time I borrowed him. Let's hear it for the technology to control other people's brains!"

The technician scrambled up from her chair. "You mean that was *you*?"

"Yeah, sue me: a couple of years back, I found a secondary use for GETEC's ID chips. It seemed a shame not to test it, and good old Greg knows some *seriously* hot women."

Rosa grabbed the edge of the little table and overturned it. The remains of the meal spattered Howard's suit as the glasses and plates clattered across the mosaic flooring. "You utter bastard!"

The CEO waved dismissively at the approaching waiters. "It's fine; she's just a little drunk. I'll pay for all of the damages, gentlemen."

"I'm not drunk!" She backed away between two

of the neighbouring tables, pointing towards Howard. "This man claims that he uses mind control technology to abuse his employees!"

The other patrons showed enough interest that Howard made a swift exit. The restaurant, caught between civic duty and the importance of revenue, struck for the middle ground of the argument, waived the cheque, and arranged a taxi back to Desdemona Falls for Rosa. Her hands shook as she relocked the front door.

It took twenty-six minutes for the video feed to connect with the Martian communication grid. Hull answered promptly. "What's wrong?"

"Sir, you were right about your transponder! Carson Howard's been body jacking you for some time. He bragged about it over dinner tonight."

That creepy little shit is going to die slowly! "Does he know where you are now?"

"I'm not sure. I managed to create enough of a fuss at the restaurant that he left. The manager booked a taxi for me."

"Have you set the alarms?" The supervisor reached out to touch the screen at his end. "I'm concerned for you, Kellie."

"It's fine; I'm going to inform the police next."

"That won't be safe for you; Howard's got too much clout. He'll use every dirty trick available." *Of course, so will I, but you don't need to know that. After all, we don't want you running away again.*

"Well what other option is there, Sir?"

"You wait for me. We're taking the next flight home. I'll be there in forty-eight hours. Just stay put until then."

Spence cornered the senior technician in the front hall of the safe house. "Why didn't you stop him, Whitby?"

"Believe me, I tried! You of all people know how it is with field operatives. Once they get an idea in their head, there's no diverting them."

Campbell's voice drifted down from where he was giving the twins an impromptu tour of the farmhouse. "This will be your room, Kathryn."

Kathryn's voice echoed shrilly as she replied. "What about Barnabas?"

The girl's query skittered through the reeds of Spence's own concerns about the boy. Once again, Whitby received the brunt of the non-gender's emotions as they rounded on him. "Yes – what does it take for *him* to run out of chances?"

"He's...well, he's your nephew!" Whitby's rebuff sounded hollow. "Your family."

Spence scoffed. "Don't give me that – you saw firsthand what he did to Miss Darnell."

Whitby looked away. "It's only a scratch."

"He tried to gouge out her eyes!"

"Well, he didn't succeed. Now please, Spence, I really *must* go. I need to be back in London in time for tomorrow morning's departmental review."

A warm hand settled itself around the nape of Spence's neck. "Drive safe, mate. Come on, Housekeeping. Let's go see how Tanya's doing."

Moxton's usual air of cool authority drowned their notion of protesting further. Spence sighed and pushed down their feelings. "I still don't like it."

"Tough, there isn't anywhere else to stash them." He loosed his hold and pushed both hands into the pockets of his suit jacket as they walked. "Look, Darren's on his way back here from Osprey House with Dr Finch. We just had word that her flatmate was tortured to death in their home last night. Got any ideas about who might be behind that?"

"Not aside from the children."

"Spence, be nice."

The non-gender snorted and strode ahead of

him into the main sitting room. "How is she?"

"She'll live, darling." Leister patted Tanya's arm. "Keep that eye bath on and let the salve do its job. I'll go and make you something to eat."

"Let me give you a hand with that, Cob." Jenkins linked arms with him. *Mr Moxton's completely locked on Housekeeping! Paul was right to warn me off taking up with him; just not for the same reason that he thought.*

She hoped that her father didn't mention her erstwhile crush. He was the only person who knew. It was getting easier to remember her first life: before the Caribbean, and Saunders. The jigsaw of her mind was reforming. Every day a few more pieces fell into place. The biochemist liked some of them better than others. *Maybe I can leave the parts that I regret behind me – new life; new person...maybe...?*

Kennedy auto-archived unread the latest several hundred fan messages from the holographic chat board that she hadn't wanted set up in the first place. "It's a damn waste of time and resources, if you ask me, Gunny!"

"The recruitment office told you to regard it as

giving people something to aspire to, ma'am."

She scowled. "It's still bull crap."

Woods nodded his agreement. "Ain't arguing, there, ma'am. But interest in the Corps is up by fifteen percent since they launched the damn thing. That ain't too shabby, at least."

Kennedy peered at him suspiciously. "I'm starting to think you might be one of those damn optimistic types, Woods."

"I wouldn't go that far, ma'am."

Chapter Nine – Laying My Ghosts

Finch stared aghast at what her hosts had deemed to be the best means of containing Barnabas. "Are all of those locks on the door completely necessary, Mr Benedict?"

"Yes."

"Surely both he and Kathryn would be happier back at Osprey House. You could guard them there just as easily."

"We feel that it's wisest to keep all three of you here – to avoid the twins posing any risk to the general public during their rehabilitation."

"I suppose that's logical."

The field operative guided Finch gently to her own room. At some point, they would have to inform her about her flatmate, but for now, the twins needed her skills. "I'll leave you to finish unpacking, doctor."

Closing the door, he slipped back downstairs and out through the conservatory to the rear of the safe house. The designated smoking area beckoned. Thomas held the same opinion, save that the older man hadn't bothered to remain within the neatly marked square. He nodded at Benedict from the doorway of the ancient byre. "Laying my ghosts...well...trying to. Weaver had a bloody narrow escape in here!"

Benedict sucked in a lungful of very bad stuff. "Try not to burn down the entire farm, old chap."

"Hilarious. How's your girl doing anyhow?"

"Ashley? I think she's picking up. Leister seems to have brought her out of her shell."

Thomas grunted knowingly. "You want to keep an eye on him! He was quite the ladies' man, back in the day. Into some of those kinky goings on, if you get my drift...leather and such."

"Hmm, that's probably why they get along."

"Fuck me! I never would have spotted her for one of those sort. Is she going through a phase?"

"No, and before you ask, I don't think that Spence is either. Sorry."

"We'll see." The retiree crushed what remained of his cigarette between his finger and thumb.

"Sometimes women need the sense knocking back into them."

Benedict choked. "*What?*"

"A firm hand, lad. They crave it – it's why they end up doing those things to begin with!"

"Do you ever stop to notice how other people are staring at you in horror?"

"You mean when they realise that I'm there to kill them? All the damn time...well, before I retired at least."

"I need something that definitely isn't out here, excuse me. Oh, and keep away from Ashley. She doesn't need anything knocked."

It seemed to Bryce that sometimes there were only short straws available. Today was that kind of a day: take Fisher to soft play herself, or let the nanny do it and spend the morning with Marcus. Opting for the lesser purgatory, she had claimed the other moms were expecting to see her. At least that excuse got the bastard off her back about neglecting her marital duties.

Unfortunately, it also resulted in attending the damn soft play session. In case anyone doubted Marcus' dedication to family values, he had

bought over one of the biggest childcare venues in the state. *Nothing but the best for the kid; even if he ain't my own flesh and blood. You can't say I don't pay for everything he needs, Bryce. He'll go there every day! It'll do him good.*

Although she didn't dare to argue, her son had no such foibles. Despite his stepfather's firm views on the importance of parallel play, Fisher hated it. The mere sight of the luridly painted signage was enough to trigger a flat-out tantrum from the generally placid twenty-month-old. Bryce would have liked to scream too, but suspected that as the mother of said toddler, people would judge. As it was, she suspected the activity centre was forming the basis for an exceptionally negative first memory. *Greg would never have put him through this!*

She really needed to stop thinking about Greg. If Marcus even suspected...well, it wasn't as if he could read minds. He beat her regardless. Once per week – a maintenance session to cover anything that he'd missed, or that she had hidden. Greg hadn't been into maintenance. Hadn't needed to be. Bryce would have cut off her own damn arm before disappointing him. Both arms if it meant she could have him back. *I miss you so*

much. Fisher has your eyes.

Greg would have been an amazing father. There would have been no damn mandatory soft play, and definitely no controlled fucking crying. Bryce grimaced at that thought. At night every fibre in her body ached to lift her son and sooth him, but Marcus forbid such coddling. He told her that she was too soft! *If you were still alive, you'd kick his ass, wouldn't you, Greg?*

Fucking Tokyo, fucking monsters, and fucking unfair twists of fate: she wanted him back! She wanted their life together back – the life snuffed out thanks to that damn corporation and undoubtedly to Marcus too. He'd hinted as much since. That had made accepting his subsequent offer even more sickening: marrying her fiancé's killer. *I'm sorry, Greg. There just wasn't any other way they'd let me keep Fisher.*

"Good morning." The fellow waiting in the safe house porch smiled affably at the security camera. "Byron Caulfield, on behalf of National Intelligence; I was hoping that we might pool our resources."

Spence sighed and opened the door. "You'll need to speak to Dr Finch. She's in the sitting room –

second door on your right."

"Marvellous, thank you...and your name...?"

"I'm just leaving."

"But it's raining!"

"So what if it is? We're in England; rain's a remarkably common hazard."

"Well yes, but you haven't a lazrella. Please – take mine."

"I really don't think..."

"I insist." He had already pressed the handle into Spence's grasp. "There's nothing worse than having to sit in wet clothes whilst driving!"

"You assume that I'm planning on travelling by car. I'm not, and I can't abide wrestling with zrollies whilst walking."

Caulfield reactivated the offending item tossed back to him, and followed the pale figure out again into the chilly April morning. "Going anywhere in particular?"

"Not especially."

"It's just that in my experience, people who go walking in the rain tend to be incredibly interesting to know."

"In my case, that would be the Chinese notion of interesting."

"A-ha...here there are dragons, eh?"

"Not literally."

"Cob mentioned that you were feeling a little bit down."

The non-gender scowled. "So you're here on behalf of the old swan?"

"Oh good, it seems that I do have the right person! Nightingale, isn't it?"

