

Dance Towards The Cloud

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Seven

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Dance Towards The Cloud
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DANCE TOWARDS THE CLOUD

In the direct sequel to *Politics Of C.A.K.E*, it's business as unusual for socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence. A joint mission between BIINT, ANI, and the Martian Marine Corps sees everyone involved facing tough choices – some more responsibly than others.

Meanwhile, back in soggiest Bournemouth, with old ghosts out for revenge and temptation nagging him at every turn, Craig Campbell discovers that the life of a retired spy turned parent is no less hazardous than fieldwork...

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Chapter One – Quiet Areas

“I shan't tell you again, Miss Darnell – open your eyes and keep bloody breathing!” Nightingale Spence dropped to one knee on the grilled floor of the grimy little cell and prodded their semi-conscious colleague sharply in the ribs. “So help me, Tanya, I refuse to be the person who tells Darren Jolley that his girlfriend is dead! Now wake up!”

The young American groaned and lifted her head from the bloodied mattress on which she sprawled; her long dark hair matted to her scalp. “Spence...? Is that really you...?”

“No. They found some other poor fool willing to accept this damnable job.” The non-gender plucked the correct vial from their medical kit and loaded a syringe with practised ease. “Of course

it's me! Now keep still – this shall definitely sting."

Tanya yelped but managed not to flinch at the bite of the needle. "I hardly recognised you in your field gear! What was in that shot anyhow?"

"It's medical's latest cocktail of super morphine and regenerative serum. You ought to feel much better once it kicks in." In fact, according to the biometric scanner, her vital signs were already levelling out. Spence tidied away the medical kit and glanced towards the little robot hovering above the remains of the cell door. "Quincy and I put down sufficient numbers of people on our way in here that we've got time to wait for that."

<advisory-nottoomuchtime>

"Where exactly is here?"

"GETEC's old Luna Base – C.A.K.E has repurposed it." Spence held out a rebreather mask. "You'll need to wear this for the trip to the extraction point. There are a few spots where the air isn't wholly reliable. The environmental systems weren't especially robust to begin with and parts of them are now on fire."

Tanya slowly managed to shift her position on the mattress from prone to sitting. Her hands trembled as she reached for the rebreather. "What

day is it? The last thing I remember, Carson Howard was kidnapping me from outside Dr Rosa's place. Wait – is she okay?"

"I don't know; we haven't found her yet. Howard and his minions snatched you both four days ago. His much-reported demise doesn't seem to have taken. Someone really *shall* need to see about addressing that."

"Oh, hello, I'm glad I've caught you! My, that's a lot of gym equipment to have at home!"

Craig Campbell looked up from his mid-morning physiotherapy session to stare at his unexpected visitor. "I'm terribly sorry but I haven't the faintest idea who you are."

The plump, middle-aged blonde woman beamed and held up a garishly coloured plastic canister. "I'm Carol, you know, Carol Bingham; from next door but one on the right? I just popped in to collect your donation!"

Campbell frowned and staggered upright, reaching for his cane. "What donation?"

"Oh, you know – the NWI has started a fund for the impoverished Martian children. I mentioned it to your partner, the last time that I saw them. Didn't

they tell you?"

"It must have slipped their mind. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but how did you get in?"

"Kathryn and Barnabas said that you wouldn't mind." Carol nodded pointedly again at her collection box. "They're playing some sort of game together – running in and out of the house, hiding and jumping out, that sort of thing. I must say, they're being awfully quiet about it, not a bit like my two! I say, come to think of it, they're all roughly about the same age group, aren't they? What jolly luck – we ought to arrange a little play date for them!"

"I'll be sure to mention it to Spence when they get home, Mrs Bingham." Campbell had finally located his wallet. He plucked out several notes and folded them neatly in half before slipping them into the collection box. "We'll let you know what we decide."

"Oh it's Ms Bingham, actually." She glanced at the framed photographs lining the drawing room walls. "Jerry and I have been divorced for three years now. So, you and your partner – Nightingale, I mean: gosh, it's such an exotic sort of name! But you've got five between you?"

"Yes." The former spy wondered if there was some unknown social protocol in play here. "We're a blended family. The eldest two are Spence's – sorry, that's just a silly old habit of mine; using their surname! I mean they're *Nightingale's* niece and nephew, and the toddler's my son by my ex-wife. She died."

"Oh, I'm so sorry for your loss, Craig!"

"Thank you, Ms Bingham."

"Do call me Carol, honestly everyone does." She patted his arm in what Campbell assumed was meant to be a comforting fashion. "Has the au pair taken the three littlest ones out to give you a break then? I thought I saw her headed to the park with them earlier – lovely girl, always very polite!"

"Yes, she is, thank you, Carol." He kept walking; steering his unanticipated guest back towards the front door. "I expect that they'll be home soon, so I'd best get a move on with lunch. Thank you so much for dropping in."

"Oh no, it was my pleasure, really...!" Carol paused and stared aghast at the now openly brawling siblings. "Oh dear – it rather looks as though they've started playing just a little *too* roughly, doesn't it?"

Campbell growled. "Kathryn, Barnabas – what did we tell you about *that* game?"

The pale haired children sprang apart instantly. Kathryn flung herself at Campbell: her thin arms wrapping around his waist as she buried her face in his shirt. "*He* started it, Craig!"

"No I didn't!" Barnabas' voice tipped shrilly and he blushed. "Honest, it was her idea! She *always* blames me, but...!"

"Kids, please, enough." Campbell gently extricated himself from the girl's possessive hug. "Look, it doesn't matter which of you started it – that game isn't nice, and we all agreed as a family that you wouldn't play it again. Now go to your quiet areas and reflect on things until you feel calmer."

Carol clucked sympathetically at him as they watched the twins slink away. "It must be hard having two with additional needs. You handled that really well, you know."

"Thank you, Carol." Campbell pinned on his brightest smile as he finally managed to herd her out through the front door. "I'll let Nightingale know that you popped in, goodbye!"

Christ, he missed fieldwork.

"Hey, Az, do you think I'm pushy?"

Waverly Industries' senior engineer Ari Zahn peered warily over the top of his tablet at his best friend and business partner. "No, pretty much the opposite, buddy. In fact, Vinnie and I were just discussing yesterday how you're a total *pushover*. I don't know, maybe you misheard us or something?"

"Thanks for that, Az." Robert Waverly sighed morosely as he took another sip of his morning coffee. "Do you suppose that's the real reason why Susan picked Alistair instead of me? That I'm too easy going for her?"

The lanky first generation feline augmetric groaned, dragging one massive paw down over his whiskers. "Bob, you need to let that go, seriously! So your childhood sweetheart was engaged to your big brother, big freaking deal! I mean in the end she got cold feet about getting married anyhow and ran away to join the military. You ask me, you probably had a lucky escape. Anyhow, it's been what, twenty-four years since you last met now? You're Mars' most eligible bachelor. There are other fish out there, my friend. Go hook one or three."

"I just still miss her sometimes, Az." Waverly scrolled further down the social media feed he was reading. "It says here that she's living on Earth now – Miami."

Zahn yawned, and picked a stray fragment of synthetic bacon rind out from between his pointed teeth. "That means we're going to Florida, doesn't it, Bob?"

"Tessa does keep on saying how she'd like to visit Earth someday. And it would be a great opportunity for promoting the latest range of APSUs, so Vinnie should be pleased." Waverly paused to scroll through his schedule for the week ahead. "Maybe Susan and I will just happen to bump into one another at one of the public Easter events."

"Didn't her gunnery sergeant threaten you with ritual disembowelment if he caught you bothering her?"

"Yeah; I remember thinking at the time that it was a *seriously* bizarre response to a luxury food hamper. I mean hello, priorities, much? Susan was seriously ill back then – it was all over the news! She nearly died, Az. And that asshole was hung up on a damn *hamper*. What, did I send the wrong kind of champagne or something?"

“Okay.” The tawny furred augmetric shrugged resignedly. “We’re going to Florida to die by ritual disembowelment – fun times!”

Spence shoulder charged the internal airlock door for the tiny BIINT stealth shuttle to which they and their two companions had just retreated. The sturdily constructed portal swung closed with only seconds to spare, and the airtight seals hissed into place. Something – because it damn well *wasn't* a person any longer – slammed into it an instant later. A twisted, mottled visage pressed up against the viewing panel: bloodshot eyes bulging from their pus-encrusted sockets. Some of Luna Base’s more deeply buried corporate secrets were proving worryingly lethal.

“Let’s not wait for our new friend to find his or her keys, eh?” The non-gender gestured frantically at Quincy. “Get us clear of the hangar and vent the ruddy airlock! Strap in, Miss Darnell – it’s only a matter of time until someone or something starts shooting at us again.”

Tanya scrambled past Quincy to the nearest passenger seat and yanked at the safety harness. “Spence, do you think that whatever that thing had

is infectious?"

"Only via direct fluid transfer, if the biometric scanner is to be believed, and neither of us was bitten. Still, quarantine would only be sensible." Spence joined Quincy at the helm as the shuttle lurched clear of its moorings. "We'd best signal Headquarters as soon as we get beyond the range of C.A.K.E's jamming device. Medical shall need time to prepare."

<advisory-unitrechargecycleimminent>

"Plug in now; I'll pilot." Spence activated the shuttle's main laser and smirked as a huge section of the steel dome of the hanger evaporated. "It's a pity that Mr Howard wasn't here in person to witness his base's decommissioning!"

"You're pretty much as bad as the field operatives when you get riled, aren't you?" Tanya slumped back, exhausted, as they rose clear of the partially terraformed moon's nascent atmosphere. "I have to admit, Spence – I figured that Pembleton would send Darren and his team, not you."

"Never mix personal and professional if you can avoid doing so, Miss Darnell."

"Is that one of Cob's sayings?"

"Oh no – the old swan hails from the *classical*

school of spying! He has personal contacts everywhere; it works for him, Christ only knows how, mind you."

Their young associate raised an eyebrow. "Huh. Are you sure that maybe your separatist approach isn't more down to you being totally antisocial as a person, Spence?"

"I'll have you know that I'm now a fully approved member of my local branch of the New Women's Institute!" The non-gender sniffed. "I even *bake* things."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, I've got five children and a retired field operative to manage, so generally the kind that can go from their packaging to a disposable tray in the oven with minimal intervention en route. We voted, and everyone agreed that the proper cooking was best left to Miss Hedturner."

"I guess it's good to know that life in dullest Bournemouth hasn't changed you *too* much." Tanya grinned. "Aside from signing up for the New Women's Institute – is this your way of saying that you're done with the non-gender thing?"

"Don't be absurd, Miss Darnell. They accept people of all gender identities nowadays. Doing

otherwise would be discriminatory."

"Aw, but I wanted to take you shopping for pretty shoes instead of guy boots...!"

A reddish hued light engulfed the shuttle. The propulsion systems cut out abruptly, followed by the artificial gravity. Tanya's hair took on a medusa like drifting habit, and Quincy, fully powered down for the journey home, floated up as far as his recharge cabling would allow.

Spence tapped futilely at the controls. "Damn it all – the bastards must have hit us with something clever!"

"I don't get it: aren't we way out of range for the base's weaponry by now?" Tanya clung to the arms of her seat and peered out through the front viewport. Her face paled. "Spence – look!"

The thin featured operative swung their seat around and followed her gaze. "Ah. No, that's *definitely* not likely to be good for us."

"Is that like a pirate vessel or something?"

"We should be so bloody lucky." Spence pointed grimly at the assailing craft's hull. "It's C.A.K.E again – apparently they have a warship!"

Chapter Two – Silver Fox

“Why hello there, my dear! It appears that I'm your new neighbour.”

When she thought back afterwards on this first encounter, Bryce Lenard would class the grey-haired man's voice as something between a distillation of Scotland and raw animal magnetism. For the moment, all she could really focus on was Fisher. Her thirty-one-month-old son was having what the childcare experts called a *challenging* episode. His incoherent screeching all but drowned out their new neighbour's attempts at introductions. Abandoning her groceries beside the hover car, Bryce knelt to scoop him up, only to win a chubby fist to her face. “Fisher, no – we don't hit!”

“I remember when my son was this age.” The neighbour had crossed the street to join them on the driveway. He bent and handed Bryce an

elegantly monogrammed handkerchief. "Your nose is bleeding. Here – let me take him whilst you tend to it."

"Thank you." Bryce clamped the small cloth over her nose and straightened up, grimacing. "He's not usually like this. I don't know what's upsetting him today; he just won't settle!"

"Ah, just a part of growing up, isn't it, lad?" Her impromptu rescuer beamed and dandled Fisher on his right hip. The toddler appeared too surprised to be mutinous, and instead grizzled into his by now soggy comforter. "Don't worry: it all gets infinitely easier once they're up a bit from this."

"I certainly hope so! It's good to meet you. I'm Bryce Lenard, and this is my son, Fisher. Thanks for helping me with him, Mr...?"

"Campbell – Thomas Campbell. I'm retired; moved here because I wanted to live somewhere sunny, full of beautiful people, don't you know?"

"Gracious, you're quite the suave silver fox, aren't you, Thomas?" Bryce smiled as she dabbed at her nose. "Well, flattery will get you invited in for a cup of coffee – especially if you promise to keep Fisher entertained whilst I unpack these groceries?"

"It would be my honour." Thomas winked and

somehow managed to carry both Fisher and most of the groceries into the house for her. "You know, I think I've met your partner already. Greg Hull – tall chap, works for ANI?"

"Oh yes – that's him!" The blonde woman blushed, hurriedly flashing her ring. "We're engaged, by the way. He's at the hospital with our other child, Rayne. She's had to have some treatment for a genetic disorder, but she's doing really well now. The doctors say that we can bring her home soon."

"That must be a weight off your minds."

"Yes, of course it is." Bryce nodded for her guest to take a seat at the kitchen table. "I think maybe Fisher has just been picking up on how worried we both were – that, and all the excitement about the Easter Bunny!"

Thomas murmured his understanding. *I expect that taking in her fiancé's dead clone's bastard offspring wasn't especially high on her list of personal goals.*

Fisher hiccupped and frowned at him. "Santa, where'd your beard go? Why you not have it any more?"

"I'm so sorry – he just says whatever he thinks, I'm

afraid!" Bryce handed Thomas the now ruined handkerchief. "Every man he sees with grey hair has to be Santa!"

"Well, he's right, you know. I *did* have a beard until recently. Well spotted, lad." The retiree chuckled and settled the boy into his booster seat with practised ease. "I shaved it all off because it's much too warm here in Miami for me to need it, Fisher."

"Okay, Santa."

Thomas wondered idly whether he might split Bryce from Hull as opposed to simply killing her. *It's preferable to orphaning the bairn, I suppose.*

His still unwitting hostess brought him an elegant fine bone china mug of what smelled like very expensive coffee. "Would you like some cream and sugar with this, Thomas?"

"No thank you, my dear." He made the gamble: softening the edges around his smile, and deepening his gaze ever so slightly as he took the mug from her. "It's quite perfect as it is."

"Hey Spence, can I ask you a question?"

"That depends." The older operative continued fumbling with the wiring beneath their console: far

more concerned with the rapidly declining oxygen levels within the shuttle than with matters of grammar. "Does it relate to our current unfortunate situation?"

"Um, no, but it's something that's totally been bugging me, and I figure now might be my last chance to find out. I mean given how C.A.K.E left us stranded out here with no comms."

"You might as well spit it out then."

"Okay. How come you don't like people using gendered pronouns about you?"

"Oh, that? To be honest I'm not all that bothered. It's just something that was assigned to my file mid-teens due to my not presenting with a normal puberty, and I never got around to querying it. I'll admit that it helps with the job sometimes though. So did my continued lack of menstruation, although GETEC's meddling has rather ruined that."

Tanya stared incredulously at her companion. "You're kidding me! You mean you don't actually care either way?"

"I do when not being regarded as a lesser being by dint of my biological sex is involved." Spence gave up and hunched back in their chair, scowling. "I also miss not having these cramps!"

"Yeah, those totally suck. You should get the implant fitted: I got mine as soon as I turned sixteen." The young handler pulled her knees up to her chin and sighed. "Twelve minutes of breathable air left between us. Do you think anyone will find our remains? I mean someone's bound to spot the shuttle, right?"

"Of course they shall. Dark side of Luna or not, we're still adrift in one of the more heavily used areas of our solar system. In the interim, rigging up an improvised cryonic storage chamber shall do the trick."

"Oh my God, Spence, you're a genius! Wait, so why aren't we building that already?"

"Because it only takes six minutes at most to construct from the materials at hand and I was hoping to avoid having to bother with it." Spence shrugged and unbuckled their safety harness to glide across the cabin of the shuttle. "I always get the most hideous migraines from being frozen. Moreover, we shan't have any control over who finds us whilst we're unconscious. They might even be bloody pirates."

Tanya glowered. "Well, not to question your priorities, but hello – death by suffocation looming?"

"Alright, alright, don't waste any more of our oxygen, Miss Darnell. I'm working on it!"

Greg Hull moved to stand between the Martian woman and the entrance to his infant daughter's private room in Mercy Hospital's NIC unit. "Susan, you know perfectly well that you can't be here. The court barred you from having any form of direct contact with Rayne."

His unanticipated guest scowled. "Yeah, well I don't give a damn what the court said – I'm her mother!"

"Well, maybe biologically, but not legally, and that's where it counts." The ANI agent sighed and reached towards the emergency panel on the wall next to him. "Do I need to call security?"

"That depends if you want me to shoot them too." She kept the plasma pistol levelled at hip height: out of sight of any casual observers. "You want to keep on pushing me?"

He stepped back quietly. "Don't do anything hasty, Captain Kennedy. You wouldn't want to bring the reputation of the MMC into disrepute."

"Shut up, drop your phone and your sidearm on the floor, and get in the damn bathroom."

"Okay – you're in charge."

"Damn right." His captor followed him warily, nodding towards the tiny sink. "On your knees, cuff yourself to the wastepipe, and then toss the key over here. I'm sure you'll survive until the hospital cleaning robots locate you."

"Just what are you planning to do?"

She picked up the key and pocketed it, holstering her plasma pistol beneath her jacket. "I'm taking my daughter back home to Mars with me, you privileged Terran asshole!"

Hull stared at her incredulously. "Do you really think that you can just walk out of here with her?"

"I can't but you sure can." She smirked and then pulled a slender roll of military grade holomesh from her pocket and shook it out, draping it around herself like a shawl before activating the transmitters. "Pretty neat little bit of kit this. It even comes with vocal filters. Nobody's going to look twice at me."

"Damn it, Susan, this is insane!" Hull yanked at the wastepipe to no avail. "Think about what you're doing here – stacking potential charges of identity theft, false imprisonment of a federal agent, child abduction, and endangerment? When the

authorities catch you, they'll throw away the key!"

"She ain't in any danger with me, Mr Hull. Growing up with someone like you as her parent is a whole other ballgame. I won't let you put her through that. Like I said at the custody hearing, if I had the means, I'd get Fisher out too; before you have the chance to mess him up."

"You really are mentally unwell, aren't you?" The ANI agent sighed and shook his head at his nascent doppelganger. "I love both my kids more than life itself, Susan. I'd sooner die than do anything to hurt them."

The copy of his face sneered. "Don't you get how denying Rayne any contact with me could hurt her? Guess you don't think that having access to her cultural heritage matters either."

Hull rolled his eyes. "Oh, spare me! You hate being Martian so badly that you couldn't get your Terran citizenship approved fast enough! Don't try to pretend that growing up on the Red Planet is some vital spiritual experience. Admit it, Susan – you're running back there to hide amongst the rest of the dregs of human society – hoping that no one will find you. You'll spend the rest of your pathetic life cowering in some crappy Martian slum, whilst

our daughter pays for your pride with her health! Maybe even with her life."

She stared back at him from behind a now flawless copy of his features. The rest of the holographic disguise continued to form around her: a chrysalis of hard light energy. "What do you mean? I thought the doctors here had already fixed what was wrong with her."

Hull softened his tone a little. "They stabilised her genetic matrix and gave her a normal lifespan, yeah, but it isn't as simple as that. She has multiple health problems linked to being born so very prematurely. Susan, she could die without the resources available here on Earth."

"I...I didn't realise that." She turned her head to gaze at the dozing infant in the hospital issue crib. "Damn it."

"Hey, it's okay, Susan. Come on – we can still work this out together. Maybe Bryce and I jumped the gun a little with getting custody; we just needed to be sure that they wouldn't deny her treatment. Those damn lawyers kept insisting that we were doing the right thing, and I guess we got carried away. Don't make our precious little angel be the one to pay for that."

She chuckled mirthlessly. "Oh, real nice try – it's just too bad you couldn't resist overegging things a little, huh?"

