

Project Nightingale

Codename: Housekeeping

Book One

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Project Nightingale
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PROJECT NIGHTINGALE

It is the late 21st Century. Whilst mega corporations and governments fight a less than discreet war for control of the general population, there are others who operate within the traditional boundaries of Intelligence. Walking in the shadows and trading in secrets, these operatives will do whatever is necessary to complete their missions. In the interest of maintaining public ignorance, someone is needed to clean up in their wake.

Introducing socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence – aka Housekeeping. Assassin, medic, alibi merchant, and therapist to some of the most inventively lethal people in the world...

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Chapter One – No Names, No Details

“He has vital intelligence; you must bring him back alive – is that understood?”

Nightingale Spence yawned and nodded automatically despite there being no way that those at headquarters could see the gesture. “Bring him back alive, got it.”

“He’ll be in Room 406 of the hotel. Don’t get distracted, and don’t let him bleed out.”

“That was implied in the order to bring him back alive. I’ll take him straight to medical.”

There was a slight pause and then a sigh. “He hates medical. You’ll need to patch him up yourself.”

“Should I bring superglue or plasters, ma’am?”

“God alone knows.”

That had been twenty-six minutes earlier. Now Spence was standing in the doorway of Room 406 and attempting not to let the operative in question collapse. "Look, if you fall over now mate, I can't get you back up."

He was smirking despite the pain, or at least attempting to do so. "Scrawny sort of a thing for a field operative, aren't you?"

"Shut up and sit down before you fall down."

"Bossy...how come everyone is so bloody bossy..?"

Spence sighed, kicked the door shut, and managed to drag him to the bed. "Sit!"

It was typical for operatives to be less than obedient, and more so when injured. This fellow was no exception, but nor was he stupid. He sat and did no more than grimace as his impromptu physician set to work. "This was my favourite shirt, you know."

"Mmn-hmm, I count two small calibre rounds to your left bicep and three cracked ribs."

"It was a rough day at the office..!"

"So help me, if you start coughing up blood, I shall be most displeased."

The tone dragged him back enough to refocus

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his wits. "No coughing up blood; got it."

"Good man."

"Are you a doctor then?"

"Not as such, but I can patch this up well enough for you to be fit to travel."

His eyes were blue; there was something both playful and wary to them. A clammy sweat that had grown out of exertion, pain and probably alcohol beaded his pale skin and made the longish black hair appear lank. "Are we taking a trip, not really a doctor?"

"Yes; back to headquarters."

"I got the hard drive. It's in my jacket."

Spence glanced briefly at the jacket that was draped over the coffee table. "Well done."

It was painful how important those two words appeared to be to him. "It's what I do."

"You're beyond drunk."

"I didn't have any morphine."

And of course, that was a perfectly rational explanation. Sometimes Spence felt that they asked too much of them – these wandering creatures of mass destruction and unbridled chaos given human form. *Point them at the enemy, and watch the shenanigans ensue. Just don't ever let*

them drive within the UK. "Morphine is overrated anyhow."

"Oh? Did they make a new...is there a better one now?"

Observing someone in this much pain was less than enjoyable. "They're working on one."

"Can I...can I have some please..?"

"Once we get back to headquarters, yes."

He hissed a little as the bullets were dragged loose, and muttered in something that sounded vaguely chthonic as the wounds were cleaned and dressed. "First class ticket I should hope, not really a doctor?"

"Budget cuts I'm afraid. We're going by car – there's a driver already waiting for us outside."

"I can drive."

"You'll be busy sleeping."

"Not tired – sleep when I'm dead."

"You'll sleep when I tell you to and that's final."

He chuckled at that and made a vague attempt at a salute. "Drill sergeant..!"

Spence dabbed a bit more arnica gel onto the bruising about the operative's ribcage. "Housekeeping, actually – I clean up everyone else's mess."

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“Do you...do you have a mop then? Is it a mop with a gun in it?”

“Sometimes, yes; it depends on the mission. Now – put this on.”

“You brought me a new shirt.”

“I think of everything.” Which was true; the role that Spence performed was reliant in equal parts upon inventiveness and foresight.

It took him four attempts to fasten the buttons properly, and by then Spence had finished clearing up. “Housekeeping – is that what I call you then?”

“It's what everyone calls me.”

“I'm called – “

“No names, no details. Let's go.”

He looked hurt but followed along without protest.

The corridor was empty, as was the lift. There was a single receptionist at the desk in the foyer, but the room had been pre-booked and there was no bill to settle. For once, it seemed that extraction would be simple.

That illusion vanished the moment that they reached the spot where the doorman ought to have been and found a pair of gunmen instead. “Hello there – you two look like the people we're

here to find!" The two enemy operatives moved forwards; their weapons ready. "British Intelligence at its best, yes?"

The receptionist was levelling a gun now too. "That's the operative; this must be his back-up."

Spence sighed. "Why can't we all be reasonable about this?" There were three guns and one injured operative too many to risk this argument. "You want the drive; we want to keep breathing. I'm sure we can work something out."

"Hand over the drive." Gunman number two was less chatty, it seemed.

"You heard him; he wants the hard drive." Spence winked at the now bemused British operative; who was barely upright but still clearly too stubborn to co-operate. "Let him have it!"

It was always incredible to watch when an operative improvised. Although, they wouldn't be able to use this particular hotel again; given that security had been compromised. And the bullet holes in the walls – hoteliers always hated those. Still, it was done. The three dead enemy operatives would be written up as a robbery that had gone badly wrong when the receptionist attempted to play hero.

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Spence had informed headquarters and the technical people were already placing the required details onto the relevant computers. The CCTV footage had been wiped. All that remained was to get home safely. Their driver glanced at them in his rear-view mirror as they fastened their seat belts. "Any change to the route?"

"No thank you." Spence relaxed backwards against the leather headrest. "All's well."

There was a cough from the injured operative. "So, tell me, why no names and no details?"

"It's simpler to remain detached."

"Well, it sounds bloody lonely to me."

"I wade through bodies for a living. I don't have time to learn their names."

"But I'm not dead!"

"No one starts out dead. They all end up there sooner or later."

"My God, that's depressing."

"It's the truth."

The driver had closed the privacy screen. Spence's companion continued his argument. "It's one truth, or one part of a truth! Don't you have friends in the job?"

"Not out here."

"Coping mechanism, eh?"

"I'm simply being practical."

He grunted. "Well, I'm called – "

"Please don't. I really don't need to know."

"Alright, call me – call me Smith! It isn't my name, but it makes talking simpler."

"We don't need to talk. You need to sleep."

Smith's eyelids were already drooping. "Cheers for the help, Housekeeping."

"It's what I do, Mr Smith."

"You do it well."

"So they tell me." Spence thought of another conversation: twenty years ago; a pair of teenagers stuck playing at being socialites and hating every moment. *Where have the years taken that boy to – that lanky youth with so many dreams and so little hesitation?*

The car took a smooth turn to the right then and merged warily into the traffic streaming out of the city. There was a vague threat of snow behind those too still clouds, and the brilliance of the city's lights masked stars which would otherwise have been too clear to be warm. November again, just as then, but Spence was alone tonight and had been so for well beyond a decade. No mobile

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devices then beyond radios – it had been frighteningly simple to lose touch with one another.

And now the risk of reconnection loomed – would he even want to hear word? His life had taken a different path. They were worlds apart surely. Perhaps that was better. There was little hope of merely picking up where they had left off. Too much water and more than too much blood had flowed under that bridge. The boy was a man now; this was not a world for children or for vague dreams.

Beside Spence, Smith was muttering his way through sleep. The operative would be out of commission for a few weeks at least. Hopefully he would make the most of the time, but when did they ever see rest as important? Obsessive devotion to duty was a key feature in this role. It spurred them on past the normal limits of endurance and blurred the pain of the latest bullet into little more than a dull nag at the back of their thoughts.

It was utterly mad and Spence relished every shred of it. Smith did too; he wouldn't be there otherwise. No – he would have been a banker or perhaps a stockbroker. Something clean and well ordered, where he wouldn't end his career

bleeding out alone and unknown in a puddle of his own innards. And that was the most usual sort of an ending for them – that or torture by one of Britain's many enemies. Spence was employed to prevent the latter and clean up the former. A foul but vital occupation within a tangled hush of secrets and deceits echoing back at least as far as the Great War, and almost certainly beyond it.

No – he was not named Smith. That was a cover for a cover for a ghost wrapped up inside a shadow. Spence had managed such important unknowns for the past ten Novembers and a few months prior besides. It was an art, just as much as what they did. Someone had to clean up the bodies; the shell casings and broken windows. All the messy remnants of a job well done and a world saved once again at the eleventh hour.

Secret radios and miniature bombs had remained amidst the rise of increasingly tiny phones. Code breaking had evolved into coding; cypher melting into cyber and somehow back again. Computers were the blood of it nowadays, along with satellite surveillance, facial recognition software, IP tracking, and forensic accounting. Everything had been digitised but the endgame still

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revolved around the operative with the coldest nerve; be that behind a computer screen or a gun.

The world of tomorrow was upon them all. Spence wondered what the boy made of it now that he had grown. He had always had an innate understanding of technology. *Is he out there somewhere behind a terminal, or perhaps underneath a half-completed chassis for some new vehicle? Or has he gotten past his horror of killing and taken to the field himself?*

Spence regretted mocking him now. Mercy was not so pathetic a quality when one knew the cost of it. They had been friends before that awful conversation. Spence knew now as then that they could easily have been much more. Perhaps they ought to have been. Probably that was the truth of it; the reason that any risk of a kind word had seemed too dreadful. Commitment was not either of their strong suits, not really, but the boy was the type that might have attempted to become better at it. Even then Spence had understood that.

What sort of a man did you become? Do you think of that evening in November; the too expensive restaurant with its crisp white tablecloths and velveteen seats? Do you think of that

argument?

It seemed so very small now, looking back - two silly teenagers; both too desperate to grow up to realise the worth of what they could have had together. Spence closed both eyes and imagined what his face would be now. There had always been a catlike mixture of guile and amused disdain in his eyes - blue beneath his black hair; the injured operative whose actual name was not Smith had triggered that memory. But Smith, whoever else he really was, could surely never have been that boy! Life simply didn't play out so very kindly. *Two lost little pieces would surely never find each other like this – would they?*

The operative mumbled and yawned then, and the sound edged Spence into looking at him more closely. It still had to be impossible for this battered operative to be that long lost boy. And yet there were similarities; the turn of the jaw line, the soft throb of his pulse. The scent of him, albeit overlaid now with layers of alcohol, cordite, sweat and the copper scratch of blood.

Christ on a bicycle; what would be the odds?

Chapter Two – Not Enough Gin In The World

Greg Hull had been having trouble sleeping for months now. Almost dying had not agreed with him, and the internal politics at work were not helping. His cardiologist had told him to avoid stress.

All the good diet and exercise in the world won't stop another heart attack if you don't take things a little easier, Mr Hull.

Hull understood that all too well. The first one had been down to stress as well, but it hadn't been as severe as the second. Things had been less complicated then too: it had been far easier to follow the advice of the doctors that time around. Until that mess in Tokyo had happened. That had gotten everyone running in circles, and Hull along with them.

He'd been too busy counting up the fallen to

recognise his own symptoms. Halfway through a mission briefing, he had collapsed. Three days later he woke up in intensive care and damn it but he'd only gone and dropped the ball with Tokyo. His cardiologist had flatly refused to entertain the idea of him returning to work at that point.

Two strikes in a row, Mr Hull; three and you'll be out of the game entirely. We don't want that now, do we?

No; of course they didn't. But you could never really get out of the game, not the game that Hull played anyhow. He'd been a part of it for more than half of his life now, and he was extremely good at what he did. Although his years of experience hadn't been enough to prevent Tokyo...the others were still cleaning up the aftermath even now, almost two years on. Hull had been politely, even kindly reassigned to other duties elsewhere.

Elsewhere equated to anywhere that wasn't staring at the only now levelling out death toll. All of those lives snuffed out as though they had never counted at all. Little wonder that his dreams were so unsettled. Several of those who had been working the initial event had retired since then. Two

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of them turned up dead, the rest just forgot as best they could. Hull was finding it impossible to forget. He had the feeling that turning up dead would be inconsiderate of him, and so he kept on breathing, and nodded and smiled politely as required.

Headquarters was as discreetly busy as ever when they arrived. The driver handed over responsibility to a team of medics and stepped quietly away into the gloom of the underground car park. Spence edged clear of the fuss and slunk upstairs to report back to Pembleton.

As always, the spymistress was brusque. "Tidily done, Housekeeping. Medical are optimistic, and the data is already proving to be invaluable."

"Good to know, ma'am. Will there be anything further?"

"No, not for the moment; you may go."

Spence nodded and went in search of tea. The cafeteria was mostly empty, aside from the bored woman staffing the till and a pair of boffins babbling in some form of higher mathematics in the far corner. One of them waved cheerfully. "Spence – come and sit with us!"

"Mr Whitby; and how are things with your

accursed robot army today?"

"I keep telling you it isn't an army."

"They have enough firepower to take down a small country."

"That doesn't make them an army." Whitby sniffed. "You reek of death and bullets again. What happened?"

"Extraction in Strasbourg and a long drive back. I haven't had the chance to shower yet."

Whitby's fellow technician nodded towards the corridor. "They've installed a new wet room for post operational recoveries."

"And how many cameras are there in the showerheads?"

The two geniuses had the decency to blush before denying any involvement in the ongoing potential case for harassment that made up the internal surveillance of the building. Only the vague growl of the Official Secrets Act kept things from bubbling over into actual legal action.

Whitby was in truth offended by it. "Those devices are utterly outmoded; it's a joke."

"I expect the water pressure isn't up to much either." Spence attempted to swallow the greyish liquid that claimed to be tea. "This is foul."

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"We've started bringing our own from home."
The female technician raised her mug in a mock toast. "Here's to decent beverages!"

"I'd drink to that, but I want to live."

Whitby chuckled. "So, who was it anyhow?"

"Strasbourg? Oh – no one special. Chatty fellow; going by the field name of Smith. He took two to the shoulder, but he'll live."

"Ah, that's good to hear. I know which one you mean. He's not a bad sort; generally brings things back in a useable state. And he doesn't pester us too much."

"It sounds to me as if you boffins favour him."

"Rosa certainly does."

Rosa squeaked and elbowed Whitby for that. "What? He's polite and well...well, he isn't awful to look at either!"

Spence thought of what had been and regretted what had been missed. "I should really crack on. Traffic's a nightmare."

Daniel Moxton had been driving for the agency for three years. Strasbourg to London was one of his favourite routes. The average time required for the journey was eight hours and forty-three minutes.

Moxton made a hobby of improving upon such things, and had managed it in eight hours and seventeen minutes this time. His passengers had not made comment, but one had been unconscious and the other probably ought to have been.

Pembleton had certainly seemed to be impressed; she had even given him a bonus on top of his expected salary. Moxton meant to enjoy himself with the difference. There was an expensive but extremely nice hotel that he knew of, with secure parking for his vehicle. It was also convenient to **unDer**; a nightclub where awkward questions and unwanted advances simply did not occur.

The flat was precisely as it had been when Spence left it last. A pile of clean but un-ironed clothing took up most of the perfectly made-up divan in the bedroom, and the potted plants were desiccated. Although clean, it could not be described as neat, and that was fine. Spence did not mind this type of mess; it was oddly comforting. Curling up on the ageing brown sofa was like drawing an invisible barrier against the world.

There was nothing of interest on the television.

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Spence grumbled about that and flicked idly through the channels in search of a film. A menu from the local Chinese takeaway lay on the coffee table within far too easy reach. There was cheap gin and cheaper baked beans in the kitchen cupboard. It was good to be back. There was nowhere in the wide of the world that could compare to London, and especially not in November. The city and the month were too well matched in temperament - cold and unrelenting; cast out of greyness itself, and full of pigeons.

One of those feathered denizens was perched on the rail of the rusty fire escape. It tilted its head and shifted back just enough to drop its greenish spoor. Somewhere far below, in the alleyway that ought to have been empty by this hour, a man swore. Company had come to call.

Spence sighed and pulled the slim cold of the rifle out from beneath the sofa. "Not enough gin in the world, if you ask me."

But no one ever did ask, and perhaps that was the reason that the sniper had been looking a little more keenly at the glossy photos in magazines showing villas for sale in Tuscany. Retirement seemed warmer by the day; always assuming that

one lived long enough to attempt it. Spence doubted whether Pembleton would approve of making such plans. It wasn't considered appropriate behaviour for people in this profession.

Live fast and hard and always by the edge of your wits. Die as well as you can; just make certain to be discreet when you do.

Eyeing the uninvited guest through the crisscross of the scope, Spence mused as to whether anyone would miss him. Someone had sent him here, of course, but they would be concerned for his failing and nothing else.

Has the fellow a life outside of this? Will there be a family left with a gap this Christmas? Is there a house somewhere with a loyal dog expecting to be fed and walked as normal?

Hopefully arrangements were in place for any dependent factors. One would expect a professional to understand the risks. It wasn't down to Spence to look after orphans belonging to the enemy. That was the thought that made it possible to squeeze the trigger.

I do hope that the dog doesn't starve.

He was below average height and thin; that made cleaning up a good deal simpler. Spence

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dug out the bullet from the crumbling brick where it had settled. Through and through; one shot via the left eye. The still hot lump of misshapen former ammunition joined its casing in Spence's aftercare satchel. The body went into the usual plastic sheet and then into the boot of the failed assassin's own car. It was a short drive to the Thames, followed by a longer drive to headquarters to report the issue.

Craig Campbell blinked as far clear of the better than morphine induced haze as he was able. The yellow glare of the overhead lights hurt his eyes and his throat was scratchy. The medical bay smelt of disinfectant and old pain. He didn't want to be here; he hated this sort of place.

Pembleton knows that by now.

Shuddering fully aware, Campbell was on his feet and halfway dressed by the time that the medical staff arrived to check on him. A stern look was far from being enough to dissuade their attempts at keeping him there. Indeed, the nurses appeared more than prepared to argue the point. They had their orders and those orders were that he was to remain overnight for observation.

Such was their determination that he might have

submitted to being kept in, had they not attempted to forcibly sedate him. In his defence, Campbell's horror of being drugged was no secret: it was clearly noted in his file. The unpleasant situation that had occurred in Malaga was the root of it; his training coupled with a lack of any post traumatic event support had done the rest. Suffice to tell that grappling with Campbell whilst holding a needle was only ever going to have one very unpleasant result.