"If I say no, will you go away?"

"Certainly, but Miss Drake would have to take over for me. I've assured Leister that you won't be left to top yourself."

"I'll assume that's a double."

"Words within words, and so forth; it's all very French. Shall we head back in?"

"I suppose we might as well. Bring your poor colleague whilst you're at it."

"That's the spirit! Lottie – we're going indoors now, do come along."

Drake stretched clear of the NIT vehicle and squeezed in beneath the vibrant glow of the lazrella. "The forecast says we're to have sleet!"

"Lottie detests the wet weather. Feline based genetic matrix; you know how it is."

"Actually, no – if you hadn't said, I wouldn't

have guessed." Spence eyed the slender augmetric. "What generation are you?"

"Third on my mother's and fourth on my father's, to be precise: eyes, ears, and reflexes."

"That must be handy in this job."

"Very." Drake hesitated as they entered the farmhouse. Her nostrils flared. "Ugh! Byron, you *assured* me that there weren't any dogs!"

"Leister didn't mention any when we spoke on the phone." Caulfield deactivated his lazrella carefully and tucked it away inside his blazer. "I made sure to ask him."

"It's Mr Dobos' jacket, sorry." Spence pointed at the nearby coat rack. "He and Mr Jolley are only just back from visiting Weaver at Century."

"Is that where you were heading off to?" Caulfield supposed it only fair to offer the non-gender an out. "Quite the walk from here to there – you must be very energetic!"

"Let's not pretend that our mutual friend hasn't told you everything that's happened. I just wanted to clear my head."

"Byron thought that we might end up pulling your corpse out of the Ribble." Drake ignored her colleague's pained expression and steamrolled

on. "Leister said you'd had a falling out with the fellow who got you in the club."

"Well you didn't. Now if it's all the same to you, I don't want to sit in on your interview. I'll be in my room if anyone needs me."

Kennedy grimaced as another chill ran through her. She tried and failed to settle herself more comfortably on the medical gurney. "Well, I guess you were right about the dangers of vengeful geneticists, Gunny."

Woods grunted from behind the faceplate of his hazmat suit. "How long do you think you'll be stuck in quarantine, ma'am?"

She shuddered. "Depends how long it takes the anti-viral meds to get to work. Our CMO said to allow anything from twelve hours to three weeks."

"Could have been worse, I suppose, Marine."

Kennedy coughed, and then rubbed miserably at her forearms. "Feels like my skin's trying to crawl off and die in a corner without the rest of me!"

The older Marine slid a rehydration pack between her blistered hands. "The recruitment office will need to check your fan mail a little more carefully from now on, ma'am."

"Your talent for understatement is truly fucking unrivalled, Woods...!" Kennedy coughed again. "Damn this cough!"

Beyond the hermetically sealed doors, the rest of Deimos Base continued to operate as normal. The Marines were working round the clock to contain the warblers, which now had sixteen known nests dotted about the main Martian settlement alone. Lethe's literal poison pen letter could hardly have arrived at a worse time.

"Don't plan anything too hasty." Woods knew that his CO would want to deal with the perpetrator personally. "You ain't going to be able to connect it to her, ma'am – at least not officially. That little self-immolating micronized doo-hickey she used made damn sure of that."

Kennedy scowled mutinously. "Maybe I'll do something completely *unofficial* instead then. Take myself off on leave to Pluto and accidentally run the bitch over with a hover tank."

Woods feigned checking his comms. "I didn't hear that, Marine, seeing as my ears are regrettably gummed up with anti-viral gel plugs, and so on."

"Just clearing my throat is all." Kennedy folded her arms. "Got a tickle in it. Or a frog."

"They have lozenges you can take to help with that, ma'am."

"Maybe Lethe will choke on one...!" Kennedy waited for the latest bout of coughing to pass. "Fuck, it's like I was back before I got my respiratory tract fixed!"

Woods frowned. "I never realised how bad your lungs were pre-treatment, ma'am. How the Hell did you even get past kindergarten alive?"

Kennedy shrugged; wincing sharply when the movement hurt. "Medication and dumb luck. Mostly the first one. I was a damn sickly kid."

She was a double damn sickly adult now, but Woods didn't want her to dwell on the percentages around her chances of recovery. "Reckon a botanist's kid like you should've known to eat her damn vegetables, Marine!"

"Yeah, my mom kept saying that." Kennedy let her eyes drift closed. "Course I was allergic to pollen too, so they had to keep me away from the greenhouse."

Woods blinked. "Shit, ma'am, it's like Nature *intended* for you to die!"

"I sometimes think that I must have pissed a lot of people off in a former life, Woods."

He forced himself to sound amused. "Got to love how you've just kept right on adding to that list of angry people this time around too, ma'am."

She opened her eyes and smiled tiredly at him. "Play to your strengths, and all that."

Woods clasped her hands. "Just you bear in mind that not everybody hates your guts, Marine. Some of us are rooting for you."

Kennedy tightened her fingers around his gloved hands. "Your inner fan freak again?"

"What can I say, ma'am? He's thoroughly invested in the whole Captain Mars thing. Gullible bastard even bought the sticker album."

His CO sat up a little at his words. "Hold up, there are *stickers* now?"

"Aye-Hell yeah, ma'am – some of them even have glittery edgings."

Chapter Ten – Insufficient Pink Wafers

Desdemona Falls had settled into its usual Wednesday night tranquillity by the time that Hull arrived home. Somewhere along the street, a few of the neighbours were hosting a barbeque. His own house was in darkness: the security alarms inactive. He abandoned his suitcases in the front hall and went immediately in search of Rosa. "Hello? Are you still here, Kellie?"

"Supervisor Hull, thank God you're back!" The young woman sprinted downstairs to greet him. "Mr Howard kept on phoning me; making all sorts of horrible threats...!"

"Hey, it's okay. I'll take care of it."

She huddled into him. "I tried to contact you again, but then the electricity went off."

A faint whiff of sour dairy and too-warm raw

meat reached Hull then. "Ugh...let me guess – everything perishable in the kitchen...?"

"Oh yes, that too. I'm sorry, Sir; I mean I tried to clean it up, but...!"

"Poor thing; you're really shaken up, aren't you?" He smoothed her hair away from her face. "That's my girl. Come on: let's go power up the secondary generator in the basement. I really should have told you where to find it before I left."

Rosa followed him at as close a distance as could be considered decent. "A spare generator yes, of course. I ought to have thought of that."

"Panic does funny things to people. Aeneas wasn't wrong there."

"You've read Tacitus?"

"Yeah, but my parents always wanted me to be a museum curator. I majored in Ancient History at college. What's your excuse?"

She hiccupped nervously. "Since...since when does one require an excuse to appreciate the Classical Era?"

"So at heart you're a Humanities student and proud of it, huh?"

"I suppose I am."

"Then I'm in good company." Outside of the

torchlight, the basement was even darker than the main house. It made a perfect excuse for him to take her elbow. "Careful – mind the steps."

"When are we going to report what he did to the police?"

"Howard? We're not. It's your word against his, I'm afraid, and he can afford to shout louder."

"But my memories are technically recordings! We could present them as such...as proof."

"The second that we go down that path, you end up counted as a machine again." Hull set down the emergency lantern and threw the lever that activated the generator. "Is that what you want as your life – being treated as less than human?"

"No, but I have to show them *why* I did it!" She pointed, sobbing even as he turned to look. "I swear I didn't have any other choice, Sir!"

Carson Howard's by now bloated corpse lay in the far corner of the basement, a kitchen knife still embedded in his chest. Hull swallowed slowly: delighted and concerned. Clearly, his new pet had found her claws! "It's okay: I know it was self-defence, Kellie. I won't let you take the fall."

Campbell leaned in around the edge of Spence's door. "Dr Finch's interview went about as well as we could hope. She's gone up to her room to call her flatmate's mum about the funeral."

"I suppose we'll need to sort out security for her to attend it?"

"No, NIT's seeing to that, thankfully. They want to talk to the rest of us next. Cob told me to fetch you."

"Alright, let's go."

Drake nodded to them as they entered the main sitting room. "As I was saying, the home invaders' technique clearly resembles that of the infamous Elba killer – the late Jasper Lackey. The media aren't remotely interested in spotting the connection, and nor are our uniformed compatriots."

Moxton frowned. "That's a bit odd."

"It seems that there may be more skeletons hiding amongst the old money." Caulfield handed Spence the tablet displaying the details. "However, we need to find someone from that echelon of society to invite an investigation."

Spence closed their eyes and waited in vain for the hint to go away. "You want me to out myself as

being the next in line to the Lackey estate."

Leister elbowed Thomas sharply in the solar plexus before he could weigh in. "No one here expects you to do anything of the sort, darling. You walked away from their world years ago."

"Still, it would help if you tell us any details that you remember." The augmetric stared deep into the pale blue eyes. "Perhaps then you'll be able to forgive yourself for not reporting sooner."

"Forgive *myself*, Miss Drake? I tried to tell the truth for six years! No one bloody listened. They said I was mentally disturbed – locked me up and threw away the damned key. So no, I don't blame myself for not reporting it again once I finally escaped!"

Silence descended. Dobos shook his head in response to Quincy's small beep. "Hugging it out won't fucking help this time, 'bro.'"

<query-caFFEinatedbeverage>

Jenkins scrambled to her feet. "Good idea – I'll go and put the kettle on!"

"Aye let me give you a hand with that, love!" Jolley vaulted over the back of the sofa to follow her. "Ollie, why don't you and Quincy come along with us to sort the biscuits out?"

"Cheers, Darren – come on Quincy."

<advisory-insufficientpinkwafers>

Tanya giggled, the synthetic morphine erasing her usual shyness. "What's next – a duel to the death?"

"I wouldn't rule it out yet!" Thomas glowered at Leister. "Why the devil *shouldn't* Craig's little bit of skirt claim their inheritance? Am I the only one that can see the benefits involved?"

"I'm *not* his bit of fucking skirt!"

"Fine: trousers, whatever. The point is that you're refusing the one sure means of protecting my grandchild!"

"Um...you mean grandchildren, plural – because it's twins." The teenager clapped both hands over her mouth. "Sorry!"