"What's that supposed to imply?"

"It means that I've read through all of the legal documentation." Her fingertips hovered over the security panel. "You and your fiancée filed for parental rights *before* Rayne was even born. Back then, nobody had reason to suspect that she'd need any kind of special medical care. If you'll lie about that, then it's a pretty safe bet that I can't trust you over whether she's healthy!" The soundproof door slid shut before Hull could reply.

Kicking his phone and sidearm out of sight beneath the changing unit, his captor hurried over to the crib. The infant wriggled sleepily as she scooped her up. "Time to go, brat; I've got plenty more people to deceive on the way out of here!"

Chapter Three – Nothing To Tell

“Has there been any word back from Housekeeping yet, Mr Moxton?” Darren Jolley was waiting in the corridor just outside his handler’s flat when the older man arrived home from browsing the local supermarket’s Friday night reductions. “I mean any news at all about my lass? I’m sorry bothering you at home like this but I’ve tried asking via the proper channels and nobody will tell me anything!”

“That’s because there’s nothing to tell yet.” Daniel Moxton sighed and handed the blonde man his groceries. “Since you’re here you may as well be helpful. Carry these in for me. I’ll make us both something to drink.”

“You do your shopping at midnight all the time then?” Jolley followed him into the front hall and elbowed the door closed behind them.

"No, only when I work late, Darren."

"Ah, okay. It's just that I haven't the foggiest who's working when at the moment, what with Pembleton benching me and everything...!"

"Quiet."

"Aye, but...!"

This time Moxton placed his right index finger over the sniper's mouth. "I said *quiet*, Darren. You're working yourself up into another panic, mate. Count to ten, breathe out, and then we'll talk."

He took the groceries back and carried them to the kitchen. Jolley tagged miserably at his heels. "I still don't see why Pembleton wouldn't let me help. It's ripping me to bits not knowing whether or not Tanya's safe!"

"That's exactly why you weren't cleared."

"It's still not bloody fair though, is it?"

"It's not about whether it's fair, Darren. Pembleton won't risk that fucker Carson Howard using your relationship with Tanya as leverage. Sending Spence and Quincy in alone was the best choice available to her."

Jolley wasn't convinced. "No harm to Spence, but they've been out of the game for nearly a year now. What happens to Tanya and Dr Rosa if they

fuck up?"

"The exact same thing that would happen to them if anyone else was running the operation."

"Aye, well I mean their fitness levels and so on – what if they don't have the right muscle mass anymore? What if there's a big door or something needing manhandled open and they can't manage it?"

"That's why they have Quincy along."

"Okay, but what if...!"

"Darren. Breathe."

"I *am* breathing!" The younger operative clenched his hands around the back frame of one of the tall chairs lining the breakfast bar. His knuckles whitened. "It's just that I'd much rather be shooting the people responsible right now! That's all that I'm any bloody good at, after all."

"Hey, now that's not true. You're a very talented operative, Darren."

"Ah, don't talk bollocks, mate!" Jolley snorted. "I'm never going to make the top ranks, not like Ollie might; everybody knows that. I mean if I was any real use as a spy then Tanya and Dr Rosa wouldn't have been snatched in the first place, would they? I'd have spotted something was off."

"No one else spotted it either." Moxton decided to let the good whisky do at least some of the counselling from that point. "Here, drink up. You can crash here until Oliver gets back from his holiday or we have word back from Housekeeping, whichever happens first. I wouldn't be much of a handler if I chucked you out to fend for yourself in this state."

Eleven-year-old Tessa Waverly pressed her nose up against the main observation panel of her adoptive father's private interplanetary transport vessel and frowned. "Vinnie, come here quick and look at this!" Her fingers flickered through the words excitedly as she turned to look at her diminutive companion. "There's something out there; a little shuttlecraft, just sort of floating near Luna!"

The robotic pine martin scampered across the gleaming white deck plating to crouch beside her at the floor to ceiling window. The filtered starlight cast dim patterns across his synthetic fur covering. "Huh, looks as if somebody must've broken down between planets, kid!" He switched briefly to audio communication. "Hey, Az – are you and the boss man seeing this?"

"Seeing what?" Zahn's voice crackled over the intercom. "Hold on...oh. Yeah, we see it. Bob's opening hailing frequencies now."

Tessa gestured to the APSU again: oblivious to the augmetic's reply. "Do you recognise the hull configuration, Vinnie?"

"Yeah: according to my database it's a BIINT vessel." Vinnie's stubby digits wagged impatiently. "That stands for British International Intelligence, if your school hasn't bothered teaching you about Earth's spy agencies and their cheesy acronyms yet."

The girl blinked. "Why would my school teach anything like that?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot. It's just us robots who need to know everything about everyone who ever existed. You organics have it easy, kid."

"That's what you *always* say, Vinnie! You even said it when I caught super measles."

"Hey, you ever even see the robot equivalent of super measles? It ain't pretty, kid."

"Does it kill your ears like with organics?"

The cantankerous little APSU shrugged. "There's nothing stopping you from getting cybernetics fitted, Tessa. Well, nothing aside from racism against

the mechanically improved."

"That's ableist, Vinnie! You suck sometimes."

"Quit whining. Cochlear augmentations ain't ableist, they're practical."

Tessa turned her back and ignored him for that. Being part of the Deaf Community was just as important an identity as being non-organic, but arguing with Vinnie was pointless. *Maybe Az is right about his base code being faulty!*

The little BIINT shuttle was getting closer now: safely engulfed in the *Sandsprite's* tractor beam. *Dad'll get good money for salvaging it – ten maybe even twenty-five percent of the total value, just for low-order. As much as fifty percent if there's people rescued along with it.* She toyed with one of her ringlets before turning back and signing again. "So how much is a shuttle like that worth anyhow?"

"I guess it depends on how top secret the contents are. BIINT might just assassinate whoever tries to return it to them."

"That's not funny, Vinnie!"

"I ain't joking, kid." The APSU shook his head slowly. "Spies don't have much of a reputation for generosity or gratitude."

"Greg!" Bryce dropped the halfway folded shirt back into the laundry hamper and threw herself into her fiancé's arms as he entered the kitchen. "Dinner's in the oven: we waited for you. Kassie's just gone upstairs for a shower. Where have you been all this time? I tried calling you, and texting, but you didn't pick up, and the staff over at Mercy said that you'd left with Rayne nearly seven hours ago now!"

"That wasn't me, baby." Hull buried his face in her soft honey blonde hair. "I explained it to their security already, and to ANI. Someone really should have contacted you before I got here."

"What do you mean, Greg? Where's our daughter?"

He hugged her tight. "Susan abducted her from the hospital. She locked me in the en suite and used a holomesh cocoon to steal my identity long enough to get clear. From what she said, I think she's heading back to Mars."

"Oh my God, Greg, what do we do?"

"Volker's on her way over to discuss our options now. I called her before I left Mercy. I didn't have enough battery to do anything more than that." He stepped back and pulled out his dented cell

phone. "Susan again: she must have kicked it or stepped on it, I'm not sure which."

Bryce thought of the empty nursery upstairs that they had only finished decorating the week before. She choked back a sob. "Maybe if Aaron and the other two guys had still been living here, then one of them would have gone to the hospital with you. I'm so sorry, Greg; I never should have asked you to have them packed off like that...!"

"No, baby, you were right. They're better living independently, and we need the space for our own family." Hull glanced towards the den; tilting his head at the sound of cartoons. "Is Fisher still up?"

"It's only seven thirty – I promised him he could have until eight."

"Bryce, we agreed that the television isn't a babysitter. I'm disappointed you left him alone to watch it. You should have told Kassie to help until I got home. She's supposed to be earning her keep as our au pair, after all."

"He's not alone; our new neighbour offered to stay and watch him whilst I got on with the laundry."

"What new neighbour?" Hull stepped back, frowning. "Are we just letting people into our home

at random now?"

Bryce looked down at her feet. "He helped me bring in the groceries earlier and Fisher really seemed to like him, so I made coffee and he ended up staying. Then Kassie came home in one of her moods again, and letting her unwind for a while just felt easier than arguing about it. I'm sorry, Greg. I honestly thought it would be okay."

"No. Leaving a total stranger out of sight with our toddler is *not* okay, Bryce! It's never okay, but especially not at the moment – for Christ's sake, what if he's in league with Susan?" He strode off into the den without waiting for her reply. "Hi, I'm Greg, and you need to leave now, Mr...Campbell? What the Hell are you doing here?"

Thomas smirked at him from the couch: nodding quietly towards Fisher, who was sound asleep under a blanket beside him. "Careful, now: we don't want to wake the wee lad."

"Get out." Hull had already taken aim: his sidearm trained at the retiree's head. "I've had it up to here with your agency kidnapping my son! Believe me, I won't miss."

Thomas rose slowly to his feet and moved towards the door. "You should know that your

fiancée invited me in of her own accord. We've been getting along swimmingly."

"Don't try to play me. I know how you people think: this is some sick ploy to damage our relationship!"

The older man didn't bother to deny it. "She's an attractive woman, Agent Hull, and a charming hostess too, as luck would have it."

Hull felt something in his psyche twist up a little. He turned warily: circling around to shepherd Thomas to the front door. "Go back to Britain, Mr Campbell. You're not Desdemona Falls' resident material."

"Well, I'm afraid that our local Home Owners' Association thinks otherwise." Thomas stepped out into the mild Floridian evening. "Still, goodbye for now – neighbour."

Laine Volker's familiar dark hover car pulled up in the driveway before Hull could squeeze the trigger. The senior ANI agent raised an elegantly sculpted red eyebrow as she exited the vehicle. "Mr Campbell – why are you here? Are you assisting with ANI's investigation or merely harassing my operative and his family?"

The houseline shrilled before anyone could

respond. Hull sucked in a breath and answered it, holstering his weapon. "Hello?"

"Greg, buddy, how's life going for you?" Carson Howard's voice oozed down the line and into Hull's ear: impossibly alive. "Don't hang up! Not unless you want me to take it out on Kellie."

"I'm listening, Mr Howard." Clearly, the universe was set on fucking with him even more than usual today. "What do you want?"

"Ha, surprised to hear from me, Greg?" His former CEO chuckled. "Yeah, I figured that BIINT probably wouldn't bother to read you in! Let me cut to the chase: I have Kellie Rosa and a list of demands that you're going to meet. Oh, and Nightingale – mustn't forget about them, even if they are doing a damn good impression of a frozen ready meal right now. You know, it's real handy when your enemies waltz straight in and lie down on the trap, Greg! Can you imagine the effort it would've taken to capture someone like that if they weren't already in cryonic storage?"

Hull swallowed. "I have some idea, sir."

"Yeah, I bet you do. Incidentally, I made a judgement call and left their little killer robot adrift in the shuttle with Tanya Darnell. I'm sure you

remember her – young, hot, everything to live for up until one of our erstwhile employees butchered her family?"

"Yes sir; but for the record, that was Bernard Vetch's doing, not mine."

"Not really the point I'm making, buddy. Listen up. My engineers have rigged that shuttle to blow sky high once the interior airlock opens. We're talking extra high yield nuclear matter. Now, if you play along with what I want, I'll give you the code to shut off the bomb. If not, then you'd better start planning dear Tanya's eulogy! So how about it, Greg: do we have a deal?"

"I guess we just might, Mr Howard." Hull gestured silently to Volker; indicating that she should make every effort to trace the call. "It all depends on what exactly it is that you want me to do."

"Simple, Greg – you're going to steal back all of the evidence that you gathered against GETEC, and bring it to me, along with that new hot boss of yours! See, running C.A.K.E is all very well, but I miss being a corporate fat cat, Greg, and you're going to solve that for me."

Chapter Four – Powered Down

"That's a bomb, Bob."

Waverly nodded and continued scanning the shuttle. "Yeah, Az, I know. It's attached to the interior airlock mechanism."

"I mean it's a really *big* bomb, Bob."

"Uh huh, guess we'll have to cut our way in through the front viewport instead. What do you reckon would be the safest method – radial micronic atomiser blade, maybe?"

"I'd much prefer to leave it to someone else! You know, like British International Intelligence, or a professional search and rescue crew." Zahn backed away from the tiny craft. "Why don't we just put it back where we found it and plant a marker buoy for the relevant authorities?"

"We can't do that, Az; there's someone alive on board. Adult female, it looks as if she's in some kind of an improvised cryonic storage pod."

"She is huh?" The augmetric padded closer, purring softly as he peered at the scanner. "Wow, a regular sleeping beauty! You know what; let me get a better look at that bomb. I'm sure we can figure something out."

"Okay. There's a seriously impressive robot in there too, but it's powered down. I'm going to try and access the shuttle's flight recorder before we start cutting. Maybe that'll shed some light on what happened. Based on the potential explosive yield, I get the impression that whoever planted the device *really* wanted to hurt people."

Kellie Rosa squirmed helplessly on the surgical gurney as the white uniformed C.A.K.E technicians repositioned the nanomolecular implantation unit: this time directly over her lower abdomen. The miniscule wires itched as they burrowed into place beneath her skin. A latticework of sub dermal body armour was slowly knitting into place. Her tormentors had bragged about how it would protect her soft tissue and internal organs from all types of external physical harm. *Mr Howard wants to keep you alive for as long as possible, doctor. You should be flattered, really. He greatly admires*

your work.

The fact that he fully intended to brutalise her for entertainment purposes didn't seem to faze them. That was the other side to the modifications forced upon her. Every inch of bodily sensation multiplied tenfold: an indestructible sensate. *The perfect toy for a sadist like Howard – no doubt he'll add a few command codes to my neural map too!*

The process was only twelve percent complete, ergo her body was still eighty-eight percent human. Rosa wasn't altogether certain what way to look at her situation. Glass half full, or glass half-empty; either way, she wished there was some way of smashing the metaphorical vessel and opening enough of her veins to end this nightmare forever. *Except even then he'd just clone me and upload my consciousness again. I'll never escape him.*

She rolled her eyes to the right: straining to see the improvised cryonic storage pod. The partially thawed chemicals sloshing within it still obscured its occupant from view, but she could make out the information on the biometrics monitor. Name and numbers didn't tally: the vital statistics displayed were completely different to those of Housekeeping. *Whomever it is that C.A.K.E has*

abducted, it certainly isn't Spence.

"Ugh, okay – I totally get why you don't like being frozen, Spence!" Tanya groaned as she opened her eyes. Then the worst of the post cryonic fugue lifted and she realised that there was what appeared to be a giant cat dressed as a spacer staring down at her. "Jeez, am I on the like, extra good drugs or something?"

The creature snorted. "Welcome to the *Sandsprite*. I'm Ari Zahn; senior engineer with Waverly Industries. Me and my business partner Robert found your shuttle adrift on our way to Earth – nice bomb, by the way."

"Huh? What bomb, and why are you wearing people clothes? No, wait. Why is a *person* a *cat*?"

"Starting to think maybe we should have left you to drift." Zahn handed the young woman a plastic beaker of water to sip. "I'm a first generation feline augmetric. Yes, those are still a thing, before you ask. Seriously, I've heard all of the witty remarks already, and none of them are funny, so just *don't*, okay?"

Tanya nodded. "Sorry. I just thought that maybe I was hallucinating. Where's Spence?"

"They're freshening up in the bathroom at the other end of this level." The augmetric shuddered. "I seriously don't know how you ladies manage to go through that horror show every month."

"Most of us are smart enough to choose not to have to!" Tanya staggered up from the medical bed. Her legs wobbled. "So which way do I go from here? Also, again, *what* freaking bomb do you mean?"

"Take a left and follow the corridor." Zahn took hold of her elbow before she could fall over. "I'll walk with you. As for the bomb, we checked the flight recorder and there was some kind of pseudo black ops team involved. Spence said to tell you it was C.A.K.E again, and that they stole the other pod."

"But Spence was supposed to be in there!"

"Yeah, apparently that part was just dumb luck: they were trapped in the bathroom on your shuttle when the hijacking occurred. Seems they went in to do whatever, and then the door jammed. We found them in there, sucking the dregs out of an emergency oxygen canister."

The young American banged on the door of the bathroom. "Spence, are you okay in there? Where

did you even *find* an oxygen canister?"

There was a sigh from the other side of the door. "In the airlock, along with the spare EV suit; I forgot about it until after you were already frozen. It's funny how realising that there's still a Level 4 biohazard lurking on board crystallises one's thinking."

"I thought we already spaced that thing!"

"So did I, Miss Darnell. Evidently, we were both wrong. Anyhow, I secured it in my pod and froze it, hence why I needed the canister." The door slid open and Spence emerged; both arms folded tightly around their abdomen. "The good news is that our emergency pods are tagged, so we'll be able to track it down, along with Howard's minions. Hopefully, they'll lead us to wherever they've taken Dr Rosa."

"Not many people about this morning, but to be fair the lodge isn't really set up for the Easter holiday types." Oliver Dobos glanced at his son before continuing. "It's an old building; dates back to the mid sixteenth century or before. Hard to be sure how many lives it's seen play out over the years. Careful of how much of it you let notice you

looking, okay?"

"Okay, Dad." Brett traced his fingers across the assorted heraldry of the intricately carved wall panelling of Artemis Lodge. The history of the wood tugged at his psyche, and he jerked his hand back: glad that the lounge was empty of other guests.

"Your Nan and Granddad have a big Sunday dinner party planned for tomorrow. I hear Aunt Noreen's bringing one of her fancy cakes."

"How come they aren't here to meet us?"

"Aunt Noreen's probably still elbow deep in cake batter. As for Mum and Dad – well, you'll see when they get back." The field operative winked. "It's a surprise. Something to do with all the birthdays and Christmases they missed."

"You mean they got me a gift? Cool!"

"Come on – let's take our luggage upstairs to the family annex and get unpacked. Leave the ghosts alone for a while, eh?"

Brett rolled his eyes. "Ah, jeez, it's not *ghosts*, Dad! It's just combined empathic residue. Like when the shower gets clogged up with old hair."

"When I was your age, we called it ghosts."

"Yeah, well I guess us kids nowadays just aren't superstitious like you were."

"Some of you are cheeky little gits too, in my opinion."

"You don't mind though – me speaking my mind, I mean." His son ambled after him along the hallway. "Mom always wants me to internalise stuff. She says it's important to maintain emotional control."

"Laine's not *always* right about everything. That's all I'm saying, Brett. Not that she's wrong, or that you should ever disrespect her. Just that she's human too, okay?"

"Okay."

"Jó fiú!" Dobos smiled and buried his other concerns under a layer that the boy wasn't likely to sense at all, let alone breach. There was stuff you didn't share with your kids, not ever, and his past experiences in Miami *definitely* qualified. *I just hope you make extra bloody sure to keep that fucker Hull at a safe distance, Laine. He's not on anyone's fucking side but his own.*

Campbell scraped what remained of his attempt at making scrambled eggs out of the blackened frying pan and into the food waste caddy. It was just after ten in the morning and

Saturday was going poorly already. Heidi was off to London with a fellow au pair on their shared day off, and barely an hour after she left, he'd almost burned down the kitchen. To compound matters, Carol had popped around again at the sound of the smoke alarm, and was *insisting* on being helpful.

"It's really no trouble, Craig! I was about to cook for us at home anyhow." She bustled past him on her way back to the dining room with breakfast for the older twins and her own two sons: toasted bacon sandwiches. "Besides, you need to take things a little easier; what with your leg and all."

He limped after her with Sam's porridge. His son cooed happily from his high chair at the sight of it. Jacamar and Honeyguide were mercifully still asleep upstairs in their cots. Then again, perhaps that was a bad sign. "Should very young babies sleep in past ten of a morning? I mean they were awake earlier from about six through until eight or so, but then they just conked out again. I wasn't sure whether or not to risk waking them for a feed. They've been a bit grumpier than usual since their last set of jabs – Heidi took them on Thursday."

"It's probably just a side effect. Don't worry, I'll go and check on them now to be safe. You sit

down for a bit and feed Sam. Have some toast yourself at least too." Carol glanced around at the four older children. "Kids, have you all got enough breakfast?"

They mumbled their assent, and she hurried off. Campbell sat down next to Sam and started spoon-feeding him. The toddler swatted irritably at the proffered food and grabbed a handful instead. "Porry...!"

"Porridge, Sam." The ex-spy set down the spoon to wipe his son's hand. "Puh-or-ridge. Now you try."

Sam blinked and snatched up the spoon with his other hand, slamming it into his breakfast triumphantly. "Porridge...!"

There was now lukewarm porridge splattered over half of the dining table. Barnabas grinned. "Well, you did tell him to *try*, after all!"

Kathryn was less amused. "Ugh – it's got in my hair! Why did you let him do that, Craig?"