There had been a small amount of paperwork to be filed. More crucial was the going over of the man's belongings: his clothing, car and personal effects. He had been carrying an assortment of the usual tools of their trade. Whitby found his name and everything else that was available via the Internet within thirty minutes. Rosa frowned at the lack of a body. She always did; the technician was human enough to believe that everyone deserved a grave.

Spence made an effort to ease her conscience. "It was clean; he didn't know a thing."

"It still feels wrong somehow."

"That's why you're in here and I'm not."

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Killers did not belong in this warm, clean burrow. Kellie Rosa and Nathaniel Whitby were part of a different edge to the game. Spence did know their names and would miss them if the worst happened. It was easier to be remote from the field operatives because one had to be. Boffins inspired too much of a connection to enable one to keep a safe distance.

Pembleton would regularly observe that they were simultaneously the heart of the agency and the bullet that could stop it cold. As such, they were dualistically sacrosanct – prized beyond measure and permitted no misdeed. *Traitors have a special place in Hell; traitor boffins even more so.*

Rosa was not a traitor, but she was softer than Whitby, and Spence knew that those in charge kept a closer watch on her because of this. They trusted the woman implicitly. They also understood how readily their enemies would take her to pieces, should she ever be taken alive. It was an unspoken necessity that boffins could not be risked. Death before the risk of breaking; there were procedures in place to ensure this occurred.

Spence watched the technicians pulling information out of the digital ether for a few more

minutes, before turning quietly and heading to medical. It had been a long two decades since their falling out. The operative who went by the field name of Smith wasn't that hope heavy boy anymore, so maybe, just maybe they could finish that conversation on a better note than they had last time around.

The situation within medical bleached any risk of such a peaceful reunion instantly. There were four nurses slumped on the pale green tiles. They wouldn't be getting up again. Behind them, the first bed had been overturned; the monitor smashed and the drip – inventive. Operatives were always inventive. Spence followed the only possible route for Smith to have taken – there had been no sign of him on the way here, so he must have headed down towards the mortuary. There was a fire escape there, as well as a garage exit used by the ambulances and hearses that came and went as required.

Predictably the operative hadn't gotten far before his injuries and the better than morphine that remained in his system had outweighed the adrenaline rush. He lay curled in the first turn of the stairwell and growled when Spence approached

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him. "Let me alone, damn you!"

"I didn't bloody glue you back together in Strasbourg so that you could die here in London, you pillock."

He blinked and finally registered who had found him. "Housekeeping...what, are you here to mop me up?"

"Mop up after you would be more like it. There are four very non-operational nurses back there, Mr Smith."

"I don't like needles."

And that was that; it was all that needed to be said. One did not push an operative on their hard limits and expect to live. Spence texted Pembleton with the shape of the matter and knew that it was already closed. "Incidents like this are behind our medical staff insisting on operating using those blasted shells, you know. Maybe if field operatives could be less violent, then we could have actual human beings treating us again."

"Would that improve their bedside manner?"

"Probably not, I expect."

"Then we'd just have dead people instead of dead shells, wouldn't we, Housekeeping?"

"Yes; that's why our operatives would have to be

less violent, Mr Smith."

He grunted and allowed himself to be examined where he lay. The wound had not reopened at least. "My name isn't Smith."

"I know that, Craig."

"You looked up my file then? I suppose Pembleton sent you to find me once they realised I wasn't in medical."

"You're still capable of drawing logical conclusions from evidence presented to you then. Good; you're probably not suffering from brain damage."

"I thought you said you weren't a doctor."

"Don't purr at me, Campbell; I'll neuter you."

"That's blunt."

"I assure you that it would be keenly sharp."

Campbell chuckled as he regained his feet and followed Spence docilely towards the garage exit.

"Where are we going now? Firing squad at dawn?"

"Pizza and possibly also a kebab at mine – someone has to make sure you don't manage to die from your injuries. It appears that task has fallen to me."

"Does that mean you'll tell me your name, Housekeeping?" There was too little menace for it

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to be anything beyond polite conversation.

"It means that I'm buying you a cheap takeaway and allowing you to have the guest bed temporarily."

"I like anchovies." He almost sounded hopeful now.

"Now I know who buys them."

"Lots of people like anchovies!"

"Most people try them once and regret it deeply."

"You sound like someone I used to know."

"For a spy, you're not very adept at keeping things to yourself, Mr Campbell."

"I trust you."

"Just as well I'm not out to murder you then."

The resultant smirk was worth the inevitable attempt at innuendo. "A man might die in your arms happily enough, Housekeeping."

"He'd be a happy eunuch before he finished breathing."

"You've made that threat already."

"I can't be bothered extrapolating on my put downs until I've eaten something."

"I don't think I'll risk that particular opening."

"No openings for you."

"Oh, you're very good at this!"

"Years of practise."

"Not one of Whitby's killer robots then?"

"If you're hoping that I might be programmed not to murder you, you'll be sadly disappointed."

He was breathing normally again; the tension had left him. A hint of a smile had returned to his eyes. "Stuffed crust sound reasonable to you?"

"Somehow I'm unsurprised that you like that sort of thing."

"Do you mean the cheese or the sausages?"

"You strike me as an all or nothing type of fellow."

"And you strike me as having read around my file."

"It's important to research one's subject fully. Additional reading is to be recommended."

"Mmn-hmm – ask any good teacher, eh?"

"Spoken like an experienced student."

"You really will kill me, Housekeeping."

"Only if you need to be killed, Mr Campbell."

Chapter Three – Too Many To List

Campbell was a difficult guest. He was no less tactile now than he had been when they were teenagers, and this became readily apparent. The operative was incapable of merely conversing: his long fingers were perpetually exploring the surfaces around him. Tapping and gliding over the arm of the sofa to his left; curling into the soft pile of the throw to his right. Spence knew that given even the slightest hint of permission the boundary line between furniture and host would be forgotten.

It was a tempting notion but not a sensible one. Campbell needed boundaries; the chaos that was his reality depended upon those around him keeping it firmly in check. And he was reeling still from the stress of the mission in Strasbourg; coupled with whatever ghosts medical had inadvertently awoken. The boy whom Spence remembered was

buried under a career's worth of trauma and misplaced guilt: accepting the man's advances would be cruel. Spence was many things, but cruel was not one of them, and neither was stupid.

That was why, forty-five minutes into Campbell's stay, his host was already making alternative plans for the weekend. "I'm going out for a bit. You know where all the necessaries are, Mr Campbell. Make yourself at home."

"Don't suppose I could tag along then, Housekeeping?"

"You need rest. Get better and perhaps we'll discuss it."

His smile was less hopeless now. "I may hold you to that."

I may want you to. That was what drove Spence out and along the rain blurred streets to bury any risk of what might have happened under a haze of alcohol and overly loud music. *I may want a lot of things that I can't have.*

Whitby had lost track of time again. He was up to his elbows amidst circuitry when the outer doors to his workshop slid open and Rosa peeked in. "I'm just heading home; thought I'd best check in with

you first."

He grunted and bent closer to the machine that he was repairing. "Trying to make certain that I bother sleeping?"

"I'm happy as long as you pop up for air occasionally." She smiled fondly at him, but only the security cameras observed it. "See you tomorrow, Whitby."

"Bring the coffee." It wasn't the politest of goodbyes. Still his fellow boffin would understand. She was the best in his department; possibly the world. Whitby was glad to have her on the team. *Bloody shame the others don't have her talent, or her enthusiasm. Must call her later and make sure she got home safely.*

Rosa hummed as she walked. The half mile to the tube station made for a healthy way to finish her shift. She much preferred it to the gym. The familiar press of other late commuters cradled her as she boarded the train. There was nowhere left in the carriage to sit, but Rosa mistrusted the cleanliness of the seats anyhow. Even the floor was a little tacky beneath her shoes. *I'm taking a taxi in tomorrow morning.*

Moxton recognised the thin figure perched at the bar as soon as he entered **unDer**. He wasn't especially surprised that this would be their sort of scene. One gained a knack for reading others after a while. The practical black twill trousers and unisex blazer could only hide so much.

"Good evening, Spence."

"Mr Moxton."

"You're troubled."

"And you're observant."

"Who is it that you're trying not to catch?"

"An old flame that never really did light fully; he turned up unexpectedly and made me realise how stupid I used to be."

"Huh."

They paused for a while and ignored the rest of the world. Moxton sipped appreciatively at his scotch, whilst Spence toyed with the tiny paper umbrella in the cocktail that clearly wasn't going to be imbibed. The cocktail was a suspiciously vivid shade of blue; the umbrella pink, with a yellow edge.

The driver set down his glass. "Those things tend to have more effect if you actually drink them."

"That's why I'm not."

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"Hmm-mmn, so you aren't going to fuck him tonight."

"It wouldn't be right."

"And you don't do wrong."

"Do you?"

He met the ice blue gaze readily; his own dark brown eyes mirroring the challenge set to him. "I won't take you apart just so that you can avoid thinking about your problems."

"Then why are we even talking?"

Moxton's broad shoulders rippled beneath the crisp white linen of his shirt as he reached across and cupped Spence by the chin. "What are your limits?"

"I have too many to list."

Moxton exhaled slowly and shifted his hand; gliding down the side of Spence's neck and coming to rest on one narrow shoulder. "It's like that then."

"Yes it is."

He squeezed just hard enough for it to approach discomfort. An involuntary shudder drained a little of the tension from the slight body that was now pressing backward to seek his grip. "You don't get out much."

"I'm a very busy person, Mr Moxton."

"It goes with the job."

"You ought to know; I expect you cover as many miles as I do, if not more."

"I like to travel." He squeezed again and felt Spence melting. "See the world; meet new people, that sort of thing."

"I suppose you're in the perfect job then."

"It's not dissatisfying."

The pizza had been a good choice. His stomach was contented and dragging his thoughts towards an attempt at sleeping. Campbell yawned and ignored it. Instead, he padded to the impressively spacious shower room; shedding his clothing as he went. The water was hot enough to shift the final vestiges of Malaga out of his bones for now at least as the steam embraced his battered form. *Strasbourg was a dream by comparison.*

Who was he staying with anyhow? He still hadn't gleaned that: no name, no clues at all. The flat was bereft of any personal effects. There wasn't even a hint of who his host actually was. No utility bills or letters to be found; no photographs, not even a bloody address book by the telephone. The

bookshelves were too eclectically stocked to be analysed. *Clearly Housekeeping knows the game well.*

Campbell was impressed: most within the agency had at least some tendency to play at normality. Four handguns and sixteen bladed weapons had emerged so far in his methodical search for information. The medicine cabinet proved unhelpful – being too well stocked to belong to any one person. *Something for everyone in here; presumably Housekeeping has plenty of guests. Or else this is a safe house.*

He resorted to examining their clothes. There were dozens of outfits that might have been for anyone at all: nondescript and utterly androgynous, right down to the unisex styled undergarments. The latter were hideously practical, almost sportswear, and nothing at all like the stuff his companions generally favoured.

Perhaps they really are just another bloody machine. It wasn't impossible; Whitby had grumbled often enough of making something to keep an eye on the field operatives. Still, Campbell couldn't shake the notion that there was something familiar about them. It was somehow both

comforting and unsettling. *I like them.* He nodded to himself and smiled again. *I think perhaps they like me too. Either that or Pembleton is afraid to leave me unsupervised in London.*

Realising that he was indeed unsupervised currently, and very much alone, Campbell stopped smiling. He didn't enjoy solitude. The memories were better able to creep up on him, and by this stage he was far outnumbered by them. Alcohol helped to drown out the worst of them, so he gave up on playing detective and opened the gin. With a bit of luck, the television would help too.

It wasn't anything beyond letting go: a sweaty coil of two people desperately in need of winding down. Sex would have removed something far too vital from the equation. Both Moxton and Spence had understood this perfectly even before they began stripping one another. Now, in the afterglow of their grappling match, they simply breathed.

"You should get out more."

"I told you; I'm very busy."

Moxton glared. "Get out more, Spence."

"You're not in charge of me, Mr Moxton. This was just something we both needed; nothing more."

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"It wasn't an order; it was a piece of friendly advice."

"We both know I can't follow it."

"More like you won't."

Spence rolled over and stared up at the canopy of the bed. "You were right: this is a very nice hotel indeed."

"Changing the subject doesn't mean that I'm wrong."

"And being right doesn't mean that you can fix me."

"Maybe I just like being right." The driver sighed and dragged his palms over his face. "Do you want a drink?"

"Gin, please. No ice."

They drank in silence and then took turns to shower and redress. When Moxton emerged from the en-suite, Spence had already gone. *Don't leave it so long next time, Housekeeping.*

Campbell blinked awake as the door opened. "Did you have a nice evening, Housekeeping?"

"Why are you sleeping on the sofa, Mr Campbell?"

"I dozed off watching something – not really sure

what it was about to be honest. Some sort of comedy, I think.”

“I’d send you to bed but it’s almost morning.”

“And I recall you saying that I’m on sick leave or some such nonsense. We could stay in bed all weekend - if we wanted to.”

“You’re not royalty, Mr Campbell. Stop speaking of yourself as though you were.”

He chuckled and stretched out further. “Hospitality clearly isn’t your forte, Housekeeping.”

Spence eyed the empty bottle on the floor and switched off the television. “Put some clothes on, you pillock.”

“I’m not sure where I left them.”

“Trust me; you can’t miss them. There’s a trail of unwashed garments from here to the shower.”

“I wanted to freshen up.”

“Well now you need to sober up.”

“Coffee would help with that.”

“You’re an utterly insufferable bastard.”

“I’m starting to think that you don’t like me.” Campbell exaggerated a pout as he finally went in search of his discarded clothing. “I just can’t think as to why.”

“It’s all the trace materials you’ve been

shedding around my home. I expect I'll need to fumigate once you leave."

"Hadn't taken you to be so very OCD, Housekeeping."

"People aren't OCD; it's something that one has, not that one is."

"Pedant."

"I'll have you know that this pedant has a rifle and permission to use it."

He fastened his belt. "Well, how about if I make us that coffee?"

"Does the coffee involve biscuits?"

A memory from well over twenty years ago stabbed Campbell hard at that phrase. He stared intently at the slight figure perched on the arm of the sofa. "It could do."

"What sort of biscuits?"

"Copious."

The smile was still as enigmatic as he remembered, but possibly twice as dazzling. "Those always were my favourite."

"Dear Jesus, it is you! Spence - where have you been for all these years?" He closed the distance between them in under three paces and reached forwards instinctively.

Spence held him at arms' length. "No hugging, thank you, you know that."

Campbell bent his head and rested his brow against the slightly too closely cropped pale hair. "But I've missed you! And you haven't answered me – where have you been hiding? Why didn't you ever call?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, chiefly because you told me to fuck off and die."

"Oh yes, that. Sorry."

He laughed despite the stupid waste of years, or more probably because of them. "I can't believe I didn't recognise you! Although you do look different now; what possessed you to chop off all your hair?"

Spence shrugged and let go of Campbell's shoulders to stroke his head. "It's practical; less of me to grab hold of in a fight."

"There's little enough of you already, you little canary!"

"Flattery still isn't chief amongst your talents then?"

"Stop sniping at us, Spence. Be nice for once."

"I am being nice, Campbell." The sniper leant

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backwards to evade his nuzzling. "Quit that! Honestly, it's like being friends with a giant cat sometimes."

Ouch. "Friend zoned again then, eh?"

"Always the bridesmaid, darling, and so forth – anyhow, what happened to you making us both coffee and biscuits?"

The operative grumbled but took the hint. "So how long have you been working for the agency?"

"Pembleton recruited me straight out of university, much like you yourself. Of course, I get paid a good deal less. You field operatives are very expensive creatures to maintain."

"You do get what you pay for."

"By that logic, Pembleton ought to have sole possession of the world's most extensive selection of vastly overpriced alcoholic beverages."

"She does; they're safely contained in our assorted livers."

Spence snorted and handed him the milk. "No wonder she keeps muttering about having your guts as garters!"

"I console myself with the fact that recycling a living operative is generally frowned upon."

Chapter Four – Standard Protocol

Whitby frowned. Rosa was late for work. She hadn't answered her phone last night, and there was no sign of activity on any of her social media either. It wasn't like her to drop off the digital map at all, let alone for this amount of time. He dialled her number for the third time that morning and finally heard something other than voicemail. "Hello, Dr Rosa speaking."

Something's not right; Rosa's never so formal. Whitby was already running a trace based on the young woman's locator chip. "Whitby here; just wanted to run those numbers by you again for final analysis."

"Oh yes – the analysis, of course! Thank you so much for reminding me, Jonathan."

Whitby's guts churned as he recognised the

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emergency phrase. *Burn me now; I've been compromised.* "No trouble at all, Dr Rosa. Have you the time now?"

"Actually, it might be best for you to e-mail me."

Taken for unknown purposes; successful extraction unlikely. "Right you are then. I'll see you on Monday morning."

"Thank you again, Dr Whitby. Good bye."

The call disconnected abruptly. Whitby looked hopelessly at the screen in front of him. The locator chip insisted that Rosa was still within London – less than four miles from headquarters. Protocol demanded that he should inform Pembleton and revoke Rosa's clearance. *Burn me now, Whitby. Now before I break.*

The senior technician closed his eyes and pressed the emergency intercom on his desk. The switchboard diverted his call straight to Pembleton. "Dr Whitby, what seems to be the issue?"

"Ma'am, Dr Rosa is being held by unknown persons precisely three point two miles south west of headquarters. She indicates extraction is unlikely to prove viable."

"Then we'd best send Campbell. Make certain he has whatever he needs."

Whitby blinked at the divergence from protocol.
"I'll contact him immediately, ma'am."

GETEC really did need to find a better way to recruit new employees. The current method was far too unreliable; for every potential candidate who successfully transitioned, another three died from the side effects. In Hull's opinion, this was an unacceptable waste of resources, but unfortunately he wasn't in charge of the budget. He nodded to the operatives accompanying him and stepped back from the now barely conscious woman slumped in the corner of the shipping container. "Torch it."

Doubtless there would be someone coming to find Dr Rosa. Hull didn't envy whoever that might be. The young technician's cerebral tissue was dribbling out of her sinuses along with the chemical that had destroyed it. It was one of those sights that you just couldn't hope to forget properly. *Restructuring a person's cognitive responses on a synaptic level simply isn't a practical solution.*

They had been eating breakfast when the call came through from Whitby. He had given

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Campbell a set of coordinates and the terse instruction to extract at all costs. And then the name: Dr Kellie Rosa. The world shrank as Campbell repeated that: everything had become far too personal.

Sixteen minutes later and Spence was scrambling clear of the car in pursuit of the field operative. He had already vanished into the boiling murk of the container. The smell of white-hot metal and petrol smoke had left both of them choking but there wasn't time to pause. If they meant to get to Rosa in time, they would just have to risk it.