"Right, that does it, enough – everybody aside from Spence and me get out now!" Campbell slammed the door closed on the assorted congratulatory remarks. "Why in the world did you tell Tanya ahead of me that it was twins, canary?"

"I didn't: she overheard Hull on the jet."

"*Hull* knows that it's twins?"

"Yes, of course he bloody knows! He has boundary issues and virtually unlimited access to ridiculously advanced sensory technology."

"He certainly didn't mention it when he was threatening to send a gift." The field operative knelt and rested his forehead against Spence's navel. "Jesus, twins! We really did kick the odds with this, didn't we?"

"So, you're *not* angry?"

"Anger will have to wait. Right now, I'm too busy repressing my hug instinct and reminding myself that grinning from ear to ear won't be appreciated."

"I suppose that the grinning part might be acceptable, given the circumstances."

Woods frowned at the gift hamper; pondering if this was one of the things that you sent back. On the one hand, he didn't want Alistair Waverly making any overly privileged assumptions. Then again, the fancy storage pod was crammed full of luxury foodstuffs. Under normal circumstances, Kennedy would have decided what to do with it, but for now, the CO of Deimos Base was still delegating. The good news was her prognosis for a full recovery was reasonable.

Fuck it - a sympathy hamper from the asshole that Kennedy had fought to leave behind her was

never going to taste good. He'd send it back and remind the bastard about that non-molestation order. Maybe Waverly wouldn't be smart enough to take the hint. Hell, maybe he'd demand to visit in person! *I might even let him try, if it means I get to demonstrate why he shouldn't throw his weight around with a Marine.*

Rosa stared at the bright lines of code skittering across the screen. Her security clearance level had decreased. It seemed that giving your supervisor proof that he wasn't insane *didn't* equate to furthering one's career within GETEC. *At least he's covered up what I did.*

"That file's corrupt." Kenlow's voice interrupted her regrets. "I take it that those drinks went further than you'd anticipated?"

"Yes – it all got very out of hand."

The medic nodded towards the news feed on his own screen. "Howard doesn't think so."

"What...whatever do you mean?"

Her companion scrolled back. "CEO declares his undying love for underling."

"That can't be right!" It really couldn't be. Howard was dead, and the dead didn't give

humiliating interviews on mass media! Yet there he was, smirking at the cameras and bragging to the world about his plans for their future together.

Kenlow fidgeted. "I'm sorry I rushed off without you on Monday."

"I...excuse me; I've got to speak to Supervisor Hull about this!"

"He's on his way down here for another assessment. It seems certain that the issues we were worried about were due to the problem with the file, as opposed to a medical concern."

Rosa almost started to tell him that it had most likely been the residual effect of Howard's puppetry. *No – that isn't safe information.* In fact, it was beyond unsafe. Far too many other details would then come roiling to the surface. *Take my having murdered our CEO, for one example!* She swallowed hard and forced herself to smile. "Alright, I'll speak to him about filing a grievance after his medical."

"I always think of eyeballs when I do this." Weaver peeled the final shred of skin away from the grape and popped it into her mouth. "Sheep's eyeballs – not human, obviously!"

Spence took a mouthful of banana before the field operative could connect anything horrible to that. "How long has this basket been sitting out?"

"Since my initial admission...they just top it up whenever things run out."

"I'll make sure that you get a fresh one. Sorry Dr Whitby's not been by much. He's juggling a few too many balls if you ask me."

"Has there been any word about Dr Rosa?"

"She's in Miami; working for GETEC. Technically it's above board."

Weaver snorted. "So who are we sending in?"

"Most likely it'll be Mr Dobos."

"That's going to be loud for the Americas."

The non-gender tossed their half-eaten banana into the waste disposal unit. "Oh, I don't know – he and Mr Jolley appear to have shaped up somewhat."

"Mr Moxton has hidden talents."

"He's good at keeping order."

"Maurice told me that he's been pushing. I'll hit him a jolly good thump once I'm recovered, if you'd like?"

"It's fine."

"Are you sure about that, Housekeeping?"

"Believe it or not, I can look after myself."

"Is that why no one else is with you today?"

Spence looked down. "I suppose you could say that I decided to draw a line."

"How far along are you now?"

"The initial scan's been delayed; technical issues, apparently. Unofficially, it's six weeks. We're still waiting on sentencing regarding whether we'll be approved to continue."

"You do realise that you don't have to go through with it? We aren't in Ireland, after all."

"Cob did mention my options, yes."

"I trust you're not just hanging on in there for the good of Craig?"

"No. Well, yes. It's complicated." Weaver had always been far too bloody able to spot the cracks. "I love him."

"I'd still hazard that he wouldn't want you to martyr yourself for him! Anyway, how about Thomas: has the old git voiced his opinions yet?"

"Oh, only every day since he found out."

"What seems to be the problem, Dr Rosa?"

The technician glanced around the office. "May I speak frankly, Supervisor Hull?"

"Of course – that's why I had the multi-frequency jammer installed. You look tense."

"Mr Howard's alive, Sir!"

"That does tend to be one of the pre-requisites for a functioning CEO, doctor."

"But...but he was...in the basement...?"

Hull blinked. "This building doesn't *have* a basement level."

"Sir, I mean the one in your house!"

He was enjoying this a little too much. "Why would the CEO have been in my basement?"

"Because he was stalking me, and then I killed him, but...!"

The supervisor smiled. "Don't be silly. I saw him this morning for a debriefing regarding Mars. I think you must still be suffering the after effects of the FBT process – it's disrupted your thinking."

"What...but...but Sir, I...!"

"You obviously need some more time off work. I'll arrange a week's leave. Congratulations on your impending nuptials, by the way. I'm sure it will be the wedding of the century."

"I'm *not* bloody engaged to Mr Howard, and he definitely was dead! Why are you acting as if you don't know that?"

"Why are you insisting that you want me to believe that you're a murderer?" There was no warmth to his voice now.

Rosa sank onto the couch opposite the desk and buried her face in her hands. "Sir...!"

"I'm only going to reiterate this for you once, Kellie." Hull stepped around behind the couch and rested his hands on her shoulders: savouring the resultant whimper. "As far as anyone else knows, Carson Howard is alive, and regrettably healthy. The fact that he's secretly a cheap clone hosting an AI under my control is irrelevant, and we're not going to mention it ever again. Got it?"

"Oh! Yes Sir. Yes, I've got it."

"Good girl. Now, do you have any other concerns that we need to go over?"

"This supposed engagement between me and Mr Howard...it's wrong."

He tightened his grip. "There's an awful lot of money and power attached to him, doctor. It could be a once in a lifetime chance for you."

"Please Sir, I don't want it."

"Do you need me to make it all go away for you, Kellie?"

"Yes, please Sir."

CAPTAIN MARS

“Okay. I’ll get the relevant forms, and we’ll sit down and discuss the details of your grievance with Mr Howard.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Chapter Eleven – Exceptionally Dangerous

Captain Mars had been cured, and now the press wouldn't shut up about it. The medical specialists wanted to name her condition as Hwenjosdos Syndrome. It had something to do with it being groundbreaking research: a truly unique disease. Kennedy was too relieved to have the all clear to care much either way. She had buried herself snugly in her career to celebrate, and now that had led her home to the Red Planet.

There was only one secure psychiatric facility on Mars, and the MMC oversaw it. That made visiting Professor Dermott a lot simpler. Kennedy figured that the blinded woman might provide some insight into what the warblers were after. Maybe then, the Marines could predict where the next attack was likely to occur. Playing catch-up with the damn

things was wreaking havoc with morale. But now that she was there, Kennedy admitted to herself that the idea was maybe less than sensible. *Just have to hope that it turns out to be worth it!*

Most of the inmates were exceptionally dangerous. Six mass murderers, two cannibals, and a trio of sexual deviants were amongst the less terrible. There were constant automated reminders for staff and visitors to use due caution. Unfortunately, the audio on the broadcasting system was slightly off key. Kennedy's nerves were down to their last notch by the time that she and her escort arrived outside of Dermott's cell.

The former lecturer turned towards the sound of the door opening. Her eyelids sagged over the empty sockets. "Who's there?"

"You've got a visitor – Captain Kennedy." The male orderly looked at Kennedy for instruction. "She ain't violent, Ma'am. You want us to wait outside?"

Kennedy nodded curtly. "Yeah, but leave the door open, Marine. I don't need to end up accidentally locked in!"

Dermott cackled. She was pacing the far wall of the room, tracing her fingertips along the padding. "You're already a prisoner...all chained up inside

your pathetic human morality...!"

Kennedy cut her off. "I ain't got time for your sympathising. The only reason I'm here is to figure out how those damn monsters tick."

"They're not the monsters."

"Yeah, well, we got a trail of mangled corpses that says otherwise." Kennedy stepped further into the cell. "Maybe you missed out on all the news reports about that."

"I remember. He cut my eyes out, not my memory." Dermott swatted vaguely at thin air. "I never should've trusted him...!"

Kennedy frowned. "Who are you talking about? Besides, if you remember what happened, then how come you insist that the warblers ain't monsters?"

Dermott smiled beatifically. "They only kill those who try to hurt Mars."

Kennedy sighed. "Is there any chance of you being a little less God damn cryptic?"

The blinded woman hummed. "I'm not the one keeping secrets. You should ask the corporate fucks at GETEC; with their dig site, and their chemicals...!"

"Hold up!" Kennedy strode across the cell and clasped Dermott by her shoulders. She stared into

the prisoner's ruined face. "You're saying that GETEC are to blame for the warblers' activities?"

"GETEC are to blame for a lot of things, captain."

Kennedy could believe that much all too easily. It didn't make Dermott any less insane. "Professor, what do you mean? What has GETEC done?"

Dermott snarled and twisted free from her grasp. "My students and I warned people what was happening! No one wanted to listen!"

Kennedy kept her voice level. "I'm listening now, ma'am. Why don't you tell me more?"

"You just want to kill the warblers!"

The CO grimaced. "The thought had crossed my mind, sure. Still, that was before you told me about their motives."

"So now you're on our side, is that it?"

"I might be, if you can prove that they ain't out to slaughter us all." Kennedy stepped closer. "How about it, Professor Dermott – do you want to read me in on the details?"

"You don't understand...none of you fucking understand! You, me, and our entire planet – we're finished. GETEC has made sure of that."