"Sorry about that, Kathryn." Campbell quieted Carol's boys with a sharp look. They were both a fair bit worldlier than the twins, to judge by how quickly they'd started snickering just now. *I'll need to speak to their mum about that!* "So anyhow, Philip – your mum said earlier that you've just turned eleven,

and John here is what, thirteen?"

"Yeah." The elder of the Bingham children grunted an answer for both. "Phil doesn't really chat much to strangers. He's *shy*, aren't you, Phil? He prefers his comic books!"

The younger boy bristled behind his mouthful of toast and bacon, but he didn't attempt to reply. Campbell finally managed to wrestle the spoon away from Sam. "Right, back to breakfast!"

Chapter Five – No Such Assertion

“God damn that bastard Howard and his crazy schemes!” Hull looked away from the main viewport as they approached the *Sandsprite*. He peered again at the hospital security footage streaming on loop across the screen of his phone. The sight of the bright pink baby blanket wrenched at his heart. “With every respect, ma’am, I should be the one leading the team looking for Rayne! She’s my little girl, and I know Susan better than anyone else at ANI does. Besides, you were there with me in England last December. What makes you think that BIINT trust me enough to work with me now?”

“Irrespective of your previous interactions with their operatives, we are working in conjunction with them to rescue Dr Rosa.” Volker paused to key in the docking codes for their shuttle. The hangar bay

of the gleaming solar yacht cycled open. They had spent the past nine hours deceiving Carson Howard. It was somewhat ironic how useful her agent's old skill set had been. "Try to accept that things have changed, Agent Hull."

"Yeah, well good luck convincing the British of *that*, ma'am."

"Luck is the last thing that I intend to rely on."

He swung around in his seat to stare at her. "I hope you aren't planning on taking any drastic psionic related measures?"

"I made no such assertion."

"But you're thinking about it, aren't you?" Hull tucked his phone away. "Ma'am, there's a *limit* to how far I can cover for you."

"I am not asking you to cover for me. I never have before either."

"You don't need to ask – we're colleagues, Senior Agent Volker. We're always supposed to have one another's backs."

"That is indeed true, Agent Hull. Therefore, by your own reasoning, you must believe me that ANI shall retrieve your daughter. Permitting your immediate involvement with that effort might jeopardise any potential prosecution of her

mother."

"To be honest, I don't care about prosecuting her or not, ma'am. I just want to bring Rayne home safely."

The lurch and click of docking interrupted their conversation. They disembarked along with their luggage and made their way to the hangar bay airlock. It had been the better part of a year since Hull last worked off planet. Even then, he hadn't experienced travelling by solar yacht. GETEC's space faring ships had tended towards blunt functionality, and the main public transport vessels weren't much prettier.

Looking around the interior of the *Sandsprite*, he supposed that BIINT really did prefer the finer things in life. "Do we know how Housekeeping managed to swing this arrangement, ma'am?"

"That information was not provided in the dossier for our mission."

"Huh, so it was plain old-fashioned dumb luck then." Hull smiled as a familiar thin figure opened the airlock. "You certainly know how to land on your feet, Nightingale!"

Spence glared at him. "Pembleton insists that you're to be allowed to work with us on this C.A.K.E

nonsense. I'm told that there's no other option available."

"Your information is correct." Volker stepped past the non-gender and set down her suitcase. "Agent Hull and I are the only ones who can lure Howard out from hiding. He believes that we are working with him to reinstate GETEC."

Hull shrugged. "Well, it's more like he believes that I'm frantically scrambling to appease him. Officially, Senior Agent Volker is here as my hostage."

"Yes, we saw the news reports, they were very convincing. Your status as a reliable government mole has definitely been shaken." Spence eyed Volker warily. "You do realise that given how those in charge are supporting the media circus it's very probably only a matter of time until Mr Dobos arrives to rescue you?"

The senior ANI operative nodded serenely. "All the more reason for us to work swiftly. Where are your companions?"

"They're all up on the bridge; it's this way." Spence led off along the corridor and into a surprisingly large mirrored elevator. "Rather spacious, these solar yachts – Mr Waverly says that

it's to do with the surface area needed for the exterior power cells."

"Not because he's a billionaire who enjoys a luxury lifestyle then, huh?" Hull smirked. "Yeah, I'm sure he's being totally self-aware with his reasoning!"

"Don't tar all billionaires with the same unscrupulous brush, Mr Hull." The thin British operative exited the elevator and turned left. "Some of them are rather less awful than others."

"Good to know that you've made a new friend out of this, Nightingale."

"That's still Spence to you."

"I kind of feel like we should be on first name terms by now. Speaking of which, what did you decide to name the babies?"

"Frankly their names are none of your damned business."

Volker cleared her throat. "Agent Hull, I have already reminded you *once* of the need for mutual interagency cooperation."

"You'll find that he gets off on antagonising other people." Spence slid their palm across the security panel outside the bridge. The door hissed open, revealing yet more gleaming white decor;

this time punctuated by neat rows of flashing diodes and soft blue-violet holoscreens. "Of course you both already know Miss Darnell and Quincy. This is Robert Waverly, the taller fellow over there is his business associate Ari Zahn. The girl is Tessa Waverly, and her APSU's name is Vinnie. He's fully capable of employing lethal force, by the way."

Hull blinked. "Why is there a kid along for this? What, does British Intelligence now openly condone the use of child soldiers or something?" He ignored Volker's pointed look. "I'm not okay with this – Howard's a predatory psychopath, and his minions aren't likely to be any nicer!"

"Wow." Tanya leaned back in her seat. "That's pretty much what you said too, Spence! I totally didn't expect that from him."

"It's fine, really." Waverly gestured from behind his console. "Tessa will be perfectly safe here on the *Sandsprite*. Besides like Spence said: she's got Vinnie to protect her if need be."

The lanky augmetric yawned then: displaying fangs that Hull felt surely belonged in a zoo. "They might have a point, Bob. I'm fairly sure there are laws about not endangering minors."

"She's not in any danger, Az. Vinnie – back me

up here please?"

"Oh please!" Hull snorted. "What, we're supposed to listen to a cybernetic gerbil now?"

"Hey!" The APSU sprang down from his perch on Tessa's shoulder and sat up on his haunches in front of her. His beady eyes locked with Hull. "First off, I'm modelled after a pine martin; which just so happens to be what those in the know refer to as an apex predator. Secondly, what, you think I ain't up to full defensive specifications or something? Because I got some news for you there too, buddy boy...!"

"That is quite enough debate." Volker pulled up the data stream regarding C.A.K.E on the nearest holoscreen. "Let us focus our energies on locating Carson Howard and his hostage before he has time to uncover our deception. Our respective agencies shall not be able to run interference with Earth's media indefinitely."

"You're underestimating Pembleton!" Spence sighed. "Anyhow, let's crack on. Christ only knows how poor Dr Rosa is holding up by now."

The one bright point in this entire horrid situation was that the unanticipated chaos had interrupted the augmentation process at less than twenty

percent completion. Rosa clung to that fact as she dragged herself still further into the ventilation ducts. *Besides, I've managed to evade the creature for almost six hours now – that's more than can be said for Howard's people!*

Another agonised scream echoed from somewhere outside of the ducts. The sound of rending flesh and snapping bone carried with it. She shuddered and kept on crawling. The biohazard was still hunting down and butchering her erstwhile captors. That was to her advantage, as gruesome as it seemed. *They don't deserve any pity. I mustn't let myself forget that fact.*

Her escape had been a mere fluke. The creature might just as easily have sprung at her as it had the C.A.K.E scientists. Only luck had seen it ignore her as she scrabbled free of the damaged surgical gurney. The acrid smoke from the ruined nanomolecular implantation unit had helped cover her retreat. One simply didn't stop to question those sorts of opportunities. *Tsunami protocols, as the field operatives would say. Run, and don't ever stop to look around you.*

Looming into view of the *Sandsprite*, Io's

sulphurous atmosphere lent its volatile surface an almost pustulant hue. The tiny satellite base hung within the moon's trailing hemisphere; C.A.K.E having made full use of the Jovian radiation levels to mask their presence. Waverly frowned at the telemetry on his screen. "You say Howard expected you and Senior Agent Volker to arrive on that puny little shuttle?"

Hull nodded. "By the look on your face, I'm guessing that it doesn't have the necessary environmental features to get us there alive?"

The Martian shrugged. "Alive, yeah – maybe; but I'm not sure that you'd *want* to be. Radiation exposure is an especially bad way to clock out."

"He's not exactly fond of either of us. We keep on meddling with his evil schemes. My intelligence gathering for ANI is behind him losing GETEC."

"Ha, that must be why he wanted you to die slowly and horribly!" Waverly smiled and pulled up a schematic. "Here – this is the layout of their base. According to what my computers have found, C.A.K.E's holding Dr Rosa on this level here. It seems to be a biomedical department, but there are also systems more common to cybernetics."

"I think we can guess what that means for Kellie."

Can you access the interior security systems – maybe get us a visual on her, or Howard?"

"Already on it: there's something up with the feed though." The man's fingers virtually danced across the holographic interface. "I think some of the cameras are physically inoperative. With what Spence and Tanya said about the thing in the cryonic storage unit, I'd guess that we're going to need to go in loaded for – well, not bear per se, but you probably get the idea. Ha, there's an old Terran saying...!"

"Don't say it, Bob." Zahn was busy recalibrating the sights on his preferred weapon. "Seriously, buddy. I don't want to hear those words in connection with this situation!"

Spence looked up from triple checking their equipment. "By any chance do you mean that quaint old saying about there being no safe distance from a bear?"

The augmetric growled, his tail swishing angrily. "Okay, just for that, you can be the first one through the airlock!"

Unlike the homes directly opposite them, the houses on Thomas' side of the street were classically

styled, single storey, open plan dwellings. Most were occupied by fellow retirees, but a handful belonged to young, first-time buyers. The rear side of the properties backed onto the water – flat, square lawns of artificial turf, edged off neatly by the walkway belonging to the planned community's marina. The view across the water was breathtaking, particularly now at sunset, but there was nothing of practical height between the back doors and the risk of drowning. Small wonder that most residents with children tended to reside elsewhere in Desdemona Falls.

He settled back in his armchair and sipped at his evening coffee. It wasn't a patch on what Bryce had served up, but might have been better if served by someone other than the machine in the kitchen. Not, of course, that he needed company. *I just wouldn't turn it down if she happened to offer.*

There was no denying the attractiveness of Hull's fiancée. The au pair, Tanya's friend – Cassandra whatever her other name was – had changed her look since last year's live news reports. Quite why such a delectable young creature would want to appear so bloody plain was beyond him. *Who knows why women do anything!*

He gazed out the window and across the street. The local HOA had clearly swallowed ANI's ruse; that or they no longer wanted to house former GETEC employees. One of their representatives was standing just outside Hull's front door with a self-important look on his face; Bryce shaking her head in reply. *It looks as if it's time for me to provide dear Bryce with some support in her hour of need.*

Chapter Six – On Point

Hull adjusted the focus on the HUD of his environmental suit and peered down through the noxious smoke billowing up from the depths of what had once been an engineering bay. The railing that he was leaning against creaked ominously. “I see something moving two levels down from us – there, beside that coolant outlet!”

“It’s another one of those ruddy things!” Spence fired past him. The mutated C.A.K.E operative pitched forwards onto the deck plating, minus the back of their head. “I’m starting to wonder if there’s anyone left alive in this base that *hasn’t* been infected.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it’s probably a good thing that we left Tanya and Waverly back on the *Sandsprite* too. I don’t really think either of them are cut out for these kinds of situations. Here’s hoping

that Kellie's okay."

"I can't be certain about Waverly but Miss Darnell is made of sterner stuff than you give her credit for." The non-gender paused to reload their rifle. "I wasn't aware that you and Dr Rosa were on first name terms. Should British Intelligence be concerned?"

"That probably depends on whether I can convince Senior Agent Volker to make her a job offer." The ANI operative turned and gestured for the rest of their companions to move forwards from the chamber. "This area's secure, ma'am."

"Good." Volker tapped the screen of her tablet and consulted the holographic schematic of the base. The image fizzled slightly as it interacted with the chemicals in the air around them. "According to the map, we must make our way through this section and then up one more level to reach the biomedical department."

<warning-hostileorganicsahead>

"Thanks for the heads up!" Zahn growled behind his faceplate as he hoisted his plasma cannon back up onto his right shoulder. "So how many are there this time?"

<estimation-six>

"At least we're only outnumbered by one this time." Spence dropped back to cover the rear of the group. "Quincy, you're with me. It's your turn on point, Mr Zahn."

At first glance, the six unfortunates between the rescue party and the biomedical department were little more than a glutinous mass of melded tissues. Then a tendril slithered outwards from the nightmarish heap: writhing and grasping. Zahn hissed as he opened fire. "Anybody else never sleeping again after this is done?"

Hull stared past the augmetric at the remains of the internal airlock. "Something pretty big certainly wanted out of there. I wonder where it went."

"I have a horrible feeling that we'll find out soon enough." Spence peered back along the smoky corridor towards the lift. "If this fire gets any worse, we'll need to find another route back down when we leave."

"The schematic indicates an emergency ladder." Volker highlighted the route in purple. "We must hope that Dr Rosa remains capable of descending it."

"I'm sure we can figure out a way to carry her between us if need be, ma'am." Hull caught the

look that Spence gave him. "What's the matter, Nightingale? Am I failing to live down to your expectations of me again?"

<advisory-movementinventilationducts>

Everyone turned to face the nearest grille. A faint scuffling noise emanated from behind it, and then slender fingers emerged through the wire. "Please don't shoot – it's me: Rosa! I'm not infected but I can't get the vent open from this side. It's jammed!"

Hull crouched down and laced hands with the terrified young technician. "It's okay, Kellie. There's a joint task force here. We'll get you out of there, just try to stay calm."

"Quincy, try your precision laser." Spence nudged Hull aside with the barrel of their rifle. "I'll thank you to stand clear of our boffin, Mr Hull!"

"Hey, that's Agent Hull." He stepped back anyhow, and stood next to Volker. "I'm with ANI, remember?"

"My operative is correct." The red-haired woman returned her attention to her tablet. "I have informed Mr Waverly of our current situation and requested that he prepare full quarantine protocols ahead of our return to the *Sandsprite*. It would

appear that there are no other survivors left in this facility for us to question anyhow."

"I really don't think you should have to be alone right now, my dear." Thomas herded Bryce back indoors as the now thoroughly terrified HOA representative drove away. "Greg and I might not see eye to eye on a few things, but taking care of family isn't one of them. He'd want me to keep you safe in his absence."

She tried to close the front door in his face, gasping nervously as he pushed on in alongside her. "Mr Campbell, please, you can't be in here...!"

"Nonsense, Bryce!" He squeezed her shoulders. "Be a good hostess and run along and pop the kettle on."

"No! I mean, I can't – Greg told me not to take anything else to do with you." The mix of emotions in those wide blue eyes echoed more than a few of his previous marks. Wives, girlfriends, mistresses – it really didn't matter what their official title was. They all looked the same once their lovers' masks began to slip: afraid to rock the boat any further in case they drowned in its wake. "I'm sorry, Mr Campbell, but you've really got to leave now."

"He really does have you cowed, eh?" Thomas sighed as he released his hold. "What a terrible shame that is."

"I'm not...it's not like that...!"

"Isn't it?" The sympathy he wielded with such finesse had sliced through a little more of Hull's control over her, but not enough, not yet. "Of course, I do *want* to believe you, my dear, but I couldn't help overhearing how he spoke to you on Friday evening."

Bryce looked away from him, a muscle twitching in her jaw. "You...the people you work for...Greg told me that he's had a lot of trouble from them. They took Fisher – that's why he kept calling you Santa: he remembered you!"

"He's a very astute wee lad. Did Greg happen to explain that it was a third party who arranged the abduction?"

"Yeah, he mentioned that. Some woman named Brooke – she's a psionic or something."

"She's a bodyjacker, and obsessed with Greg. Wait, surely he can't blame British Intelligence for *her* actions?" Thomas feigned surprise. "That wouldn't be at all reasonable of him! We've nothing to do with her: she worked for GETEC."

"I...well, no, but you still kept my baby."

"We were only protecting him from Brooke. Come now, you can't think that we'd harm an innocent bairn?"

She shook her head miserably. "Oh, I don't know what to think anymore! I just know that Greg will be upset if he finds out that you were here again!"

"You're a very dutiful woman, Bryce. I admire that." The retiree sighed. He'd pressed her enough for now: it was time to retreat a little. "Well, I've got no wish to cause you difficulty. I'll see myself out. You know where I am should you need anything."

Thirty-nine hours and twenty minutes had passed since the events at Mercy Hospital. It was Easter Sunday, heading up towards three thirty in the morning here on Deimos Base and Gunnery Sergeant Archibald Woods was concerned for his CO's wellbeing. "You can't blame yourself, ma'am. The security at Mercy should have picked up on what was happening!"

Kennedy shook her head. They had gotten the news just over twenty-nine hours ago, and she hadn't slept since. "Someone impersonated me and abducted Ellie. I should have been there,

Woods. My baby needed me and I wasn't there for her – I wasn't even on the same God damn planet!"

He grunted. "That was Hull's fault, not yours, Marine. He's the one that let it happen. You ask me, once they find her – and believe me, they *will* – you need to figure out some means of using this mess as a means of getting custody. Any chance you're still owed a favour or two from old Iron Jaw after all of that spook work you did with GETEC?"

"General Palmer-Hewitt's sympathetic but there ain't much that he can do, Gunny. You know how they see Martians on Earth. No court on the planet's ever going to pick me as resident parent over Hull. That's been made abundantly clear." She sighed. "Who would want to take Ellie, and why pretend they were me? It doesn't make any damn sense!"

Corporal Jennifer Davies glanced across at the two senior officers then. "We have an incoming communication from London, ma'am."

"Put it through, Corporal."

The data feed took a few seconds to connect fully. On screen, a tall, older man, with clear blue eyes, neatly combed grey hair, and a refined air, nodded politely. "Captain Susan Kennedy? My

name is Maurice Jacob Leister – we haven't met, but I'm Nightingale Spence's mentor. As I understand it, British Intelligence owes you a debt of gratitude for having assisted them."

Kennedy frowned. "You mean the non-gender from GETEC's old space station? I thought they were killed by the maniacs that attacked it – and I don't remember anything about helping them, sorry. You must have me confused."

"No, darling, they weren't and I haven't, but all of that's still beyond classified. Regardless, Nightingale insists that you were the only one there who tried to help them, and that's enough of a character reference for me. The fact that you're on the wrong side of Greg Hull simply compounds the matter – it's an utter disgrace that he was awarded custody of your daughter! I regret that there's nothing practical I can do about it."

The Martian woman leaned forwards in her chair. "Then why *are* you contacting me?"

"BIINT's technicians have found a return flight plan logged between Pluto and Earth which just so happens to line up perfectly with the timing of your daughter's abduction. The name of the vessel is the *Bolas IV*. I'm transmitting the data to you now. Tell

me, Captain Kennedy, do you remember a Dr Helen Lethe?"

For a moment, her professionalism scattered and she sprang to her feet, eyes wild. "Aye-Hell yeah I remember her!"

Woods nodded grimly. "She ain't exactly easy to forget, what with her designing that one-person virus especially for Captain Kennedy, and so on."

"Are you saying that Lethe's the one behind Ellie's abduction?" Kennedy's dark eyes went flat as the realisation sank home. "Jesus – she didn't manage to finish me off so now she's targeting my baby *and* framing me in the damn process?"

"I'm afraid so, darling. Her ship shall be halfway back to Pluto by now. There's every chance that you can still intercept it, but you must make all haste."

She gestured curtly to her Marines. "Prep the Galloway – I'll be there in five. Thanks, Mr Leister; I reckon I owe you one."

"Not at all, darling, and please, call me Cob."

Chapter Seven – Every Mirror Since

Dobos lurched awake: the soft beep of the alarm clock interrupting his early Sunday morning nightmare. Even when conscious, he could all but feel the other man's hand petting his hair. The rest of it stayed buried, thank fuck, except when he slept. There was no escaping the memories then. *It's been the guts of a fucking year already – how long will it take for me to fucking get over this?*

Thirty hours in GETEC's electro stimulation unit had left him desperate enough that he'd not objected when Hull finally offered him use of the bathroom. Accepting had been a mistake that, with hindsight, Dobos supposed the bastard had fully anticipated. The field operative's body had betrayed him at every turn: first with his inability to stand or toilet unaided, and then with all the rest. *Yeah, that fucker knew what would happen all*

right. I still shouldn't have fucking liked it though!

