

Live, Die, Kill

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Ten

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Live, Die, Kill
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ISBN-13: 9798666712566

Published by Upatree Press July 2020

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LIVE, DIE, KILL

In the direct sequel to *The Spy Who Borrowed My Identity*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence struggles to believe that a man can change his ways. The man in question, Craig Campbell, is determined not to disappoint, but has his past finished haunting either of them yet?

Meanwhile, ANI Agent Greg Hull is playing by the rules a little too efficiently for Captain Mars' liking...

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Chapter One – Prevailing Fantasy

“Thanks for the smoke.” Nightingale Spence nodded curtly to their sole current companion, and slouched back against the wall of the dilapidated byre framing one side of the safe house's designated smoking area. Much to their resignation, it was loud out here in the farmyard, despite the absence of any livestock. At almost eight o'clock in the evening, the warm May air rang with the sound of nesting birds settling. Spence rolled their newly acquired cigarette contemplatively between two thin fingers. *I suppose I really should start carrying my own again for emergencies.*

“Having a bad day then, eh?” Beside them, Brendan Clacher proffered his lighter. “I couldn't

help but notice over dinner that you and Mr Campbell have something complicated going on together."

"That's hardly any of Irish Intelligence's business." Free smoke or not, Spence wasn't in the mood to indulge a near stranger's need for gossip. Today had simply been too long of a Tuesday for such pleasantries, primarily due to the situation with Craig Campbell. *Is letting him back into my orbit, even on a platonic level, really such a good idea? Come to think about it, does he realise that I'm not interested in anything more than that with him?*

The Irish operative shrugged, exhaling a soft ring of grey smoke into the warm evening air. "No, I don't suppose it is. Still, given what we know about you, our profile for *him* must need updating. We didn't have him down as liking the whole BDSM thing – he never seemed the type."

Spence handed the lighter back; mildly amused at how far off target the fellow's theory was. "Do you consider yourself to be an expert on the matter?"

"Not an expert as such, but I'd still reckon that I know enough about it and about reading people generally as to guess what you'd enjoy."

"Right now, my prevailing fantasy involves this cigarette and your left retina."

He smiled too pleasantly. "Does it really?"

"Piss off, Clacher!" Tossing the barely started cigarette aside, the non-gender spun on their heel and started back towards the safe house.

Behind them, Clacher raised his voice slightly as he followed them. "Now of course, when I say that Campbell doesn't seem the type, I *also* mean that I can't quite picture him as being all that safe to have as the one in charge. One can only surmise that you enjoy taking risks, Lady Lackey."

Spence froze. "Don't call me that."

"Ah, but come on now! It's your official title; BIINT even made sure to have had it carved on your headstone." The Irish operative drew level once again with the non-gender. "Surely, you don't want to undermine all of the work that went into securing equal inheritance rights for women and non-binary individuals?"

"I shall tell you exactly what I told NIT, Mr Clacher. As far as I'm concerned, the Lackey name and everything associated with it can rot along with the monsters in human form that passed for my family."

Seemingly ever sanguine, Clacher nodded. "Aye, our profilers guessed that it would be something along those lines. Can you answer me this one thing, though? Was it only their murdering that was the problem for you, or was there even more to it behind closed doors? You see, there's a wee theory floating that there may have been sexual...hey now, watch it!"

Spence's right fist had missed the man's bearded chin by less than an inch when he dodged. "Keep your nose out of my affairs, or...!"

The Irish operative dove forwards without warning: dragging Spence down onto the rough concrete surface of the farmyard in a tangle of limbs and muffled swearing from both parties. From there, the scuffle devolved into several minutes of outright dirty fighting, until, still wincing from a nasty jab to the area over his right kidney, Clacher finally managed to pinion the non-gender. His left forearm closed across their throat, just tightly enough to imply that any further struggling would be a very bad idea. "So, I'm thinking that the theory I mentioned touched enough of a nerve for it to have been accurate, but you don't want to talk about it, eh?"

Spence glared up at him. "Fuck you!"

"Not unless you buy me dinner first." He scrambled well clear of his seething opponent before rolling to his feet. "Honestly, probably not even then – you suddenly look like you're planning my suicide."

"I wonder why *that* would be." Spence regained their feet with a scowl. "Our profile for you is certainly accurate anyhow, Mr Clacher: you're a thug."

"Ah, ah, now we'll have none of that!" Clacher shook his head, mock sternly. "You threw the first punch. I was just defending myself from a clearly superior foe. Well, that, or re-enacting one of those old fantasy adventure films – that one with the big man with all the muscles and the sword wielding redhead in the chainmail bikini, maybe."

Spence blinked. "Excuse me?"