It was what they did; especially Campbell. Spence hung back and readied the medical supplies. *They'll both need oxygen; best have the burn kit ready too.*

For a few seconds, it seemed that no one was going to re-emerge from the inferno. Then the broad silhouette of Campbell staggered into view and collapsed just clear of the door. Rosa was cradled against his chest; her face barely visible under a layer of soot. There was blood and other more worrying fluid still dripping from her facial orifices.

Spence prodded Campbell with one foot and

chucked him a handheld oxygen tank. "Self-care, Mr Campbell. I'll see to Rosa. Get Whitby back on the phone and tell him to have medical on standby for our arrival."

"We need better communications." Whitby was pacing the breadth of the corridor outside the ICU. His fingers dragged through his hair as if he thought there might be something of help amidst it. "She's been working on centralising it – communications and such. The idea is to provide satellite uplinks for everyone in the field."

"Do you suppose that's why she was targeted?" Spence looked up from monitoring Campbell's oxygen intake. "Another five minutes to go, Campbell."

The field operative's eyes were squeezed shut behind the mask. He hadn't moved since slumping into the corner between the bench and the vending machines almost an hour before. His left hand was curled around Spence's right forearm. Every few seconds it tightened and loosened reflexively.

Whitby shook his head. "I don't know, Spence. We have no idea who was behind this; there's a

blank half an hour's worth of surveillance footage for half of London."

"They were professionals then. I suppose it narrows the matter somewhat." Spence scratched absently at Campbell's head. "Professionals ought to know better than to try this."

"Clearly someone didn't get that particular memo, Housekeeping." Pembleton joined them then. "What's the prognosis?"

"They don't know yet, ma'am. Aside from the smoke inhalation, there's evidence of some unidentified substance in her blood." Whitby dug in his pocket and proffered a crumpled sheet of paper. "This is a copy of the initial analysis."

Grey eyes that had witnessed the fall of nations scanned the medical report. "Unknown chemical – believed synthetic in origin? Nothing yet on whomever might have developed it?"

"We've alerted all of the usual bodies and they're digging. It's not flagged up with the HPA or the CDC as yet."

"Well, someone must know something; this level of research doesn't happen without resources. It will have been expensive to do. There must be a backer."

Campbell wheezed and opened his eyes. "How do we find them?"

Pembleton was already stalking back towards the lift. "You don't, Mr Campbell. The analytics department will do that."

"Bloody accountants." The field operative was exhausted.

Spence hunkered down and squeezed in next to him. "Let them do their job, Campbell. You can shoot whomever they dig up."

"A bullet would be too kind."

Whitby had already pulled up every inch of available surveillance for the past week regarding the area surrounding the shipyard. His underlings were still trawling through it. "This has to have been planned. We'll identify everyone who's so much as glanced at that facility and go from there."

"Good idea. They may have visited the container previously to prepare it." Spence tried and failed to forget how Rosa had convulsed in the rear of the car as they sped back to headquarters. "Facial recognition might find something of use."

"At least we have a timeframe. Rosa was caught on camera leaving the tube station nearest her home at precisely eleven fifteen on Friday

evening. That's when the cameras all shut down."

"Then she was snatched between eleven fifteen and eleven forty-five. And you traced her locator chip and phone to that container at nine thirty this morning."

"Yes. It's an average journey time of two hours from that station to the shipyard. They won't have risked speeding; too important to avoid being noticed. That means that they can't have reached the container before one fifteen at the earliest."

"Campbell and I will go ask a few awkward questions of the night shift over at the shipyard."

"Be careful out there, Spence."

"I'm always careful, Whitby." Spence forced a smile and dragged Campbell up. "We'll call Mr Moxton in to help. He's perfectly capable if it does come down to there being violence."

Moxton leant against the office wall of the shipyard's administrative building and listened to the elderly supervisor whining about his lack of manpower. The driver was unsympathetic. "My colleagues don't care about that, Mr Harte. They're really very unreasonable people, I'm afraid."

Harte stared past him to where Campbell was

systematically snapping the pencils from the tub on his desk. "I don't get paid enough for this! There aren't any cameras for that part of the yard – the containers there are supposed to be empty."

Campbell shot the filing cabinet. "And the gate?"

"Camera Six!" Harte was by now flat against the farthest wall. "The footage will have been backed up on the hard drive of the main computer – there."

Spence smiled politely and unplugged the machine. "We'll be taking this with us, Mr Harte."

They drove back to headquarters and deposited the computer with Whitby. The senior technician was haggard looking. "Rosa made it through surgery. She's on life support – minimal brain activity. They say the damage will be irreversible."

Campbell sat down on the nearest chair. "So she's a vegetable?"

Whitby nodded. "They're transferring her to our civilian friendly medical branch; the private facility near Battersea. Pembleton has sent word to her family. Her parents are already on their way. It's being written up as a car accident."

Spence tried to bury that mindless, choking

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figure underneath all of their better memories of Rosa. It didn't work; there was too much smoke and blood in there now. Too many dull moaning sounds that had no place emerging from a human being. *Craig had to hold her all the way back. How is he supposed to move past that? How are any of us for that matter?*

Moxton hadn't seen Rosa as she was now; but then he hadn't met her before either. The driver looked around at his colleagues and then back at the computer. There was a team of boffins already hooking it up to a monitor. "I'll get us all some tea."

Hull rested his forehead against the small black tiles of his shower cubicle and savoured the staccato of the just too hot water against his shoulders. *She screamed for longer than the others did. I wonder if that's relevant at all.*

He pushed the young technician from his mind and considered what to have for dinner. There was a prime cut of steak in the refrigerator, and salad. But Hull wanted something else; anything that wasn't readily to hand. This often happened. It was a foible that he wasn't proud of, yet he always indulged it. *Grilled lobster would be nice, and a*

decent bottle of Chardonnay.

There were three decent restaurants that knew better than to give his preferred table to anyone else. He would go to one of those. Perhaps he would make a night of it – pick up one of the countless desperate singletons who thronged the bars and clubs of Boston. A few minutes of polite conversation and the right body language were enough to land that type, and they were rarely connected to the sort of person that could hope to find what had become of them.

The tired figure that went by the moniker of Housekeeping lay fully dressed and overly aware along the warm line of Campbell's back. As usual, the field operative was sleeping in the nude; twitching and muttering his way through the night. It wasn't quite audible; just loud enough to keep his host awake. Which didn't require much to be fair – Spence was inherently twitchy.

Rosa's parents had refused to switch off the machine. They were sitting vigil at their daughter's bedside; praying for a miracle that wasn't going to transpire. The means to reconstruct that level of brain damage didn't exist, but how did you tell

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someone that their only child simply couldn't be saved?

Pembleton had told the medical centre to pursue whatever treatment plan the family requested. Money was no object, apparently. *Another breach of standard protocol – Rosa really was her favourite. But to be fair, she was everyone's favourite. I'll miss her.*

Campbell flinched again; a sudden jolt, followed by a long tremor. He rolled abruptly onto his other side and wrapped his arms around his companion. "Spence – promise me you'd switch it off if that were ever me?"

"I promise."

"Should I?"

"What – switch it off for me?"

His blue eyes seemed as grey as everything else in the dark. "Would you want it kept running?"

"Don't be morbid." Spence burrowed closer and nuzzled his chest. The dense hair that covered it was softer than one might have expected. "And no, I wouldn't. Not if my mind was gone."

"I'll remember that for you."

"Cheers."

Chapter Five – Better Safe Than Dead

“I must warn you both: this procedure is still in the experimental stage. It hasn't been tested on a human before.” Whitby looked from Philippe to Eva Rosa and slowly held out the clipboard. “Kellie was extremely hopeful about its viability, but there are no certainties.”

Mrs Rosa signed and handed the paperwork to her husband. Both looked to have aged ten years over the past month. “We have to try. There's nothing else left.”

Philippe nodded. “Kellie would want this. She left a provision in her – with her solicitors, I mean. Yes; it's the right option. Yes.”

They both kept nodding; seemingly trapped somewhere between frantic denial and dazed acceptance of their daughter's fate. Neither of them was fit to provide consent. Whitby told himself

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that it wouldn't matter in the long term. But he knew, even as the medical team wheeled what remained of Rosa off to surgery, that he didn't believe that. He would never tell anyone of this, regardless of the outcome; and especially not the field operatives. Or Housekeeping for that matter – Spence would have shot him for so much as thinking of proposing this.

Christ, perhaps that would be best.

Campbell straightened up and attempted to wipe off the most of the gore now splattered across his face. "They didn't wish to cooperate, ma'am." He turned wearily and exited the remains of the bunker whilst Pembleton's terse response shrilled undigested through his earpiece.

He hated Borneo. Between the climate and the spiders and the local would-be dictator's militia it was a tedious place indeed to have to visit. The orang-utans were perhaps the only redeeming feature of the place. And he hadn't seen any of those so far at all.

Still, it was preferable to Malaga. That cheered him up sufficiently for him to bother listening to Pembleton as she relayed the next part of the

operation. "Nuclear warheads hidden under the wildlife sanctuary, yes ma'am."

"Be discreet, Mr Campbell; those animals are endangered. The last thing we need is bloody Greenpeace getting involved."

"I'm always discrete, ma'am."

"Housekeeping is en route to your location with transport. Just wait where you are."

The field operative sighed and switched off his comm. *Sometimes I think the off button is the only feature that's worth having on this thing.*

Moxton busied himself with topping up the coolant for his car. Behind him, Spence was still berating Campbell over the unfortunate crater that had been the visitors' centre for the sanctuary. There were around twenty terrified human survivors cowering by the fence, and the resident primates were probably halfway to the far side of this area of rainforest by now.

"What were you thinking?"

"I dealt with the warheads, what more do you want?"

"You blew up a building!"

"In my defence, it was just a pre-fabricated sort

of thing. Not exactly a proper building."

"Get in the damned car, you horror. Mr Moxton, we are leaving right now!"

"Right you are, Housekeeping." The driver closed the bonnet and methodically repacked the boot before climbing back behind the steering wheel. "Fasten your seatbelts please."

They drove away far more sedately than they had arrived. About forty miles later, the local emergency services rattled past them in the opposite direction. Spence elbowed Campbell and pointed after the string of jeeps. "Do you see how much trouble you've caused for those poor environmentalists and their guests?"

"I got a selfie with one of the baby orang-utans and his mum just before everything kicked off." Campbell held up his phone proudly. "Adorable little fellow, isn't he?"

Moxton closed the privacy screen before Spence could reply. *There's living dangerously and then there's that.*

Pembleton had been all but spitting feathers when they arrived back at headquarters. Spence and Moxton were dismissed from the post operation

debriefing only moments in. Campbell was less fortunate, and the orang-utan based selfie did not help matters.

"I think perhaps it's time that you had a break from fieldwork, Mr Campbell. Take a holiday until further notice."

"Where should I go to, ma'am?"

"I don't care; just make certain that it's far away from me."

And so here he was, two days and six cities later: unpacking his suitcases in one of the finest hotels on the planet and wondering what to spend the agency's money on first.

The decision was proving to be rather complicated: Campbell missed London. More precisely, he missed Spence. He had all but moved in with his old friend and had been enjoying the company. Unfortunately, Pembleton had needed Housekeeping's skills elsewhere; on a mission that didn't involve him.

It's as though the agency doesn't like our being friends. Perhaps it didn't – perhaps someone was concerned that one or both of them would be compromised. Campbell smirked at his own reflection in the mirror over the bathroom sink as he

mused about that. *Fair enough on my part but Spence is better than that!*

He pulled a face at himself and decided to dress down tonight. There was a small restaurant by the Port de Beaulieu-Sur-Mer that served decent shrimp and excellent beer. It wasn't at all as high class as might have been expected for this area, and so he could probably find some interesting sorts to get to know. He certainly had the last time that he had visited here. *I wonder whatever became of those alpacas in the end.*

Spence eyed the small robot with something that straddled curiosity and trepidation. There was a small but clearly functional laser turret attached to its chassis.

“Mr Whitby, why have you armed this cleaning robot?”

“Ah, good – you've met him already!”

“Since when do robots have genders?”

Whitby snorted. “Why shouldn't they have them? They're sentient beings after all. This little fellow is named Quincy.”

The little robot emitted a series of shrill beeping noises and trundled forwards. Spence stepped

warily out of its way. "The last time that I agreed to meet one of your projects it tried to kill me."

"Nonsense; that was merely a glitch – I've resolved it. And Quincy operates on a different base code anyhow."

"Hmm-mmn; if you say so, Whitby."

"Don't be so churlish, Spence. Quincy is to be your back up from now on. He's designed to assist with clean up, amongst other things. Think of him as a spotter."

"I don't need a spotter. And he's far too noticeable."

"He's actually very stealthy when necessary. I fitted him with our latest holographic emitter to enable him to blend in. He could very probably get the drop on you."

"You really aren't selling me on this, boffin."

"It hardly matters; Pembleton has already signed off on the matter."

Quincy was circling Spence's ankles in the manner of a cat crossed with a small tank. The beeping had intensified. It wasn't the most auspicious of beginnings, but at least he hadn't actually attempted to kill anyone yet.

"Fine then – I'll take him along with me. Heaven

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help poor Prague if he does malfunction."

"Prague should just be grateful that we aren't sending in Mr Campbell this time."

Spence chose not to think about the details of why the field operative was banned from Prague. *He did get the job done.* "Will Mr Moxton be driving us there?"

"Actually, he'll be piloting you first; you're going by private jet – it's that level of urgent."

"What the devil has our fellow found out there?"

"His last report mentioned a bio-weapon. Now we can't seem to reach him. I expect that you and Quincy will have plenty to investigate." Whitby handed Spence a suitcase. "I've packed all of the usual gear, plus an environmental suit and a re-breather unit for each of you. Be careful, Housekeeping."

"I don't know of any other way to be, boffin."

"What the absolute fuck do you mean we've lost contact with Prague?" Hull was out of patience with those responsible for the genetics branch. "This had better not be a repeat of Tokyo!"

The biochemist on the other end of the video link was visibly unnerved by the comparison. "No Sir – all

reports prior to the communication issue were perfectly standard! In fact the project was showing some positive results."

"So you're issuing a Priority 3 alert over an issue with our e-mail provider?"

"Well, no, of course not. I mean – Sir, I'm only following standard protocol."

He had made her uncomfortable enough. "Fair enough, Dr Jenkins. I'll look into the situation."

"Thank you, Sir."

Jenkins was still a pretty little thing; Hull recalled recruiting her from Harvard four years before. "Perhaps when I get back, you and I can discuss my findings in depth."

The biochemist looked even more uncomfortable. "I – I'll let my assistant know to arrange another video conference, Sir."

"Don't bother, Dr Jenkins; I'll stop by personally." Hull cut the feed and busied himself keying in the required codes to access the records on just what it was that Prague had been developing. *Retro-spatial analytics, DNA sampling, and the hybridisation of linear field diagnostics...how do those things even go together?*

Sometimes he wondered how GETEC was still

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functioning at all, let alone leading the field in research. The multinational powerbase of futurists was in truth a hotbed for egomaniacs and pseudo-anarchists with too much free time and questionable judgement. Mercifully enough of those involved also happened to be stupidly wealthy. With sufficient funding behind him, Greg Hull knew that he could manage virtually any crisis. Outside of the nightmare that had been Tokyo – and even that was fading out of the public eye now.

Hull was proud of his efforts to ensure this. The second anniversary of the event had passed by quietly; with just a few hundred candlelit vigils worldwide and a largely ignored social media campaign. He did a good job of clearing up other peoples' mistakes. It was a lonely career path, with little recognition for those who were good at it. Rumour had it that the British had someone similar to tidy up after their field operatives, but no one was certain if this was true.

The British are too canny.

That had been his late mentor's opinion on the subject. Hull wasn't quite as leery of the fading Empire. *It's just a ragged little backwater nation on*

the edge of what's left of Europe.

Prague was his concern for now. He would take a helicopter directly to the facility. It wouldn't hurt to bring a full strike team along; better safe than dead after all.

Chapter Six – In The Dark

Paul Benedict had been their operative within Prague for three years. His position came with an apartment, and they had driven there after arriving by jet at Václav Havel. Along the way there, Moxton had provided a running commentary on the history of the Tunel Blanka. Having now endured the congestion within it, Spence was less than fond of the underground route. The four flights of stairs to Benedict's floor had provided a welcome stretch of the legs by comparison.

Moxton shuffled edgily and looked down at his gloved hands. "Are these environmental suits really needed, Spence?"

"I honestly don't know yet, Mr Moxton. When an operative goes dark after mentioning a bio-weapon, there's no sense in taking risks."

Quincy beeped and extended something that

looked like a biometric scanner. The little robot was enthusiastic. His hover mode had allowed him to glide ahead of them on the ascent, but the holographic emitters had malfunctioned two flights in. It would be awkward to explain any of this really.

Spence opened the door and permitted Quincy to enter first. "Mr Benedict – it's Housekeeping. Are you home?"

The apartment was dark; the blinds were drawn and none of the lights were on. Moxton had a new appreciation for the night vision feature to their face plates. "I have a feeling that if we weren't hermetically sealed, we'd smell something nasty, Spence."

"I suspect you're right. Quincy, locate Mr Benedict."

The robot trundled off into the gloom, leaving his two companions by the front door to observe things via their HUD. Thirty seconds later, he found Benedict's remains on the living room floor. The operative had died coiled in on himself; his face contorted and his hands clenched. Quincy's scanner detected a curious lack of decay: Benedict seemed to have been preserved at the moment of his demise.

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"It looks as though he suffered some type of a seizure." Spence had edged closer to the body. "Vomit and what looks like blood all over this rug. His pupils are dilated. It may have been poison."

"Murder then, as opposed to something more generally worrying?"

"Possibly; I'll wrap him up for the journey home. You and Quincy check the rest of the apartment. See if you can find his computer, or his phone. It's not on him."

Moxton nodded and closed the door properly behind him. There was no sense in risking undue attention from the late operative's neighbours. He was heavy in death, and stiff. Closer inspection revealed a tiny needle mark behind his left ear. The skin around it had been inflamed; it was still puffy now. *Three days since you last checked in – how soon after that did this happen?* Spence sighed and unrolled the body bag. "Not to worry, Mr Benedict. We'll soon have you home."

Moxton was in the bedroom. "The computer is still running – there's a file open. I think it was his next report. The date is for two days ago."

"He's got a needle mark behind his left ear that suggests someone put him down. It seems odd that

they would go to that effort and leave his computer running."

"Maybe they got him on his way home. He mentions suspecting that someone was following him back from the facility."

Spence frowned. "What facility?"