The rational part of Dobos' mind reminded him yet again that it had been nothing more than an unintentional physical response to non-consensual stimuli. There was no shame in that, even if he felt halfway sure that there *should* be. Another, far more treacherous part of his psyche insisted that he'd wanted everything he got. *Wanted it – ha, nice one, more like fucking gagging for it!*

For one insane moment, that accusation might even have been true. Pinned down on the tiled floor of the interrogation suite's windowless bathroom, with a ragged whine escaping his gritted teeth. The way that he'd stilled under those relentless, incredible hands. How all of his bloody training seemed to vanish. *No – the fucking bastard got in my fucking head, that's all it was!*

Rolling out of bed, he made his way into the ensuite and stared at his face in the antique mirror above the sink. "It wasn't my fucking fault. I didn't want it to happen, not really."

The words still felt hollow. He'd been having the same conversation with his reflection every mirror since. Maybe one day he'd believe it, but not today. *It's done now, better to say nothing; just*

draw a fucking line and crack on. Besides, who'd fucking believe me when I don't myself?

"You should think about what's best for you, doctor." Hull rested his palms against the clear panel that fronted the quarantine bay of the *Sandsprite*. "Forget loyalty – it's obvious that nobody within BIINT really trusts you anyhow."

On the opposite side of the barrier, Rosa shook her head. "That's as may be, but I'm *not* going back to Miami with you, Sir! GETEC forced me to stay there. You should know; you organised the ruddy paperwork, after all."

"I know, but things were different then." He smiled quietly at her. "We were different too."

"Not that different." The technician sat down on the edge of the bunk. "You're still you, Sir. I don't want to put myself back in a position where you have any power over me."

"Don't you trust me?"

"What do you think?"

Hull shrugged. "I think you miss it a little."

She snorted. "That's absurd, Sir!"

"If you say so, doctor – I'm sure that you'll know how to reach me as and when you change your

mind. For what it's worth, ANI would definitely welcome your talents. I'll gladly give you a reference."

He made his way out of medical and up to the bridge, idly wondering how Waverly managed to keep everything on board the yacht so pristine. Presumably, there was a legion of cleaning robots amongst the rest of the automated features. *The man sure likes his machines. Maybe he can recommend a childproof model for a family home. Bryce would love to have something like that to help with the chores, especially once little Rayne finally comes home to us.*

Kassie was sprawled on the couch with her phone when Mike Cully arrived for his nine am shift on Sunday morning. "Hi, Agent Cully. Bryce is upstairs doing mom stuff with Fisher. She hasn't started breakfast yet. I think she's having some kind of weird breakdown – thank crap ANI's around to keep the paparazzi at bay!"

Cully raised an eyebrow at the young woman's disdainful tone. "Her infant daughter is missing, and her fiancé's character is being called into question on international media. I'd class that as good

reason for her to be stressed."

She peered at him over her phone: the glasses lending a deceptively bookish air to her features. "Okay, first up, Rayne's not even her real kid – at most she's like her stepdaughter. Second, Greg hasn't done anything wrong. Everything will back to normal once he and Senior Agent Volker catch that creep Howard."

He shook his head. "You're a funny blend of optimism and cynicism, Miss Shelby. Anyhow, why can't you make breakfast just this once?"

"Um, I don't know – maybe because it's like, not my job?" Kassie rolled her eyes. "Bryce *always* cooks in the mornings! Well, except for Sundays. Greg does pancakes and stuff then."

"Today is Sunday – in fact, it's Easter Sunday."

"Oh! I guess I forgot." She scrambled to her feet and stretched languorously, coral pink lips framing a deliberately exaggerated yawn as she sashayed over to him. "I totally *hate* cooking. Do you think maybe you can do it for me, Agent Cully?"

"Nice try, kid, but you're half my age, and I'm not into that." He stepped clear of her not so innocent reach. "Go tell Ms Lenard that I need to talk to her. Presumably you can at least keep an

eye on the boy while we do that?"

She glowered at him for a moment before flouncing off. "I'm almost twenty-one, you jerk!"

Cully shuddered. Clearly, Agent Hull was into some kinky lifestyle habits, and the women in his house along with him! How he'd gotten custody instead of Captain Kennedy was pretty hard to fathom. *Still, that's the Martian situation, I guess. At least the kid will have better opportunities as she grows up, if we ever find her.*

ANI had lost valuable hours pursuing the wrong suspect. If it hadn't been for the British, then chances were that they still wouldn't have identified Helen Lethe. What the rogue geneticist wanted with baby Rayne didn't bear thinking about. *Poor little thing's had a rough start in life – I sure hope the joint taskforce finds her in time.*

By mid-morning, he was seriously considering locking Kassie in her room. She let him alone whilst he briefed Bryce about the ongoing media situation, and what news channels to avoid. Then Agent Marcy arrived with breakfast burritos and coffee for all the adults present, and a chocolate bunny for Fisher, which Bryce had politely declined. Apparently, the boy only ever ate homemade

organic food, unless Hull said it was okay for him not to. *Someone really likes having control over his family! Why do women enjoy that crap?*

That being said, it was too bad that his fellow agent wasn't around to call Kassie off. As soon as the other ANI operatives returned to their posts outside the house, she started flirting with him again. Forty-five minutes later, Cully was running out of pithy remarks to fire back at her. He suspected that she knew. *This kind of stuff isn't supposed to happen outside of trashy porn!*

She shimmied closer to him on the couch then: her demurely styled clothing starkly at odds with her attitude. "So is there a Mrs Cully?"

"Yeah – my mom; she lives in Portland."

"Ugh, I *meant* are you married? You know: do you have a wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, especially beloved stuffed animal maybe?"

Cully kept his eyes squarely on the television. "Huh. Fuel prices are coming down, that's good."

"Aw, come on, Agent Cully! Give me a break for once. Greg never lets me have any fun when he's home." Kassie traced her fingertips along his left bicep. "Wow. You're like, seriously built under this suit."

He frowned and shrugged her off. "Quit that. It's inappropriate. No wonder Agent Hull is so strict with you if *this* is how you behave around guys!"

She pouted and slumped back against the opposite arm of the couch. "He's not my dad, you know!"

"Then what is he exactly?" Cully turned to look at her. "Tell me what the deal is in this house, Miss Shelby. I know there's something weird going on – I mean there's no way that you're just their au pair!"

"It's not weird! It's an alternative lifestyle choice, and it's all totally legal and above board." Her sandaled toes wiggled suggestively against his leg. "You want me to show you?"

"I thought you said that Agent Hull doesn't allow you to have any fun."

The smile on her face worried him. "Oh yeah, he's like *super* strict! Don't worry: I won't tell him if you don't, Agent Cully."

"No thank you. I don't fool around on the job, especially not with silly young women who think they're better than they are."

Fisher toddled in before she could reply. "Mommy has sad eyes, Auntie Kassie! When Daddy coming back?"

Kassie bounced to her feet and scooped him up. "Yeah, good question, Fisher! When is his Daddy coming home, Agent Cully? Or has ANI managed to mess up that mission just as much as they have looking for Rayne?"

"Take care of the kid, Miss Shelby. You know – like you're allegedly employed to." Cully ruffled the toddler's blonde hair on his way past. "I'll go and see if Ms Lenard needs anything."

Bryce was dicing onions for what he assumed was going to be soup, which made for a good enough reason not to mention how wet her eyes were. "Agent Cully, what can I do for you?"

"I just figured I should check on you, ma'am. How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. I just wish that Greg were here. Have you had any more news from him? How's Kellie doing? Did they catch up to that awful Lethe woman? Is our daughter safe yet?"

"Senior Agent Volker sent back copies of the medical scans so far. It looks as if Dr Rosa should be okay. They're on board a Martian solar yacht en route to the intercept point. One of our interplanetary stealth cruisers will meet them there and aid during the rescue mission. Deimos Base has

sent a gunship along too. We should know more about what's happening in about forty-eight hours."

Hull shook his head as he watched Tessa interacting silently with her APSU at the opposite side of the solar yacht's bridge. Her father was the only other organic present. "It must break your heart not being able to do anything for her, Robert. How did it happen anyhow, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Huh?" Waverly glanced up from his tablet. "How did what happen?"

"Your daughter – what caused her condition?"

"Oh, that? Ah, it was a reaction to super measles. There was an outbreak on Mars five years ago and she caught it."

The ANI operative frowned. "You mean it beat the vaccine? Jesus, that's horrible. I can't believe that level of outbreak didn't make the news!"

His host waved his hand dismissively. "No, she isn't vaccinated. She didn't want to be – kid *really* hates needles! Pick your battles, that's what the parenting guides all say, am I right?"

"Uh, some of them, yeah, I guess." Hull was still

waiting for the billionaire to say something that justified having left his child defenceless against a wholly preventable disease. *Avoiding a tantrum certainly doesn't qualify!* "Was she also deemed as being a high-risk category for vaccination or something then?"

"I don't think so. The doctors have never raised it as a danger with me, anyhow." Waverly yawned and took another sip of his coffee. "But then again, to be fair she hardly ever needs to see them. She's a pretty healthy kid, all things considered."

"I'm sorry but I'm kind of confused here. How was she even able to argue with you? Surely she would have gotten vaccinated as an infant?"

"Well, she's sort of adopted." The Martian looked a little sheepish at that. He lowered his voice and leaned closer to Hull. "She was a street kid before that: running with one of the gangs back on Mars. I caught her trying to steal my hover car when she was five! Can you imagine? A five-year-old that can hotwire a state-of-the-art vehicle with nothing more than a vintage penknife and a couple of bobby pins! How could I *not* take her in?"

"Ah. So, her birth family never bothered to vaccinate her?" Hull forced himself to nod and

smile. "And you were left to try and pick up the pieces once you adopted her?"

"What pieces? She's tough as nails!" Waverly grinned. "Never needs anything from anyone, that girl. She's going places, you can count on it."

"I'll bet she is." There *had* to be something missing from this account. "Didn't the agency that you adopted her through check whether she was vaccinated or not? I mean, they would have had to as part of the freeing order. You really should have been kept informed throughout."

The other man shook his head. "Yeah, I didn't bother going through official channels. There wasn't any point: Tessa told us what her life was like with the gang. I just didn't want to risk some social worker deciding to send her back to that, you know? I mean, sure, I looked into it, but you have to be pre-approved, and it can take years for that to go through! Best case scenario, she'd have ended up in care for the duration, and who knows where they might have placed her?"

"So you just got on with it as best you could." The urge to throttle this self-centred idiot was really getting to him now. "And your business partner, Ari – does he know, or should I keep my mouth shut

around him?"

"Aw, thanks for thinking about that. You're a pretty decent guy for a Terran, you know." Waverly tapped again at his tablet: browsing schematics for one or other of his machines. "He didn't ask, so I just never told him either way."

"That makes sense." Oh dear God, there were so many forms required for this mess! Hull shuddered inwardly. It was times like this that he missed having Aaron Mellor to call on. The young administrator had mentioned being based in Boston again now, temping for some firm or another. *I should contact him as soon as we get back to Earth. He's probably waiting for news about Rayne anyhow.* "What about Tessa?"

"I explained to her that we have to keep it a secret. She understands – like I told you, she's incredibly bright for her age."

"It's good that she has someone in her corner to ensure that she gets all of the opportunities owed to her." Hull peered at his own tablet: feigning surprise. "Well, I'd better go! I need to talk shop with Senior Agent Volker ahead of our rendezvous with ANI's cruiser. Thanks for the coffee, Robert. It was good talking to you."

"No problem, Greg."

The Martian was already halfway lost in his research again. Around him, the machines that ran the *Sandsprite* continued their silent duty: quieter even than Tessa. The doors of the bridge swept closed automatically behind Hull as he exited. *What am I going to do to help that poor little girl?*

Chapter Eight – Don't Catch Fire

After her efforts with yesterday's impromptu breakfast get together, inviting Carol and her sons round for Sunday dinner had only seemed polite. Campbell was somewhat bemused at Heidi's reaction to the news. "But it's a traditional Easter roast dinner, Heidi – surely there'll be more than enough for everyone?"

"Maybe, yes. I must put extra potatoes on." She pouted, shaking her head worriedly. "Still, it is not just the food, Craig."

"What then?"

"Those boys are not liked at the park. The other children; their parents do not like for them to play together."

That surprised him. "Carol's sons, you mean? Why, what are they supposed to have done wrong?"

"I don't know exactly. My friends who help with the children all say that they are not supposed to let them take part. Not even for birthdays."

"That seems awfully harsh!" Campbell frowned. "They came across as decent enough boys yesterday, albeit that young Philip doesn't talk much. It's probably just gossip. Heaven only knows what they think about poor Kathryn and Barnabas!"

"But Craig...!"

"No. I'm sorry, Heidi, but I won't be a part to such judgemental behaviour! It's no more than bullying, and I shan't stand for it in this house, understood?"

She sighed. "Okay, Craig. You are the boss, not me. I will get back to the cooking now, yes?"

"Yes, thank you. I'll go and see to the children. Carol and her boys shall be here at three, if that suits for cooking times?"

"Yes, yes – you go and watch for them! Get out from under feet, please!"

He chuckled and limped off to the front living room. "All right everyone, Carol and her sons are joining us for dinner today, so let's make sure that the house is nice and tidy! Kathryn, you check on the cleaning robots and see that they haven't

gotten stuck in any of the corners. Barnabas, you set the dining table. I'll get these three little hooligans ready."

Kathryn scowled. "Aunty Val said not to call them that because it's a very rude thing to say!"

"It shan't do any harm." Campbell smiled fondly at the girl. "Don't fret; I'm sure Spence was only joking! Right, Sam?"

His son sat back amidst the assorted toys in his playpen and hiccupped. "Hooligan...!"

"Ah, there's no need to copy me, son."

"He likes copying words." Barnabas switched off his tablet and set it back on its spot on the dresser. "He'll probably keep that up all day now, you know."

"Hooligan...!"

Campbell sighed and scratched his head. "Well, at least the other two are still pre-verbal! There's no danger of *them* dropping me in it with your aunt."

"Not yet, you mean." Kathryn sidled off towards the front hall with her bear. "I think one of them just pooped again, by the way!"

"Yes, so I can smell." The former spy wrinkled his nose. "Ugh – own up, smalls, which of you was it this time?"

"Hooliga-gan-gan-...!"

Not to be outdone, both Jacamar and Honeyguide started bawling simultaneously: the sound echoing up through the whole of the house. Heidi came hurrying in, wiping her hands on her apron. "Craig, you go and watch the pots instead for me please! Okay, babies – Heidi is here now, no shouting and crying. Happy smiles again, everyone."

She clearly had a far better grasp of this child wrangling thing than he did. Campbell took himself back to the kitchen and sat down at the table to stare at the dinner. "Don't catch fire."

"You sanctimonious prick!" Kennedy's right fist connected with Hull's jaw before anyone else present in the ANI cruiser's conference room could even think about stopping her; sending him reeling. "How could you let that bitch take my baby? You're supposed to be taking care of her!"

"And you're supposed to be riding a desk job back in Miami, so what's going on there, Susan?" Hull staggered upright again and scowled at the Martian woman. "When exactly were you planning on telling me that you were back stationed on

Deimos Base?"

"I don't have to tell you a damn thing about my life, Agent Hull! In case you forgot, the court only signed over custody of Ellie, not me!"

"Oh for God's sake, her name is *Rayne*; can you at least try to get your head around that?"

Spence pulled up a chair at the opposite of the table. "Shall the rest of us get on with planning this bloody rescue mission then? It seems that Agent Hull and Captain Kennedy have matters to fight to the death over."

"Uh, actually I'd appreciate some clarification on that, please." Waverly held up his hand. "It's just that nobody told me about this missing baby being yours, Susan. Seriously, when did you have your shower? I would have sent something! I'd still like to send something – are you registered with any particular stores or...!"

"Can it, Waverly!" Woods all but snarled at the billionaire. "I'm pretty God damn sure that I told you to stay away from my CO, son!"

"Well yeah, kind of, but come on; that was months ago now!" Waverly blinked. "Wait – so is Susan avoiding me or something then?"

"Fuck's sake!" The non-gender sighed. "If you

ask me, Quincy, we should have left this lot to it and stayed on the ruddy *Sandsprite* along with Miss Darnell and Dr Rosa!"

<advisory-hindsightistwentytwenty>

"I expect they're having a lovely time playing checkers or some such with Mr Zahn and Tessa."

<suggestion-nottoolatetoinjointhem>

At the head of the table, Volker cleared her throat. "Housekeeping is correct. We must focus on the primary purpose of our mission here: intercepting the *Bolas IV* and arresting Dr Lethe."

"With all due respect, ma'am, the primary purpose is to save Rayne." Hull finally took his seat, still glowering at Kennedy. "Frankly, Dr Lethe making it to a cell alive is right at the bottom of my itinerary."

"At least we can agree on that!" Kennedy slumped into her chair. "So read us in – what's the proposed course of action?"

Dinner had gone well enough, in Campbell's opinion. Sam had been his usual cheerful self, the four older children hadn't squabbled much at all, and the babies had mercifully slept for most of it. He couldn't fathom why Heidi was so keen to gather

the youngest three up for a trip to the local park afterwards! Then he popped to the kitchen to get Carol some more wine and spotted the mountain of washing up stacked on the bench by the sink. "Ah. Yes, that would do it!"

"Everything okay out here, Craig?" Carol paused in the doorway. "Oh dear – we'd better make a start on that before the food gets too encrusted! I'll rinse off and you load the machine. The kids are snuggled in with some chocolate watching a film in the front room, by the way; that's all right, isn't it?"

"Of course; it's nice to see them all getting along so well."

She beamed and turned on the tap. "I'm afraid my eldest can be a bit moody sometimes: typical teenager! Easter holidays aren't helping."

"He seems a nice enough lad. They both do, really. I'm not sure that Kathryn and Barnabas are at the same level socially yet though."

"Yes, I noticed that. I hope I didn't offend you the other day, by the way, Craig. I mean about assuming they had additional needs. That really was terrible of me, I am sorry."

"It's fine, Carol. No – they just had a bit of a tough home life before they came to live with their

aunt." He slid the roasting tray into its spot in the dishwasher. "It's great seeing them finally start to make friends with their peers."

"Well, you might find a few people warning you off letting them be friends with my two!" Carol sighed. "I hate saying this, but some of the other parents around here can be a bit – well, do excuse my language, won't you, but *up themselves*, if you know what I mean."

"Heidi mentioned there was a bit of an odd atmosphere at the park." The ex-spy raised his eyebrows quizzically at his guest. "What started it anyhow – do you know?"

"Honestly, I haven't the foggiest!" She laughed bitterly. "It was fine when we moved here at first. People couldn't have been nicer. Then the invitations just slowly petered out and the parents at the school gate stopped including me. Between running after my boys and all their clubs, and managing my little online floristry business I never found the time to try and find out why – isn't that awful of me?"

"I'd say it's more awful of the rest of them!"

"Thanks, you're very kind. Still, I don't like to think that we'd be causing your family any difficulty

fitting in. I'll understand if you need to be wary. You have to put your own kids first. That's pretty much Parenting 101, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "Nonsense, don't worry about that. Anyhow, for all we know, that's how they treat all newcomers!"

"I hadn't thought of that!" Carol handed him a saucepan. "Well, if you're right, then we were here six months before they started freezing us out, so I expect you'll be okay for a few more weeks at least!"

"Good to know. Perhaps we still have time to figure out what sort of archaic local traditions we need to comply with to be accepted fully!"

"Ha!" She snorted and patted his arm: oblivious to how utterly touch starved he was just now. "Do you suppose that we ought to have built some sort of giant straw goat or something?"

He shrugged haplessly: smiling at her. "Hey, don't ask me! I thought you were one of the NWI? Don't say that there's nothing mentioned in the handbook about how to make idols out of straw to appease one's neighbours?"

"Oh dear God...!" Carol almost doubled over laughing. "Sorry, but I really have missed this! Thank

you so much for having us over, Craig. Just getting in a bit of normal *adult* conversation – oh, it's such a release!"

The wink was second nature to him: this was how one did things. At least it was in the field. "Well really Carol, we simply must discuss your concept of *adult* conversation. I worry that you're doing it wrong!"

He flirted just as he always did, remembering an instant too late that this was a civilian, who didn't understand that he'd just given her cue to knock him back: to dismiss his nonsense and change the subject. Not to gaze up into his eyes as though she'd never dare blink. Certainly not to nod at him like *that*, and trace her fingers along his arm. "Hmm, perhaps I am just a bit, Craig. Doing it wrong, I mean. Do you think...?"