"GETEC has doomed Mars?" Kennedy scowled. "Not if I have anything to say about it!"

Of course, *that* kind of statement was what was feeding the whole Captain Mars bandwagon. Really, she needed to stop making them. But with any luck, the young corporal serving as orderly would keep his mouth shut. Kennedy hoped so. *There's far too many of those damn trading cards in print already!*

"It's kind of hard to believe you, Tanya. I mean you totally trash talked our friendship!"

"That blog was supposed to be private!" Tanya winced at the resultant screeching. "Kassie, I'm sorry!"

"The only thing that you're sorry about is being found out!" At the Miami end of the video chat, Kassandra Shelby reached for the cancel button. "Fuck you!"

Tanya switched off the safe house communications console and slumped back onto the sofa. "Well so much for that idea!"

Drake glanced up from the newspaper that she was pretending to read. "You can't really blame her. Those blog entries were terribly harsh. Although I expect the media exaggerated things to inflame the public."

"Thanks for nothing!"

"At least you get to use the nice painkillers." The augmetric yawned, revealing a perfect set of slightly too-sharp teeth. "Byron once got so hammered on synthetic morphine that I had to sling him over my shoulder and carry him!"

"Wow, so do you have super tiger strength powers or something?"

"No, it's all in how one lifts."

"I got another question...what's up with you and Mr Caulfield hanging out here? Is there a big joint operation thing happening? Only I thought Spence vetoed helping investigate."

"They did, which leaves us with Dr Finch. If she's here, then we will be too. Protecting an asset is something that our department takes extremely seriously."

As always, one of Marcus' cars was waiting when Bryce and Fisher exited the Friday morning session at the soft play centre. It was a different driver to the guy who'd dropped them off, but Westlowe hired and fired staff as it suited him. By now, his wife knew better than to remark on it. *The name on the bank account calls the shots!*

She nodded politely to their chauffeur and settled Fisher into his booster seat before attending to her own seatbelt. "Sorry we're running a little late today; there was a party for one of the other kids."

"It's fine, ma'am."

Bryce frowned as they pulled out into traffic and took a left instead of the anticipated right. "Hey – this isn't the right lane! You need to turn the car around."

"I was told to take you and the boy directly to the Bellamy, ma'am."

"Oh. Marcus didn't mention that."

"It's a last-minute thing, ma'am."

The Bellamy was her husband's preferred hotel whenever he had anything big to celebrate. She wondered what today's occasion was. Knowing her luck, the secondary pre-conception FIL was back. The pregnancy would mean a break from the maintenance sessions, at least. Marcus wouldn't want to risk his biological heir. Bryce could only hope that he wouldn't deem Fisher surplus to his requirements.

They drove past the front of the Bellamy and around to the hotel's underground parking lot. Fisher cooed at the driver as the man lifted him

clear of his booster seat. "I was told to take the boy on up to your usual suite, ma'am. You're expected in the Fig Leaf – Table Six."

"But I'm not dressed for the Fig Leaf...!" Bryce choked back a sob as her son vanished into the elevator with his hulking escort. She would have to work with what she had. Brushing the worst of the toddler related detritus from her sundress, the blonde-haired woman touched up her make-up before pressing the call button. *Just when I figured Marcus couldn't be any less understanding, he found a way!*

The glass doors leading into the Fig Leaf glistened despite the minimalist lighting, as did the rest of its surfaces. Six was the furthest booth from the entrance. The wrought iron grille surrounding it followed the restaurant's theme with a pattern of stylised leaves and fruits. Bryce glimpsed a single figure seated at the black marble table. A little of the nervous tension left her. *At least he can't accuse me of showing him up in front of company this time!*

She steeled herself and slipped quietly into the booth. "If you'd prefer it then I can go up to the suite and get changed."

"You look perfect, baby. You always do."

The voice knocked Bryce's concept of reality out from underneath her. She gaped at the man sitting opposite: not merely alive but somehow younger! "Greg...?"

"It's okay now, Bryce. I'm back."

"But Greg, you can't be here! You *died*!"

He leaned closer and cupped her face in his hands; tracing her skin reverently. "I got better."

"So, are you all heading back down to London, or shall it just be the active operatives?"

Spence eyed the NIT agent warily. "Why does National need that information, Mr Caulfield?"

"We don't; I'm just being nosy." He winked and settled himself on the opposing armchair. "I like doing that."

"I don't know how it is in your department, but Pembleton doesn't pay us to sit around doing nothing."

"Maternity related leave of absences aside of course, hmm?"

"I'm still on the injured roster actually, and besides which I *didn't* get myself pregnant for holiday reasons, you pillock!"

"You're very zingy when you're cross."

"What?"

Caulfield sneezed. "Sorry – pheromones; I have a talented nose."

"You're like Miss Drake then?"

"Not as such. I think you know what I mean."

The non-gender tensed. "Speak plainly, before I get any more paranoid."

"Alright, let's set augmetric types and SCOs aside. Seventeen percent of the basic human race is a bit different from the rest. We're two of them." He tapped the side of his nose. "Me with my special olfactory capabilities and you with what you do. You know – that clever way that you have with words."

"Just where do you get your information from, anyhow?"

"Oh, I have my sources. It's the nature of the game – you know that."

"I feel oddly afraid that you might be about to sprout a baggy shirt and start singing."

"No, no – *nature*, not *name*!"

"Nevertheless, you get the reference."

"You can blame pub quizzes for that." Caulfield stretched out his legs and rested both feet on the

coffee table. "Twentieth Century popular culture happens to be one of my team's specialist topics!"

"I've missed you, baby." Hull wrapped his arms around Bryce as they entered the hotel suite. "Not as much as I'd have liked to, but as I said, there were memory suppressants involved."

"It wasn't your fault, Greg. I'm just happy that you're back."

"Since when do I get off this lightly for missing that many date nights?"

"Well, you haven't got off yet at all."

"Hmm, guess we'll need to see about that."

"Later, for sure – first I want to introduce you to our little boy." Bryce looked towards the burly figure crouched on the rug beside Fisher.

The supervisor nodded. "You can go get the car ready now, Mr Saunders. We'll follow along presently."

"Yes Sir."

Fisher hiccupped and reached for his mother. "Mommy...up...!"

Hull hung back a little and watched as Bryce lifted the boy. There was wariness to her movements: as though she halfway expected

someone would intervene. "This is your real Daddy, Fisher."

Suddenly his arms were full of recalcitrant toddler. A chubby fist socked him squarely in the front teeth. "No – Mommy...up...!

"Ouch!" Hull chuckled and shifted around so that Fisher had a clear view of Bryce. "I guess he's inherited my tendency for micromanaging."

"Sorry, sorry; I could've sworn that he'd grown out of punching new people!"

"Hey, it's fine; he's just a baby, Bryce."

"You aren't mad at him."

"What – mad at a toddler for being a toddler? Of course not...come here, you!"

She sighed as they settled into their group hug. "I'm sorry, Greg. I...I guess I've forgotten what normal couple stuff is."

"We've got the rest of our lives to take that for granted. Try and take things easier on yourself, baby."

Chapter Twelve – Go Team Kraken

For the past five hours since the phone call from London ended, they had lain here together not talking. Every so often, Spence strove to find the words, failed, and huddled a little closer to their mentor. The smooth cording of strong arms and the pepper clean scent of aftershave was a half-step clear of everything that the lies had promised and the truth had ripped away. His presence slammed down a soundproofed lid over the entire screeching can, and somehow made it possible to breathe.

The non-gender finally broke the silence. “I simply never dreamed that *he'd* do that.”

“I know, darling.”

“I let him back in, and he lied.”

“He *omitted*, Nightingale.”

“It's no bloody better, Cob!”

"No, darling – no, in fact it's worse."

"Single for six fucking months before Strasbourg; oh, but by the way, technically, I'm already fucking *married!*"

"Ease up, a little." Leister bent his head just far enough to kiss the pale brow. "Yes, he misled you, but their relationship was only supposed to be part of his cover."

"He still should have told me! Christ, did he really think that it wouldn't be flagged up when we applied for the FIL?"

"Edith ought to have read you in on the matter far more gently – very poor form."

"Ha! All those work-related separations – I thought it was me that she disapproved of for him, not the other way around!"

"I must ask, darling – what did she say to you the last time that had you so tangled up?"

"It's awfully silly by comparison, old swan."

"Tell me anyway, Nightingale."

"She said that Craig wasn't exactly Thomas' son...that he was made artificially, and that he was sterile."

"An SCO, you mean?"

"Yes. Pembleton inferred that I must have been

sleeping with other people. I hadn't; ergo her concerns made no sense, and that meant that it wasn't true. Still, I couldn't figure out the reasoning behind the lie. Now it makes too *much* sense."

"So is Ashley still under you?"

Hull smiled as he toyed with Bryce's hair. "I'm afraid the lovely Dr Jenkins has been through a lot of personal stuff recently. We'd be better off finding someone else to play with us."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Well, there's a list. Do you want to help me narrow it down, or should I surprise you?"

"Having my fiancé come back from the grave twenty years younger is enough of a surprise! Give me the details."

"Okay – wait here while I get my tablet."

Bryce snuggled down beneath the sheets: drinking in the sight of Hull's perfectly toned body as he padded across the bedroom. "I love that you're this well-organized."

"I love that you love it."

The lights on the baby monitor flickered as Fisher began babbling in his sleep. Bryce scrambled up; grabbing her robe. "Is it okay if I go check on him?"

"Yeah, sure, of course it is!"

"Sorry. Marcus always says that I fuss too much. He thinks I spoil him."

"Bryce, sweetie, you aren't spoiling our son. Look, it's almost morning anyhow. I'll get dressed and make us both some coffee. You check on the little guy."

There was a missed message icon showing on the household communications console in the front hall when he got downstairs. The supervisor sighed and rerouted it to the kitchen. He frowned as the ID coding sequence for GETEC's Martian facility scrolled across the screen. Then the text of the message appeared: military investigation; Priority 4 alert; immediate action needed...!