"I think that was going to be the next part of the sentence. It looks as if he stopped mid report."

Quincy trundled back into view from behind the bed and dangled Benedict's phone in front of Moxton. The driver frowned and examined the device. It was out of battery, and the screen was cracked. Looking more carefully about him, he noticed an empty glass and an overflowing wastepaper bin.

"Spence, be careful. There are a lot of used tissues in here. I think Benedict may have been ill."

"Do you reckon it was flu or something worse?"

"I have no idea. Quincy's bagging everything; I'll pack up this computer."

"No – e-mail Whitby from it. Tell him to access Benedict's files remotely."

"I can't; the wireless isn't working. There's no power. This machine is running off battery only, and it's about to fail."

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Spence sighed. "Fine; pack it up for now. Then let's see if we can determine why this apartment has no electricity when the rest of the building does."

"Maybe a fuse has blown."

"We can but hope that it should be so very simple."

"If it were simple, they wouldn't need us."

"I don't think that I'd object to not being needed for this."

Moxton had returned to the door of the living room. "The fuse boxes for these apartments are usually in the kitchen. I'll take Quincy and go and look for it."

"Alright; we'll be here."

The driver huffed at the poor joke; mortuary humour was to be expected given the situation. "You could tag along with us if you'd prefer?"

Spence was busy swabbing the operative's nostrils. "No, I'd best do this properly." The vials for samples were fiddly little things to manage, especially in the dark. "Light would certainly help with it, mind you."

Unseen by anyone in the darkness, Benedict's hand twitched.

Hull sighed as the helicopter came into view of what had once been the Prague facility. "Take us down outside the perimeter fence. Let's do this by the numbers."

His team knew their job. Within ten minutes the area was fully secured, and a half dozen remotely piloted drones were scouring the wreckage in search of answers. Hull stood quietly next to those controlling the robots and focused his attention on the camera feeds.

The once state of the art building was little more than a burnt-out shell now. Bodies littered the scene – twisted heaps of charred flesh. Most hadn't even reached the main lobby area. The corridors and offices were a crypt. The carnage led back into one of the primary laboratories. It appeared that there had been a quarantine initiated, but that some of the staff had broken protocol. The security team seemed to have attempted to prevent them from leaving; there were bullet holes in most of the walls.

"We haven't been able to access any of the security cameras for the facility, Sir. Someone made an impressive job of isolating the network from our

main server."

"Any thoughts on who that might have been, or how we can access the data?"

"We'd need to go in and retrieve whatever survived the fire manually. The drones don't have the ability to do that. Biometrics isn't showing anything of concern, so if there was a hazard, it isn't airborne."

"That's something at least. Alright people – let's get this done before the locals notice the smoke."

"Not an issue, Sir; we've already fed the authorities a line on it being a controlled demolition. There was a blip with a news crew over by the main gate but Saunders has them under control now."

"Good work. Tell Saunders to wipe the slate clean. We can't risk this getting out."

"Yes Sir."

Campbell had drunk too much good beer last night. He was attempting to remedy this with a hearty breakfast but the hotel insisted on providing him with croissants instead. The field operative was hung over, lonely, and bored enough to risk angering Pembleton. He dialled Spence's number largely on impulse.

"Mr Campbell, this had better be important. I'm in the middle of something."

"I'm being starved to death. France does not provide one with a decent breakfast."

"I thought you were going to Turkey."

"I changed my mind and flew back to Paris instead. I'm regretting it now. How are you?"

"I'm busy."

"Oh? What are you busy with?"

"You're still drunk, aren't you?"

"If I deny it, will you keep talking to me?" Campbell grinned as he pictured the expression that was probably forming on Spence's face. "And no; I'm just hung over from last night. Too much beer, not enough shrimp."

"Where did you find good shellfish in Paris?"

"I'm not in Paris; I'm in Nice. I drove here by rental car. You'd love it – very relaxing sort of place."

"So, you're spending Christmas on the Riviera? Don't obliterate it please, Mr Campbell. I could do with a holiday myself."

"Well, if you're Nice to me, I might take you yachting."

"Pillock."

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Campbell blew an exaggerated kiss towards his phone by way of response. He listened for Spence's inevitable retort, but none came. Frowning, the operative resumed speaking. "Is everything alright?"

There was the unmistakable sound of a shot, and then the call cut off abruptly. The field operative hissed and redialled whilst dragging on his clothes and snatching his handgun from the wall safe of the hotel suite. The call didn't connect at all this time; Spence's phone appeared to be switched off. He would have to go and find out what was happening in person.

Moxton almost tripped over Quincy in their rush to reach the living room. The electricity was still off, so his view was limited to the green and grey of the night vision feed, and Whitby alone knew how Quincy processed his environment. "Spence?"

"Busy!" Housekeeping was grappling with Benedict. That was impossible enough; the fact that the supposedly late field operative was wielding a handgun merely added to the confusion. "He's not dead!"

"Yeah, I can see that!" Moxton lunged forwards

and aimed a solid kick at Benedict's gun hand. There was a satisfying crunch as his foot connected.

The former corpse howled and dropped the weapon. "Get out of my home!"

Spence took the opportunity to press a tazer against the base of the man's spine. "Sleep it off, Mr Benedict. You're not thinking rationally."

They stared down at him. Quincy was beeping anxiously; bemused by the inexplicable movement on the part of the non-functioning organic. Whitby hadn't programmed him to deal with this sort of situation.

Moxton panted. "Any idea what the fuck is going on here, Housekeeping?"

"As best as I can surmise, Mr Benedict wasn't actually dead; it looks as though he were merely comatose. I'd guess some sort of a poison or possibly venom. That mark behind his ear could have come from a scorpion."

Moxton decided to ensure that the operative remained under control and bent to handcuff him. "And he's been lying here unconscious ever since?"

"Apparently so, but it doesn't explain the lack of electricity. Did you locate the fuse box?"

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"Yes – we were just about to open it."

"You'd best be careful. If it was a scorpion, it could be lurking anywhere. I'll keep an eye on Mr Benedict."

"Thanks for that image. What happened to your phone?"

"It took a bullet for me. Which reminds me – may I borrow yours instead? Mr Campbell is probably over-reacting by now."

The driver's name flashed up on the screen as Campbell took the call. "Mr Moxton, have you any inkling as to where Housekeeping is right now?"

"I'm mopping up in Prague. Everything is under control, Mr Campbell. My phone made the ultimate sacrifice for me."

"Oh. That's a relief to hear. I was about to come and rescue you!"

"I don't need rescuing, but thank you for the thought."

He sat down on the bed and dropped his gun beside him. "It's just as well; Pembleton doesn't really like me visiting Prague."

"I've seen the file. And the crater – really, that museum was a very important part of this city, Mr

Campbell."

"Tell that to the terrorists."

"I can't; you killed them."

"So does this mean you'll be joining me after all?"

"What do you mean?"

"Christmas on the French Riviera – I told you that I'd take you out yachting." The silence was probably not quite as long as it felt.

"I'll see you on Christmas Eve."

Campbell smiled as he hung up the phone. He didn't bother wondering how Housekeeping would know exactly where to find him. It was enough to know that it would happen, and that he wouldn't have to eat alone this year.

Chapter Seven – It's Not In My Nature

David Saunders clasped the terrified anchorwoman to his side almost tenderly whilst he put a bullet in the cameraman's left temple. "Prosím, zkuste se uklidnit, slečno."

She didn't calm down at all, which was disappointing, in the security chief's considered opinion. In fact, she struggled even harder – screaming at him as though this were somehow unfair. "Pusť mě, ty zrůda!"

He wasn't a monster, of course; he was simply doing his job. It was always such a shame when folks didn't understand that. Saunders sighed and holstered his gun. It wasn't right to shoot a woman, especially a civilian. But Mr Hull had said to wipe the slate, so he couldn't let her go either. "Opravdu se omlouvám se za ten nepořádek."

Her neck snapped easily and he was confident that she hadn't suffered. Saunders didn't like to hurt civilians. He had a code of conduct that he adhered to rigidly. "Hey, we need some lime over here for the bodies."

Whitby frowned. "And you've resolved the issue with the electricity now, Mr Moxton?"

"Yes; a fuse had blown. We managed to get everything running normally – Spence wants you to access this computer remotely from headquarters and see what's on it."

"I'm already doing so. How is poor Mr Benedict?"

"He's still delirious for the most part. I'm not completely certain whether I believe the scorpion theory though, Whitby."

The senior technician hummed. "Yes, well, not to worry. I expect that medical will determine that either way. How's Quincy doing so far?"

"His holographic emitter is broken. Aside from that, he's beeping consistently. I don't know whether that's a good thing or not."

Whitby sighed. "He's communicating with you using binary."

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"It's noisy. Spence hates it."

Whitby ignored that. "I've found some reference to a facility outside of the city. Benedict was investigating the research that's going on there. It seems that he had concerns. I'll forward the location and any other pertinent details now."

"Do you want us to take a look?"

"Spence certainly ought to; Pembleton will want you to escort Mr Benedict safely home."

"Are you certain that that's wise, Whitby? Look at what happened to him! What if Spence ends up the same way?"

"I rather expect that Housekeeping can manage to fend off any scorpions, Mr Moxton. Quincy will provide back up."

Moxton wasn't as confident. He shook his head as he hung up. "Are you alright about this plan, Spence?"

The thin non-gender nodded. "I work far better on my own. Your concern is appreciated, but you'd really just slow me down."

"Huh. Well, be careful."

"People keep saying that."

"That's because it's a dangerous job."

"It's a dangerous world."

"Campbell will kill us if anything happens to you."

"I knew that there had to be a more selfish motivation behind everyone's increased concern for my safety."

Hull had spent four hours reviewing the salvaged security footage. He was by now even more firmly convinced that scientists were incapable of making rational decisions. "Saunders, there are times when I ask myself just why it is that GETEC doesn't simply keep these people chained permanently to their workstations."

"They certainly don't seem to have adhered to protocol regarding the quarantine here, Sir."

"No indeed. I count two missing personnel: Dr Anya Zarosky and Professor Niall Foncette. Both geneticists, both based in the laboratory where this mess began. Find out why they aren't amongst the body count."

"Yes Sir!"

The security chief was an easy sort to manage: point and click based conditioning at its finest. *No brains dribbling out of his ears, thank you very much. But then, we didn't breed him to think beyond his remit.*

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In truth, GETEC had been extremely selective when designing Saunders and his ilk. They were Superior Combat Operatives – physically faster, stronger and more enduring than normal humans. Their skin and tissue were capable of resisting extremes of climate, and if it wasn't a round from a tank then chances were that it wouldn't bother them. In a rare moment of common sense, the scientists responsible had ensured that all such operatives were also sterile.

After all; we really don't want any of them getting ideas about taking over the planet, now do we?

Hull sincerely doubted that any of the SCOs would ever dream of that possibility. They just weren't ambitious enough. It was as likely as a bunch of laboratory mice staging a coup. In fact, Hull's money would still be on the rodents. But whatever helped those in charge sleep at night.

Spence peered at the remains of the private facility through the comforting distance of the scope. "Quincy, something tells me that this isn't a controlled demolition."

The robot shrilled his opinion. It wasn't especially

complimentary towards organic life in general.

"Be that as it may, we need to investigate further." There was something moving amongst the forestry to the northernmost side of the complex. Spence switched to heat vision and smiled. *Two distinct humanoid forms, moving away from the facility.* "And I think I've found our first in."

Zarosky was still whimpering when Foncette returned to where he had left her. "My arm hurts!"

"I know, but we can't fix it here. Anya, we must get to Prague – there are hospitals there, and better yet police! We must warn people about what happened."

"What use will it be? That man – Paul Benedict; he promised that he would help us and he didn't!"

"I'm sure that he wanted to though, Anya. Perhaps something happened to stop him."

She choked back her tears. "You mean he's dead, don't you, Niall?"

"I don't know. Maybe he is; probably, yes."

"We're going to die too, aren't we? Just like all of the others did!"

"Shush, won't you? GETEC has sent a team to investigate; they're swarming the facility right now.

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If we make too much noise then they'll catch us for sure."

The woman's grey eyes widened fearfully. "Have they realised that we survived yet?"

"They're probably still going through the security footage. There was a news van outside the main gate; it's gone now. I don't want to wonder about what happened, do you?"

"No." Anya shivered. "Fine then: let's make a go of it!"

"That's the spirit!" The older researcher forced a smile and helped her up. "We'll take the back road – we can stay within the tree line to avoid being spotted."

Saunders had found the blind spot in the facility's security coverage: there had been a camera removed from one of the emergency exits on the north side. It had to have been an inside job, and that meant a traitor. Mr Hull wasn't going to be happy about that news. The SCO padded out of the northern exit and looked about to gauge which way the two escapees might have fled. It seemed likely that one or perhaps both was responsible for the missing camera. They had probably sabotaged

the main feed too.

The road was empty; they would have spotted anyone trying to follow it. This left the forestry and whatever mountain trails led out of there. Saunders wasn't certain about the overall layout of this region. He supposed that the scientists might be better informed; they had been stationed here for four years before this event. And GETEC was kind to its employees: they had regular downtime allocated to them. Zarosky and Foncette would also have lived off base. Scientists weren't expected to remain in barracks, even though that probably would have improved discipline.

I'll bet they're headed back to Prague; maybe they have allies there who helped to plan all of this!

So there were two options: scour the forestry in search of his targets or head back to the city itself and find where they were based. Saunders knew that the latter would be more sensible. He could take one of the hover cycles and get there ahead of them, given that they had to be on foot. Even with their head start, they couldn't hope to win that race.

But he didn't want to take the easy option. His keen senses had detected the fear pheromones

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left by the two renegade scientists. The SCO's drive to pursue had been triggered. He wanted the thrill of the pursuit; hot blood melting the snow beneath the trees. The snap and crunch of bones under his booted feet – it was so very tempting.

Mr Hull wouldn't approve of me cutting loose and risking the whole operation. And Saunders wanted to please Mr Hull. He sighed and gestured for the strike team's technician to prep a hover cycle. "I have to go to Prague. There are a couple of scientists heading there who need to be retrieved."

"Hull already sent word back to the main office in Prague. We have people waiting to pick them up – if they get that far." The engineer grinned. "Go have some fun, Saunders."

That was all the permission that the security chief required. He vaulted effortlessly over the perimeter fence and loped off across the road and into the forestry. There was fear in his nostrils and revenge in his gut. *It's time for me to show those traitors just how badly they fucked up.*

Zarosky choked back another squeak of pain as her injured arm bumped against a tree branch.

"Niall, I can't do this! My arm is too painful, and it's so cold – proč to musí být tak velká zima?" She lapsed into her native language.

Foncette was struggling more than he dared to admit. He needed his insulin, but in their desperate attempt to escape, the scientist hadn't thought to stop by his locker. "Anya...you have to try, my dear. Someone needs to tell what happened...what they are doing out here...what GETEC is attempting..!"

"Niall – get up! Don't you leave me now; not on my own!"

He sighed and wished that he could find the strength to open his eyes. The snow was soaking through the stiff white polyester of his lab clothes. "Chère fille, je suis tellement désolé de vous décevoir. Être courageux - être courageux et aller à Prague!"

"My French isn't what it should be, but that sounded like he wanted you to finish something."

"Who are you?" Zarosky whirled to face the newcomer. They were thin, and dressed all in black; between their goggles and their balaclava it was impossible to see much of their face at all. "You sound English – do you work with Paul Benedict?"

"Yes. I'm here to pick up where he left off; he's

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indisposed. Your friend looks very unwell."

"He has diabetes."

"I may have something that will help him then."

The stranger moved to kneel beside Foncette.

"Housekeeping, by the way; and that's Quincy."

"Anya Zarosky and this is Niall Foncette. We worked at that facility down there – there was an experiment and it went wrong. Please; we need to warn people!"

"All in good time, Ms Zarosky."

"It's Dr Zarosky, and Niall is a Professor."

"I'm not here to debrief anyone. My job is to get you out alive." Their rescuer had injected Foncette. Now they were checking his pulse. "Professor Foncette is stabilising, but we must get him to a hospital as soon as possible."

"How can we do that? Do you have a vehicle?"

"Quincy has a hover mode. If I rig up the emergency harness then he can carry Foncette. You and I will have to manage on foot, I'm afraid."

"But they will be looking for us!"

"Who will be looking – do you mean the people who destroyed the facility?"

"No – GETEC. We worked for them; they won't want us to talk about what happened. The

research that we were doing..!" Zarosky stopped mid-sentence and cowered even as Spence registered the interloper.

He was tall and broad, with light brown hair and clear features. His blue eyes were too flat to belong to a sane individual, and he had a semi-automatic rifle aimed at them. "That's enough chatter! Stand up and keep your hands where I can see them."

Spence hoped that headquarters were still observing via Quincy. The man's uniform was indeed that of GETEC; just as the two scientists' were. "And you would be called?"

"Saunders. I guess you're their contact – the one who encouraged them to turn traitor?"

"No; I just met them. I'm a facilitator, that's all. I was told to find out what was happening here."

He couldn't quite place the voice as being either male or female but it was soothing to listen to, and they weren't acting hostile. "Who sent you?"

"I think you understand that I'm not authorised to tell you that, Mr Saunders. It's far above both of our clearance levels."

"Then I guess you'll have to be interrogated by my superiors."

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"It would appear so."

"Well then...it's nice to see that you're prepared to be reasonable about all of this." Saunders was less angry now. It was hard to be angry towards someone who was just doing their job. And the two scientists weren't a threat. Maybe Mr Hull would want to talk to them too. "How do I switch off that robot?"

"Oh – you mean Quincy? He's harmless, I assure you."

"It's procedure; we're supposed to deactivate any robots."

"Alright; you just need to open the little red panel on the top of his chassis. But please don't damage him."

He could probably listen to that voice all day. "I'll be careful..!"

Spence waited for the neurotoxin to finish its work before calmly emptying half a clip into Saunders' unconscious form. The bullets tore through the man's body armour but there was a distinct lack of blood. "Hmm. Quincy, we'd best get our new friends out of here before this fellow wakes up. I'm not certain that I have anything with me that can actually kill him."

Quincy beeped plaintively as Foncette was buckled into place.

"Suffocation might do the job, but if it didn't then I'd be right next to him when he came round from the neurotoxin. And it's not in my nature to take those sorts of chances."

Whitby's voice crackled over the robot's communication channel then. "Housekeeping – get out of there now. He's a Superior Combat Operative."

Spence winced. "Please tell me that you have extraction waiting?"

"Yes. Follow Quincy; I've sent him the coordinates. Moxton is standing by with the jet."

"Let me guess – a reverse HALO from the nearest cliff?"