Campbell regretted the kiss even as he deepened it. For an instant, the memory of wisteria and crisp, white linen engulfed him. Then Carol's hand slid down and between them, cupping and squeezing where it settled, and the worth of the deeper past exploded. Between babies, moving house, and bullet wounds, there had been nothing more than occasional cuddling in the months since

Spence's return from their supposed grave. He needed more; he wanted more, and God forgive him, but Carol was present and willing. *Ah, Christ, so very willing!*

Tangling his hands in her thick blonde hair for a moment longer, he made his choice. "Stop – we can't do this where the kids might walk in. Come upstairs with me. There's a lock on the door of the master bedroom."

She gulped and stepped away from him, nodding and dragging her wits back together. "Uh huh, that works for me. Let's go."

Neither of them had noticed the pale haired child poised in the hallway behind them with her beloved bear. Darting back unseen into the empty dining room, Kathryn sank to the floor silently and pulled her knees up to her chin. The glassy eyes of her toy stared back emptily as she choked down the funny feeling in her tummy. Auntie Val would be furious! The big bedroom was strictly off limits to guests – that's where the weapons' locker was kept. *I'd best not mention it: I'm not supposed to sneak! Why was stupid Carol from next door but one even kissing Craig anyhow? Doesn't she know that he's with Auntie Val?*

Perhaps the silly woman hadn't realised, and Craig hadn't liked to embarrass her. Still, they were both gone now, so the kitchen was empty. She could slip out the back door without anyone noticing. It wouldn't do to be caught – then she'd have to listen to lectures about being good and staying safe! Kathryn grimaced at the thought. *I can take care of myself! It's not as if I don't know my way to the park by now.*

She zipped up her coat and tapped in the code to unlock the door. John had changed the channel over as soon as his mummy had left the room. He wanted to watch a different film: one with fast cars and lots of swearing. Kathryn didn't like those films, but apparently Barnabas and Phil both did: at least when John was present. Brothers really were horrid creatures. *I'd much rather have a sister. Maybe if I play with her enough now, Honeyguide will want to be my little sister when she grows up.*

It was her best hope. The other girls around here didn't seem to want to be friends, or to play with stuffed toys and dolls. That was stupid, they said. They were too old for those sorts of things, and so was she. Kathryn scowled and hugged her bear even closer. *I don't want to learn about wearing*

DANCE TOWARDS THE CLOUD

makeup and making boys like me! Why does it even matter? Aunty Val hardly bothers with all that, and Craig likes her...them, even. At least I think he still does. Maybe he likes Carol better. Maybe Aunty Val should bother a little bit with makeup, just in case. I don't want Craig to leave and live with stupid Carol!

There was a strange car parked right across the gates of the front driveway. Whoever owned it was lucky that Aunty Val wasn't home to see how badly he'd parked. *Stupid man – how's Heidi going to get back in with the pram? He's just sitting there anyhow; I shall tell him to move!*

Chapter Nine – Just As Ginger

The puppy, a three-month-old Hungarian Vizsla, was just as ginger as the rest of the family, but with amber eyes. There weren't many litters of his breed available in the UK, and puppies were generally reserved long before birth. Dobos knew perfectly well how many strings that his parents had pulled to secure the purchase. The indescribable look on Brett's face yesterday afternoon when he first spotted his new pet had shown how right they were.

Twenty-four hours, two pairs of shoes, and umpteen puddles later, his son was still grinning. "He's the best dog ever, ain't he Dad? For real – I mean you can tell already, right?"

Dobos chuckled and retrieved Aunt Noreen's handbag before it could go the way of all things chewable. "As long as he keeps you off the streets

and in school, he's done his job!"

Noreen herself was busy fine-tuning the place settings ahead of the meal. "At least he's not a cat, eh, Oliver?"

"Yeah, there's no risk of me ending up a mad cat lady now, I suppose!" Dobos rubbed the puppy's ears gently. "I'm officially a dedicated family man."

"Dad, what's going to happen when I go back to school? I mean, you work the same kind of hours that Mom does, maybe even more sometimes, I guess. Who'll take care of him?"

"You will." The field operative pulled out his phone. "Here – take a look at this website. It's for a boarding school in Dorset. Leister reckons you'll like it there better than where you were anyhow, and they allow pets. I've already spoken to the head, so unless you hate the idea, we're heading there for a visit tomorrow afternoon."

Brett peered worriedly at the screen. "Okay."

"Don't worry: hating the idea's still an option, son. We can always just find a dog sitter instead."

"Nah, I guess it'll be okay. Is it like, a military school or something?"

Dobos shook his head. "Not exactly – more kids

of military families and diplomats. You know; Foreign Service types."

"Like you, Dad?"

"Yeah, you might say that."

Apparently, that was almost as exciting as getting a puppy. "Awesome! So will Kathryn and Barnabas be going there too?"

"I take it they're his friends?" Noreen potted past them in search of more napkin rings. "Here, is Kathryn your special lass, Brett?"

"They're kids of a work colleague of mine, Aunty Noreen. Don't tease him."

"Who's teasing? Our Brett's a nice boy. Any girl would be lucky to have him." The elderly psionic winked at both of them. "Or any boy, I suppose, if he takes after his dad!"

"I uh, I think Scooter needs to pee again!" Brett scrambled up from the floor and scooped up his pet. "I'll just take him outside for like a few minutes! We'll be back in time for dinner, I swear!"

Dobos scowled at her. "Here, go easy on him – he's only eleven!"

"I remember what you were like at that age, Oliver. You and that blonde lad from Wales: what was his name again? The nice one that we all

thought you'd end up marrying."

It was fucking shit watching her memory rot like this. "I didn't meet Darren until we were both sixteen, Aunt Noreen. You're getting things mixed up again."

"Eh?" She blinked at him for a moment, and then started refolding the napkins. "Don't be silly! Darren's not invited to the party, love! It's just family today: to meet young Brett. Anyhow, you said he had business in London or some such, so I'm sure he won't mind!"

Today was starting to look like a less than good idea after all. Dobos sighed. "Yeah, you're right, sorry, Aunt Noreen. Excuse me; I'm just going to go check on Brett."

"Brett? Who's that then? Is he a little pal of yours from school, Oliver? Does your mum know he's here for his tea?"

"Yeah, she knows." Fuck, but he missed how she used to be! Witty, insightful, tough as nails – that was the *real* Noreen Hamilton; the woman who'd trained up three generations of her extended family's psionics including him. Too bad Brett would never get to know *her*. This form of the old woman was tragic. *Nobody should end up like this. Hard to*

believe that she'll get even worse before it's over.

The sex was guilt fuelled and filthy – fucking as opposed to making love. Carol was softer beneath him than Spence: there were no hard edges to her body or to her character, and Campbell thrilled at the difference. With hindsight, he hadn't been with many people who weren't somehow connected to or part of the job. *I'm starting to think that was a mistake.*

There was a faint disc of scar tissue on her right shoulder blade, about the same diameter as a golf ball. Campbell frowned as he traced his fingers over it. "Where did you get this from?"

A little of the post coital glow fled her cheeks. "It's nothing. Jerry had a temper, that's all. That's why we're divorced."

"He hurt you?"

"Yes, a few times more than I should have stood for, but he always told me that it was my fault and idiot me, I believed him. Then one day he started in on the boys instead. That's when I called time." She huffed out a breath. "I rang the police. He's doing ten years for it."

"I'm sorry that happened to you and your sons,

Carol." The desire to take her in his arms again and comfort her was too much. He told himself that it was only the decent thing to do, and tried to pretend that he wasn't kissing her out of anything beyond pity. "If you ever need to talk about it, I'm here."

"Thank you, Craig." She smiled at him: her light brown eyes full of pain and shy hope. "I promise that I shan't mention this afternoon to anyone. I mean – well, it was just sex. Incredible sex, mind, but you're in love with Nightingale, and I don't want to get in the way of that."

Campbell glanced at the alarm clock and sighed. "We've been up here for nearly an hour and a half already. The kids will be getting to the end of their film, and Heidi's due back with the smaller three in twenty minutes. Otherwise I'd take my time showing you just how much you've affected me."

"What are you saying?"

He took her hands in his and kissed the smooth palms reverentially. "It was just sex to begin with, Carol. I'm not so certain now."

"You're only saying that because you want to keep me happy. Really, it's fine: you don't have to

bother...!"

The rest of her sentence faded against his mouth as he tangled his left hand in her hair and slipped the other down between her soft thighs. Breaking off the kiss, he smiled as she squirmed against his fingers. "Let me bother, Carol. I *want* to. Let me show you a glimpse of how much that I want to."

"Oh my God, Craig...yes...yes...anything...!" She clung to him frantically: burying her face in his chest and gasping out her release. "Fuck...!"

He kissed her again: tenderly this time and slowly withdrew his hand. "I didn't even think that you knew those sorts of words! Come on – we really do have to get back downstairs now."

Cleaning up and redressing took longer than he had anticipated thanks to his weak leg. Still, that was the other benefit of a lockable bedroom door: keeping the aftermath out of sight. He could strip the bed properly tomorrow morning and chuck everything in the wash. *I'll need to make sure to tell Heidi not to worry about sorting the washing though.*

Kathryn was sitting alone on the rug at the foot of the stairs, wrapped in her new winter coat. The bright red parka was long enough that it took a

moment for Campbell to realise that her legs and feet were bare underneath it. He took the last few stairs faster than his doctors would have liked and crouched beside her. "Kathryn – what's wrong? What happened to your clothes?"

She shrank back a little: burying her face in her bear before he could see it. "I did something naughty outside, Craig!"

He edged out of Carol's way so that she could pass; nodding for her to go and check on the boys. "Kathryn, it's going to be all right. Whatever happened, I'm here, and I'll look after you, I promise."

"Okay." The girl sniffled and raised her head. There was blood spatter on her face: enough for the source to be dead or at least dying. A few hairs from the bear were stuck in it. "I didn't want to slice him, Craig, honest."

"Who was it, Kathryn?" He glanced anxiously at her legs again. "Did he – did he force you to get undressed?"

"No." She shook her head. "My jeans and my shoes are all muddy now though, and I didn't want to ruin the hall carpet, so I left them in the kitchen when I came back indoors."

"Right, that's good." Campbell felt his stomach unclench ever so slightly. "That was very practical of you. Now please, what happened?"

"There was a strange man parked right across our front gate, blocking it with his car. I knocked on the windscreen and told him to move – you know, just like Aunty Val always does!"

Campbell nodded again. "I know."

"Well he got out of the car and came into our garden." She fidgeted: curling her toes up nervously. "He wanted to know where you were, Craig, but I wouldn't tell him, because he was a stranger. So he said he'd just let himself in and find you instead, and then he pulled a knife out and tried to slice me!"

"Sweet Jesus, Kathryn...!" He scooped her into a hug, ignoring the searing agony in his leg. "Did he hurt you?"

"He tried to, but he wasn't fast enough. Barnabas is *much* faster than he was, Craig!"

The ex-spy choked back a bitter laugh at that. "Is that with emphasis on the word 'was', by any chance?"

"Yes. I tripped him up and he fell on his knife. Then I pulled it out and sliced him properly." Her

words hung over them both in the mercifully empty front hall. "His eyes wouldn't stay shut. I rolled him in underneath the rhododendrons so no one would spot him. That's how I got muddy. The stupid car is still blocking the gate though. Heidi won't be able to get the pram back in!"

"Don't worry about that, I'll deal with it."

She wriggled clear of his arms and stared at him then. "Craig – why were you upstairs with Carol instead of with Aunt Val?"

"I...well...we were...!"

"Is it because Carol wears makeup and Aunt Val doesn't bother? Do you like Carol better, Craig?" The girl lowered her voice abruptly. "If I don't tell anyone about you two being upstairs together then will you not tell about what I did?"

He blinked. "That's blackmail, Kathryn!"

"Not if you weren't doing anything wrong up there it's not, but you were, weren't you?"

"It's not that simple. I'll tell your aunt the truth when they get home – we'll work it out."

"So you *do* like Carol better." She sniffled again. "Are you going to go and live with her instead of with us?"

Campbell sighed. "That's usually what has to

happen in these situations, yes."

"But you only met her on Friday!" The girl scrambled to her feet. "How can you know for certain already? What if it's just a phase and you grow out of it, like Barnabas did with stamp collecting?"

"People aren't stamps, Kathryn! Look, no matter what may or may not happen with me and Carol from here on in, I still *have* to tell Spence the truth about today; it's the only decent thing to do. Besides, I can't expect you to keep a secret like that for me."

"I don't mind! Please, Craig – please don't let's tell Aunty Val about it yet? Just in case you and Carol change your minds again, I mean." She held up her right hand solemnly: fingers coiled. "We can even make a pinkie swear in the meantime! Please?"

He caved and hooked his finger through hers. "All right, I promise not to mention it; but *only* because you've been through more than enough already today!"

The door to the front sitting room opened again. Carol edged back into the hall. "Um, the boys have finished that film. Is Kathryn okay?"

"She's fine, thank you, Carol." Campbell dragged himself upright by means of the banister. "It was just an inconsiderate driver who had a go at her: a bit of a rough sort, by the sounds of it. She slipped on the driveway running away from him and got a bit muddy; ended up taking her jeans off in the kitchen."

Kathryn raced off upstairs, dragging her bear by the ear. "That's right, I'm fine now!"

"Oh gosh, she must have been terrified!" Carol dragged her fingers through her hair and sighed. "We shouldn't have done this!"

"It's all right, Carol. He didn't hurt her." He stroked the side of her face. "Hey. I meant what I said to you upstairs. That hasn't changed."

"Well perhaps it ought to have – I mean, if we'd been down here keeping a proper eye on all of them then that horrid man never would have frightened her!" She glanced towards the staircase. "And are you *sure* that she's okay? It's just that I could have sworn that I saw blood on her face just now and...!"

Evidently, kissing the other person's concerns away worked for these sorts of situations in civilian life too. *Does that make it a transferable skill?* "Yes,

she had a nosebleed, that's all. It happens sometimes when she's stressed. I'm just going to ring the relevant people and report the incident; ask them to see about moving his car away from the gate too. Why don't you make yourself at home in the meantime? Grab a drink, and put another film on for the boys."

"Well, if you're sure...?"

He nodded. "Honestly, you'd be doing me a massive favour: I'm not sure whether I can help Heidi lift the pram in over the gate by myself."

"All right: I can't very well just leave you to struggle!" Carol beamed at him. "I'll pop the kettle on and make us both a coffee!"

Chapter Ten – Painfully Well Timed

Spence stared down at the newly rescued infant in their arms. "Well, you don't look much like a genetically modified superhuman to me!" The baby yawned, in that pink mawed, wrinkly sort of way that all babies had. "I expect the late Dr Lethe was exaggerating for the sake of appearances."

The *Bolas IV* was adrift less than four hours away from Pluto. It had been a hard-won victory. There were two dozen dead bodies on board, the rogue geneticist most recently among them. Of the rest, more than half had been allies: ten ANI agents from the *Ithaca*, and four Marines from the *Galloway*. Six more were the freelancers employed to crew Lethe's vessel.

The remaining three had posed the main difficulty: silent and unrelenting killers in EV suits with polarised faceplates. Spence had encountered

their kind before. *Captain Kennedy mentioned that Lethe was the one providing the SCOs that attacked GETEC's space station and Mars. It looks as if she was right.*

Behind them, the computer running the genetic analysis beeped quietly. Spence turned and studied the data on the screen. "Quincy, make certain to get a copy for future reference, and then wipe whatever's stored on this machine's memory banks. It's probably best that Dr Lethe's secrets die along with her."

<...working...>

According to the latest message from Tanya, the rest of the combined boarding party were halfway through the series of very secure airlocks between them and here in Lethe's private quarters. The non-gender stepped carefully over the scientist's corpse and sat down on the bed with the baby. "With any luck, you shan't be left too traumatised."

Ellie, or Rayne, or whatever name she might eventually choose for herself, seemed calm enough for now. Her tiny fingers closed around Spence's gloved thumb. "That's quite the grip you have there, small. Remind me not to ever try and arm wrestle with you."

The SCO that Quincy had finished off was sprawled in the opposite corner: his upper torso largely reduced to a red smear on the wall behind him. Spence couldn't help but think back to the man that they had butchered on Mars whilst saving Campbell. The one whose heart had somehow been a perfect match. *Pembleton tried to convince me that Craig started life in a vat on Pluto. I'm not so certain that she was definitely lying any more.*

Looking under that damned faceplate was pointless. Chances were that the fellow didn't even have a face, or at least not one that matched standard human parameters. He probably needed the suit to live. Lethe had to have had some means of controlling her creations, after all. *He's most likely all wires!*

Not liking to risk discovering what degrees of mobility superhuman babies were capable of whenever one's back was turned, Spence built a nest out of pillows and laid the infant in it. "Just wait there for a few minutes, small. There's something that I'll never forgive myself for not checking otherwise."

The faceplate, secured with six hermetic bolts on

each side of the EV suit's helmet, opened with a soft hiss of pressurised air. Spence glanced at their biometric scanner: just normal air, the same as that which filled the *Bolas IV*. No sign of any additional cybernetics either. Aside from an unhealthy pallor, there was nothing in fact, to disguise those oh so familiar features – the strong jaw line, the slight dimple to the middle of his chin, and the now vacant blue eyes. "Fuck."

<advisory-minororganicpresent>

"Pembleton wasn't lying, Quincy." The non-gender closed the helmet again and backed away. "Craig's a clone: very probably an SCO too. I suppose that explains how he keeps surviving."

<observation-mostappropriateofday>

"Hmm, you mean because it's April 1st – yes, I'll admit that it's painfully well timed, as far as shocking twists to one's life go!"

<advisory-biometricsindicativeofstress>

"That's one bloody way of putting it. Still, Craig and I have weathered worse than this. I expect that we'll muddle through."

Heidi blinked in surprise at the spotless kitchen and the already cycling washing machine. *Since*

when does Craig get up before everyone else to do so very much housework? I thought that he was still supposed to take the day easily!

Perhaps he was making up for the short notice dinner guests, and the fact that they had ended up as overnight guests thanks to the car parked across the gate until almost midnight. Apparently, NIT deemed sending a clean-up crew out late at night to be more practical. *Why is the towing away an abandoned car so very hush-hush anyhow? Who would care about that?*

She tried not to speculate on what had become of the driver. Six in the morning was no time at all to imagine what a girl like Kathryn might have done to someone who menaced her! There was too much stillness, and not enough light in the house for such concerns at this hour. *Besides, Craig will have told NIT whatever really happened. It is not my business.*

The all too obvious attraction between him and Carol was another matter entirely. Heidi knew the signs all too well. The same thing had happened with the family who employed her before poor Sarah. That time it had been the man of the house who was away with work, and the mother who was lonely enough to be selfish. *Why must people be so*

very unfair to the ones who they are supposed to love best of all?

It would be much worse this time. That broken family had not been spies and assassins by their trade! They had not kept guns and who knew what else stored in their home just in case. When the truth boiled up for them, there had only been screaming rows, doors slamming, and solicitors. *No – I do not want to be here for the moment when Spence finds out!*

Spence cradled the baby a little closer and listened to the bitter argument unfolding just outside the partially opened airlock. "Oh dear – it sounds as if your parents still haven't agreed to disagree after all, small. Any luck with reopening that door yet, Quincy?"

<advisory-mechanismjammed>

"We sent for Waverly; he's on his way over from the *Sandsprite* with Zahn and a repair kit." Hull braced his shoulder against the offending sheet of metal. "And for the record, our personal arrangements regarding Rayne are none of your concern, Nightingale!"

"I named her Ellie – why won't you let her keep

that one thing from me?" Kennedy's voice hitched. "You can't write me out of her life, you bastard!"

Volker cleared her throat. "This debate is not something that should be allowed to infringe on the overall mission."

"Good luck reminding them both of that, Senior Agent Volker." Spence settled back against the headboard with the dozing infant nestled in their arms. "I'll just wait here and mind the baby whilst the rest of you work. For what it's worth, I agree with Captain Kennedy; mostly because she's never abducted me and imprisoned me on a space station or an uncharted island!"

"Hey, I already told you – both those times were wholly justified!" Hull scowled through the narrow gap at the non-gender. "Technically speaking, I saved your life too; from Howard's vivisectionists, I mean, and from the Capoliveri Killer. He was one room over from you when I intervened to stop him!"

Tanya squeaked. "Oh my God – you mean that you're the one who killed Jasper Lackey?"

"Yeah, I got to him right as he was about to start butchering you and your friends. As I said, he was one room away from Nightingale. You're both welcome, by the way."

<observation-diminutiveplanet>

"Wait – was that the same Lackey as in *Horatio Lackey*?" Kennedy recognised the name. "The old money guy who hired Lethe to provide the SCOs that attacked Mars? Don't tell me he sent them there after you for revenge or something...!"