Clacher shrugged. "You remind me of her. Although I can't really picture you wearing those sorts of things, mind. All the rest of it though, the intimacy issues, and the carving a red trail of revenge in her wake part. You've got those down perfectly, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I do mind. Never say it again."

He grinned. "No promises."

Thomas Campbell stalked across the main atrium of BLINT headquarters with the air of a man who was at best moments from unleashing the standard field operative level of chaos on those around him. "Good evening, Doris. So – where's my son and his lad? Are they safe yet?"

The willowy SCO fell into step alongside him. "They're both fine; they arrived at the old dairy farm yesterday. Spence and Daniel picked them up from the marina in Poole. It appears that Craig had decided to try living on his yacht."

"He gets that from his mother. Eunice insisted on raising him aboard, although Christ only knows why, mind you."

"Speaking of mothers, I presume that you'll want to speak with young Cassandra too whilst you're here?"

"Not particularly, but I suppose that I might as well get it over with." Thomas paused to accept a temporary security lanyard from one of the receptionists, straightening the knot on his tie as he did so. "I got your text message on the drive down from Scotland – almost drove off the bloody road

when I read it! You say that she claims it's *mine*?"

Weaver nodded as they both resumed walking. "The dates certainly line up with your little excursion, but who's to say whether that proves anything?"

"It could do, if you're right about how far along she is. From what I saw of things, Hull was keeping her on a short leash back then, but he wasn't fucking her himself."

"What a thoroughly misogynistic process of elimination." His companion stopped outside one of the interview rooms. "In here; we made her up a camp bed last night rather than risk letting her leave headquarters. She wasn't keen, but I sold the arrangement to her as being the safest option given how Carson Howard blew up her last known address. Now, I'm not staying to monitor, so play nicely."

"Yes, Mother." Thomas ducked as she swiped at him. "One other thing though before you go, does either version of Hull know that she's still alive yet?"

"Christ, no – they're both far too busy accusing one another of each having been the one to sign over custody of baby whatever her name currently is to Captain Kennedy!"

"Good. Let's try and keep it that way."

Craig Campbell met Spence on the first floor landing of the safe house. The black-haired man frowned as he spotted the dust on the non-gender's clothes. "Are you all right, canary? You look as if you've had a fall or something."

"I'm fine, Craig. Mr Clacher and I did some sparring out near the cow shed, that's all."

"Oh. How's his form?"

Spence shrugged. "It's impressive, especially for a fellow in his mid-sixties. Anyhow, where are our assorted dependents?"

Campbell nodded towards the bedroom that he had just exited. "Sam and the younger twins are down for the night. Heidi's volunteered to keep an eye on them since she's planning on sitting up late to study anyhow, so we went ahead and swapped all three of their travel cots into her room. I hope you don't mind. Moxton's downstairs teaching the older three how to make pasta from scratch."

"Hmm, well rather him than me. I'll be sure to avoid the kitchen until after they've finished tidying up." Spence hoped that the handler wouldn't regret his choice of activity. "What about your artist friend and her daughter?"

The still technically retired despite what his surviving enemies appeared to think spy sighed. "Ah, Zoe isn't really speaking to me at the moment; something to do with my past having endangered her, Primrose, and everything else that matters."

"That sort of perfectly understandable reaction is why Pembleton says that people like us can't *have* normal people as friends."

"I'm beginning to see her point." Campbell smiled somewhat ruefully. "Still – we've got each other at least, right?"

Spence nodded. "I count us as *friends*, yes."

"The unspoken caveat being that I don't decide to ruin things again, eh?" Campbell shook his head sadly. "Fine: I'll accept that, but only as long as you know that Vasnetsova *wasn't* better than you! I was just lonely and stupid, that's all."

The non-gender glowered up at him. "By any chance did that wholly unasked for comparison seem like a better idea in your head?"

He grimaced. "Sorry; shutting up now!"

"Please do."

The interview room was a dull, grey and magnolia shaded box and the canteen little better,

and so Thomas had taken Cassandra out of BIINT headquarters entirely for dinner. Of course, going anywhere decent required dressing the part, which had resulted in an impromptu out of hours visit to his personal tailor. Thomas still wasn't sure which of these two acts of generosity had impressed his companion more. Watching as she practically inhaled her main course, he suspected that it had probably been the food. *Well, she is eating for two now, I suppose.*

That thought did little for the aging former spy's gloomy mood. He didn't especially want to be a father again at his age. It was all well and good nagging Craig about grandchildren; one could hand *those* back whenever the novelty wore off. Your own offspring were far trickier things to manage, and their mothers generally only added to the hassle. Take Cassandra, for example. The young American woman was pretty, certainly, but behind those looks was a toxic mix of vacuous and mean: which, whilst useful for manipulating her against Hull, weren't qualities that one wanted to deal with on a regular basis. *If she keeps it, I'll have to manage her attitude somehow, for I dare say that she'll want my support in raising it, not to*

mention every last penny that she can wring out of my accounts.