"You invented it, don't blame me."

Zarosky whimpered. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, the good news is that we now have a vehicle."

Chapter Eight – Your Plans Are Cancelled

“But I’ve already made plans, ma’am!” Campbell deeply regretted having answered his phone. “I had my yacht brought down from Monaco!”

“Your plans are cancelled, Mr Campbell. Effective immediately, you’re back on active duty. Return to headquarters for further instructions.”

“Yes ma’am.”

There was nothing else to be said; one didn’t argue with Pembleton when she used that tone. He would pack his things, arrange to have the *Angry Canary* sent back to her usual berth, and take the first available flight to London.

There goes Christmas. I expect they’ll have called Spence in too, if it’s really so important. At least I’m not to blame for it.

Moxton looked at where Spence was slumped on the bench of the decontamination chamber. "You look shredded."

"I feel worse. I promised Campbell that I'd see him in Nice two days from now. That seems unlikely to occur."

"Chances are that Pembleton will recall him to help."

"You're probably right. Still, it's hardly the sort of Christmas that anyone wants, is it?"

"Do you mean because of the quarantine or the fact that GETEC might be operating outside of acceptable parameters?"

"Let's face facts, the two are intrinsically linked."

"Well at least the dead aren't rising."

"Stop tempting fate, Mr Moxton. God alone knows what they cooked up at that facility. Benedict was more than nervous, and those two scientists were running from something."

"Perhaps they were just afraid of that SCO."

Spence grimaced and sat up. "I'm really not keen on those sorts of people. Humans shouldn't play at being God."

The driver chuckled. "Well, well – so you're a Pro-

Natural then? I wouldn't have expected that."

"We both know what SCOs are capable of."

"Everyone who doesn't live under a rock knows what SCOs are capable of, Spence. It doesn't automatically mean that genetic augmentation is evil."

"Humanity has a long and impeccable history of using science to make things worse."

"Grim."

"Accurate."

He leant forwards; not quite close enough to touch. "I don't know what broke you, but it doesn't have to own you."

"Personal bubble if you don't mind, Mr Moxton."

"As you prefer, Housekeeping."

"He was out cold for two and a half hours; can you believe that? What sort of neurotoxin would do that to an SCO?"

"Well, there are any number of synthetic protein combinations available on today's market that could in theory have a similar effect." Jenkins was careful not to meet Hull's gaze as she replied. "The most likely candidate would be KB-402. But the blood work will tell us for certain, Sir."

"How long will it be until you'll have the results?"

"Another four hours, Sir."

"Very well – forward the results to our production lines. We need to see about removing that weakness from the next batch."

"Yes Sir."

"And then meet me at that little sushi bar we went to last time around. You like the food there."

The biochemist flinched. "Sir – I thought you hated it."

Hull smiled. "I don't go there for the food."

Whitby and Campbell were waiting for them outside of decontamination. Both men were splattered with gore. The technician looked tense, the field operative was almost certainly concussed, and there was an emergency alert sounding in the background.

Spence glared at Campbell. "What did you do?"

He shrugged and offered a rueful half smile. "Well, I'm fairly certain that I just averted the zombie apocalypse. What have you been up to?"

"I am in no mood for your nonsense, Mr Campbell."

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"He isn't joking." Whitby held out a tablet. There was a worryingly graphic looking blur of security footage playing on the screen. "Dr Zarosky's injury was more serious than we had anticipated. She mutated whilst in decontamination and attacked Foncette, who then also mutated. Medical tried to contain the situation but things got out of hand and – and - !"

Moxton caught hold of the younger man before he could collapse and pulled him close. The driver nodded curtly to the others. "I've got this. Do what you do."

They left him there to manage Whitby's aftercare and made their way to Pembleton's office. Spence took hold of Campbell's hand as they walked and slowly counted the digits. "Sorry about assuming you were joking about the zombie apocalypse."

"Sorry for making light about it."

"Any idea how many we lost?"

"I had to put down twelve members of staff. Thankfully no field operatives or it might have proven difficult. Whatever mutated Zarosky was able to affect the shells too. Medical is out of commission again."

"Were you counting the shells in that tally?"

"I'm afraid not. After they mutated, the shells made straight for the control room. Their operators were all in cryospace. None of them were able to rouse in time."

"So the mutated shells attacked their users?"

"Yes. And then they all went looking for more victims. I was on my way to decontamination with Whitby when they jumped us. Thankfully they didn't get any further."

"I expect Pembleton won't be happy about losing medical."

"Indeed; so much for the shells keeping them safe."

Spence squeezed his hand briefly and then released it. "Good work, Mr Campbell. Let's make a pledge not to kill any more medical staff for the foreseeable future though."

"Agreed – well, as long as they're not attempting to chew off our faces."

"That seems perfectly reasonable to me."

"And again, my feelings regarding sedation are well documented."

"Don't push it, Mr Campbell."

"I understand that Paul Benedict is in the ICU?"

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"He was poisoned in Prague; ended up comatose for two days and woke up delirious."

"At least he didn't mutate into a zombie."

"Indeed; he's possibly the only one with any idea of what was going on in that GETEC facility."

Campbell frowned. "I don't understand why it is that we don't simply shut that organisation down once and for all. First that hideous event over in Tokyo and now this – plus of course whatever happened in Prague."

"There was a facility outside the city that Mr Benedict had concerns about. I'd hazard that whatever affected the late Dr Zarosky originated there."

"So does that mean that I'm allowed back in Prague now?"

"No."

"Can I at least investigate GETEC?"

"That's up to Pembleton really. Chances are that they'll wriggle out of this, just like they did with Tokyo."

"I swear to God, Spence; if I ever get my hands on whomever it is that keeps on tidying up GETEC's mess, there'll be Hell to pay!"

"It's probably another bloody committee."

Ashley Jenkins huddled into her seat and watched the city blur past behind the tinted glass of the taxi window. She wasn't certain how far she would get before Hull found her again. He always found her; no matter how careful she tried to be or where she went. This time at least she had a four-hour head start and an actual plan in mind.

The British had already been raising questions about the facility outside Prague, even before the disaster. There had been an operative named Benedict investigating, and an e-mail trail leading from him to someone in London named Whitby. Jenkins hadn't told Hull about that. Her flight had touched down in Gatwick forty minutes earlier and she had abandoned her luggage to make better time.

Now there were six miles left between Jenkins and the building that housed the mysterious Whitby's computer terminal. Hull would kill her once he caught her; that was a certainty. But perhaps she might be able to reach Whitby first, and pass on what she knew about the incident at Prague.

The taxi had stopped at another red light. The London traffic really was awful; Jenkins had

forgotten how very congested her home city usually was. And this time of the year always made things ten times worse. In fact, it would probably be faster for her to walk the rest of the way.

"Driver, here will be fine, thank you." She leaned forwards and paid twice what was on the meter. "Keep the change!"

Hull stepped clear of the cryospace unit and nodded to Saunders. "Keep an eye on Dr Jenkins until I get back. I've left her safely inside the London simulation for now. The programme will record what she does."

"It's an amazing way to interrogate someone, Sir."

"Isn't it just? I suppose that science occasionally gets things right. Although I must admit, it's nowhere near as satisfying as the more traditional methods."

Saunders nodded. "Yes Sir – I've seen you work before."

"Huh. Well, maybe once the machine has finished tempting information out of Dr Jenkins, I'll give you a chance to show me what you've picked up."

"I'd be very pleased to do that, Sir."

Moxton handed Whitby another plastic cup of vending machine issue coffee. It was the technician's third in the past hour. The driver was considering cutting him off after this one; there had to be a limit on how much caffeine someone could safely consume. "Why are you so fixated on those e-mails anyhow?"

Whitby tapped at the screen of his tablet one handed. He was perched cross legged on the end of an empty bed in medical. "It isn't the e-mails – Benedict hadn't actually found anything yet. But I noticed whilst reviewing the contents of his computer that someone else had been observing his communications."

"So, someone was what – hacking his account?"

"I don't know to be honest. It's as though they were keeping tabs on who he was communicating with, rather than what was being said."

"Any idea as to who it was?"

"Yes. I've traced the IP address back to a GETEC employee named Dr Ashley Jenkins. She's an English biochemist; graduated from Harvard University four years ago, and went straight into employment at the Boston facility. And then she just

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dropped off the map – no contact with anyone outside of GETEC whatsoever.”

“That sounds worrying. But why would a biochemist have been snooping around Benedict's contacts?”

“There aren't any reasons that I can think of that don't involve espionage of some degree.”

“I suppose that Pembleton will want Dr Jenkins brought in for questioning then.”

“Indeed, and given that she's still a British citizen, there won't be anything that GETEC can do to refuse that. Ultimately, treason is still bigger than corporate greed.”

Moxton sighed. “Not by much though. I'd best go and prepare the car. And the jet too – you know, I really like having access to a jet.”

“I'll inform Pembleton of my findings.” The technician was a good deal steadier now. Burying himself in his work always settled his nerves. “Hopefully Dr Jenkins will lead us to whomever poisoned Benedict.”

The journey to the facility at Boston had gone by smoothly. There had been a degree of hostility towards the British investigation but, from a legal

perspective, treason was not something that could be brushed aside. All the relevant papers had been filed. Now Moxton was waiting for a representative from GETEC to fetch Dr Jenkins. Apparently, she was under investigation for attempted corporate sabotage.

Moxton suspected that this was nothing much beyond a crude attempt to cover up what had occurred in Prague. *They're throwing her under the bus.* He stepped forwards as Hull returned with the accused. "Dr Ashley Jenkins, I'm here on behalf of my superiors to escort you back to London. You stand accused of treason."

The hope died in Jenkins' pale hazel eyes and she slumped in the grip of the two security personnel who were holding her. "I'm innocent..!"

Moxton remained impassive as they dragged her out of the lobby towards the waiting car. "I'm pleased that this exchange has passed off smoothly, Mr Hull."

The supervisor smiled a little too broadly. "I like to think that we'll have the opportunity to compare notes at a later date. My apologies; I didn't catch your name earlier."

"I didn't give it. Goodbye, Mr Hull."

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Hull stared after the British operative. "Get me everything that exists about that Limey fuck. And tell Saunders to prep a helicopter."

Chapter Nine – Very Slow Boat Indeed

Paul Benedict opened his eyes and attempted to understand how he was in medical when he had passed out in his apartment. “How did I get back here?”

“Housekeeping brought you home thirty-two hours ago.” Whitby was monitoring the operative’s vitals. “I’m afraid we had a crisis whilst you were unconscious and medical is unstaffed.”

Benedict grunted and sat up. “There’s something wrong in Prague; the GETEC facility there is working on a project involving recombinant conditional fields within genetic data.”

“Does that translate loosely into zombies?”

“I suppose that it might do. My sources were concerned that the situation was unsafe.”

“They were right. Do you know what happened to you?”

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"Someone broke into my apartment and knocked me out with a bloody tazer!"

"Ah. That was Housekeeping. Do you remember what had happened before that?"

"I was in the middle of compiling a report on my computer. Something – it was sharp – a stinging feeling near my ear. It's a blur, I'm sorry, Whitby."

"Hmm, never mind; we'll figure it out eventually." The technician tapped a few of the brightly coloured icons on the touch screen of the monitor. "Just try to rest for now. Pembleton has placed you on medical leave."

Rest was the last thing that any operative ever wanted to have inflicted upon them. Benedict was no exception; Whitby could see the tension building. "Alright, boffin; I'll play along – for now, anyhow."

"I doubt that you'll be off duty for too long. But there's no sense rushing the situation. It's Christmas Eve tonight anyhow."

"Season's greetings; good will to all?"

"And peace on Earth, if they know what's good for them."

"We could still make it to Nice in time for

Christmas.”

“Next year perhaps, Mr Campbell; I suspect that we’ll be on babysitting duty for the foreseeable future.”

“Hmm-mmn – what about if we bribed Moxton to fill in?”

“He’s busy enough already.”

Campbell took out his phone and tapped at the screen. *Can you cover for us over this Xmas pls? :) x lol!*

An ocean away, the driver ignored his phone and focused instead upon the pre-flight checks. He had deliberately set Campbell’s number to vibrate rather than sound; the better to avoid disturbance. *It’s probably another bloody orang-utan selfie.*

Dr Jenkins was shifting miserably from foot to foot by the doorway that led to the passenger section. “Where am I going to be held prior to my trial?”

Moxton rose to his feet and guided her back into the passenger section of the aircraft. “My superiors already know that you didn’t commit treason, Dr Jenkins. It was just the easiest way to insist that GETEC hand you over.”

“Wait, so you mean that this is a rescue? I don’t

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understand. How did you know that I was being held against my will?"

He had to admit it: Pembleton was right in her theory. Sometimes it was simpler to let the target ask the questions for you. "That's above my pay grade, Dr Jenkins. Let's get you seated comfortably for the flight home."

The treatments were working. Whitby was both amazed and terrified by that news. He hadn't dared to meet with Pembleton about it yet, and the near disaster surrounding the events of Prague had delayed this further. But the feedback from the hospital remained consistently positive.

Rosa is getting better.

Well, perhaps not precisely better. And nor was she really herself anymore: the treatment had merely grafted on a copy of what had once been her personality. Her brain was gone – sluiced away via tubes and funnels. In its stead was an experimental AI unit. Instead of a cybernetic shell to host a human consciousness, there was a programme hiding in an organic container.

That was the guts of it: they had reversed the theory of cryospace and found a way to cheat

death. Not that everyone would approve of this. The Pro-Natural movement especially came to mind, as did the Faithful. Nothing beyond a pair of boffins playing at being God - this would of course be their view!

Whitby shivered as he re-read the latest report from Rosa's physicians. *And what if we were; if we still are? It worked, damn it!*

But had it really? Or was this merely a refusal to accept that she was indeed gone – could he ever hope to look into the eyes of this creature and see Kellie looking back at him?

Whitby wasn't certain. He closed the report and shut down his computer for another day. It was late, and it was Christmas Eve. The breaking apart of the natural order of the universe could wait. It was enough at present that Rosa's parents had their hope.

Jenkins had never enjoyed air travel and this flight was no different. She had her usual travel sickness; it did not pair well at all with the after effects of induced cryospace. To her relief, Moxton had proven to be sympathetic, and had provided her with numerous plain snacks and bottled water.

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Now he returned from the cockpit. "We're clear of American airspace. The autopilot can manage things from here. Are you feeling any better, Dr Jenkins?"

"Not really; my stomach won't settle and I have the shakes. I suppose it's the adrenaline."

"It's never easy coming down from cryospace. Were you extracted properly?"

"Hull icebirded me."

"That's unsafe. You appear to have grounds for a legitimate grievance against him."

"I'm just glad to finally be free."

"It must have been traumatic. Will you file a complaint?"

"There's no point; GETEC have policies to avoid being held accountable by disgruntled employees."

He could tell that physical contact would be a bad idea, and so he simply softened his gaze. "You have rights, Ashley."

She whimpered and closed her eyes. "Hull will have covered all the bases. Christ only knows what sort of designer drugs that he had planted in my system whilst I was in cryospace! There are track marks all up my left arm."

"I don't believe you're a junky, Ashley."

Jenkins looked at him again, and finally smiled. "He said no one would listen to me if I talked."

"That's because he was afraid of what you'd say."

"But it's still my word against GETEC's – against his too."

The biochemist was terrified of Hull; that much was obvious. Moxton suspected that he could guess why. "When did he collar you, Ashley?"

"He didn't; not officially. I just sort of had to go along with things. We all did – it's how he is."

Her mousy hair looked soft despite all the sweat and salt gel from the electrodes that would have been used to dredge her mind whilst she was in cryospace. Moxton wanted to run his fingers through it; to drag away her fear one touch at a time. He knew how to do just that, but instead he kept talking; because that was fairer. "We'll protect you."

Jenkins sighed and leant a little closer to him. "It's so good to finally be going home."

Moxton murmured something suitably kind and wondered if he should be concerned about the blotchy rash that was beginning to show on her

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face and hands. He glanced at the jet's biometric scanner. Presumably it would alert him if there was anything of note.

Spence was tired of subsisting on out-of-date field rations and whatever dregs remained within the vending machines. It was Christmas Eve for another two hours and if there had been any measure of reason to the world then tomorrow would have involved presents and turkey, and a set of stupidly energy inefficient decorations. Instead, there was merely another form to file and no less than two bored field operatives to manage.

I suppose it's time to dismiss the notion of Campbell taking me yachting on the French Riviera. Perhaps we could go next year.

Next year would never come; at least not the mythical next year that would allow them to have a normal holiday. It wasn't an option for people like them. And until now, that hadn't bothered Spence at all. Somehow things had changed – ever since realising who the field operative was. The ghost of their past was scratching insistently upon the door. *Twenty years apart; perhaps I ought to let it back in again.*

The door to the break room opened. Paul Benedict hobbled in and sank onto the nearest chair. "Whitby claims that I'm healthy enough to be up and about."

"He's not technically that sort of doctor. Still, I'm glad to see that you aren't dead."

"And you're even gladder that I'm not a zombie, yes; I've heard all of the jokes already, Housekeeping. Thanks for not shooting me."

"As I recall, you were the one with the gun."

"My training kicked in automatically."

"So did Mr Moxton's. How is your wrist now?"

"It's still fractured, but the pain relief is helping. The x-rays didn't indicate any need for surgery. So I have this cast for now and then physiotherapy to help with muscular recovery once it's removed."

"Pembleton will have to assign you to a less physical role in the interim."

"Prague was supposed to be a desk job – just look how that worked out."

"We really do need to figure out who poisoned you."

"The blood results were inconclusive; they don't think that it was a naturally occurring toxin."

"That rules out the scorpion theory."

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“Whitby reckons the delivery mechanism was some type of hypodermic needle. It might have been a dart gun.”

“It might have been any number of things.”

“You’re just pissed off that it wasn’t a scorpion, aren’t you?”

Spence sniffed and peeled open a third bar of cheap toffee and cereal coated in even cheaper chocolate flavoured coating. “Perhaps it was an artificially developed scorpion.”

Benedict smiled and handed over a small fold of neon green coloured paper. “Campbell said that I should give you this.”

It was a handwritten note, which meant that Campbell had somehow acquired non-weaponised stationery. *No easy task, in this building.* “His handwriting is dreadful. I can only surmise that this is something to do with orang-utans again.”

“He’s in the canteen waiting for you.”

“I suppose that I’d best go and see what he wants.”

There was another aircraft shadowing them: a squat, heavily armoured helicopter, with dull grey

paint and no identifying markings. Moxton eyed it through the nearest window for a moment before reaching his decision. "Dr Jenkins, I'm going to need you to trust me."

"What's going on?"