The *Bolas IV* lurched abruptly: artificial gravity failing even as the lights flickered off and all of the internal airlocks cycled open. Spence snarled and coiled around the baby as they drifted clear of the bed. "Oh for God's sake now what's going on? Quincy, what was that?"

<...error...system...rebooting...>

Kennedy glided past Hull into Lethe's former quarters. "Comms are down too; it looks as though everything electronic was hit!" She reached up and caught hold of Spence's left leg. "Just try to relax – think of it as swimming, only without the water."

"Ah, so in other words it's nothing like swimming at all!" The non-gender glowered as they handed the Martian her daughter. "Here, sod the custody nonsense! Put her inside your EV suit before the oxygen levels onboard start dropping. I need both my hands free to see to Quincy anyhow. Incidentally, did anyone notice a sort of reddish

glow outside the ship just now? Only this all feels *horribly* familiar – it's almost identical to what happened to our shuttle."

"Spence is right!" Tanya was busy adjusting the settings on her suit's magnetic boots to allow for the sudden lack of gravity. "C.A.K.E has some kind of a weird ray that shuts down technology."

Woods grunted. "I say we get the Hell out of here and back to our own respective vessels pronto, ma'am. I don't like not knowing what way up we're facing."

"Technically, there is no up in space, Gunnery Sergeant Woods." Volker tucked her now defunct tablet back into her field kit. "Nevertheless, regrouping would seem the most rational course of action. I suggest that we use the *Ithaca* as our base of operations."

"We really should have brought an EV equipped infant travel pod." Hull barred Kennedy's way and checked the seals on her suit. "Don't get any ideas, Susan. This changes *nothing* regarding custody."

"Can it, before I go high and right and deep-six your sorry remains, shit-brick!" The Martian woman refocused her attention on the mission: nodding to her three surviving squad members. "We'll go with

Senior Agent Volker's suggestion for now. Woods, you're with me. McCauley, Heisman – pop smoke back to the *Galloway* and request PRP for all fourteen casualties. We'll sort the secret squirrels from the Marines later."

"Wilco, ma'am!" The two men jogged off towards the port side of the *Bolas IV*. The rest of the boarding party headed towards the opposing exterior airlocks, where both the *Sandsprite* and the *Ithaca* had docked.

Waverly and Zahn met them halfway there. The billionaire moved immediately to examine Quincy. "Damn, what happened to you?"

<...statusreportstillpending...>

"He's rebooting." Spence gestured at the emergency lighting in the corridor. "So is everything else on board, by the looks of things!"

"Well, whatever's wrong, it hasn't affected the *Sandsprite*." Waverly looked proud behind his faceplate. "Clearly we build *seriously* good technology, Az!"

"That or whatever caused this mess was contained to the *Bolas IV*, Bob." The lanky augmetric twitched his tail slightly. "Let's get out of here before it spreads. I don't want to end up stuck

in this EV suit any longer than...!"

The ship split apart around them in a cacophony of rending metal and merciless vacuum. Volker reacted instinctively: cocooning herself and her companions in an intangible bubble of pyrotemporal energy. *Agent Hull – it appears that the inter suit communications systems are still not functioning. Of those currently present, you are the most accustomed to engaging in telepathic communications with me. Kindly find some means to inform the others that I must concentrate solely on maintaining this pocket within the space-time continuum. The rest of you shall have to resolve our unfortunate situation. Once we rejoin the present, we shall immediately be subject to the dangers of space. I would advise that we attempt to reach one of the other friendly vessels.*

Hull nodded his assent, and gestured to the others. "I'm a little rusty at signing – everybody okay? Volker has to focus on keeping us from ending up lost in the void! Any ideas how we get back inside a functioning ship?"

"All EV suits have emergency manual controls built into their propulsion systems." Waverly indicated the correct panel whilst Zahn set to work

helping the others prepare for their impromptu flight. "We should head for the *Sandsprite*; I don't want to leave Tessa and Dr Rosa alone during a fire fight. With any luck we're too small a target to show up on anyone's targeting scanners!"

Chapter Eleven – Down A Notch

"I wonder what old Mr Campbell's deal is anyhow." Kassie stood at the front door, staring at the property across the street. "Didn't Greg say that he's like an ex-spy or something, Bryce?"

"Yes, and don't stand there; he might see you!" Bryce glanced nervously at the control panel for the home security system. "Please, Kassie – I don't think we should do anything to escalate things."

"Hey, he's the one who started it! We were just minding our own business waiting for Greg to get home until he introduced himself. Well, at least *I* certainly was." The younger woman smirked at her companion's startled expression. "Why'd you tell ANI to cancel our security detail anyhow, Bryce?"

"I told you already: we don't need them. David and Aaron will both be here sometime this afternoon. There's no sense in our taking up

resources."

"Oh. I figured it was because Agent Cully kept trying to nose around in the basement. Seriously, what's the deal with that? Does Greg have like an illegally imported bottle of wine or something stored down there?"

"No! I mean, of course he doesn't – it's just a silly misunderstanding." The blonde woman sighed. "I'm going to go check on Fisher before I start lunch. Don't antagonize Mr Campbell if you see him, okay?"

"Jeez, relax! I'll be good." Kassie returned her attention to the opposing house. Yeah, there he was again: setting up to start washing his car on the driveway and acting as if he owned the entire neighbourhood! *Ugh, what a creep – you're so gonna get it if you're still here when Greg gets home again, asshole!*

He glanced up then, and spotted her staring at him. Much to Kassie's surprise, he smiled, beckoning her to come over. *Well, I guess it'd be more antagonistic to refuse, right?*

She slipped out of the front door and strutted down the driveway and across the street, folding her arms and pouting. "I didn't think you'd still be

hanging around here, Mr Campbell. Don't you know when you're not welcome?"

"I'm not especially famed for my adherence to social expectations, my dear." Thomas smirked and set down his bucket and sponges. "I take it that you've appointed yourself as guard dog in your employer's absence?"

"Yeah, hilarious: literally no one ever called me a bitch before!" Kassie rolled her eyes. "What's your plan anyhow? Why did you latch on to Bryce like that?"

"Revenge against her other half: plain and simple. I'm not the only one looking for it either." The retiree dug in his jacket for his cigarettes. "You and she are running in bloody dangerous circles...smoke?"

"Um, okay." She tweaked one of the slender cylinders from the carton and held it up for him to light. "Thanks. Greg doesn't like me doing this. I kind of miss it."

"Greg's an obnoxious shit. You should get well clear of him, lass; before you end up paying for his sins."

"What the fuck does that even mean, Mr Campbell? What's your deal with Greg?"

"He's put my lad and his bit of skirt through living Hell, and that's just the damn start: abducting people, imprisoning them, forcibly impregnating them – aye, the list is long and unpleasant. Thomas drew in a long, slow lungful of tobacco fumes, savouring the feeling against his palette and sinuses. "So, I take it that he doesn't bother telling you about those sorts of things, eh?"

"He's always looked out for me." Kassie thought then about how Valentine's Day had gone this year. "I mean, *usually*, anyhow. He can be kind of particular about stuff. He doesn't like it when people disappoint him."

"Hmm. What an unfailingly familiar tune." He reached forwards to smooth her bangs aside. "I can't imagine why you went for this look. I saw you on the news reports last summer – fuck, you were gorgeous then! What happened to *that* girl, Kassie?"

His teeth were whiter than those of a smoker ought to be. They clashed with the jaundiced hint to the pads of his fingers. Somehow, the overall look was *seriously* hot. "Greg said...um...he said I needed to tone things down a notch."

"It's a bloody shame that you listened." Thomas'

smile sharpened as he tossed his cigarette aside and cupped her face. "I would cheerfully have fucked *that* girl senseless."

Apparently, her body was way more into this weird old dude than she had anticipated. "Uh...so what, you think I'd even have been interested...?"

"Well, you certainly are *now*." His hands were already toying suggestively with the straps of her top: rolling the material down over her biceps. "Aren't you?"

"I...um...I don't date elderly weirdos and besides I have to go now!" She dropped the cigarette and stepped backwards, squirming angrily when he didn't release her shoulders. "Take your hands off me!"

He chuckled and pushed her away from him. "Run along home, my dear! Do feel free to come and find me again when you're finally ready to scratch that itch of yours *properly*."

The village clock in New Lulworth was chiming four thirty as Dobos and Brett walked into the grounds of The Old Pony Inn with Scooter. Leister and Jenkins waved to them from their table at the far side of the little beer garden. The older

operative rose to his feet to shake hands and admire Scooter. "What a stunning pup! So, how did your tour of Caldecott Academy go today, darlings?"

Brett grinned. "It was awesome, Cob! They even have classes in how to drive a hover tank!"

"Yeah, I think we've finally found the right school for him." Dobos sat down, pausing to tie Scooter's leash to the leg of his chair. "Dinner's on me today – it's the least I can do to thank you. Is there any word yet about whatever it is that Laine's lot are really playing at? Whitby messaged me to confirm that the media coverage was well off."

"She and Agent Hull have teamed up with Nightingale and Quincy. The last that we heard, Tanya and Kellie were both safe, and there was a joint taskforce going in search of Helen Lethe. I managed to tip Captain Kennedy off in time for her to join it." Leister sighed as he retook his seat beside Jenkins. "It's downright disgraceful how the system has treated her! There must be something more to do to help."

"Maybe Hull will accidentally fall out of an open exterior airlock." *I fucking hope so anyhow!* Dobos reached for the menu. "I take it that someone's

keeping Darren read in?"

"Yes, Cob rang him as soon as we had confirmation that Tanya was all right." Jenkins took a sip of her mineral water. "He's been staying with Mr Moxton for a bit."

"That's good that he isn't on his own. He worries himself sick." The red-haired field operative eyed Jenkins' glass. "Not drinking, boffin?"

She blushed. "No, not today, thanks! I'm um, doing one of those clean Palaeolithic detox things, oh you know the ones!"

"Huh. Okay. Your skin looks great so far." Dobos kept his face impassive. *I'm sure Cob will figure it out soon enough, assuming he hasn't already! It's not my fucking place to announce that sort of news.*

"All things considered, I think we can safely assume that Howard's abandoned his attempt to reinstate GETEC as a legitimate corporation, ma'am." Hull took a half step back away from the windows of the *Sandsprite's* observation deck; wincing as a joint salvo from the *Ithaca* and the *Galloway* obliterated the final C.A.K.E vessel. "Do you suppose we've seen the last of him?"

"That outcome would indeed be preferable, Agent Hull." Volker gazed inscrutably at the remnants of the battle. "Only time shall tell. He does have a history of feigning his own demise."

"Good point. Still, at least it's over for now." He turned to face her. "Have you reached a decision regarding the other matter?"

"Yes. Regardless of current events and alliances, we must adhere to legal protocol. It is our duty as ANI agents to remove Tessa from Mr Waverly's care until her case can be properly assessed by Children's Services."

There were only three hours left of April 1st as Lottie Drake entered Byron Caulfield's office in NIT's London headquarters. The augmetric peered down at her tablet: frowning at the results of the initial report into Kathryn's assailant. "If it weren't altogether too late in the day, I'd *almost* suspect that someone was playing a trick on us, Byron!"

Caulfield looked up from his computer with a resigned sort of smile. "Do you mean the curious matter of the late Sean Patrick Miller, aka he who was very clearly *not* stabbed until he was dead by someone even remotely his own height and build?"

"Yes, that's the one. There's no way that Campbell killed him – which of the twins do you suppose he's covering for?"

"My money would be on the boy, but it hardly matters." Her colleague sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, just beneath where the frame of his sunglasses rested. "Miller wasn't there for a social visit; not given his history with British Intelligence. There's no doubt of it having been self-defence."

"Hmm, I expect that Spence and Campbell shall manage any emotional fallout for the children." Drake set her tablet aside as she perched on the edge of Caulfield's desk. "So, onto the real concern: how probable is it that Miller was working alone?"

Caulfield pointed at his screen. "Let's just say that I wouldn't care to lay odds on it. These three fellows are his best – or rather worst – known associates: Stephen Derek O'Boyle, David John Ferris, and Liam Tresweld-Cohen."

"Wait; is that Tresweld as in Sarah Marie Tresweld?" The augmetric leaned closer to study the data. "Cousins – how in God's name did that not flag up sooner? Did Campbell know that his wife had family ties to Irish terrorist circles?"

"I can answer both of those questions with the same statement, Lottie: they met through work."

"Those sorts of answers are precisely why we need the swear jar, Byron."

"Well, those and the not-so-subtle sexual tension between Campbell and Ms Bingham!" Caulfield pushed off from his desk with both hands: the wheels on his swivel chair rattling softly as he glided across the office to the filing cabinets. "Which, to judge by the smell of them last night, they've already thoroughly resolved."

"Ugh: really?" Drake wriggled back and pushed up with both hands: coiling nimbly to sit cross-legged. "What a disgusting cheat! One would think that he'd have been only too happy to be reunited with Spence!"

"Now to be fair, Lottie, it *might* be his training that's to blame. BIINT does rather encourage their field operatives towards promiscuity."

"Or perhaps he's simply an unmitigated cock who doesn't deserve our discretion?"

"That's also a possibility, yes." Caulfield continued rifling through the files. "Ah, here it is – Operation White Ferret! Let's see what exactly it was that Campbell did to earn the enmity of Miller

and his compatriots."

The hangar of the *Sandsprite* had lost both of its exterior blast doors during yesterday's battle with C.A.K.E. Spence peered ruefully through the viewport of the interior airlock at the resultant devastation. "Well, so much for all of your hard work repairing our shuttle, Mr Waverly. I can't speak for ANI, but if it's any consolation, BLINT's financial department shall be in touch with regards to compensation. I'll chase it up personally on my return to London."

"Don't worry about it. You might not have noticed, but I'm kind of doing okay for cash." The Martian smiled and gave them the thumbs up. "It's been an interesting road trip all round, don't you think? I mean with the way that everything worked out."

The non-gender shook their head. "I could think of several other descriptive words for at least some parts of it! I expect Captain Kennedy could too."

"Yeah, that whole situation with her baby is messed up." Waverly fell into step with his guest as they headed back towards the elevator together. "Do you suppose that she and Greg will manage to

work things out?"

"I doubt it. He's really not the sort of fellow who agrees to reasonable compromises, and she shan't be especially likely to roll over and be subjugated."

"I don't get what you mean – Susan's always been stubborn, but Greg seems an okay guy." He paused to key in the deck number on the control panel. "Well, okay for a Terran."

Spence frowned at him as the elevator began its journey back up through the vessel. "A word of advice, Mr Waverly: don't think for even a moment that Agent Hull is anything other than predatory. Captain Kennedy is right not to want him raising that child."

"It kind of sounds like there's some personal stuff going on between all of you that I'm not clear on. Do you want to enlighten me?" The billionaire looked down at his feet as he continued. "Uh, over coffee, maybe...? Just as friends though – sorry; that came out weird, didn't it?"

"Yes, a little, but I can't deny that I've endured far worse attempts at arranging social engagements."

Chapter Twelve – Just Geese

Kassie checked the time on her phone before she rang Thomas' front doorbell. Eleven thirty-five am: she'd held out for the full twenty-four hours *and* an extra five minutes, so this *totally* wasn't desperate hooking up kind of stuff! Not that it mattered, given that nobody else was ever going to know about it. *Ugh, hurry up and answer the damn door already! Bryce will freak if she sees me standing here, and as for Aaron and David – oh jeez, maybe this was a dumb idea...!*

The door opened, and the smell of coffee and tobacco wafted out. Thomas arched his eyebrows mockingly as he greeted her. "Good morning, my dear – to what do I owe the pleasure of your company today?"

"Well, I'm sure not here selling cookies, you asshole!" She rolled her eyes as she stomped in past

him. "Oh, and let's be clear on this: it's *just* gonna be sex, not some weird May to December romance, you got it?"

"Ah, the direct approach: how very refreshing." Her host chuckled as he closed the door behind them. "Far too bloody many people insist on dressing it up! Just let me make sure that we aren't interrupted."

Kassie felt her stomach lurch at the quiet beep of the home security system as it reactivated. "Um, so where's your bedroom anyhow?"

"We'll get to that later." His hands clamped down firmly over her shoulders as he stepped in close behind her. "First thing first though – take off those horrible glasses. You look like you've escaped from a library!"

"But I need those to see...!"

"The last time that I checked, women don't need to see to be fucked – a fair number even seem to prefer *not* to." He spun her to face him and kissed her until she shut up: pushing her backwards into the den and up against the floor to ceiling level bookcases covering most of one wall. The plastic frame of the glasses clattered on the polished floor as he tossed them casually over his shoulder. She

blinked, squinting slightly as he pushed up her flimsy skirt. "I suspect Greg wouldn't approve of *this* hemline! Now, no more noise from you unless it's to tell me how much you're enjoying things."

"Wow, you really are sure of yourself...!"

Between the subsequent rattling of the bookcases and the utterly primal noises from Kassie, Thomas barely noticed his phone shrilling at first. Then the ringtone registered. Cupping his left hand across the young woman's mouth, he pulled the insistent little device from his back pocket and flipped it open. "What the devil is it, Leister?"

"Edith had a call from ANI yesterday – something about a field operative going where he shouldn't. She's ordered you back to London immediately."

"I'm retired: that means that she can't order anything of me!" The former field operative grunted. "And besides, I'm bloody busy right now!"

"Yes, I can see that now, darling: I'm standing on your back patio. Perhaps consider closing the curtains first in future?"

Thomas snorted. "I'll think about it! Coffee's already made, by the way." He ended the call and pocketed his phone. Kassie was still moaning behind his hand: her legs wrapped tightly around

his waist as she bucked against his lap. "It appears I have company on the way. Fix your clothes and go watch television, there's a good girl."

She gasped angrily as he deposited her unceremoniously on the floor at his feet. "Company or not, you can't just drop me like that, you jerk!"

"You'll live. Now be quiet."

"Ugh, forget it – I'll just go home!"

"Suit yourself. The code for the front door is in the phone drawer."

He zipped up and sauntered off to the kitchen. Leister had just finished resetting the alarm. "I'm afraid that these American security systems aren't very impressive, darling."

"Understandable really: they're designed with Americans in mind." Thomas pulled up a chair at the table. "I've decided to give Greg Hull a taste of his own medicine – let's see how he likes having someone meddle with his relationship!"

"That's commendably foolhardy of you, old chap." Leister shook his head forlornly at the coffee. "Dreadful synthetic stuff, I don't know how you stomach it! Look, just don't push too many of Edith's buttons, Thomas. You're already on official notice for your actions so far. Oh, and for pity's sake, ring

your son! I've just had a ridiculously vague text from Byron: apparently, there's been some sort of trouble in Bournemouth."

Barnabas knocked impatiently on his sister's bedroom door. "Hurry up, Kathryn, dinner's nearly ready! Heidi needs us to set the table."

"I'm not hungry."

The boy frowned, scuffing his trainers against the dull brown carpet. "But you haven't eaten anything all day today, or yesterday either. Aren't you feeling well or something?"

"Just leave me alone, Barnabas!"

"Fine then – die alone and see if I care!" He stomped off downstairs and into the dining room. "Heidi, Kathryn says she's still not hungry. Can I have her share of the pudding please?"

Heidi clucked unhappily. "Craig wanted me to make sure that she is eating something before bedtime! I will take up a tray for her."

"Where is Craig anyhow?" Barnabas pulled open the middle drawer of the dresser and began to pick out cutlery. "I mean he's been gone for hours now – isn't he supposed to be looking after us and the babies for Auntie Val?"

"Ah, he is maybe busy today, yes, that will be why." The au pair glanced at the playpen set up in the corner of the room. Jacamar and Honeyguide really did need more one to one attention! "Busy with Seamus – I mean Sam."

"Aunty Val still thinks we ought to keep his full name, you know, in memorandum or something; because his mummy died." The boy paused. "Heidi, is it memorandum or memoriam? I think I get the two of them confused sometimes, sorry."

She smiled at him kindly. "It is memoriam – try to think of it as memorandum always having the letter d for things to do! And it is okay to get confused, Barnabas."

"Kathryn never gets words mixed up!" He sighed and placed the first utensil down on the table. "She's smarter than me, isn't she? Do you suppose that I'll catch up to her once we go to school?"

"I think you are both very smart children just that perhaps it is in different kinds of ways. And yes, the teachers will help you with learning more."

"What if they don't like us?"

His voice wobbled, and Heidi moved instinctively to give him a hug. "I am *never* seeing reasons for that to happen! Yes, you are very scary but still

good children, okay?"

"Okay." He sagged against her: enjoying the warmth of the embrace at least as much he did the steely weight of the cutlery in his hands. *Mummy used to hug us all the time. I miss her.* "Thanks, Heidi."