Kassandra paused between forkfuls, locking eyes with him. "So, are you trying to bribe me into keeping it, or not keeping it? I mean, you obviously have the finances to be approved for the FIL, even despite how old you are, so it's hardly as if *that's* a problem."

Thanks to a lifetime of spying, Thomas didn't show his relief at her candour, but it was a close thing. "Don't you have a preference? It's your body, after all."

She rolled her eyes. "Everybody knows that it's the father who gets to have the final say in these situations! Look, don't drag things out: if you want this thing, then just say so already and we can maybe work out some kind of like, pseudo surrogacy deal between us, provided I don't have to raise it. Otherwise, we should *really* source a clinic."

"Well, to be honest, I don't care for child rearing." Thomas took a sip of his wine before continuing. "It's always been my policy to leave that side of things to the woman involved – aside from Craig, of course, and even he only lived with

me fulltime after his mother died. You know, it's ironic really. Eunice was the only one of them who I could have seen myself staying the distance with, and yet in the end, after all the bloody effort that we went through for her to have Craig, she dropped me! Kept on spouting some nonsense about my being good stock but not husband material. Come to think of it, I expect she'd have been the first person to tell you how terrible my parenting skills...!"

Kassandra waved her fork impatiently. "Ugh, jeez, can we please not do this whole potted history of your life? I mean, I'm sure *you* think it's fascinating, but I really don't care. We hooked up, my implant failed, and now we have a decision to make: it's literally that simple."

He smiled at her pragmatism. "Well, since neither of us wants the trouble involved. I'll take you to one of the private clinics tomorrow and sign whatever forms they ask for."

"Great!" Kassandra beamed and stabbed at another chunk of her braised beef. "With any luck, this will all be over and done with in time for the weekend. Maybe I'll even get to do some sightseeing before I go home!"

“Perhaps you shall.” Based on previous experiences, Thomas doubted that the termination would leave her in the mood for any such pleasant activities, but she'd surprised him so far. Either way, it wasn't his concern. He could safely look forwards to taking part in this year's Hebridean Marathon season, after missing it last year thanks to the debacle with Craig and his now ex-partner. “Will you take a glass of wine with the rest of your meal?”

She nodded and proffered the relevant glass for him to fill. “No reason not to now! Thanks, by the way. I was kind of freaking out this whole time in case you insisted on me keeping it. I'm so not ready to be stuck with a kid.”

Chapter Two – Fallback Option

A pale blue removals vehicle glided slowly away from the already closing gates of Shorecrest's Turtle Grove housing development. It was early on Wednesday afternoon by Miami's clock, and back in 1118, Bryce Lenard was admiring the layout of her new home. The house was a two-storey single-family new build, with six large bedrooms, all of them with walk-in closets and full en suite bathrooms. There was also an additional half bathroom for guests built into the space beneath the stairs, which was useful. It was a practical sort of design all round, she felt: between the bathrooms and the way that all the power outlets were located at waist height or above. That last part especially was great when you had kids. *Greg's*

really picked a good place for us. It's too bad that he'll need to leave for work again so soon, but at least he might be able to bring Rayne home with him.

She was wracked with guilt over having left him; especially since she'd almost not come back at all. British Intelligence had just been so persuasive! Somehow, in Bournemouth, between Heidi's fussing, Spence's cynicism, and poor confused Oliver, all the arguments against Greg had made perfect sense. Drawn in, she'd temporarily forgotten the good side of living with him: the kindnesses, all of the random little things. After everything that he'd done for her – how ungrateful could you get? *Although, saying that there's a good side does kind of imply that some of it's bad too.*

There she went again: being ungrateful for she had! Bryce shook her head at her traitorous thoughts. So what if their relationship hadn't started out the conventional way? They weren't what mainstream society would class as a conventional couple anyhow. Older man, younger woman, open to including others, keen to experiment; it all added up, and people judged. She knew that. Greg had taught her all about the challenges facing them,

and the rules that they needed to follow to make things work. He'd warned her right from the start that things wouldn't always be easy. *Well, almost right from the start. He did have to wait until I'd settled into living with him first.*

It was a good thing that he was so patient. Not just for Bryce's sake, but for Tessa as well. Their preteen foster daughter was another difficult soul, due in no small part to her unstable upbringing. From orphaned street urchin to billionaire's neglected pity project, all that chaos had inevitably taken a toll on the girl's attitude. *No wonder she's religious – it's probably the only stability she had before us!*