"It looks as though someone wants to interfere with our flight plans. We're in for a spot of turbulence."

"Is it GETEC?"

"I can't be certain. Follow me please."

She obeyed; frowning in confusion when he led her to where the car was stored. "Why are we getting into the car? Shouldn't you try to contact someone, or take evasive action?"

He turned to lock eyes with her where she huddled into the front passenger seat. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes..?"

"Then fasten your seatbelt."

Campbell grinned at the slight figure leaning in the doorway. "Happy Christmas, Spence."

The expected correction regarding merriness did not materialise. Spence was too busy staring wide eyed at the artificial winter wonderland which filled

the room. "Craig – how did you get snow?"

He preened a little. "That was managed through the careful application of liquid nitrogen and a couple of enthusiastic young boffins with time on their hands."

"And that choir of elves singing carols?"

"They're all trainee field operatives."

Spence was laughing aloud now. "And - and - those eight – admittedly rather vampiric looking - little Reindeer?"

"Ah, those are alas not Reindeer but Chinese Water Deer. London is overrun with them. I had a little drive around Hyde Park in one of the vans and rounded some up. The flying sleigh is Quincy with some additional panels glued on. Whitby's idea; we couldn't convince the deer to go along with it though."

"This is possibly the maddest, and nicest, Christmas ever."

"I'm glad you like it, Spence. Sorry we couldn't have that little trip to France."

"Campbell, it couldn't have hoped to compare to this."

"Not even with my yacht?"

"Yachts are slow."

"Indeed they are." He held out a packet of turkey and ham sandwiches; acquired during his foray to catch the deer. "Here's to very slow boats, Spence."

"I'll eat to that."

The jet was now a shrapnel cloud; tearing itself to pieces all around them. There were flames licking at the car and the sky had clawed its way into the hangar along with the missiles. Jenkins screamed wordlessly as the vehicle began to plummet.

Moxton finished pressing buttons and braced himself for the slam of the water. "Trust me, Ashley!"

The Atlantic swallowed them, in their sleek metal tomb. The fuel from the jet scabbed into a lid of searing heat across where they had hit water. That would hopefully prevent their pursuers from noticing that the car was now adapting to suit its new environment.

Jenkins stopped panicking as she realised that it wasn't an average car. "Mr Moxton – is this a submersible?"

"Let's just call it a special project of mine."

"How deep can it go?"

"Well, last summer I rigged up some recording

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equipment to the exterior. I managed to get some impressive footage from the area surrounding the Marianas Trench. I don't plan to repeat it though; far too many giant squid."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Only if they manage to open the door."

"You're joking, aren't you?"

The driver grimaced as he thought of the scarring across his left shoulder. "No."

"And that's why the canteen floor is a bit soggy."

Moxton raised his eyebrows. "He *really* wanted to spend Christmas with you, Spence."

"I had noticed that."

"Don't kick him too hard."

"I wasn't planning on kicking him at all."

"Ah – so you're taking my advice then?"

"Let's not run ahead of ourselves, Mr Moxton."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Housekeeping."

Chapter Ten – Poor Fit

Hull was pleased to be home; it had been a difficult Christmas and he intended to relax over the New Year. After all; he had to be careful of his health. With both Jenkins and the mysterious driver now buried at sea, work was no longer his chief priority.

On that note, he picked up the phone and dialled one of his contacts. "It's me. I need new curtains for my home."

"Would Sir prefer to order from the catalogue or to go for something bespoke?"

"I'm prepared to leave that aspect in your capable hands. Your designers know what I like."

His penthouse apartment overlooked the port. One entire wall of the main living area was constructed from glass to make the best of the view and the light. It wasn't regular glazing; it self-

cleaned, and if required it could be polarised to ensure absolute privacy. That was a feature which Hull had yet to employ. He had always been something of an exhibitionist. In this regard, Jenkins had been a poor fit for his needs.

"I'm not happy about this, ma'am."

Pembleton glanced up from the report before her. "It's the only logical solution, Mr Moxton. Until we can bring formal charges against GETEC, you and Dr Jenkins are to remain dead."

"It will impede my career."

"So would a successful assassination." She gestured for him to leave, and he obeyed reflexively: hating that anyone could simply order his life to pause.

Spence met him in the corridor. "I'm only going to add to the bad news, I'm afraid."

"What now? No; let me guess – you and Campbell are on protection detail for me and Dr Jenkins."

"Actually, it will be Mr Campbell and Mr Benedict protecting you both. I'm off to investigate GETEC."

"Don't go alone, Spence. I'm not joking."

"I'll be fine. I'm good at not being noticed; sniper training and all of that. Besides, Quincy will be there and he's rather heavily armed, should the worst happen."

"Watch out for Greg Hull."

"I'm not like Dr Jenkins; I can handle a rogue Dom. But thank you for your concern. To be frank, I'm more worried about that incident in Prague. We still don't know what they lost control of in the facility there."

"Is that what Pembleton wants you to investigate?"

"It was included on the very long list."

"Well, you'd better not end up mutated into a zombie." He eyed the smaller operative as they waited for the lift to arrive. "Promise me that you won't hesitate to contact us if it goes wrong – especially with regards to Hull."

"Why are you so fixated on him? He's nothing remarkable. In fact, his file indicates that he's far from at peak efficiency. There's something wrong with his heart."

Moxton thought about that night in **unDer** and knew that Spence was all too viable a target. "I don't think he's simply a rogue Dom. I'm not certain

what he is, but it bothers me."

"Duly noted; Hull is to be considered as a primary risk."

"I'm partially inclined to suspect that you aren't taking my advice very seriously, Housekeeping."

"And I have the oddest concern that you believe me to be incapable of doing my bloody job without your help."

"I don't want to be the one to have to manage Campbell if we lose you. I'm not even confident that he *could* be managed."

"He's not a monster."

"Dr Jenkins' account suggested that Mr Hull on the other hand, most definitely is. So – be careful."

They entered the lift together and began the descent to the lower levels of the building, and the break room. Spence was smiling slightly; a faint tilt of the lips. "Thanks for caring about my wellbeing, Mr Moxton."

"I'm not alone in that."

The safe house was typical to the agency: tucked safely away in plain sight and leaving no luxury unaccounted for. It was almost as if those involved in its design had attempted to smooth

away the potential emotional distress of future occupants. Apparently being housed like members of very high society was a key part of this strategy.

"Let my grave receive me sated, eh?" Benedict nudged Campbell. "I must say that I've missed this aspect of things; the provision allowed for my job in Prague was very basic."

"Are you positive that you're capable for this, Paul? With your wrist and all, I mean."

"I've done more demanding stuff with worse injuries, and well you know it too, Craig. Do you remember that time in Antigua?"

Campbell groaned. "The cabal of assassins disguised as a nunnery! It's not something that one forgets easily."

"I still don't know how they managed to train the donkey to do all of that. And the microwave transmitters in the rosaries – those were ingenious!"

Moxton led their other companion into the villa. "Have you ever spent time in the Caribbean before, Dr Jenkins?"

"This is my first visit. Are all your agency's bases like this one? It seems a little impractical."

"The field operatives like to be pampered. And appearances can be deceptive. We could hold off

a small army from here if need be.”

“I’m scared that may be necessary once Hull finds out that we aren’t dead.”

There was an unspoken “Sir” lingering after her words, and she kept her gaze low enough to avoid meeting his. It was starting to bother Moxton. “I’m not him you know. And neither of our bodyguards is so inclined: it’s over. You’re safe.”

But being safe wasn’t something that she could cope with yet. The biochemist edged away from him and feigned interest in one of the paintings. “This is an original.”

Benedict had dodged this bullet by volunteering to take first watch. Campbell could tell that Moxton was running out of answers. He put on his most affable smile and moved to stand alongside Jenkins. “Yes, it is. The artist spent many years living on this island. She had some involvement with the agency and when she passed away Pembleton made a point of honouring her memory.”

“Were they close then?”

“Not as such, but Pembleton did her best. Family don’t always see eye to eye whilst all involved are breathing.”

Jenkins realised too late that there were

unspoken ghosts to this place. She blushed. "I'm sorry."

"It's quite alright." It wasn't at all, but that could hardly be regarded as Jenkins' fault. The woman was obviously traumatised. Anyhow, he had promised Spence that he would be nice. "Your suite is on the third floor; second door on the right. The wardrobe is ready for anyone, as are the toiletries. Just let us know if there's anything else that you require."

"Hey there – you must be my new neighbour!"

The younger man turned and offered something between a bemused frown and a tired smile. "What – oh, yes. Sorry; it's been pretty hectic getting moved in. George Welles."

They shook hands. "Greg Hull. It's nice to see that apartment finally occupied."

"Yeah, the realtor mentioned that it had been almost a year since the previous owner emigrated."

Hull blinked. "I'm sorry to break it to you, George but Mr and Mrs Farne didn't emigrate. They died."

"Jesus! How did it happen – were they elderly?"

"No, they were both mid-thirties actually. I expect the realtor was concerned that the truth

might put you off buying the place."

Welles' eyes had widened beneath his slightly too long fringe; the pupils jet against a clear, bright sort of brown. "Please tell me it wasn't something nasty?"

"Oh heck; I really thought everyone must have heard – look, maybe I shouldn't go into the details. The past is the past, after all."

As he had predicted, his new neighbour was by now verging on a panic attack. "I think I'd like to know actually!"

And bang; got you hooked, little fish! "It uh, it was pretty bad – really bad, if I have to tell you the truth." Hull paused and sighed through his teeth. "Murder suicide; he had a breakdown, apparently. The papers were full of it at the time."

"I'm not local; just moved here for work from Canberra."

"Ah, I see. Right then, so I guess you wouldn't have heard."

"Not until now – damn that realtor! I should have known this place was too cheap to be true!"

Hull figured that he had shaken the man up enough for now. "Hey, it's not the end of the world. It was bad, but like I said it's in the past. This is a

really nice building aside from that. You'll be fine, George."

"I guess. It's just I never owned a property before; I was renting my last place. I never figured on buying a murder house."

"To be honest, I'm a little relieved to hear that, George. I mean, I'd be a little uncomfortable living across the hall from a ghoul."

"Ha – no worries there mate; chances are you'll hear me having nightmares at the thought of what went down!"

Not with my soundproofing, George. "I'm really sorry. How about I make it up to you? I have a couple of beers going spare in my refrigerator. You're welcome to stop by for a drink once you've finished unpacking."

Welles brightened. "Cheers, Greg. I'll take you up on that."

Well that was easy. "No problem."

Quincy was being less than fully cooperative with regards to the plan. Spence had begun to feel irked. "For the last time; Hull will be busy entertaining his neighbour for the evening. We know that; anyone with access to the damned building's

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security cameras knows that. You will enter the air conditioning vent via the roof. Then you follow it down to Hull's apartment and plant the bug next to whichever outlet has the best reception, and get out. It's a bloody cakewalk, Quincy!"

The robot beeped again: offering a series of analytical data surmising the potential hazard ratios for all involved.

"Don't worry about Mr Welles."

The beeping increased.

"Sometimes it's necessary to take a calculated risk, Quincy. It's all down to balancing the outcome against the resources needed. The security cameras don't cover the interior of the apartments, and Hull most likely has access to the feed anyhow. It isn't a reliable source of intelligence. We need to plant that bug."

The little robot was at last prepared to comply with the plan. His companion watched him disappear into the gloom of the main duct. It was unnerving to have one's morality queried by a machine. Whitby and his fellow boffins had a lot to answer for.

Chapter Eleven – A Legitimate Hatred

Jenkins was cold or at least there was a corner of her mind that thought so. This was normal post icebirding. Her body was still strung out on the cocktail of cryospacial enablers and synthetic mood inducers that Hull had used. It could be months before they cleared her system. Withdrawal would not be a pleasant experience for anyone involved. That was a part of why she had been brought here too; the villa was set within its own grounds. There was a fifteen-foot-high concrete wall and a pair of securely locked electronic gates to divide it from the rest of the island. Mr Moxton had already clarified that any visits to the beach or to the local resorts would be carefully managed. *I'm as much a prisoner now as I was within GETEC.*

The offer of post doctorate level employment

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within the private sector had seemed too good to be true. Jenkins had believed that it was the chance of a lifetime. In some regards this had been the case, but then there had been everything else. The isolation from her friends and family began the moment that she arrived at the Boston facility. Security had confiscated her belongings – laptop, phone, clothes, even her lucky keychain. Instead of the smart private accommodation that GETEC advertised, there had been an unfurnished holding area filled with other new recruits and a security cuff locked to each inmate's left wrist.

It occurred to her that she had never managed to learn the names of any of the others from that first terrifying ten days. Attempts at verbal communication were stifled instantly; the cuffs programmed to stun on the first instance, and kill on the second. Four recruits were dead before Hull had bothered to stop by and explain that to the remainder. He had made their situation perfectly clear in his address. They were now the property of GETEC. If they did well enough, then one day they might be promoted to being actual paid employees, but there would be an eighteen-month assessment period first. Everything they needed

would be provided, including a uniform, which was of course a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why they were all naked.

They had been too shocked to react. The supervisor left them there to be processed. One by one they had been led out and assessed. The bulky wrist cuffs were replaced by microchips embedded into the napes of their necks. No mention was made of these having a kill setting but who would risk testing that? The survivors accepted their uniforms and tried desperately not to fail their internships. Eighteen months was a life sentence under the right sort of pressure. And Hull was an expert in pressure.

He's going to find me; he always does. The chip tells him exactly where I am.

She ought to have told them about the chip. But what if that was what would trigger the kill function? Jenkins wasn't certain whether she was ready to die. The plane crash had made her want to keep on breathing. The fact that eventually GETEC would realise that her chip was still broadcasting, and not from the bottom of the Atlantic, made her wonder how long she had left.

Unless this is still part of the simulation, of course –

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maybe Hull is still interrogating me. Maybe none of this week has been real at all. Maybe none of the past four years has been real.

The notion wouldn't go away. Shivering with what might or might not have been real cold, Jenkins curled up on the bed in her suite. She was either still trapped or between cages; it hardly mattered. Sooner or later, Hull would appear and this whole nightmare would get even worse.

Welles was a considerate guest; he had brought pizza, and it wasn't that cheap, nasty sort of takeaway crap either. Hull recognised the packaging as being from a local Italian restaurant. "I see you're a man of impeccable taste, George. Come on in and make yourself at home."

"Cheers, Greg." The younger man ambled through to the main living area whilst Hull closed the front door; oblivious to his host reactivating the security system. *To be fair, everyone with sense has one of those nowadays.*

Not that Hull was planning on being fair. His contact's design team had hit a blip with regards to the curtains; it would be another two months before delivery could be arranged. Hull hated to be let

down; especially if it meant that he had to change his plans. *Tonight is not your lucky night, George.*

"I have to say, Greg, this place is uh – actually, I'm not sure what you have going on in here. What is that over there? Is it a home exercise thing?"

"Well, you could call it that. It's a little project of mine."

Welles blinked and peered more closely at the machine. "Wait a minute – are those restraints?"

Hull smiled and waited for the now inevitable series of reactions to occur. *Good old delayed instincts must have kicked in by this point. He'll go through realization, shock, denial, anger, fear – the same way as it always goes.*

His guest spun to face him then; still halfway through opening the pizza carton. A thick haze of steam pillowed towards Hull, bringing with it the smell of pepperoni and – almonds? That didn't seem right...at all...but he couldn't speak; couldn't move a muscle.

"Sorry Mr Hull; you aren't my type."

The little bastard wasn't sorry at all. Hull could tell that. Unfortunately, his face was now pressed against the cold dark marble tile of the floor. And he still couldn't speak.

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"I have this curious dislike of sadistic monsters, you see. One might almost say it was a - what do you call a legitimate hatred? Is there a term for that?"

Hull had no idea what Welles was up to now but it sounded as though he was headed into the office area. It was beginning to look highly unlikely that he was simply an unassuming new neighbour. In fact, this felt like an op being run – here, in his fucking home! *I'm going to have to kill this little shit very slowly.*

"Ah – here we are. Nice machine you have in here, Mr Hull. I like this model; very user-friendly interfacing."

The unmistakable sound of a micro screwdriver as it took his computer apart. The faint clack of the hard drive being removed and then pocketed followed. Then nothing aside from the absence of footsteps as Welles explored the rest of his apartment and broke various irreplaceable things in inventive ways. Hull lay there helpless to intervene. *Motherfucking little piece of fucking shit!*

Silence right next to him: the kind of silence that meant something was about to happen that he wasn't likely to appreciate. The sharp bite of a

hypodermic into his neck heralded an even deeper silence. This one was dark too.

Moxton sponged Jenkins' face with tepid water and added another reason to do extremely unpleasant things to Hull to the existing tally in his head. The biochemist had collapsed during dinner. Six hours later, they were past the initial wave of delirium and into the shakes. Ideally this would be taking place in a medical centre, but GETEC had too many connections to risk that.

Instead, they had carried her to bed and made the room as quiet and dark as possible. Campbell and Benedict then got out of the way: neither field operative had experience in managing withdrawal. Moxton wished that he hadn't. Unfortunately Jenkins wasn't the first witness to be cocktailed or icebarded, and she wouldn't be the last either. It was a horribly popular method of avoiding testimonies.

It was worrying to realise that GETEC were employing the same methods as organised criminals. Mega corporations were as much an influence on the general population as legitimate governments. He couldn't actually think of any

current politicians that would risk trying this though; the backlash from the public would be too risky. It saddened him that this was possibly the only thing that stopped some of them. *Maybe the 22nd Century will see humanity finally move away from this sort of barbarity.*

Jenkins was convulsing again. The driver checked her vitals and eyed the clock. He would have to give her another dose soon. At least it was a gel rather than an injection. That made administering it simpler; painless. He could only hope that the side effects of the treatment wouldn't prove overly detrimental in the long term.

Whitby had claimed that this drug was in the top percentile with regards to safety. Moxton knew enough to understand that this didn't translate as it being completely safe. But there wasn't another option; Jenkins needed chemical support if she was to have any chance of surviving.

She screamed in her sleep and he knew that the field agents would both be flinching. His own responses were buried a little deeper. It didn't make the sound easy to bear. The only positive was that she wasn't aware of what was happening. Which didn't actually help – he'd been cocktailed a few

times. Chances were that the biochemist was trapped in a horror show right now.

He wondered how Spence's investigation was going. Logically there was no one better to send, but still – that night in **unDer** had shown the risk. Housekeeping wasn't impervious. *Watch your back, Spence.*

Hull blinked and tried to be somewhere that wasn't under the stark white glare of the overhead lights. The sickly odour of disinfectant clogged his nostrils and the beep of the monitor hammered his ears. He was in a medical centre; a GETEC facility in south Boston. They had explained that to him the last time that he had woken up.