The house phone shrilled in the front hall before she could answer. Both infants joined in with the noise. Not for the first time, Heidi wondered about the fairness of her hours and wages. "I must get the phone now – you finish with the table, please."

It was Paul Benedict: ringing from London to let Campbell know that whatever Spence was doing for work would soon be finished. "I can't seem to reach him on his mobile at the moment, Miss Hedturner. Is everything all right there? NIT reported an incident having occurred on Sunday."

Heidi shivered as she thought again of the abandoned car and the missing driver. "I am not certain of what exactly it was, but everyone here is okay now, yes. Craig is out for the day with Sam – perhaps he is having signal problems?"

"Hmm, maybe that's it." Benedict sighed. He sounded tired. "But if he's out, then do you have all four of the other children to mind? That *can't* be

within your duties as an au pair, surely! What about your catering studies?"

"It is okay, thank you, Paul. I am used to it."

"No; that shan't do at all – Spence will hit the roof when they find out that he's bogged off and left you to run things alone! Look, I'm up to my eyeballs in after action reports here, but I'll speak to Moxton. He, Dobos, and Jolley can drive to Bournemouth and pitch in. Please, don't hesitate to let one or other of us know immediately if Craig pulls anything like this again. He really should know better!"

Mellor was on his way out as Kassie approached the house. She gawped at his suitcase: any semblance of shame or nervousness forgotten. "Jeez, Aaron – you're like, leaving again? Wow, so much for loyalty!"

"I have a meeting back in Boston that I can't miss. Hey, is that a *hickey* on your neck?"

"Yeah: breaking news, I have a sex life!" She scowled and stuck up both middle fingers at him. "Have fun in Boston, Aaron!" She elbowed him out of her way and strode into the front hall. "I'm back safely; you can cancel the search party!"

"It's about time! I hope you know that you've got some *serious* explaining to do, young lady!" Bryce came hurrying out of the kitchen. "You promised to help me with the chores today, and instead you spent all morning in the shower and then vanished. Where have you been for the past hour anyhow?"

"Mind your own business! I answer to *Greg*, not to you." Kassie lowered her voice and glared at her. "Or *maybe* you want me to tell him about Mr Campbell visiting you again on Saturday evening?"

Bryce paled and shook her head. "Just go up to your room and put your laundry away, okay? I don't...I'm not sure where everything goes in your closet."

"That's more like it!" The young au pair smiled triumphantly as she flounced off upstairs. "I don't know about you, but I *think* I see a shift in the pecking order around here!"

Up until the events of the previous Friday evening, Bryce would have dismissed that possibility out of hand. Three and a half days ago – how had things spun so far out of kilter since then? *Maybe it's because Greg left here still angry with me.*

She knew that she had let him down. The rule

was so simple! No guests unless Greg said so – in all their years together, Bryce had never once forgotten to stick to that. Not until Thomas came along anyhow. If only she'd known who he was! Then again, if she hadn't broken the rule, that wouldn't have mattered. *Why am I so stupid?*

Fisher toddled up beside her and tugged at her hands. "Mommy, I want to go feed the garden birdies!"

"Okay, sweetie; let's get the seed first."

Aaron's cab had already left with him by the time that Bryce and Fisher exited the house: a trail of spilled food marking the toddler's route to the ornate multi-level feeder in the front yard. Bryce sighed. She'd see about vacuuming later. Something else that was technically against the rules, but cleaning as you go wasn't always possible with nobody else around to watch your child. Greg might be comfortable to let David babysit, but the burly SCO still made her nervous. Anyhow, he'd seemed engrossed in whatever he was watching on his tablet. *It can't hurt to let him have some down time.*

She usually enjoyed watching the birds with her son. Admittedly, Fisher's idea of watching was

closer to chasing at times, but the birds could fly faster than he could run, and were undeterred by his antics. Today though, Bryce found that the scene just made her sad. There were no harsh regulations for travel if you were a bird! *I wonder how many of these little guys migrate to and from Canada each year? Do songbirds even do that, or is it just geese?*

A polite cough from the end of the driveway interrupted her reverie. Turning, Bryce saw a tall long-legged man, of a similar age to Thomas, standing next to the mailbox. "Good afternoon, Ms Lenard – my name is Maurice Jacob Leister. I'm here to deliver a formal apology on behalf of British International Intelligence for our inadvertent role in your son's abduction. We'd also like to compensate the boy financially for any emotional trauma linked to the matter. Now, it's my understanding that you're his primary caregiver?"

She nodded slowly. "I'm a stay-at-home mom, if that's what you mean, but Greg's the one in charge of all of our finances. You'll have to talk to him about it."

Leister's expression tightened slightly. "Ah – yes, of course, I ought to have anticipated that. I'm

afraid that Agent Hull simply isn't someone that I'm willing to do business with, darling. Personal reasons, I do hope that you understand. Besides, the details for the trust fund have already been notarised, naming you as trustee and Fisher as sole beneficiary." He stepped forwards onto the carefully manicured front lawn and handed her a sleek tablet. "All of the details are in order, as you can see."

It was a big number: more than enough for college at the very least. Bryce's hands trembled as she returned the tablet. "Mr Leister, I'm sorry, but I *can't* be the trustee – surely the bank ought to have flagged that? I mean...well...with what happened; my record...?"

He frowned at her quizzically. "Whatever record are you referring to, darling? Why, the only issue on your file is a misdemeanour concerning an out-of-date travel visa in 2081, and that charge expired six years ago!"

"No, that's not right. There were additional charges added!"

"Not according to any database that we know of, Ms Lenard." Leister winked then. "And for what it's worth, BIINT has access to a great many things

of that nature. Congratulations – you and your son are now financially independent."

Chapter Thirteen – Different Guy

Waverly smiled at Kennedy as she entered his workshop with her infant cradled in her arms. “Hey you, how's things? Did you explain to Woods that I'm not the Waverly he thinks I am?”

The Marine nodded. “Yeah, he knows now that Alistair's a different guy! Sorry for the confusion.”

“It's okay. To be fair, our companies do have pretty similar names: Waverly Industries and Waverly Mining Industries.” He rummaged in the drawer beneath the workstation. “I have something for Ellie. It's a rattle with an inbuilt holographic emitter – projects an image of the solar system.”

“Thanks. I'm just on my way to drop her off on the *Ithaca* with Agent Hull, so hopefully he'll agree that she can keep it.”

“Oh.” The billionaire hesitated. “That's not...I mean Spence filled me in on a few things earlier.

That guy's a real piece of work, huh?"

"The people in charge don't seem to see it." Kennedy reached forwards and took the rattle; careful not to disturb the drowsing baby. "Thanks anyhow, Robbie...wait, it's Bob now, isn't it?"

"Robbie had too many painful memories attached to it." He stared down at his feet; counting the faint scratches on the toes of his shoes. "You know; like how my girl just randomly ditched me for my older brother and then stopped taking my calls?"

She spluttered. "What the Hell do you mean that I ditched you? You're the one who left Mars without so much as a forwarding address!"

"Yeah, but you'd already picked Alistair by then." Waverly frowned. "Hadn't you? I mean my parents said that you had, but then I guess why did you run out on the wedding?"

Kennedy sank down onto the other bench. "He picked *me*, not the other way around, Bob. And what Alistair Waverly wants, he gets."

"Oh. Wow. Um...that makes a lot more sense. I'm sorry I doubted you, Suzie goose."

"I'm sorry too, Robbie duck."

He raised his head and peered at her shyly from

behind his hands. "Are we *seriously* that dumb? It took us nearly a quarter of a century to sit down and talk?"

"Dumb enough to run away from the cloud, as Woods might say!" She smiled sadly. "At least you didn't manage to lose custody of your kid."

"Hey, give me time – chances are that she'll disown me for embarrassing her as soon as she hits her teens!" He paused and sucked in a breath before continuing. "And besides, who says you don't just refuse to hand her over? I mean it's a real big solar system out there, Suzie. People manage to disappear all the time. Maybe...well maybe you and me; we could try that, you know? Run away together, see the stars up close and cold, raise our kids like – I dunno, pirates, or something?"

Kennedy stared down at her daughter for a long moment. Ellie's lips parted slightly: blowing bubbles in her sleep. The tiny fingers twitched against the soft pink blanket. "Robbie, are you asking me to give us a second chance?"

"Well, kind of, if you think it could work? I mean mostly I'm just saying that there are other options than playing by the rules all the time. Oh, and before you lecture me about your duty to the Corps

and Mars, just let me point out that um, you're also her mom. Doesn't that weigh in as more important?"

"Yeah, of course it does! But Robbie, you do get that we'd be fugitives for the rest of our lives, right? Agent Hull ain't just gonna shrug his shoulders and give up. Heck, the MMC will probably charge me with dereliction of duty!"

"I get that." Waverly smiled as she met his gaze again. "Still, they'd have to find us to punish us, and like I said, it's a real big solar system."

Tanya switched off the *Sandsprite's* long-range holographic communication unit and sighed happily. "Thanks for setting that up, Spence! It's nice to be able to talk directly to Darren – jeez; I've got it bad, haven't I?"

The non-gender nodded from their seat at the opposite side of the bridge. "You both have, Miss Darnell. If you aren't careful, you'll end up a happily married couple at this rate."

<request – thisunitcallsdibsonringbearer duty>

"Aw, thanks, Quincy; you'd be an adorable ring bearer!" The young American sank down into the chair beside Spence. "So how about you and Craig

anyhow; is he planning on popping the question any time soon?"

"I bloody well hope not! The last thing I need is yet more paperwork regarding who I am. Besides, he's still processing what happened to Sarah. It could be years yet before he's really over that."

<advisory – revengeiscathartic>

Spence eyed the little robot. "What did I tell you about not enabling the field operatives?"

<semanticclarification – exfieldoperative>

"He's got a point though, Spence." Tanya lowered her voice. "I mean, we're not just going to sit back and let Mr Hull get away with everything he did, are we?"

"There's really no need to whisper, Miss Darnell. All the ANI lot are safely contained back on their own bloody ship. If we want to talk about the best way to murder the bastard then we shall!" The pale blue eyes hardened. "In answer to your question, no – we're *not* going to let him get away with it. He can't hide behind Senior Agent Volker forever."

"Oh. So, we're like, just waiting for her to see through his act?"

"Ideally, yes, but we'll also settle for her being physically too far away to stop us killing him with

bullets and or fire...!" Spence paused as the door of the bridge cycled open to admit Hull. "Speak of the Devil. Is there a legitimate reason that you're here as opposed to aboard your own agency's vessel, or were you hoping to try forcibly recruiting someone?"

Hull smiled calmly despite the barb. "I keep telling people that's not my job anymore. You'd think by now at least some of you might have got the message. Look, I'm just making sure that Susan doesn't *forget* to return Rayne. Have you seen her around?"

<warning – hostileforceadjacent>

Tanya snorted. "Good one, Quincy...!"

The *Sandsprite* lurched sideways under the initial salvo: her automated defences activating before the enemy vessel could inflict any further damage. Emergency shutters of two-inch thick kevlatanium alloy plating rolled out across the solar yacht. Spence hissed as the metallic cocoon closed over the bridge's main viewport. "No prizes for recognising our opponent!"

<statement – thisunitalertedorganicspresent>

Beside them, Hull was helping a dazed Tanya back into her seat. "Either I'm as concussed as she

looks, or your pet robot just disrespected us, Nightingale!"

"He's not a pet." The older BIINT operative glared at their ANI counterpart. "And I told you before – stop using my first name. I reserve that privilege for the people whom I *don't* actively want to murder."

"Well, at least you count me as people!" Hull straightened up. "It looks like the fall exacerbated an existing head injury. She needs treatment as soon as possible – any chance that we can all just bury our differences until after we make it to the medical bay, *Housekeeping?*"

<advisory – needsmust>

Spence scowled but nodded nonetheless. Pulling an emergency rebreather from their field kit, they carefully settled it in place across Tanya's nose and mouth. "Fine, prep for potential loss of atmosphere and let's go. Quincy, in the all too likely event that C.A.K.E manage to board, I want you to protect Miss Darnell."

Tanya winced. "But...what about you...?"

"I'm guessing that they'll take the opportunity to use me as an improvised human shield! You know; tell everyone that it was C.A.K.E who killed me, and

so on." Hull pulled the young handler to her feet. "Okay, take it easy, just lean on me."

"Ugh...I don't *want* to lean on you...!"

"Look at it as leaving both my hands free to throttle him, Miss Darnell." Spence led the way to the door of the bridge. "Agent Hull, if you let her fall, I'll break your bloody neck."

He chuckled. "Team building exercises must be a lot of fun in your agency! You know, this reminds me of the time when GETEC Boston...!"

The corridor outside the bridge was somehow missing its entire floor, creating a fifteen-metre deep drop to the level below. Tessa peered up at them wide-eyed from where she cowered right beside the pile of ruined deck plating. There was no sign of Vinnie, and the dust and smoke obscured most of the girl's frantic signing. "...help me...scared...!"

Spence sighed. "And *this* is exactly the sort of situation that I was concerned about! Children should *not* be brought along on missions!"

"Amen to that." Hull edged backwards a little with Tanya. "Any thoughts as to how we get down there? Somehow, I don't feel that we'll be taking the elevator."

<advisory – deactivateartificialgravity>

Tanya glanced backwards over her shoulder at the already flickering consoles within the bridge. "Um, I'm not sure if that's going to need much effort on our part, guys! It looks like the ship's losing power."

The non-gender was already rappelling downwards, a thin wire feeding steadily from their belt buckle. "Quincy, break out the climb kit and use your hover mode to assist the others! My previous warning still applies, Agent Hull."

Tessa scrambled to her feet as soon as Spence touched down. Sobbing incoherently, the young Martian clung to the thin British operative. Her fingers drummed against their forearm: the frantic pattern of a bird trapped behind glass. Whatever she hoped to convey was lost. Ignoring the rising wave of panic from the physical contact, Spence crouched in front of the girl and soothed her until the others caught up. "She's not injured, thank Christ; just badly shaken up."

Hull frowned. "Wait a second – where's that creepy little robot she usually has with her?"

<...engagingsearchmode...>

One glance at Tanya's pallid face was enough to make Spence veto that course of action.

"There's no time to spare looking for him, Quincy. We need to focus on getting Miss Darnell to medical. Besides, I'm sure Mr Waverly has a backup copy of his program anyhow. Worst case scenario he can upload him into a new chassis."

"Housekeeping's right." Hull steadied Tanya. "We're on the right level now but we still need to pick up the pace! So, Spence – think you can convince Tessa to stick with us?"

"If need be I'll handcuff her to me."

The ANI operative arched his eyebrows sharply at that. "Hey, there's this thing called gentle parenting – ever hear of it in merry old England?"

"Do you *really* want to waste time lecturing me on how best to manage other people's overindulged children whilst your own offspring is God knows where in all of this ruddy chaos?"

He sighed. "Of course not, but Tessa's traumatised enough already. Tell you what – I'll keep an eye on her and you help Tanya. I'm pretty sure everyone involved will be better off with that arrangement."

In the end, Hull had to carry Tessa most of the way to the medical bay. He smiled with relief as the door cycled open to reveal the rest of those

present aboard the *Sandsprite* already gathered inside, and apparently uninjured. "Hey Susan, the next time we make arrangements for a handover, let's both try and stick to them, okay?"

Kennedy scowled at him over the top of their daughter's head. "You say *that* as if you're even planning on letting me see her again!"

He shrugged as Tessa scrambled down from his arms to run to Waverly. "Yeah, well, I guess if you can keep her safe during all of this, then maybe Bryce and I could agree to something. How do you feel about having contact every other weekend? On Earth though – I think Rayne's had more than enough space travel."

Spence growled as they and Zahn lifted Tanya bodily onto the nearest gurney. "Oh, for the love of Christ, can you two please just stop? We don't have time right now to waste on your passive bloody aggressive vying over who gets to raise the baby! This ship is in bad shape, and so is Miss Darnell. Mr Waverly, can you reach either the *Ithaca* or the *Galloway* – for that matter; do you even have access to communications from here?"

"Uh, yeah, we already contacted them." The billionaire glanced up from where he was

comforting Tessa, and pointed towards the isolation unit at the far side of the medical bay. "Dr Rosa was able to modify one of the components in her brain to...!"

The non-gender held up both of their hands impatiently. "We honestly *don't* need the potted history of how you boffins managed it! You're smarter than us, and we're fine with that. Small words: what's the plan of action and how long will it take?"

Waverly blinked. "Oh. Okay then – well, Volker and Woods advised us just to sit tight until they come get us. They're bringing medics. Apparently, it was a drone attack, so there's no risk of boarders. Hey, where's Vinnie gotten to? Why isn't he with Tessa?"

"Why weren't you with her?" Hull couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "Seriously, we found her all alone out there – she was almost crushed by a collapsing ceiling, and I'd put money that Vinnie's somewhere underneath it. All the way from there to here, I guess I just figured that you'd show up at some point, but nope. Well, way to go, Robert: that's certainly an *original* interpretation of how a father should react during an emergency!"

"I thought she'd be perfectly safe with Vinnie, Greg! Susan, Az, and I were literally just about to start a search when you arrived here...!"

The shrill whine of the multi parameter monitoring system now connected to Tanya cut across the rest of Waverly's sentence. Zahn rifled frantically through the contents of the supply cabinet. "She's crashing! Damn it, Bob, we need that medical team now!"

Chapter Fourteen – Put A Lid

It was raining again, and had been constantly for the past four hours, when Moxton and his companions arrived at the house in Bournemouth. Brett was the first one out of the hover car, followed by a relieved Scooter, whose immediate response to setting paw on the driveway was to pee. "It looks like we made it here just in time, Dad!"

"Make sure to bag up anything solid, son. The bins are over there next to the front porch." Dobos closed the rear door of the vehicle behind him and and glanced at his watch. "Quarter to eight – well, we've definitely missed dinner. Just as well that Darren thought to bring those sandwiches."

"Cheers mate." Jolley was unloading their luggage from the boot. "But to be fair, that was Ashley's idea, not mine. She said the traffic was going to be rotten, and she was right!"

Moxton deliberately caught Dobos' eye. "Did you happen to notice anything a bit off with her, Oliver? I know you and Brett travelled back to London with her and Leister yesterday."

"Ashley's okay." The red-haired operative picked up his and Brett's suitcases whilst his son jogged over to the bins with Scooter in tow. "She's just taking more interest in eating healthily. That's not a crime."

"Aye, it's probably Mr Leister's influence rubbing off...!" Jolley paused as he spotted the slight twist at the side of Dobos' mouth. "Oh hold on now, Ollie! She's *not*, is she?"

"I didn't say *anything*, Darren." Nevertheless, the smile on his face was loose now, and so was Jenkins' secret. "It wouldn't be our news to announce either, so let's put a lid on it, eh?"

Their handler smiled softly. "Well here's hoping it all works out for them! Right, let's hurry up and get in out of this weather before we drown – ah, there's Barnabas at the front door. So how's everything going here?"

The boy shrugged as he let them in. "All right, I suppose. Are Cob and Auntie Ashley not here with you?"

Moxton shook his head. "Cob has an assignment abroad, and Ashley's swamped with lab work back at NIT. They send their best though."

"Oh, okay. Is that a real dog or a robot?"

"He's real; my grandparents bought him for me." Brett was already wriggling free of his coat, dripping just as much rainwater onto the hall carpet as the puppy was. "His name's Scooter. Dad says that I can take him to school at Caldecott Academy with me! I start there as soon as the Easter vacation is over – maybe you and Kathryn can go too!"

Leaving the boys to catch up with each other's news, Moxton, Dobos, and Jolley abandoned their coats and luggage and headed into the living room to join Heidi. The young au pair smiled when she saw them. "It is good to be seeing all of you again! Craig phoned to say that he and Sam were being late this evening."

The handler blinked. "So he's still out gallivanting? What's going on – is it something to do with that bloke NIT tidied up after on Sunday?"

Heidi shook her head. "No; I am thinking that he is just spending extra of the father and son time! They are arriving back for eight thirty, so it is not too long now."

"Here, that's still a bit of a long day for a toddler though, isn't it?" Jolley made a beeline to the playpen where Jacamar and Honeyguide were nestled. "Hallo little ones – did you miss Uncle Darren then?"

Dobos smirked. "I'm pretty sure that it's meant to be Tanya who gets broody, you daft pr-person. Sorry."

"Ah, now don't you mind your silly old Uncle Ollie." The Welsh operative pulled a face at his colleague and scooped up the twin infants. "He's just jealous that you like me the best!"

Moxton decided to be useful. "I'll go and pop the kettle on for everyone. Darren, you babysit – they seem to like you, and I'm sure that Heidi needs a break! Oliver, can you take the suitcases on up to the guest bedrooms?"