No. Hull switched off the feed. It was supposed to be his day off. Someone else could handle the shit this time. He had enough blood on his hands, especially given what had gone down with Marcus and his security team. *Saunders is getting a little too inventive in his thinking. Maybe Howard was onto something. No, don't risk thinking about Howard – fuck, what if Rosa lets the truth slip?*

That didn't seem unlikely enough. She was hanging on to her wits by an increasingly tenuous

thread. If recent events hadn't indebted her to him, Hull would have erased the relevant data from her memory files. The latter was still an option, of course, but he hoped to avoid it: Bryce did like British accents, after all. *Because hey, why not opt for the most impractical choice of sub that you have available, huh, Greg?*

The console lit up again: still Mars, still his day off, still not handling whatever had gone wrong. So determined, the supervisor busied himself with the coffee. His cell joined in unnoticed with the chorus of demands for attention. Set to silent, it vibrated itself right off the edge of the counter before he could grab it. The casing pinged open on impact with the tiled floor and skittered away from the assorted contents. "Damn it!"

"Hey, baby." Bryce sidled up beside him and kissed his neck. "What's the matter?"

"Just work stuff – it can wait. They do have other supervisors."

"Hmm, but not like you."

"I'm prioritising, sweetie." He smiled and kissed her. "You know; a healthy work and home life balance. Research indicates that kind of thing's important."

Her hands showed him that she was definitely on board with that, but she chided him anyhow. "You wouldn't leave them hanging, Greg. I know how that big loyal brain of yours ticks over when it comes to the job!"

"Well, keep *that* up, and my brain won't be all that's ticking over!"

She shook her head and ducked just out of reach to pick up the remains of his cell. "I still think you should check, just in case it's serious."

Neither of them would mention Tokyo aloud. Hull sighed and nodded. "I'll see what they need, and arrange for someone else to provide it. Because for the foreseeable future, you and I are going to be very busy catching up...clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. Now – I get that combining kids and coffee equals a very bad parenting decision, so I was thinking maybe fruit smoothie if Fisher's awake? Is he into those? Wait, has he any allergies or intolerances; is dairy a problem? Because I can make a grocery run – there's a little round the clock store twenty minutes from here that stocks everything."

"Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"He loves smoothies, but he's still sleeping."

"Oh."

"You get weirdly adorable when you're menu planning, do you know that?" Bryce smiled. "Look, go do the work thing; I've got this, I promise."

"Alright, but my home office is right across the hallway, so holler if you need anything. Oh, and the milk is...!"

"It's in the refrigerator, I know!"

He finally let her shoo him out of the kitchen: smiling as he went. Humming under his breath, the supervisor switched on the computer and sat down at his desk to piece his cell back together. They'd clawed their relationship back, despite all of the odds. Hell, even the age difference was gone this time around! For the first time in too long, life was exactly as it was supposed to be.

Aside, that was, from the fact that Susan Kennedy had apparently been calling him. *What could the military's wannabe wonder spy be after from me?*

There was only one way to find out. The Martian answered on the first ring. "Damn it, Hull, it's about time you got in touch!"

"Captain Kennedy, I do hope that this isn't to do with your inappropriate crush again?"

"Shut the fuck up, you asshole. I know what GETEC has been up to on Mars! Did you really think that you'd get away with it?"

"I'm going to need a few more details. By the way, is Captain Mars your new legal name?"

"Wow, another reason for me to shoot you."

"Sorry – I guess that wasn't funny. Look, what exactly is it that you think GETEC has done? Well, aside from providing your Marines with decent firepower against the warblers."

"According to what I've dug up, the warblers ain't the thing that we should be worrying about! Your power mad scientists have destabilised the entire Martian eco-system."

God damn it; here we go again with the fucking scientists! "Captain Kennedy, I really *don't* know what you're talking about."

She snarled at him. "I'm talking about another Tokyo! Except that this time, it'll be an entire planet. Maybe that doesn't matter though – I mean, who gives a crap about Mars?"

"I sincerely give a crap about it." Hull's stomach had sunk at the mention of Tokyo. "Just tell me

what you need me to do, and I'll put every resource that's available to me at your disposal."

"Huh. That's better than I'd anticipated."

"There are some lines that shouldn't be crossed, captain. Tokyo was one of them, and I get the impression that this is another. Fill me in so that I can at least try to be useful."

"Mx Spence – how are you today?"

"I'll assume that you haven't randomly reassigned me as Scottish, Mr Caulfield."

"Sorry; I was under the impression that using a gender-neutral honorific would be polite."

"Oh."

Caulfield hummed. "You really ought to cut a few windows in that emotional wall of yours – let some daylight through. It must get terribly lonely hiding behind it all the time."

"It's conducive to a mundane but largely peaceful existence, actually."

"Better known as a life where no one ever takes you by surprise, eh?"

The non-gender edged past him and peered dolefully at the condition of the milk in the safe house refrigerator. "Why does no one else seem

capable of replacing this?"

"You're avoiding my question again."

"Bluntness shan't change that, Mr Caulfield."

"Would anything?" The NIT operative poured himself a glass of orange juice, and sat down at the table. "Look, I promised Leister that I'd try to cheer you up."

Spence shook their head firmly. "There's no need. I'm already completely over it, as the Americans like to say."

"Hmm. That's obviously a steaming pile of male bovine excrement, to paraphrase another of their popular utterances."

"Shouldn't you and Miss Drake be focusing your efforts on Dr Finch?"

Byron shrugged. "There's hardly much point. Let's face facts; we can't hope to bring those responsible for her flatmate's murder to justice, now can we?"

"This feels a damn sight less like cheering up than it does guilt tripping, Mr Caulfield."

"Well, I'm not a counsellor."

"It's just as well that no one here needs professional help then."

"Your niece and nephew certainly do."

Spence took the chair opposite him and picked at a bowl of dry cereal. "Finally, we agree on something. Still, that's Finch's job."

"She's not equipped to fix that degree of damage. So now there are two things that we agree on, aren't there?"

"Are you keeping score?"

"I'm merely totting up the reasons for you to let me in that non-existent window."

"Sorry – I cut my hair off for a reason. Recent events have reminded me of what it was."

Caulfield's eyes softened enough to indicate his understanding. "Well, let's hope that nobody ends up blind."

"Do you guys ever talk like normal people?" Tanya shuffled into the kitchen. "Ugh, so tired!"

Spence was unsympathetic to her plight. "That's what happens when one stays up all night dredging the Internet, Miss Darnell."

Tanya glowered back at them. "Hey, for your information, I was kept awake against my will; listening to you and Craig arguing!"

"Sorry."

"Whatever." The young American woman set about making toast. "Where is he today anyhow?"

"He's gone fishing with Thomas." Spence pushed their bowl away almost savagely. "I hope they hook a bloody kraken!"

Tanya edged further away from them. "Okay...seriously no idea what that is, but you sound pretty mad, so yeah – go Team Kraken, I guess?"

Byron cleared his throat politely. "Sea monsters notwithstanding, how long until the current Mr Campbell is back on the active-duty roster?"

"Another fortnight, but he shan't be spending too much more of it here." Spence sighed. "Pembleton wants him back in London."

"Gee, I guess you'll have to hurry up and rebook your scan before he goes!"

Spence blinked. "What makes you think that I need or want him along for that, Miss Darnell?"

"Well, because it'd be a cool memory for the two of you to share, don't you think?" Tanya frowned. "You know – for when the babies are grown up and ask you about it?"

"Oh." Spence frowned. "I hadn't considered that. "I'll have to ring him to discuss it."

Chapter Thirteen – Call Me Susan

Mellor had tried to talk Hull out of going back to Mars. The younger man was proving to have an impressive talent for envisioning worst-case scenarios. Hull appreciated his concern. But they couldn't risk another Tokyo. And if what Dermott claimed was true, that was the level of horror waiting to erupt. Maybe even worse. From what the Marines had uncovered, the crazed activist wasn't exaggerating. Someone with adequate clearance had to go. Still, that didn't necessarily have to equate to Hull risking his own life.

The supervisor eyed his reflection in the polished glare of the spaceport window. Beyond the transparent panelling, the red plains surrounding the main Martian colony drowsed. There was no sign of sand related issues, at least. What lurked beneath the bedrock of the planet was less easy to

spot. Perhaps a few anomalous readings in the chemistry of the ground water – nothing especially obvious. *Just like Tokyo, Greg.*

It was a damn sight easier to volunteer for suicide missions when you knew that you could use a cybernetically enhanced copy of yourself to take all the risks. They were ahead of the mess this time too. His team knew what to expect. So did the Marines. The warblers added a degree of uncertainty: what the fuck *did* those things want, anyhow? *No way they're acting out of altruism!*

Neither was he. Howard had been careless whilst wearing his identity: the kind of stupid behaviour that made powerful enemies. Left holding the ball, Hull needed to curry all the favour available to him, and quickly. With her recent ascent to celebrity status and existing military connections, Kennedy would be a valuable ally, if he could get her on side. *I wonder whether she's still imprinted on me.*

Kennedy's reflection loomed into focus beside his own then: her familiar strong featured greyish-golden face framed by a still slightly too short crop of curly black hair. "Word was that you'd just gotten younger, Mr Hull. What's with all the additional cyber shit?"

"Given how famous you are now, I thought I'd make an extra special effort to impress you."

Kennedy scowled at him as he turned to face her. "I'll just file this under GETEC being sneaky. Take it that you're all set to begin?"

"As I said, you have our full cooperation."

She scoffed. "I'm sure you understand why I ain't falling over myself to trust you on that."

Hull decided to move the conversation along. "What's the situation with the warblers?"

Kennedy gestured for him to walk with her. "They're focusing their attacks on people who work at that facility. Quite how they're able to identify them is another matter."

"Uh-huh." Hull quickened his pace to keep up. "So – what was their excuse for the initial assault in the main plaza?"

"The only fatalities were employees of GETEC. As to why they cocooned everyone else, your guess is as good as mine, Sir." Kennedy sighed. "It ain't as if the damn warblers are particularly chatty."

Hull nodded. "We should probably investigate it. How's life as a superhero, by the way?"

"Don't even joke about that!"

He smirked. "I'm pretty sure humour's regarded

as important during stressful situations, captain. They say it helps to relieve tension."

She bristled. "So does punching the source of said tension in the throat, Sir."

Two for two – so she's still hooked, and not just on my original body either. Hull filed that thought away for now. "Look, for what it's worth, I deeply regret just standing you up. It was a dick move on my part. I should've been more pro-active in investigating why you were acting so out of character."