You're a lucky man, Mr Hull. Another half an hour and that coma would have been permanent.

Amazingly the British investigation into Dr Jenkins had saved his life. The operative involved had apparently been observing him and had arrived in time to provide emergency treatment. Welles – or whoever that crazy bastard really was – had already gotten away; taking the hard drive with him. How he'd gotten past the alarm system was anyone's guess. There was an inexplicable gap in

the building's security footage.

A slight figure had appeared on the edge of his peripheral view. They were dressed in a dark twill suit and had pale hair peeking out from beneath the edges of their knitted hat. "Good afternoon, Mr Hull. I don't expect that you remember me, but I'm the person who saved your life."

He did his best to focus. "I'm sorry; I don't remember anything past inviting my new neighbour round for a drink."

"That's understandable. The doctors say that you may have permanent memory loss."

"They didn't tell me your name earlier."

"You weren't conscious long enough. I just thought that I'd visit and see how you were doing."

What is it with these British agents refusing to tell me who they are?

"I hope you aren't too annoyed at our investigating you. After Dr Jenkins' unfortunate demise, there weren't many options left. My superiors are deeply concerned about her activities. We lost – well, never mind that."

Hull offered a faint attempt at a conciliatory smile. "It's fine, really. I was pretty concerned by the news myself. Dr Jenkins just didn't strike me as being

capable of treason."

"Was there anyone else that might have had access to her computer? Or perhaps who might have had an undue influence on her behaviour?"

"Are you trying to clear her name?"

"I'm not really sure what I'm trying to do by this point." The British operative sighed. "I shouldn't be pestering you with this. Get well soon, Mr Hull."

He stared at the door as it slid closed behind his visitor. Suddenly his unpleasant run in with George Welles seemed less unfortunate. Maybe the British weren't entirely without merit. That little twill wrapped operative had a nice pair of legs underneath them. *None too pushy either; seemed tractable. I like tractable.*

As though summoned by the mere thought of obedience, Saunders entered the room and saluted. "Good to see you awake, Sir. I'm afraid there's still nothing on Welles, but we won't stop until we find him."

Hull didn't have enough energy to appreciate the SCO's boundless enthusiasm right now. But it wouldn't do to upset him. "I have another job for you, Saunders. See what you can find out about the British operative who found me. I like their style –

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maybe GETEC could make use of them."

"You want me to bring them in, Sir?"

"No; just gather whatever facts are available for now. This isn't a rush job. In fact, I'm pretty sure that slow and steady is what will work best of all."

Chapter Twelve – Mouse In The Wall

Spence was seriously considering joining Campbell and the others in the Caribbean. The contents of Hull's apartment had triggered several memories that were far better off buried. The look at the back of his eyes had done the rest. Moxton had been right to be concerned. This wasn't safe at all. *Hull's far beyond a rogue Dom. Perhaps it would have been wisest to let Mr Welles' poison finish him off entirely.*

But that wasn't practical. Pembleton wanted him investigated, along with the rest of GETEC. Death would have to be patient for a while longer. It was time to dredge up all of the skeletons and let them sing.

Campbell closed his ears to the screaming coming from Jenkins' suite and made another pot

of coffee that no one would have time to drink. The ritual of changing out the filter and adding fresh water was soothing. It reminded him of lazy Saturday mornings and pale hair; the scent of the coffee splicing with that of the wisteria outside the balcony. The field operative missed those innocent years. Whenever the world pushed too hard at him that was where his mind retreated to. He was safe there, and possibly had even been loved. The intervening decades had sealed away any risk of renewing their situation but still; it had occurred. No one could change that fact, regardless of how deep their respective covers ran nowadays.

Pembleton might be inclined to try though. She really didn't approve of fraternising. Campbell didn't care about her opinion but he feared how she might act. It was important that they remained discrete; professional. Rocking the boat would see them both drowning alone; their careers over and neither one of them capable of living normally. Or could they? Would they be able to adjust to not being a part of this life? Other people did so – operatives retired or were invalidated out frequently enough. Admittedly they generally weren't field operatives: those usually just died in action. But that

didn't make it impossible to do. Even if it were, both he and Spence were experts in the impossible. Who knew; perhaps they could manage.

If there was any hope of their building a future together then presumably the best place to begin was now. He sat down at the overly impressive dining table and imagined the two of them living normally together. What exactly counted as normal anyhow – owning a home, joint savings accounts? Presumably a car or three, and his yacht of course – which reminded him, he really had to take Spence to the Riviera someday.

We could go there for Valentines' Day. This mess with GETEC should be sorted by then. Campbell was tired of putting both their lives on hold for the good of the job. They'd already missed out on over twenty years. He was afraid of the next decade following suit.

Quincy booted up slowly following his recharge cycle. His sensors took in the soft lighting of the hotel suite and fed back the details of his surroundings. Images and sounds were translated into code. The hum of the ventilation system was all but masked by the thrum of the shower. Sunlight dappled the soft

folds of the bed. A half empty bottle of still mineral water lay where it had been dropped. In brief, the suite was less tidy than it had been the previous night.

It was precisely three point nine minutes before the little robot understood that Spence was not there. This fact was not logical: the shower was active, which usually indicated an organic presence. He attempted to rationalise the absence by further analysing his environment. The mirrored doors of the wardrobes were cracked along three of the six panels. The desk had been overturned. A smear of blood began at one point two metres from the floor on the wall next to the door of the ensuite.

The bloodstain travelled at an angle of thirty-eight degrees down and towards the right, and was still only partially dried. His sensors confirmed that it belonged to Spence, as did the unused tazer and the remains of the mobile phone. Evidently his human colleague had engaged in a violent combat, and had been injured. Statistically, this considerably reduced the likelihood of their having left by themselves. That conclusion was enough to warrant an emergency signal to Dr Whitby.

"I told you to hold back and observe, Saunders."

"Sorry, Mr Hull; I figured this was the best way to handle the situation."

"If you'd done as you were told, there wouldn't have been a situation in the first place!" Hull motioned for the SCO to leave the cell and returned his full attention to the scarcely conscious British operative. They had no ID on them. Saunders had brought them in still dressed for bed; having stupidly tried to sneak into their hotel room in the middle of the night. For some unfathomable reason, the SCO hadn't bothered to gather up anything else. He'd said something about a booby-trapped robot as an excuse.

Hull opened the emergency medical kit and began to clean away the blood. "This is a nasty head wound. Let's get it cleaned up for you."

His patient was unresponsive. Between the massive head trauma and the hefty dose of synthetic morphine, that was normal. It made keeping them alive simpler anyhow. He wasn't quite up to wrestling with anyone just yet; even if they were so slightly built. Saunders had claimed that they possessed a nasty kick. There was a purple

bruise of the side of his face that supported this.

The supervisor finished cleaning the injury and applied a thin layer of regenerative salve to the area. "This is one of GETEC's latest developments. I suppose it's a bit fancier than what you British are used to."

"G...way..!"

Hull blinked. "You're awake – that's good. You aren't making any sense verbally yet, but it's early still. Give yourself time; you've been hurt."

"You...you can't..!" The operative was certainly stubborn. The pale blue eyes were still unfocused; by any rights they shouldn't be capable of more than whimpering. "Can't keep me here..!"

"Hey; it's fine. You're safe here." He prepared another hypodermic. "This will help you to feel better."

"No..!"

He had to pin them down as he administered the drug. There was more strength than he had guessed in the thin form. "Relax. It's just something to take the pain away."

"Get off me!"

Hull stepped back from the bunk and studied the faint red mark that their teeth had left on his

wrist. "I know that was just the concussion – because you and I are going to be good friends. And friends don't bite one another, do they?"

"Fuck...you..!"

"All in good time; let's get you better again first. You British operatives certainly like your secrets. I wonder what your name is. Or do you just have a number?"

"None of your business..!"

He figured that now was as good a time as any to start applying some pressure. "Is that how Pembleton does things – numbers instead of names?"

The operative turned their face away from him. "This is false imprisonment, Mr Hull."

"So, you know my name, but I don't get to know yours, huh? Now that hardly seems fair."

"There's a mouse in the wall."

"What?" He moved closer again; crouching to make out what they were saying. "Is that a code?"

"It's playing the world's tiniest violin."

"I see. You're trying to make me angry at you. Now why would you want to do that?"

"Just shoot me now; I'm never going to talk."

"There are plenty of ways for me to change your

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mind about that. Some of them aren't even considered to be illegal."

"As I said – this is false imprisonment. That's very illegal."

"Only if I get caught doing it. You know, I've never met a socially non-gendered person before. It's fascinating. Are you completely physically neutral too?"

"If you look it's a breach of seventeen international laws and fifty-two assorted provisions."

"I'm not going to look. You're just going to tell me."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because otherwise I'm going to leave the room and turn off that security feed whilst Saunders and his squad check the finer details for me."

"You're a nasty bastard, Mr Hull."

"Yes I am. Now – start talking."

"I should have left you to die."

He felt a small degree of guilt over that. "Okay. I guess I do owe you a small amount of leeway. I tell you what – you get some rest, and we'll take this matter up again once that injury has finished mending. No more questions until then."

"What about Saunders?"

“As I said, you're getting a free pass for now. I'll have the medical staff keep an eye on you. Please – don't do anything stupid. I'd really hate to have to go back on my word.”

Chapter Thirteen – Always In The Loop

Rosa had regained consciousness for seventeen minutes. It was progress, but it also meant that Whitby would have to inform Pembleton of the experiment. Whitby was engrossed in the latest report from the medical team when the computer relayed Quincy's emergency signal. He frowned as he brought up the robot's live feed, then pressed the usual button and waited for Pembleton to answer.

"Ma'am, Housekeeping is missing; it looks serious."

"How serious, Mr Whitby?"

"Quincy is still streaming me the data – the hotel room is a mess. There's blood on the wall that reads as belonging to Housekeeping, and further trace which matches the genetic profile of the GETEC SCO known as David Saunders."

"Inform GETEC that they have three minutes to return our operative intact."

"What should I do when they deny culpability?"

"You're to do nothing at all, Mr Whitby. That's what the field operatives are for." Pembleton cut the call short and nodded to her assistant. "Get Welles on the secure link immediately."

"Yes ma'am."

Hull leant back in his chair and wondered how to proceed with his interrogation of the British operative. He knew that they were the one investigating whatever Jenkins had been up to, and that they had found him after Welles left him to die. But they hadn't yet been identified.

How exactly did they manage to waltz in and out of this building without giving their name? In what reality is that considered to be acceptable security?

His office phone rang. "Priority One call from London – a Dr Nathaniel Whitby demanding the return of someone named Spence. Apparently, they're the British operative assigned to the Jenkins situation, Sir."

"Patch him through to my office, Mellor."

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“Yes, Sir; I’m patching him through now.”

“This is Supervisor Greg Hull speaking. Dr Whitby, I believe there’s been some misunderstanding.”

“I’m merely passing on the message, Mr Hull. You have three minutes to return our operative intact.”

“And we’ll be happy to comply with that request, but it’s going to take more than three minutes to arrange things.”

That seemed to have thrown Whitby off his game. “I see – I mean – yes. Yes of course you’ll comply. And where is our operative now?”

“They’re in the ICU at our Boston medical facility. I’m afraid they’ve suffered a serious head injury. The doctors aren’t fully confident about their recovery as yet.”

“We know that they were forcibly taken from their hotel room and that one of your SCOs was involved – specifically one Security Chief David Saunders.”

Hull weighed his options even as he began his reply. “I’m looking into that personally, Dr Whitby. Rest assured that it’s being taken extremely seriously.”

“What did he do to Spence?”

“I don’t have that information to hand at

present. I'll do my best to have it all on file by the time your recovery team gets here. When should we expect them?"

"The last time that we sent a recovery team to your facility, both they and the prisoner that they were escorting ended up dead."

"Oh yes – that accident over the Atlantic. That was a real shame. Have the dive teams found the wreckage yet?"

"That's not relevant to this conversation, Mr Hull."

"I just wanted to ensure that there was nothing else that GETEC could help with in that regard. So – who exactly will your agency be sending to collect Spence?"

"I'll have to get back to you." Whitby was definitely flustered. "Just give me time to consult with the department involved."

"There's no hurry, Dr Whitby. I'll let our medical team know that you're aware of Spence's situation."

"Thank you, Supervisor Hull."

The call ended, and Hull grinned to himself. "Clear my diary for today, Mellor. And re-direct all my calls to my cell."

"Yes, Sir."

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The supervisor hummed quietly as he made his way to the elevator. Dr Whitby was going to be busy persuading his superiors not to level Boston by the sounds of things. Either Britain would play nice, or else they'd give GETEC legitimate cause for retaliation. This would mean a chance to finally try out those new weapons that the R&D section had been touting. Neither of these scenarios left Hull to blame, and he'd even gotten that technician to thank him. *It's the little things that make this job fun.*

Moxton joined the other two men for breakfast. "Dr Jenkins is asleep. It looks as though she's finally past the worst stage of it."

"Whitby sent me a message via the technical branch secure channel; Pembleton sent a specialist in to assist Spence. Someone called Welles." Benedict was having some difficulty managing his boiled egg one handed. "I think I should have gone for something simpler to eat."

Campbell frowned. "Why does Spence need assistance and why wasn't I sent?"

"Because you're supposed to be protecting Dr Jenkins." The driver poured Benedict a bowl of muesli. "I've heard of Welles. He's competent, if a

little overly inventive."

Benedict prodded his cereal miserably. "This looks awful. Anyhow, Whitby said not to worry. It's all in hand."

"I'm going to text Spence."

"We're supposed to be off the grid, Campbell. Seriously, is there nothing else for breakfast?"

The other field operative was busy typing. Moxton took pity on Benedict. "I could make you scrambled eggs instead?"

"Thank you. Will your patient be joining us?"

"She's improving, but I think it'll be a while until she's up and about again. I'll take her up a tray later."

"I can't get through." There was a worrying edge to Campbell's voice. "Spence's phone is never off. I think I'll call headquarters and ask what's happened."

"Pembleton won't like you breaching protocol."

"That's far from mattering to me right now, Paul."

Benedict handed over his own phone. "Here – Whitby's secure channel was the last incoming message."

"Cheers." Campbell wandered off to ask questions that could end his career.

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Moxton shook his head. "We really shouldn't enable him."

"You try saying no to that face when it has someone to worry about and access to a loaded gun."

"Housekeeping would say no to him."

"I'm not quite as brave as Housekeeping. Anyway, Whitby probably wants him to dig; why else would he have let it slip?"

"Do you suppose that Pembleton is in the loop?"

"She's always in the loop. Rumour has it that she was the one who invented circles."

"It appears that the head trauma was more severe than we originally anticipated, Sir. The monitors indicate that death occurred midway between your last visit and this morning. We'll know more after the autopsy."

"The British won't be happy about this. Better wrap things up before they send anyone to collect the body. Tell the medical examiner to get a move on."

"Yes Sir."

Hull watched as the corpse was wheeled out. He was disappointed to lose the opportunity of

interrogating Spence further. *Maybe I'll stop by and observe the autopsy.*

His cell phone buzzed then. It was Whitby again. "Supervisor Hull, I've been instructed to inform you that one of our field operatives is en route to collect Spence."

"I'm afraid I have bad news, Dr Whitby. Spence is dead; most likely due to the head trauma. Our medical examiner is about to begin the autopsy."

"What? Oh dear God – no; no autopsy! For Christ's sake, don't let them do that: Campbell will go utterly berserk!"

"Did you say Campbell?"

"Yes; he's on his way to Boston now."

Hull had seen footage of that particular field operative in action. He would be invaluable to their SCO development unit. To this end, GETEC had invested half a million dollars into covertly observing him over the past four years. And now Pembleton was all but handing him over on a plate!

He returned his full attention to the call. "I've cancelled the autopsy, Dr Whitby. We'll make sure to have the deceased ready for transport. And again, you have my sincerest condolences."

"I'm sure that you realise my superiors want the

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SCO responsible turned over immediately."

"Of course; I'll get right on that. I assume Mr Campbell will take custody of him along with the body?"

"Yes. It would be best to have them both on ice for the journey. Can you arrange that too?"

"All he'll need to do is sign the release form."

"I'll let him know immediately."

Quincy had at last succeeded in deactivating the shower and was patiently waiting for the field operative that Whitby had assured him was coming. Vocal analysis had indicated that his creator was experiencing an extreme emotional state, but not what that emotional state was.

Perhaps it was the condition termed "surprise" at the revelation that Mr Welles was in fact working under Pembleton's direct command. The door to the hotel room opened then, and the organic in question entered. "Hey there, Quin-Bot!"

<query-incorrectidentification>

"It's a nickname. You know; Quin-Bot, aka Quincy?"

<advisory-incorrectidentification>

"What happened to the shower?" Welles was

staring at the blackened crater in the en-suite area.

"Aw, did you shoot it, Quin-Bot?"

<warning-incorrectidentification>

"Whoa – put the lasers away, Quincy! I'm on your side, remember?" The operative backed up until he was flat against the far wall of the hotel room. "What's gotten into your circuitry?"

<identificationaccepted>

"I'll assume that nicknames are a no go area with you."

<query-dualidentification>

"You don't know what a nickname is?"

<awaitinginput>

Welles sighed. "It's just an extra name that you give someone. It's supposed to be fun."

<query-fun>

"This is going to be a really long trip, isn't it?"

<advisory-missiondurationundetermined>

Chapter Fourteen – Jolt As Required

Hull smiled and held out his hand towards the British field operative as he entered the lobby. “Mr Campbell – we’ve been expecting you. I’m Supervisor Hull.”

Campbell felt that he already knew enough about Hull not to risk engaging in standard pleasantries. Instead, he punched the GETEC handler in the throat and stepped over him as he collapsed.

Behind Hull, the security team appeared close to fleeing. All but one of them backed away from Campbell's empty smile. The last stood her ground and readied her stun baton. “Stand down!”

He glared at her. “Where is Spence?”

“This is a GETEC facility; you’ve assaulted a member of our personnel without provocation –

stand down or we'll put you down!"

A dry chuckle escaped him at the insanity of the situation. "I don't think that you'd want to see me when I've been provoked, my dear."

Her lanyard identified her as Susan Kennedy, and he wondered if she were fully aware of what she was facing. She certainly wasn't afraid, although the same couldn't be said for the rest of her squad. They edged further towards the far side of the room as Kennedy squared up to Campbell. "I'm not your God damned dear, and this is your final warning – stand down!"

Another day, another overly zealous minion; Campbell was sick of killing them. Someone else would take their place anyhow. He sighed and ducked his head in acknowledgement. "You'll have to excuse my impatience. My best friend is dead because of one of your SCOs. I'm here to collect the pair of them."