"Yeah, I'm on it." Dobos sauntered back towards the front hall. "Where's Kathryn?"

Heidi sighed. "She is not leaving her room today! I took her up some dinner, but I am worried that she might not be feeling well."

"I'll check in on her while I'm up there."

Cully stared at the screen of his office computer,

perplexed. All the case notes from last December's investigation into Fisher's abduction were gone. So was almost everything to do with Bryce's criminal record. "Suddenly she's a model citizen again. What the heck is going on here?" As he watched, the icons for the assorted files regarding the events in Desdemona Falls during April 2096 flickered and vanished too. "Shit – someone's in our system! Agent Anderson, get in here; we're being hacked!"

The cyber security expert was there within thirty seconds, but it was too late. "Ouch! Yeah, I don't think this was especially random, Mike. The only other time I've seen work like this was within the industry. Someone high up and extremely professional is covering, but fuck knows what or why. Do you want me to log it?"

He shook his head. "No, it's okay, Marcy. I'll deal with that. There's no sense in risking both of our lives if it turns out to be ultra internal."

"Thanks, man. You turn up dead or vanished, I promise to remember you fondly."

That was too possible an outcome to do anything other than laugh politely as Anderson packed up her kit and hurried out. Logging the incident with ANI Miami's online report system, Cully

checked his watch miserably. It was only three in the afternoon; too early to hit the bar. Then again, he might not have until polite society drinking hours rolled around. *Screw it; I might not even have until I get clear of this building!*

His computer took its time to shut down, and he could have sworn that his jacket deliberately tangled on the back of his chair. Struggling into the offending item of clothing, he walked down to his parking spot in the sub-basement as calmly as he knew how to. The elevator didn't explode, and neither did his car, so maybe he hadn't pissed off anyone too important. *Yeah, keep up the positive mindset, Mike!*

To his credit, Campbell arrived home five minutes earlier than planned, and Sam was far from overtired. The former spy nodded politely to Moxton and the others as he entered the living room. "Heidi texted me you'd arrived. I take it that you're here because of Miller? Is there any word yet as to whether he has friends in the area?"

Moxton shook his head. "NIT's drawn a blank, but it seems only sensible to assume there's some level of risk. It can't hurt for us to stay for a bit – keep

an eye out."

"That and help with the kids!" Dobos yawned and reached for his coffee. "Sorry, long drive. Paul reckons you're asking too much of Heidi."

"Oh?" Campbell set Sam down on the rug and bent to unfasten the toddler's coat. "Well, today was unavoidable – I was viewing nurseries for the three smalls. I also picked up the shopping on my way back, if anyone feels like helping to bring that in from the car?"

"Oliver, you and Darren get the bags." Moxton glanced at Heidi. "Can you pop upstairs and check on the older three please? I need to talk to Craig privately."

"Okay – I will take the little twins up to their cots now too. Craig, are you wanting me to run the bath for Sam yet?"

"Thank you, Heidi. Let me know when it's ready and I'll bring him up." Campbell kept his tone light until the young au pair had gone. Then he glared at Moxton. "Let me be perfectly clear with you. This isn't your house, and they aren't your children. How I manage arrangements with Heidi is none of your concern, or Paul's. Now, if you, and Darren and Oliver really are all just here to deal with the Irish

matter, then great. I'm glad to have back up. But so help me, if this is you sticking your oar in because you still think that Spence picked the wrong man, then you can just pack up your things and drive straight back to London! Is that understood?"

The handler leant back in his armchair and ran both of his palms over the smooth dome of his head. "Huh. So that's how it is now?"

"Yes. I'm not prepared to turn a blind eye whilst you chip away at what Spence and I have together. Okay, so maybe I'm *not* into the *lifestyle*, or whatever it is that you call it, and yes, fine, I'm medically unfit for the field. Spence doesn't care! They chose *me*, not *you*, and that's an end to it."

Moxton closed his eyes. "Did you know that NIT reckons one of the twins killed Miller?"

"I...what...?" Campbell blinked. "Why do they think that? I told them it was *me*!"

"Yeah, well the forensics told them that you're too tall. Caulfield thinks it was Barnabas. I'm not so sure; not given how Kathryn's behaving. Heidi said she's off her food; been hiding out in her room a lot too."

His host swallowed. "Well, she's growing up. It's probably just a phase. Anyhow, Caulfield's wrong.

Miller came here to kill me. It's nothing to do with Kathryn or Barnabas!"

"You're not actually helping by lying, you know." Moxton looked at him again. "Oliver already talked to her. He says she's hiding something – that it's eating away at her. What do you reckon Spence would think of *that*?"

Whatever Campbell intended to say was lost: drowned out by the slamming of the front door, and the subsequent twin sets of startled wails from upstairs. Jolley sprinted into the living room, grimaced and without any sign of the shopping. "There's a hover van parked out front – Irish number plate, and six big blokes in balaclavas climbing out of it!"

"Our weapons' locker is upstairs in the main bedroom." Campbell scooped up his son and limped towards the stairs. "Did you three bring your own gear?"

"Aye; Ollie's already gone up to grab the right cases for us. We hit the alarm on the way in."

Moxton switched off the overhead lights behind them as they made for the first landing, pulling out his phone and dialling the number for BIINT Headquarters. "How long is the ground floor likely to

remain secure for?"

"Hopefully a good bit longer than most residential properties, but it really depends how determined they are to get in!" Campbell handed Sam to Heidi. "Gather the children and take them all up to the top floor, Heidi. Lock yourselves in the attic bedroom until this is over. Spence keeps an emergency kit up there – allegedly only in case of the zombie apocalypse, but this probably qualifies too!"

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Miss Darnell." Spence peered at Tanya's eyes. "The ANI medics reckon you'll be fine, by the way, but I've to watch out for any signs of concussion."

Their young colleague groaned and sat up. "So, we're on the *Ithaca* now? What happened to the *Sandsprite*? I remember us arriving at the medical bay and then nothing until well, waking up in this medical bay instead. Is everyone okay?"

"No one died, but okay might be stretching things a tad." The non-gender reached for the water jug. "You should drink this. You've been out for the better part of six hours straight."

"Ugh, that explains the icky feeling in my mouth.

Thanks – I hope my breath isn't too gross right now?"

"Don't worry, I've smelt worse. We're about four and a half hours away from Earth now. That's plenty of time for you to make yourself presentable for Mr Jolley."

Tanya looked around at the pale blue panelled walls. "I guess ANI don't do the same kind of luxury level accommodation, huh?"

"Appearances aren't everything, Miss Darnell." Spence scowled. "Waverly may have all but limitless funds, but he neglected to inform us that his child isn't vaccinated!"

"Oh my God, that's so crappy of him! Jeez, baby Ellie Rayne could have gotten really sick because of that – wait, is she okay?"

"She's fine. Her parents are spitting feathers, though, especially Captain Kennedy. Thankfully my two and Seamus are up to date with all their jabs, so I shan't have to quarantine myself from them when I get home."

"Well, that's good!" The young American felt gingerly at her scalp. "Ouch! Do you suppose I'll have to take some time off work with this?"

"I expect so, yes. Don't worry – I'm sure Mr

Moxton will take good care of your boyfriend until you're able to go back into the field with them again."

"Darn it and I was finally getting the hang of fieldwork too!" Tanya feigned a grin, and then frowned as she noticed Spence's expression. "Hey, what's wrong? You look...um...weird...?"

"I'm conflicted, Miss Darnell. Agent Hull has managed to walk away from this presenting as a better man than Mr Waverly is – it's thrown me a little. I thought my instincts were better."

"Maybe Waverly really didn't realise that babies are so vulnerable. I mean, he adopted Tessa when she was five, right?"

"Wrong. He didn't bother to do *that* properly either – in fact, from a legal perspective, he essentially just snatched her off the street. ANI has taken her into protective custody until Children's Services can investigate."

"Jeez, remind me never to lose consciousness again! It's like everything just suddenly fell apart whilst my eyes were closed or something!"

Chapter Fifteen – No Chances

As luck, or, more accurately, good security would have it, the attempted raid on the house the night before had failed quietly. The half-dozen would-be assailants had soon discovered how little use semi-automatic weapons were against triple reinforced kevlatanium micromesh shutters: the latter having activated along with the alarm. There had been shouting, of course, and the two once sleek hover vehicles parked on the driveway were charred wrecks along with the abandoned bags of shopping by the time the NIT armed response teams arrived. The men who had set the fire were already long gone – vanished into the night along with their van.

Personally, Campbell felt that the incident had passed off as well as anyone sane could have hoped. Last night, crouched behind the banister

with Moxton and the other two men, all he could think of was that closed coffin back in Dublin: the funeral deemed too high risk for him to dare attend it. Sarah – brave, impossible woman – laid to rest beneath six feet of ungrateful soil. *Christ alone knows what the bastards might have done to Heidi and the children once they got past us!*

He flipped the halfway toasted pancakes over one by one, and then shoved the wire tray back beneath the grill. The team of grim-faced NIT operatives guarding the house might not want feeding, but everyone else did. At least, he *hoped* so. There was still the awful secret hanging over Kathryn. *Pinkie promises indeed. I should have put my foot down then – not agreed to let her lie for Carol and me!*

There was no sign of the florist today, although he had spotted John amid the small mob of neighbours gawping at the NIT cleanup activities. Was Carol avoiding him? Had all of this frightened her off the idea of whatever it was that they had together? She had certainly still seemed keen enough on him yesterday afternoon: he'd almost missed the appointment with the second nursery! *It's a good thing that the supermarket sells shirts too.*

Pembleton had phoned him an hour ago, demanding an update, and offering relocation. Campbell had provided the former, and flatly declined the latter. He was damned if he would run away from his enemies. Besides, those sorts of people would only keep looking until they found him again. *I need to take the offensive, and as soon as possible. That's the only way to be sure that this finishes once and for all.*

The *Ithaca* docked at the top ring of the Cape Canaveral Spaceport a little before nine on Wednesday morning, and those aboard her took passage planet side via shuttles. From there, the three organic BIINT operatives made their way wearily to the New Arrivals Lounge, and collected Quincy with the rest of their luggage. Halfway to the exit, Rosa balked. "Spence, please – I have to know. What's going to happen to me? Has there been any decision reached about my official status?"

The non-gender yawned. "All I know for certain is that Pembleton wants you home safely, boffin. She might not clear you for work immediately, but to be brutally honest that's due to your enmeshment with

Agent Hull and GETEC; not because of your cybernetics. Give her time and attend the bloody therapy sessions, that's my advice to you."

<alert – friendlyorganicunitsignalling>

Tanya squealed and hobbled forwards to hug Leister. "Oh my God, it's so good to see you again, Cob!"

"You too, darling – gracious, let me look at you! Please tell me that whoever caused these injuries got what they damn well deserved?"

"Sadly, we can't be sure either way, old swan." Spence looked around for any other familiar faces. "Hmm, I thought Mr Jolley would have been here too."

"He's in Bournemouth, my little chick, along with Daniel and Oliver. They were there giving Craig a bit of support, and then there was an incident." Leister held up his hands. "Don't panic: Edith assures me that no one was hurt! Come on, there's a private jet waiting for us. I'll read you all in on the details once we're in the air."

"Bryce?" Hull stepped into his front hall and closed the front door gently behind him; careful not to jolt the travel pod and disturb Rayne. "Sweetie,

I'm home – is everything okay?"

Saunders lumbered into view from the direction of the den. There was a tablet in his hands. "Welcome home, Sir. Bryce is at the grocery store with Fisher. I think you'd better look at this before you talk to her. I monitored that feed just like you told me to, and it's bad news."

"Okay, thanks, David. Just let me get Rayne settled. She's had a long morning, haven't you, princess?" Hull smiled fondly at his infant daughter. "So where are Aaron and Kassie?"

"Aaron had a meeting back in Boston. He's going to fly back later today. Kassie's gone jogging." The burly SCO scuffed his feet against the polished flooring. "Sir, I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, David?" The ANI operative set the travel pod down in the middle of the den. "What's going on?"

"It's probably better if you just review the footage yourself, Sir. I didn't know how best to deal with the situation in your absence, so I kept out of it instead."

The video feed displayed on the tablet was silent: the program set to convert dialogue to subtitles automatically. Hull sank down into one of

the twin reclining armchairs to watch it. The glasses had kept broadcasting even after Thomas had tossed them aside, but the subsequent conversation between Kassie and Bryce was what really made him angry. "I warned Miss Shelby about that attitude! David, go upstairs and pack up her things please. I'll arrange transport back to her parents' place. She's overstayed her welcome in this house."

"Yes Sir."

Hull knew of at least four qualified people within Miami alone that he could pass the young woman on to, but that would only complicate things further. No, it was better to cut her loose entirely, at least for now. She'd come crawling back soon enough, her sort always did. *You'll really have to work for it next time, Kassie. I won't just let you back in the front door in exchange for an apology! Not after how you've been treating Bryce.*

The cab arrived before Kassie did. She glanced at it curiously on her way up to the house; smiling when Hull met her in the front hall. "Hi, Greg, welcome home! How was space? Did you bring Rayne home today, or is she back at Mercy?"

He reached out and plucked off her glasses,

tucking them into his pocket. "I'll keep these. I'm sure you have spare contacts somewhere amid all that crap of yours, Miss Shelby. You can dig them out on your way home."

"I...I don't understand...!"

His right hand slipped deftly up under her top and cupped her breast. "I was planning on taking you to bed with me and Bryce tonight, you know. I figured that you were finally ready to play with us. Too bad that's not the case."

She gasped as he shoved her against the wall: squirming excitedly when his thumb brushed across her nipple. "Greg, please...!"

"No." Hull withdrew his hand and stepped away as swiftly as he had cornered her. "You blew it, Miss Shelby. I can't trust you to obey me. Believe me; word's going to spread real fast in our community about *that*. Nobody wants a sub who acts out. The Scene is now closed to you permanently."

"But...but I never even got to be part of it...!"

"That's not my problem." He opened the front door and pointed towards the waiting hover car. "Your belongings are already in the trunk. I paid the driver to take you straight back to your parents' house, so either you go now without any fuss, or

David carries you out and puts you in the cab. Goodbye, Miss Shelby."

To judge by her sobbing as she walked away, she'd be back sooner rather than later, but she went nonetheless. Hull smirked as he closed the door. "David, how would you like to have that spoilt little bitch all to yourself for a long weekend sometime?"

"Do you mean fuck her, Sir?"

"Yeah – do you think you'd enjoy that?"

"Well, she's hot, so I guess so. But doesn't she still belong to you, Sir?"

"It's okay, David. You'll be doing it on my behalf, after she realizes that she can't win my approval any other way. I'll even give you a list of things to do to her – just think of it as you test driving a company car."

Noon had just passed when Leister's hover car drew up across the scorched patch of driveway where Moxton's vehicle and the people carrier had stood. Jolley, having come racing out of the house well before the engine switched off, whooped as he gathered Tanya into a bear hug. "Ah, lass, I've been worried sick!"

She giggled and kissed him. "I missed you too, Darren! Space sucks."

Leaving the pair to their reunion, Spence and Leister entered the house. Quincy glided ahead: weaving through the legs of two NIT operatives, before coming front of chassis to nose with Scooter in the front sitting room. <warning – unidentifiedcarnivore>

"Why is there a soaking wet puppy rampaging through my home, old swan?" Spence wrinkled their nose in distaste. "I thought you promised that Mr Dobos would keep it under control!"

"Relax, andro, he's not doing any harm." Dobos whistled to Scooter anyhow. "Come on, pup – back on your lead. Brett, you need to take your dog outside again!"

"Okay, Dad!" Brett jogged off back towards the kitchen with his pet. "Come on, Barnabas; I'll show you how to throw the Frisbee for him!"

"That sounds like epic fun! Bye, Cob, bye, Auntie Val – oh, and welcome home too by the way!"

Spence stared after them for a moment, and then looked at Dobos. "How likely is it that my nephew and niece will now demand to have a pet of their own?"

He shrugged. "Barnabas might, but to be honest Kathryn hasn't shown any interest at all so far. She's not her usual self at the moment. I think you need to sit her down for a chat, andro."

"I'll make it a priority. Where is she?"

Heidi pointed upwards. "She is in her room. Craig tried to persuade her to come downstairs for the breakfast today, but she is insisting not to eat again!"

"That sounds very off indeed, darling." Leister hung up his coat. "Why don't you catch up with Craig, and let me talk to Kathryn?"

Spence nodded. "She likes you best, thanks, old swan. Where is Craig anyhow?"

"He's upstairs with Moxton, settling young Sam and the babies down for their nap." Dobos yawned. "After last night I'm only surprised that the rest of us don't need tucking in along with them!"

The young au pair bounced to her feet. "I will go up and tell him that you are home again, Spence! He has probably been missing you very much for all this week."

The non-gender frowned as Heidi hurried off after Leister. "Is it me, or did she phrase that rather oddly?"

<advisory – paranoiacreepsuponyou>

"That's only if no one's out to get you, Quincy." Dobos sighed. "Look, I don't want to stir any shit here, andro, but we all think there's something off about Craig's version of what happened on Sunday evening."

"You mean with Miller?" Spence followed the red-haired operative into the kitchen. "Yes, Cob told me that someone took a knife to the fellow, and that Craig *insisted* that it was him."

"Yeah, that." He pulled out the biscuit box. "NIT reckons Barnabas was the real killer, fuck knows why. I tried talking to Kathryn about it. If you ask me, she did it and Craig's just trying to shield her from the fallout."

"That shan't be good for her in the long run."

<observation – truthcanheal>

"Good point, Quincy." Spence checked that there was water in the kettle and then flicked it on. "This is just typical of Craig though: he doesn't understand that sometimes it's actually much better to...!"

"Canary, you're home!" Campbell hobbled into the kitchen as swiftly as he could. "I am so, so sorry about the whole damned Irish matter. I promise you

that I'll deal with it."

"Are you on glue?" The non-gender prodded his shoulder sternly. "What – so this and the leg still aren't enough to remind you *why* you're retired from the field now?"

"They threatened our family, Spence. I can't sit idly by and wait for other people to sort this!"

"You mean that you don't *want* to."

He scowled for a moment, and then shook his head. "Let's not argue about it. How was space?"

Dobos cleared his throat. "Come on Quincy; let's go check on the boys and Scooter. Give us a shout once the tea's ready, andro!"

Spence looked directly at Campbell. "So – are you ready to tell me what *really* happened on Sunday, or shall I send for the truth serum and the electrodes?"

The former spy winced. "Any hope that that's a reference to some obscure punk rock group?"

"You know what I mean, Craig. You lied about who killed Miller, didn't you? That's what's been worrying Kathryn: she killed him, not you."

"Oh." He huffed in a deep breath, and released it again slowly before continuing. "Well, yes. That's pretty much it in a nutshell. I'm sorry, Spence. It

seemed like the right thing to do at the time – I mean she's still so young! She shouldn't have it hanging over her for the rest of her life."

Leister padded in then with Kathryn huddling against him. "I take it that you're discussing what we've been discussing, darlings?"

The girl hiccupped miserably. "I'm really sorry, Auntie Val! It was self-defence, honestly it was! I did my best to tidy him away afterwards!"

"I don't doubt that for a second, Kathryn." Spence got up and went back over to the kettle. "Besides, I've read the forensics report. The initial wound was obviously self-inflicted."

Their niece nodded vehemently. "Yes – he lunged at me, but I tripped him up, and then he fell on his knife!"

"And that would have been quite enough; there wasn't any need for you to do any more to finish him off." The thin non-gender finished pouring the water into the mugs. "You ought to have shouted for help immediately – instead you chose to see the matter through, and then to lie about it instead of letting anyone help you. The latter I'll grant you a little leeway over, since Craig enabled it. No television for a week."

"But that's not fair!" Having eaten next to nothing and slept less for the preceding two days, Kathryn was even paler than usual, and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes. "Aunty Val, I *couldn't* just shout for Craig to help me – he was too busy doing bedroom things with John and Phil's mummy behind your back! You know; that stupid flower woman from next door but one on the right!"

"Craig?" Spence turned slowly to stare at Campbell. The guilt-ridden look on his face affirmed the girl's revelation. "Oh, for fuck's sake, you mean she's *right*? You cheated on me with Carol bloody I sell fucking overpriced posies to gullible numpties online Bingham? Of everyone available that you might have gone for, in the entirety of the whole fucking world, you picked *her*?"

"Canary, I can explain, I promise. Just give me a chance...!"

"No chances." Leister moved forwards like an angry tide between them. "Take your son and get out. I'll send all of your things along promptly to wherever it is that you both end up, but right now I don't have time or energy to waste on your excuses and neither does Nightingale."

DANCE TOWARDS THE CLOUD

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.