Kennedy wasn't impressed. "You mean to say that you weren't behind my brainwashing, Sir? Because our medical personnel are pretty fucking sure that's what caused my supposed crush. You got anything you'd like to add?"

"I damn well didn't tell them to forcibly imprint you, if that's what you're inferring!"

She frowned. "But you did sign off on the neuro-corrective surgery...didn't you?"

Stick to the story, Greg. "Yeah; to repair the brain injury that you'd sustained. I'd say check the records, but they went up with the remains of the space station."

"Huh. That's real damn inconvenient, Sir."

"Such is life, Kennedy."

"I hear you took out a warbler single handed. In between torturing and mutilating a Martian citizen, that is. Got anything to add to that, Sir?"

The supervisor shrugged. "If you're implying that Professor Dermott is anything more than crazy, then maybe the neuro-corrective surgery wasn't fully successful."

"Fuck you!" Kennedy glared at him as she replied. "Dermott claims that you cut her eyes out!"

"I never laid a finger on her." Hull glanced warily towards the advancing mob of journalists. "Are they with you, Captain Mars?"

"Aw, shit – come on; get in the damn hover transport before they catch up!"

"You've made an utter bollocks of this, son."

At the opposite end of the little boat, Campbell hunched further into his self-inflicted misery. "For pity's sake, give over, Dad; you're scaring off all the damned fish!"

Thomas arched one grizzled eyebrow. "Still trying to ignore the mess you've gotten into? I'm surprised at you, lad! Your mother would be disappointed."

"Since when do you care what Mum would think?"

"I don't! The opinions of the dead are their own business. Still; I was looking forwards to having grandchildren."

"Yes, it showed."

A solitary moorhen drifted past blinking in the frantic, yet gormless fashion so unique to small waterfowl. "Have I any from this other woman?"

"Not that I know about. We weren't together very long: you know how it is."

"Part of the job, aye, I know. Love 'em and leave 'em before they're used against you!"

"Damn!" The field operative hissed as he accidentally hooked his index finger. "I never should have come along today. I don't even *like* fishing!"

"Neither do I, lad, but it makes a good exercise in getting far enough away from the problem to identify the solution."

"Well it's not helping me."

"Oh, stop sulking! Do you love that scrawny little blonde-haired bit of piss or don't you?"

"Don't call them that! I'm the one who messed things up...me and Aunt Edith."

"She never did like our side of the family. Did I ever tell you about the time she tried to pay me to

stop seeing your mum?"

"How about insisting that I sign a non-disclosure form in order to avoid Kellie Rosa finding out that we're second cousins?"

"That could have gotten embarrassing at the office party! Have they found her yet?"

"Moxton's en route to Miami with Dobos and Jolley. Apparently, Whitby has upgraded Quincy's weaponry especially. I wouldn't like to be in their way."

Thomas smiled. "Me neither! Anyhow, what'll you do now? I'm assuming that you shan't abandon your little canary?"

"Leister made it very clear that I wasn't welcome back within half a mile of the safe house until Spence chooses to invite me. So I'm waiting to hear from them."

"What if they don't call?"

"I'm trying desperately not to allow for that outcome in any of my calculations."

Spence stared balefully at the screen of the laptop on the coffee table; monitoring the security feed for Barnabas' room. "What do you suppose Dr Finch is hoping to achieve with those puppets?"

"I'm not sure." Jenkins abandoned her spot on the adjacent sofa and leaned in to peer at the ongoing therapy session. "Perhaps it's to let him act out his trauma? They say that method often works well with younger patients."

"It seems bloody stupid, if you ask me."

"Are you still annoyed with Mr Campbell for bringing the twins back here?"

"A little, yes. I do understand his logic, of course. I just fear that neither one of those children have the necessary instincts for it to apply to them."

"To be fair, you don't know them well enough to make that determination."

"I know what my parents were capable of."

The biochemist curled herself in between Spence and the back of the oversized armchair. "How old were you when you broke away from them?"

"Fair point, but Christ knows that I was far from safe to be around back then!"

"Isn't that why Drake's in there with them?"

"I suppose so."

"There you are then." Jenkins sighed happily. "This is nice!"

"I'm glad that you're comfortable." *Why did*

Cob have to take up with a snuggle addict? "What time did the old swan say they'd be back from Preston?"

"Not until six. We could have gone along too, you know."

"What, and rely on NIT to hold the fort here?"

"Well, why not?"

"For a start, it isn't their safe house." *It's not their family either, for that matter.*

Buried alive, in the remains of a top-secret research facility, wasn't how Hull had expected to go out. Given his career, perhaps it should have been higher up on the list of possibilities. After the first few clean-up operations, the dangers posed by scientific curiosity had become clear, yet he'd convinced himself that he wouldn't end up as another statistic. Now all he could imagine was the solemn advisory notice that Employee Welfare and Resources would issue to all staff.

Nobody is immune to accidents in the workplace – do you have adequate cover?

At least Bryce and Fisher would be okay: his real self would see to that. Somewhat comforted, Hull ran the math again on the likelihood of his survival.

He doubted that GETEC would attempt much beyond a cursory search of the wreckage. After all, why waste time and resources in looking for what was ultimately just a clone? *I suppose that R&D might want to recover the cybernetic elements.*

The Marines would be more thorough. That ageing gunnery sergeant had seemed particularly loyal to Kennedy. Whether this was something that Hull would benefit from remained to be seen. It was just as probable that Woods would be keen to take the opportunity to force answers from him, and as a clone, he'd have no right to humane treatment. *Damn it, Greg; you don't want to hang around here for that to happen!*

One of the ruined panels sparked at the far side of the laboratory. This facility was finished. By now, somewhere on the outside of the disaster zone, his team would be making certain that the surviving staff were permanently unavailable for interrogation. He just needed to finish erasing the databases, and bite down. The contents of the capsule would do the rest. R&D had made certain that it was swift and efficient. There wouldn't be anything left but an unidentifiable puddle of carbon-based goo. *All of which just leaves me with*

the matter of Captain Mars.

She was distracted at present: striving to find a means of contacting the outside world. That situation wouldn't last. Really, he should put a bullet through her head now, and make use of the rubble to hide it. *Death was instantaneous: massive cranial trauma from falling masonry, and so forth.* He'd used that excuse so many times in his career. By this stage, he could fool most coroners, never mind a bunch of Marines. *Sure, they might suspect something was off, but they'll never manage to prove anything.*

Point, shoot, cover it up. It was simple; Hull had done it countless times before. Yet he found himself reluctant to do it now, which made little sense. He wasn't really losing out on the rest of his life. His family were safely on Earth with his real self. As was his original real self – this was getting complicated! Too bad remote piloting hadn't been an option for this mission. Walking around in the flesh made it too damn personal. *Guess I'm finally losing my edge.*

He left his sidearm in its holster and moved to join Kennedy. "How's that communication console looking so far, captain?"

She grumbled her reply. "We should've brought

a couple of damn messenger pigeons."

Hull smiled. "Birds wouldn't be much use underground, Marine."

"Except puffins – they burrow, don't they?"

Her words surprised him. "Yeah, I guess they do."

Kennedy turned to look at him; her face streaked with sweat and dust. "Being serious, I ain't too damn confident on whether we can get word out, Supervisor Hull."

"Greg."

"What?"

He swallowed. "I...my name; it's Greg – short for Gregory Yuudai Hull."

The Martian woman frowned as she felt her way around the syllables. "Yoo-uh-dah-ee? What is that...Japanese?"

"Yeah, it's because of my birth mom." *The woman who gave birth to the man that I'm cloned from.* "I never met her; it was a paid surrogacy thing. My dads raised me."

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

Hull shrugged. "Because I know that you'll need those sorts of details for the paperwork. Once they dig us out of here, I mean."

"You seem pretty sure that they will."

"I don't see Woods leaving without you." *He's likely to kill me on sight, by the way, but never mind.*

"Plus, the only way that this room will collapse any further is if we blow it up deliberately."

Kennedy winced. "Yeah, no, let's not do that."

Hull glanced around them at the remains of the laboratory. "Right now, our biggest threat is that the warblers might find us first."

"That's what the plasma weapons are for." Kennedy smiled. "You know, I halfway expected that you'd try and cover this whole incident up!"

"I'll admit that it's what GETEC pays me to do; you've got me there, Captain."

Her smile broadened. "Call me Susan."

Chapter Fourteen – A Tad Complex

“Oh, and I totally *have* to get the multi-vitamin regenerative enzyme peel; I mean it isn't a spa treatment without that!”

“Absolutely, Tanya – have whatever you need. It's my treat, darling.” Leister rather admired the girl's ability to make the most out of other people's generosity. That talent had all too often been quashed by the point operatives were recruited. “Remind me to have you talk Nightingale into visiting this establishment. The poor thing needs a break.”

“Tell me about it! Like, we were supposed to go shoe shopping together, but then that whole mess with Craig happened, and now she – sorry –they're all ‘nope; won't go, you can't make me’, ugh, and ‘don't take advantage of Cob's credit card’...as if I'd do that!”

“No, of course you wouldn't, darling. Anyhow,

one can never have too many pairs of good shoes."

"That's what I said! Hey, I got an idea – what if we buy Spence a pair of shoes, but deliberately get the wrong size so that they have to come into town to exchange them? Maybe then we can persuade them to stop by here as well."

"I like your approach. Very well, darling: you wait here and enjoy your spa treatments. I'll pop back to that delectable little shoe shop that we visited before lunch."

"The one with the hand stitched silk ballet pumps? Those were so pretty!"

"Let's hope that Nightingale agrees."

In truth, Leister had already paid in full for a correctly sized pair of the pumps in question – a dainty mixture of saffron and crimson – three hours earlier, but Tanya had no need of that information. *It will do her good to practise her subterfuge skills. I'm sure Nightingale won't mind playing along with things when I explain. And it gives me time to make a phone call to London.*

Robinson answered on the first ring. "I'm sorry, Mr Leister, but Lady Pembleton is out of the office. May I take a message?"

"Probably best that you don't on this occasion, Fiona. It's a tad complex."

"Was there fire and/or death?"