Hull was coughing and swearing as he tried to regain his feet. "Kennedy – take him now!"

She swung her stun baton up and around towards the side of Campbell's head. The field operative became a sudden blur as he reacted; there was a crackle and hiss of discharged

electricity as the baton clattered to the floor. Kennedy struggled beneath the crook of his elbow but she wasn't going anywhere.

Campbell tried to push the memories of wisteria and coffee away from this mess; back to somewhere that didn't include Spence being dead. "I'm really getting very tired of being reasonable, Mr Hull."

The supervisor was pointing a classic, albeit heavily modified M107 at him. "This rifle has bullets that will go through Kennedy, you, and the next four walls of this building before they even begin to slow down."

"Am I supposed to surrender?"

"Yes; unless you'd prefer to die, Mr Campbell."

"What makes you think that the bullet will kill me before I get to you?"

"It'll certainly remove Kennedy from the equation." Hull shifted his aim to line up squarely with the woman's head. "That's a damn nice suit, Mr Campbell. And brain matter is a real bitch to wash out."

The field operative dropped his arms to his sides; freeing Kennedy and surrendering his own gun as he did so. "Since when is it considered to be

acceptable to use your own people as hostages?"

"I'm not the one who began this little fracas." Hull smirked as Campbell was handcuffed. "GETEC was fully prepared to co-operate with your agency on this matter. Your attitude has changed that. I don't think that my employers will be quite so friendly now."

"You can't seriously expect to get away with this?"

"I don't see any reason why we won't. Kennedy – escort our guest to Holding Area 4."

"Yes Sir." Kennedy pressed the tip of the stun baton against the British operative's ribs until he collapsed. "Sir – should we sedate the prisoner fully?"

"Negative; the SCO geneticists will need him clean for vivisection purposes. Just give him another jolt as required until he's been fully prepped."

Benedict was watching Jenkins dice vegetables for soup. She was still pale, and it would be a few weeks before the muscle tremors completely stopped. But there was only so much time that someone could spend in bed. Helping to prepare dinner passed the time, and could be done whilst

sitting at the kitchen table. And it meant that they would have food that hadn't come out of a tin.

The biochemist seemed happy to be active. "Where's Mr Moxton? I haven't seen him around today."

"He and Campbell left whilst you were asleep. There was something that they needed to do for work." There wasn't any point in adding to her stress levels by mentioning what had happened to Spence.

Jenkins glanced at the operative's injured wrist. "So, it's just us? What if GETEC find out where we are?"

"I'm injured; not helpless. I can still fire a gun if need be. Anyhow, they won't find us. They aren't even looking – you've been declared officially dead. You're to be given a new identity in exchange for your testimony against GETEC. There'll be some reconstructive surgery done to ensure that no one can recognise you. Then you'll be set up with an appropriate back story and financial remuneration."

"What about Mr Moxton?"

"The official version is that he had a miraculous escape from death and was rescued by a small

Portuguese fishing vessel."

"Will I ever see him again?"

"I honestly don't know, Dr Jenkins. It probably wouldn't be considered as safe."

"I really liked him."

Benedict sighed. "Can I give you a bit of advice, Dr Jenkins?"

She shrugged. "If you think it's important."

"Don't get attached to spies. We can't stay; eventually the mission is over and we have to move on. That's how it goes."

"Is there any way that it could go differently?"

"Not unless you wanted to sign up with Dr Whitby's department. And believe me, that's not a safe choice. You'd be straight back in the firing line again; they probably wouldn't even bother giving you a fresh identity."

"Maybe I'm willing to take that risk."

"That's up to you of course. But Moxton won't necessarily be interested in taking things further with you. He's a rather cold sort of a chap."

"So I shouldn't get my hopes up?"

"Sorry."

"It's alright; I don't really believe in happy ever after. I just wanted to make a go of things. But if he

isn't going to be interested..." Jenkins let the sentence drop as she reached for another handful of coriander.

Benedict closed his eyes and thought about all the people whom he had seduced along the route of his career. He tried not to remember them too often: as he had told Jenkins, spies couldn't stay. "I can't say for certain that he won't be interested."

"Do you suppose that he'd mind if I asked him?"

"He's cold, not dead. The two of you might have some fun. It just isn't likely to work out in the long term."

"I see. Well, thank you for your candour."

"You're welcome."

Jenkins couldn't stand it any longer. "Aren't you ever going to ask me why I was nosing around in your computer back in Prague?"

"I already know." He didn't, but this seemed like the best way to bait her.

"Then why haven't you brought it up?"

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "You've been through a lot. I thought it best to wait until you were feeling up to discussing the matter."

She dropped the knife and folded her arms to prevent her hands from shaking. "I saw you in the

background of one of Dr Zarosky's video chats; from her apartment in Prague. You were wandering around looking for your shirt. Anya said that you were dating. Were you? Or was it all work?"

"A bit of both, really."

"I recognised your tattoo from my mum's photo album."

Benedict sat up sharply. "What?"

"My mum; she collects printed photos of people. She has this huge, vintage sort of album thing. I used to spend hours looking through it when I was little."

"Why does your mum have a photograph of me?"

"It's an old picture. From before I was born."

The field operative stared at the young woman opposite him. *Andrea Collins and her vintage photography – she took up with another fellow after I left. They moved away...got married quickly...is it possible..?*

"I mean, I always knew that Eric wasn't my real dad. They never lied to me. I just never expected to find you. No one knew your full name; just that you were Paul. And that tattoo of course."

"It was work. Your mum – she was part of my

cover. Jesus. I never knew that she was pregnant."

"She didn't find out until after you'd gone."

"So you spotted me by chance, and you dug?"

"You said that you knew!"

"I was fishing!"

They sat there in silence amidst the tang of parsley and coriander. Finally Benedict took out his phone. "I need to inform Pembleton of this, Ashley."

"What – all of a sudden you want to step in and be the protective father?"

"No, it's standard protocol; all offspring of field operatives have to be recorded. And there's always the risk that someone within GETEC already knows. That might even be why Hull recruited you in the first place: as leverage over me."

She went a shade of pale that made Benedict decide that he would be paying the supervisor in question a very personal visit once his wrist had fully recovered. "There's a microchip..!"

He dropped his phone and tried to catch her as she fell. Between his cast and the angle of the table this proved to be impossible. "Ashley – what's wrong?"

But there was too much blood on the pale tiles of the kitchen floor. Benedict knelt slowly to seek

the cause of it. His fingertips brushed against the edge of what remained of the back of his daughter's neck. The cervical vertebrae had splintered outwards: a sub-dermal micro explosive of some sort.

Did she know about it? Is that what she meant by microchip?

"At least it was quick."

The voice was unfamiliar. It came from behind him; the door to the rear hall of the villa. Benedict knew better than to move. "And who are you?"

"Saunders. Put your hands where I can see them."

"My right hand is in a cast. I have limited mobility."

The SCO stepped into view then; his weapon trained on Benedict's head. "Fine: get your left hand where I can see it, Mr Moxton. No funny business either!"

For an SCO, he's none too sharp. "I don't want trouble."

Saunders was convinced, and holstered his gun. "Okay; you can stand up now. But nice and slowly – I'd hate to have to bring you in dead."

Benedict straightened up carefully. His phone

was still dangling from his uninjured hand. "I suppose that I'd best drop this too?"

"Yeah; toss it over here."

"Alright then – why don't you catch it?"

The field operative whirled and hurled the phone; depressing the hidden switch as he did so. The handset erupted in a small but impressive ball of white-hot electrical fire, and Saunders leapt backwards cursing and covering his face. A small handheld detonator clattered onto the tiles, and Benedict realised that it had triggered the micro explosive in Ashley's neck.

Saunders snarled and fumbled for his gun again. "You bastard – I can't see!"

"Phosphorous micro grenade built into the battery." Benedict stepped calmly out of the line of the gun. "And the name's not Moxton – it's Paul Benedict."

The SCO fired blindly and emptied the clip into the dresser. "Stand still, damn you!"

"It looks as though you're out of bullets."

"Big deal – I'll regenerate soon enough and then I'll finish you off and find Moxton!"

"No, you won't be doing that."

"You don't have anything that can kill me!"

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"Mr Saunders, I have a private estate, a shovel, and all of the hatred available to me for what you just did to my daughter. When you're suffocating to death beneath six feet of Caribbean dirt, try to remember that."

Chapter Fifteen – Wheels Within Wheels

Quincy beeped futilely at Welles. The organic was determined to function unsafely. At present, he was prying back the cover from one of the main waste outflow pipes belonging to the GETEC facility that they were observing.

“It’s a great plan, Quincy: we’ll be in and out without them knowing anything about us.”

The robot generated a detailed holographic image of the dangers that were posed to organics by drowning.

“I have a re-breather and a wetsuit; I’ll be fine. And you’re practically indestructible.”

<advisory-practicallydoesnotequatecompletely>

“They took Housekeeping: it’s not as if we can just ignore that. Pembleton told me to retrieve both of you.”

<theorem-shewishesyoutodeactivate>

Campbell couldn't seem to free himself from the examination table that he was strapped to. It was as though Holding Area 4 had been constructed with his worst nightmares in mind. The grey tiles and harsh lighting reminded him of Malaga, but the people behind that incident were long dead. That fact did little to calm him. Imminent vivisection wasn't something that one could stop dwelling on. The geneticists involved had been all too keen to begin: he could hear them prepping their surgical equipment in the adjoining bay.

So, this is how it all ends for me – death by involuntary participation in a laboratory experiment.

Vivisection was illegal nowadays. WHO22 had banned it last July. Campbell had uncovered a horrific human trafficking ring supplying what were classed as non-endangered higher primates for research and development purposes. His actions had cleared the route for WHO22's mandate.

Clearly GETEC hadn't received that particular memo. Perhaps the entrepreneurs behind the so-called Global Endeavour To Effect Change believed that their money granted them extra privilege over everyone else. Most likely this entire

division was simply off the official books.

Just like my own career. And Spence's too – did they torture you before they killed you, little canary?

He tried to sink back into his memories of wisteria and coffee. By now Moxton would have noted his failure to re-emerge from the building. Perhaps the driver would have enough sense to call in reinforcements. Or perhaps Hull had already had him eliminated. It hardly mattered at this point: Pembleton wasn't likely to send anyone else in after them. Even if she did, it would be too late for Spence. And Campbell had decided that he didn't want to outlive the terse little non-gender.

I would have liked to have gotten minutes alone with the bastard that killed you.

Wisteria and coffee – those were what he needed to focus on. He closed his eyes: he could almost feel the crisp white linen of the sheets on the bed of his then Kensington home. Spence had seemed to like it there. They had spent numerous weekends perfecting the hazy sort of debate that belonged to slowly waking up together.

I never got around to asking why you didn't want me to stay over at your house.

Nightingale Spence had come down from Cambridge and flatly refused to discuss anything prior to this. There was presumably a good reason. Campbell had grasped that much. He hadn't pushed; perhaps this was why he had been allowed to get so close to the non-gendered. But he'd never been invited home – they always stayed at his place instead.

I hope you had a home back then.

Maybe that was it – maybe Spence had been couch surfing, or worse. Who would there have been to realise? They had been young, and everyone was either forgetting to study or avoiding their most recent mistake. No one bothered to run background checks on their fellow students.

Campbell had run an open house policy anyhow. There was generally someone staying over at his. Admittedly not when Spence was around: he had drifted into the habit of ensuring that they always had peace to...to what?

We wasted every chance that life threw at us, didn't we, canary?

There was someone standing beside the examination table: he could hear them breathing. The stench of antiseptic scrubbers blocked the air.

The field operative decided that he wouldn't look at whoever it was. It was a small attempt at defiance, but he clung to it.

"You look like you're trying to stop breathing on principle, or maybe out of spite."

"Moxton – you're alive?"

The driver was unbuckling the straps. "It's more than can be said for your hosts. We have a friend, it appears."

Campbell sat up and frowned at where a lanky dark-haired man in a wetsuit was slitting the throat of what looked like the final GETEC scientist. "Who the bloody Hell is this?"

Moxton shrugged. "He says his name is George Welles. Apparently Pembleton sent him in to retrieve Housekeeping and the robot." The driver sounded annoyed. He handed the field operative his clothes from where they had been piled. "And I don't want to know why you're naked."

"For once it wasn't even my idea."

Welles grinned at them. "Quincy's still at the extraction point; he's jamming their security feeds. We should hurry though."

"I'm not leaving without Spence."

"I already told Moxton; Housekeeping is my

department. You two need to get clear before anyone notices what's going on."

Campbell fastened his shoelaces. "Oh, believe me: they're going to notice what happens next, Welles." He nodded to the driver. "Are you sure that you're up for this?"

"Depends what you're planning on doing."

Whitby stared bleakly at his monitor and wished for the umpteenth time that Rosa were here instead of him. This entire experiment had been her brainchild. It was all based on her coding. He was terrified that he would get it wrong somehow – what if he killed her again? What if he lost the file that held what was left of her? Or worse yet – what if he succeeded only for what awoke to be something other than Rosa?

Maybe I should tell Campbell first. He'd probably shoot me and then I wouldn't be around for the zombie robot apocalypse.

The technician was secretly grateful for the field operative's lack of subtlety. He rather thought that even the colonists on Mars would have noticed the eradication of the Boston facility. Pembleton had simply filed the incident as an experiment with

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synthetic wormholes gone badly wrong. This wasn't entirely inaccurate, and it got the spotlight back onto GETEC and away from British Intelligence.

What a pity that I can't hope to keep Pembleton's attention away from this so very readily.

Campbell leant against the bulkhead in the cargo area of their recently acquired aircraft and watched as the remains began to degenerate in front of him. It wasn't Spence: it was just an RCS. Therefore, Spence was still out there somewhere, alive, and very possibly a prisoner, if GETEC had made the clone. Or else GETEC had tried to fob them off to retain custody of Spence's remains.

There was a risk of course that Pembleton had brewed the entire thing up, and that Spence was now running under deep cover. At any rate, he intended to find the truth. He also intended to locate and kill Hull. The supervisor had managed to escape the destruction of the facility in Boston along with a handful of others. The field operative added this last to his mental list of things to resolve.

He eyed his companions speculatively. "What do you think of revenge?"

Quincy beeped almost forlornly. There was no possibility of this organic understanding binary. His holographic emitter had been damaged in the destruction of the GETEC facility. His one hope was that statistically the other two surviving organics were unlikely to support a vendetta.

Moxton was bone tired, but he grasped that his powers of observation outweighed those belonging to Campbell. He elbowed Welles sharply. "Can you please ditch that ridiculous disguise now, Housekeeping?"

"Oh, thank you very much for that, Mr Moxton." Spence peeled away the wig and glared at the driver. "I rather liked this cover identity. An efficient sort of fellow – hey!"

Campbell ignored the non-gender's irritable squeak and buried his face in their hair. "I thought we'd lost you!"

Spence grumbled and managed to wriggle clear of the bear hug. "Why must you hug? I loathe hugging; you know this."

"Well, I'm not too bloody keen on being led to believe that my best friend is dead!"

"We deal in lies, Mr Campbell. Wheels within wheels, and so forth."

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"Was it worth it?" Moxton attempted to defuse the conversation.

"I should expect so. That RCS was and is packed with the very latest in biotechnical surveillance. Pembleton was piloting it; she'll have recorded everything that it witnessed during its incarceration. Hull likes to talk, so it was deemed the best way to manage him."

Campbell had to concede that it had been a well-played infiltration. "How many people knew the truth?"

"Just Pembleton and myself; there were concerns that GETEC might have access to Whitby's computers. We still don't know why or how Dr Jenkins managed to hack Mr Benedict's e-mails. How did her rehabilitation go?"

"She was improving when we left," said Moxton. "I'd guess that she's clear of the worst of it by now."

"Then we'd best get back to the Caribbean and talk to her properly. You'll have to pilot us of course; Quincy can probably help with navigation."

"GETEC build decent aircraft." The field operative was still toying with Spence's sleeve. "Spence, we need to talk properly."

"Not now, Craig; let's wait until we've regrouped

at the safe house." The non-gendered laced fingers with him. "But I do want us to talk."

Benedict was seated on the steps of the veranda when they arrived. There was an empty bottle of 19th Century Scotch beside his feet, and a shovel propped up against the railing. "Dr Jenkins is dead: the assassin is underneath the sundial."

Moxton turned to glare at Spence. "Damn you, and damn Pembleton, and damn all your secrecy! This never should have happened. Campbell and I should have been here; we would have been here, if we'd only been kept in the loop on things!"

"It wouldn't have helped." Benedict held up a detonator. "There was a micro explosive device embedded in her neck."

Spence refused to dwell on how badly both Moxton and Campbell had broken protocol. The retrieval of the RCS had been expedited by their presence. That was what the field report stated. That was all that anyone needed to know of the matter. "Did you identify the assassin?"

Benedict nodded. "David Saunders. Incidentally, how long does it take for someone like that to suffocate?"

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There was an edge to the older field operative's voice that Campbell understood. He moved closer to Spence. Paul wasn't in a good place right now. "I rather think we can wait."

Quincy had identified the cause behind the organics' distress. The inactive female organic inside the villa had clearly been an important part of their network. It appeared that her companions were unaware of Whitby's special project, and therefore did not know that her base code could be salvaged. He trundled forwards and activated the smallest of his lasers. After a moment of confusion, the organics studied the data that he had etched into the wall of the villa.

Moxton whistled. "It looks as if Whitby has a lot of explaining to do when we get back to London."

"This is monstrous!" Campbell had physically recoiled as he realised what the robot was showing them. "They made a copy of Rosa's brainwave patterns and called it life? That isn't life: human beings aren't just computer code!"

"What if Whitby's not wrong?" Benedict was suddenly hopeful. "Think about the possibilities – all of the innocent lives that could be saved!" He spun and strode into the villa. "Moxton, help me. We

need to take Ashley home immediately!"

Spence was trembling. Campbell frowned and rested his hand on the non-gender's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I need to get clear of this mess. I can't be around this."

The field operative wanted to grab hold of the slight figure and never let them go, but instead he stepped clear and nodded. "Will I see you again?"

"I don't know."

"Nightingale – be careful."

"I – I'll be in touch, Craig." Housekeeping managed to offer him a brief smile. "Watch your back."

And that was that: his best friend was gone; running back along the driveway as if they could outpace whatever it was that haunted them. Campbell knew better than to stand in the way of anyone's ghosts. Sometimes people needed to walk away. He could only hope that it wouldn't be another twenty years before Spence returned.

Fly safe, little canary; I'll miss you.

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.