He frowned at the obvious irritation in the PA's voice. "No, most assuredly nothing of that ilk – just let her know that I called."

"Very well; it's in the diary."

"Thank you, darling."

The automatic doors of the grimly titled Bellis Beauty Salon hummed shut behind him as he tucked his phone away. *Presumably, the name references the flower, rather than the ill-fated nymph: beauty and innocence, as opposed to death for good intentions.*

A familiar face caught his attention then. Leister beamed. "Cerise – what a lovely surprise, darling; I didn't know you were in England."

The young freelancer had the grace to look ashamed as she pressed the stubby muzzle of her Ruger LCR into his ribs. "Hey, Cob, how're you doing? Please don't take this personally by the way. It's just a job: I've got a new client who really wants to talk to you."

"Of course, darling: I know how it is. Shall we take your car or mine?"

"If it's all the same to you, I already got my trunk all pimped out ready for the journey. There's a hamper in there and everything."

Leister glanced briefly towards the hover vehicle that she had indicated. It was a rental, but somehow the paint was the precise shade of iridescent violet as the accents in her elaborately styled hair. Jamal-Kristof waved at him from the passenger seat. Leister nodded back. "Well, that sounds delightful, very considerate of you. Might I just pop into the facilities before we depart?"

"Hell no, sweetie – I can't risk you climbing out the window, now can I?"

"Oh please: climbing through windows, at my age? Darling, I haven't got the knees for those sorts of activities."

The gun shifted a little higher. Cerise was no longer smiling. "Get in the damn trunk, Cob. I'm on a schedule here: it's Jamal-Kristof's seventh birthday tomorrow and I still ain't bought a cake!"

"Ah, so this is a family holiday?"

"My little man wanted to visit London Zoo."

"He's quite right. It is a wonderful day out. Still, you do realise that we're currently nowhere near London?"

Cerise shrugged, letting the gun drift as she did so. "Yeah, I couldn't get a hotel room. Can you believe that they demand travel visas for kids before they can book in?"

"It's fairly standard nowadays, darling. Surely you have his papers with you?"

"Aw, you know I don't have the time to bother with all those lousy forms!"

"You've been travelling abroad without a proper visa for your child? Well, I certainly hope that you aren't caught! Britain has zero tolerance for those sorts of activities – fifteen years imprisonment for the accompanying adult."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, darling – didn't you read the travel advisory materials?"

"Not really; I figured it was just about having no oversized luggage or live animals!"

"Oh dear...well, not to worry. I can get you all the necessary documentation."

She groaned and holstered her gun. "Well, there goes my contract, huh?"

Try though he did, Leister couldn't seem to find any sympathy for her about that. Perhaps he really was getting too long in the tooth for this game.

After all, it was dreadfully petty to take a professional contract personally, especially against a single parent. "I expect that you'll find another one soon enough, darling."

"What am I going to tell Jamal-Kristof? I was counting on this contract to pay for his special day, and now I'll have to refund the money. He's going to be so disappointed!"

"Nonsense, Cerise! We shan't let the boy's birthday be ruined. Just give me the contract details, and I shall take care of the rest."

The ringtone had been almost as unexpected as the lake was chilly. Flipping open his phone to accept the call from the safe house, Campbell trod water: resolutely ignoring both his father's cackling and that of the now irate moorhen. "Hello?"

"I overreacted."

"Spence, thank Christ you rang! Look, you *didn't* overreact. I was the one in the wrong: I ought to have told you about her. I'm sorry."

"Fine, we're both sorry. I miss you."

"I miss you too, canary."

"What's that squawking noise?"

"Just a bird and an old fool laughing at a

younger one." The field operative glowered at Thomas. "I fell out of the boat."

"I'd best have a towel ready for when you get back here then."

"That would be appreciated."

"Dinner's at six-thirty, don't be late."

"Wild moorhens couldn't keep me away."

"Greg, there's a girl at the front door."

Hull looked up from the scattered pieces of the oversized puzzle that Fisher had demanded. He wasn't sure that their son fully grasped the concept of reassembling the image, but at least the toddler seemed to be enjoying himself. "Did she give a name?"

Bryce shook her head. "She seemed to feel that I ought to have known who she was."

"That sounds like the minor celebrity I dragged out of trouble – late teens, blonde, with way too much eyeliner?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Okay, baby. I'll go see what she wants. You give Fisher a hand with the corners."

"He likes starting with the middle."

"Kid's got a creative streak – he must take after

you." Hull hoped that would be true. Not just because of the artistic talent either. Bryce was an angel compared to most people, but especially to he himself. *No doubt about it: the boy could do a whole lot worse than following in his mother's pattern.*

Kassandra Shelby clearly wasn't best pleased at having been left on the porch to wait. "So what's with your housekeeper? Why didn't she show me in?"

"Bryce *isn't* my housekeeper, Miss Shelby. What are you doing here anyhow?"

"Do you know Tanya Darnell?" The question indicated that she already had some idea of what the answer was. "Only she claims that you forced her to join GETEC."

Hull frowned. Evidently Tanya hadn't taken his warnings seriously. He would need to see about straightening out her attitude. "Miss Darnell is an intern with GETEC, yes. I can assure you that there was nothing out of the ordinary about her recruitment process."

"So, why's she in hiding?"

"I thought she was on vacation."

The girl smirked. "I knew she was lying! Oh my

God, she is such a freak! Just wait until I see her next – I'm *totally* going to rip her apart over all of this!"

"I hope not literally, Miss Shelby?"

"Call me Kassie." She squeezed past him into the hallway: fully aware of her body and utilizing every inch of it. "Wow. I kind of forgot how cool your place is."

She's almost twenty – completely legal. Just don't get her drunk. "Do you want to come in for some coffee, Kassie?"

"Yeah, okay. Is Bryce your girlfriend?"

"We're engaged."

"Oh." Her voice wobbled. "So it's like, kind of serious, between you?"

"We have a toddler together."

"That's...nice. I guess. Congratulations."

"Thank you." *On second thoughts, maybe throw this one back to mature, Greg.* "How have you been doing lately?"

"Um...not so great...?"

He led her through to the kitchen and pulled out a chair. "Sit down and tell me what the matter is."

"I...ugh, I kind of did something."

"Was it something bad or just stupid?"

"Hey! I'm *not* stupid, you jerk...!"

"Shut up and sit." The supervisor suspected that his young guest was long overdue some straight talking. "I know you're smart, Kassie. That doesn't make you incapable of rash decisions. Just look at that club I found you hanging around in."

She gawped up at him from her seat. "I can't believe you're throwing that back at me, Greg!"

"Did I say that you could use my first name?"

"Well...no...I just assumed...!"

"Did I say that you could interrupt me?"

"I...I guess not...sorry, Mr Hull."

"Apology accepted. So, what did you do?"

It transpired that she had trusted a total stranger with a camera and a smooth line in how what he did was *art*. "He said he was putting together a movie about inspirational women. I – I don't think he was telling me the truth."

Hull sighed. "Have you spoken to your parents about it yet?"

"They're away with work."

"What about your attorney?"

"She was the one who introduced us!"

That put a rather different spin on the situation. "She set up the meeting?"

"Yeah: as part of my publicity work. That's why I

thought he was okay. You know, like a real director?"

"Except then he convinced you to take your clothes off, and now he won't answer any of your messages, huh?"

Kassie gulped and nodded. "I guess Tanya was right not to want anything to do with it."

"She's fairly intuitive. You could do worse than to listen to her opinions."

"Huh – even about you and GETEC?"

He smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think maybe I shouldn't have come here."

"Well, I wouldn't go quite that far. It's hardly as if I'm going to eat you, now is it?"

From the look on her face, she wasn't confident about that. "Um, maybe I should go. Sorry for barging in like that earlier."

"Yeah, that was rude. Don't do it again."

"I won't."

"Good girl. Let me get you that coffee."

"Thanks, but I really do need to go."

"Stay." It was hard to countenance that less than twenty minutes ago, that order would have resulted in a barrage of angry screeching. "You came here for help, Kassie. That was the right thing

to do. I'll take care of it."

"You will?"

"It'll be my pleasure."

Jenkins greeted her Dom with something halfway between a bear hug and a cartwheel.

"Cob, I missed you! How was Preston?"

"Rather dismal and surprisingly dangerous." Leister stroked the tousled mop of mousy hair. "I missed you too, darling."

"Spence said to tell you that Craig's on his way back. He'll be here for dinner. I think things are improving between them."

"Finally, we get some good news!" Tanya proffered a small silver gift bag. "Here, Ashley: I thought you might like this."

The biochemist trilled. "Oh, Bellis's products are so lovely! They have a branch in Boston: that's where I discovered them. Did you try their pamper session?"

"Like it's even possible to visit a Bellis franchise without doing that?" The teenager grinned. "Cob and I were trying to figure out how to convince Spence to give it a go. You should totally come along too!"

"Oh, I'd love that! May I, Cob?"

"Yes, of course you may, darling. Where's Paul, by the way?"

"Upstairs showering: he just got back from his physiotherapy session at Century. Agent Weaver sends her love."

Leister counted his blessings. Benedict wasn't likely to be thrilled about Cerise's presence: better to introduce she and Jamal-Kristof to the others now! "Ah well, he's already met my guests anyway. Ashley, come with me. There's someone outside whom I'd like you to meet – she's just parking her car."

Chapter Fifteen – Mission Goal

"I really didn't see things panning out this way for us, you know." Yuudai – because, hey, why *not* use his middle name: it made a handy demarcation – boosted himself up onto his elbows and smiled down at Kennedy. "Just between you and me, I don't think flash clones are supposed to ever get the girl."

The Martian snorted and dragged the cyborg closer: rolling them both over so that she straddled him. "Good thing for you that Marines always achieve their objectives."

"Ah, so I'm just a mission goal to you, huh?"

"I'm getting the feeling that you're the sensitive version of you."

"You say that like it's a negative, Susan."

She smirked and kissed him again. "Make that the sensitive, pouty version."

"What can I say? I've got sensuous lips."

"Got a seriously weird sense of humour, too."

He shrugged. "Yeah well, you know: it can't hurt to lighten the mood a little. I mean, here we are, buried alive, waiting to be rescued before we suffocate or die from dehydration, hoping we aren't eaten by warblers first."

"Not forgetting the part where you're stuck with a six-month lifespan." Kennedy ran her fingertips across the quietly flickering green and red diodes that ridged the cleanly muscled shoulders. "It's kind of hard to fathom how you can be so God damn sanguine about that."

Yuudai stroked her face. "I figure the best way to look at it is as my having another five and a half months left. That's a big amount of time when you've only technically been alive for two weeks."

"Do you really buy that?"

He sighed. "I'm trying to."

"I'm going to miss you when you go, Yuudai." There was a vague catch in Kennedy's voice.

"Hey, what happened to my being just another objective for you to attain?" Yuudai did his best to steer their conversation back to safer, more light hearted territory. "Something to help pass the time, remember, Susan?"

Kennedy's dark brown eyes were bright with feelings. "It ain't right: deliberately making a person with a short life span!"

Yuudai sighed. "I'm *not* a person: I'm a copy of a person. It's different. You know that...!"

She took her own sweet time with the kiss, and it left him breathless. "Just because something's different don't mean that it's any less important."

"Lillian Ashby's mother has ordered me abducted. It can't be a coincidence, Paul."

Benedict sank back in his armchair and groaned. "Well, no, absolutely not, Cob – but *why* did you bring Cerise here?"

"I could hardly have abandoned her in Preston, darling. She hasn't the proper travel papers with her. We must think of Jamal-Kristof."

"I'm *not* paying for any more music lessons!"

"I ain't into that no more." The boy's voice piped up from the living room doorway. "Piano's done: I'm gonna be a football star. That's where the big money is. Once I'm famous I can pay off all of Momma's debts."

He shuffled away with his ball. Leister sighed. "Now do you see why I'm so concerned?"

"Two words: Children's Services."

"That's hardly the kindest solution, Paul."

"Isn't it? Think about it, Maurice. Cerise dragged that poor boy halfway around the globe on the flimsy pretext of taking him to London Zoo for his birthday. We both know that it's the money from contracting that she's really interested in!"

Whatever Leister might have replied was interrupted by the sullen arrival of Agent Drake. The augmetric slumped down beside him on the sofa. "Headquarters has issued instructions to drop the Wilkes investigation."

"That's disgraceful – on what grounds, darling?"

"Lack of evidence, and yes, I do blame Spence for not cooperating. Whoever within the old money is responsible shall get away with it now."

"Let's be honest, Drake, that was always going to happen." Benedict knew that he wasn't the only one joining up the dots. "It's just how things are in those circles. You and Caulfield did your best. At least Dr Finch is safe."

She scowled at him from beneath halfway closed eyelids. "Don't patronise me, Mr Benedict! I heard the two of you arguing from three rooms away: enhanced senses, remember. You suspect

the Ashby family."

"We may do, but Cob hasn't actually found solid proof as yet."

"Indeed, darling – it's possible that Lady Ashby simply wishes to speak with me about something utterly unrelated."

"Such as...?" She waited for the silence to become awkward before continuing. "Rubbish! It's obvious that Lillian must have come from as vicious a background as her in-laws. Why else wouldn't they have queried how her children were being raised since her death?"

"Be that as it may, assumption, however logical, shan't be enough." Benedict shook his head. "The Lackeys managed to fool the world after Jasper was unmasked. What's to say that the Ashby family aren't kicking themselves for not realising the truth behind Lillian's circumstances?"

"They'd be making far more of an effort to reclaim the twins if that were so, surely?" Drake gestured vaguely at the ceiling. "Those two children – why *isn't* anyone asking about them?"

"We're presuming that Lillian was able to tell her family about them even existing, darling. She may have been kept isolated."

"A-ha, now *that* I can disprove!" The NIT operative pulled out her tablet. "Look – social media accounts for Lillian and her husband. They had regular contact with the rest of her relations, not to mention a vast friendship circle. The children are frequently mentioned; there are even photographs from parties!"

"Photographs yes, but none that were taken since Lillian's funeral." Benedict peered at the screen. "My God, look how bright and well-kept the twins are there!"

Leister scrolled through the remainder of the NIT file. "I fear things took an abrupt turn for the worse after their mother died. To judge by what Dr Finch has gathered, she was attempting to escape Lackey Hall. This then brings us back to the possibility that *her* family aren't monsters."

"Or at least that they aren't as bad as the Lackeys. Well, it's moot now. Byron and I shall be on our way back to Headquarters tomorrow morning. Dr Finch had best hope that those in charge aren't wrong about Karen's death being nothing more than a random act of violence."

Woods stared at the small glass vial on the desk

in front of him. "So, what exactly is it, ma'am?"

"Some kind of suicide capsule, Woods; it was hidden inside one of his molars. Apparently, the substance used would have dissolved Yuudai's organic parts into little more than gunk."

"That's one Hell of a get-out clause, ma'am. He does understand that he may live to regret surrendering it to us?"

"Yeah, he gets it, Woods. Given how little time GETEC allocated to his biological clock, I don't reckon that he's too concerned."

"Flash clones don't generally form personalities of their own, ma'am. Did something weirder than average go down in that laboratory?"

She hedged. "Oh well, I ain't sure that *weird* is the right phrase, per se. Still, yeah – it wasn't exactly standard operating procedure."

Woods peered at her. "Come again, ma'am?"

Kennedy cleared her throat. "You said it, Woods. Don't blame any resultant mental scarring on me."

"Ah, God damn it, Marine! You screwed him?"

Kennedy shrugged. "We connected; it happens. Anyhow, what's the sit-rep regarding the warblers?"

Woods shook his head and refocused. "Dermott was right: they went slithering off back into their

tunnels the minute that the drill was shut down. No guarantee that they'll stay gone mind you."

"It's still better than it was, Woods."

He nodded. "I can't argue with you there, ma'am. So – are you planning on reading me in about your personal situation?"

"I'm dating a flash clone of the bastard who covered up what happened in Tokyo. He claims he regrets that: says he wants to try to make amends in the time that he has left. That's as much as there is to say right now, Woods."

Woods scowled. "Well, we'll see. I just hope you ain't done gone and let the Devil in by the main airlock, Marine."

His CO brightened abruptly at that. "If I have, then you can be Captain Mars instead, Woods!"

"Not in this lifetime, ma'am!"

Kathryn scrambled up as her twin entered the library. "You're not supposed to leave your room, Barnabas – I'm telling Craig!"

The boy scowled. "I had to be sure that you were all right, didn't I? They shan't tell me anything!"

"It's your own silly fault. You oughtn't to have

played at slices with the American girl."

"I thought she wanted to!"

His sibling was unimpressed. "Well she didn't, and you almost ruined everything. Why can't you just go away forever?"

Barnabas took a half step backwards. "Kathryn, don't say that! It's mean."

"So what if it is? I hate you! I wish I didn't even have a brother!"

She flew at him then: all fingernails and teeth and screeching. He reacted in kind. They tumbled across the library floor and out onto the landing. A handful of fine pale hair spun loose of the conflict and drifted to land on Jamal-Kristof's foot. "Hey, why are you guys fighting?"

The twins sprang apart instantly: automatically beginning to circle the other child. "Who are you? Barnabas, make him tell us his name!"

"My sister wants to know...!"

"Aw, I heard her! Ain't as if I'm deaf. I'm called Jamal-Kristof. You two are weird – I don't wanna play with you." He ducked clear of their attempt to herd him and shuffled off again. "People in England are freaky!"

Kathryn blinked. "That boy is very rude!"

"Shall I get him for you then?"

"No, Barnabas; Craig wouldn't like that."

He sneered and shoved her. "Craig this, Craig that: you're *besotted* with him!"

"Stop it! You can't even spell *besotted*!"

"I can so spell it; better than you, at least!"

"You guys, c'mere, quickly!" Jamal-Kristof had paused to peer into another of the upstairs rooms. "You gotta see this!" Since they hadn't been schooled in how to refuse such a demand, they obeyed, and moved to stand behind him: one at either shoulder. "Look!"

The room beyond was set out as a playroom. Dr Finch had thought they might feel happier talking to her in that environment. Which was exceptionally silly: wherever they were, she still wouldn't like their answers. It didn't matter now though. There wouldn't be any more questions. Not when she lay all picked apart like that.

The younger boy gulped. "Is that a dead body? I mean, like for real?"

"Yes." Kathryn nudged her brother. "Well? Did you do it?"

"No! Actually, I liked that one. She gave me strawberry yogurt."

"It wasn't me either. I liked her too. She smelled a little bit like Mummy used to."

"I think Jamal-Kristof might be broken. Look, he's crying."

"He's not like us, Barnabas."

"What's going on up here?" The thin figure of their father's twin slipped past them then: pushing Jamal-Kristof aside. "Oh for fuck's sake – Craig, get up here! I *told* you that this was a bloody stupid idea!"

"Spence, what's wrong?" Campbell bounded into view. "Kathryn, Barnabas – who's this little chap? Is he your friend?"

"Damn it, Craig, will you please just *look*?"

He obeyed. "Dear God – that's Dr Finch!"

Behind him, Spence was examining all three children's hands and clothes. "There's no sign of any blood on them, although these two look as if they've been squabbling again."

"It wasn't us – Barnabas, tell them!"

"She's right: we didn't do it!"

The horror was far too much for Jamal-Kristof, and he began to howl. "Momma...!"

Cerise led the resultant charge upstairs. Scooping up her son, the freelancer turned to see

what he'd been pointing at. "Jesus! What's happening in this house, Cob? Who *did* that?"

"I don't know, darling, but there's no need for the children to witness any more of this. Let's take them downstairs. Ashley, Tanya, you take little Kathryn, I'll bring Barnabas. No, *don't* look, children. It's not nice."

Benedict drew his gun and followed them. "Caulfield, Drake, you two come with us. Whoever did this may still be in the safe house."

Already armed, Campbell settled his left arm around Spence's shoulders and nodded to Thomas. "It looks as though we might need you to stick around for a while longer after all, Dad."

His father scowled. "You don't say!"

"Are you all right, canary?"

"I'm fine, Craig. Stop fussing."

"Sorry."

"Stop bloody apologising to me! Just stay alert. Paul's right: for all we know, those responsible might be watching us right now. We need to be ready to defend ourselves."

E.V. GREIG

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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