Right now, the young Martian in question was out shopping with Greg; replacing the stuff that she needed to help mark the Pentecost. Incredibly, her irascible robot companion Vinnie the APSU had grudgingly agreed to wait here at home instead. Goodness only knew what the robot was doing right now, but he certainly *wasn't* helping to look after Fisher, who needed some extra attention thanks to all of today's fuss and excitement! Still, that wasn't any different to usual anyhow. *At least Nadimiche's pulling her weight; helping us with the*

move and everything so that I have both hands free for toddler wrangling. I hate thinking ill of the dead and all, but she's such a breath of fresh air after Kassie!

Spence prodded their fork into the stodgy mass of homemade pasta that formed the bulk of this evening's dinner. Wednesday within the safe house had somehow been worse than its preceding day. The children's attempt at cooking was merely the crowning event of things. *If Craig makes one more attempt at demonstrating his repentant solicitousness, I shall scream. Honestly, what part of just bloody friends isn't he capable of comprehending? Do I need to provide a written account of my nascent relationship with Byron Caulfield before he'll back off?*

Across from them, Kathryn was watching; her own plate still untouched. "You don't like it, do you, Aunty Val? I told Barnabas and Phil earlier that you wouldn't, but they didn't believe me, and Uncle Daniel just shrugged, and said that we should go ahead and serve it up anyhow since it was already made."

At that, Moxton finally swallowed the pasta that

he had been chewing. "It's an excellent first attempt. I've eaten far worse."

Their niece frowned. "Why?"

Beside her, Barnabas was already halfway through his portion. "I like how it's sort of chewier than normal pasta, but still with lots of little crispy edges. What do you think, Phil?"

The other boy shrugged and hunched forwards over his plate, the skin on the tops of his ears flushing red at the unwanted attention. "Uh, it's okay."

Clacher smiled as he refilled his water glass. "Life pro tip, kids – if you're busy eating, you can't say anything to embarrass yourselves, or anyone else!"

His colleague from Kildare – thirty-two-year-old Jasmine Finn, a petite, fair-skinned woman with waist length auburn curls and light brown eyes – scowled at him. "Trying to get your face in the dictionary beside the word *ironic*, Brendan?"

Zoe glanced up from wiping her daughter's mouth. "To be fair, it is good advice. Craig could have done with hearing it sooner, actually! Has he already inflicted his bizarre any woman who doesn't flirt back is a lesbian theory on any of the rest of you, or was it just me?"

Ice cream as a reward or bribe was often a useful tool for long-term behaviour modification, in Greg Hull's experience. The lack of kosher ice cream for sale here in what was now his family's local mall, was proving even more so. May 15th 2097 was the hottest on record this decade, with the temperature pushing ninety degrees. Hull didn't want to imagine how bad it would be by the August peak. *Maybe I should just arrange to pack us all up in the jet and head back to that island for a break.*

The point was that Tessa, still wilting in the heat from their walk across the parking lot to the main entrance of the mall, was gazing forlornly at the menu in the window of a nearby ice cream parlour. She signed up at him. "I can't have any of these, Agent Hull! They aren't made right."

Hull patted her shoulder gently before signing back. "Don't worry; I'll buy an ice cream maker for home while we're shopping, baby bird. You can get an iced fruit smoothie for now instead. See – there's an organic place right over there that sells them. Come on, let's go and see which recipe you want to try."

He wanted to give her an extra fun day out. It only seemed fair, given how he'd secretly deactivated her APSU and erased its program before they left for the mall. His GETEC training had come in useful there. The trickiest part had been disabling the thing's locator chip. By now, what remained of Vinnie was on its way to the recycling facility along with all of the packaging from kitting out the house with not only brand-new furniture and kitchenware, but also everything else that Hull and his family needed, right down to replacement clothing and toiletries. *It's a completely fresh start for all of us. The last thing we need is that damn robot hampering Tessa's attachment to Bryce and me by reminding the poor kid of Waverly.*

Unsurprisingly, Tessa picked the sweetest tasting option available as her drink. Hull, opting for his usual mix of celery, bell pepper, and apple, smiled his unspoken disapproval over her head at the overly manicured young man working behind the counter whilst paying. Of course, an eleven-year-old with her kind of undisciplined upbringing would want the one with honey *and* fruit syrup! Being honest, one look at that brightly coloured mixture would probably tempt Fisher too, despite how

careful his parents were to encourage healthy choices. That was why stores like this shouldn't include those kinds of drinks on their menus. It created unnecessary parenting challenges for those who gave a damn about their kid's health. *Yeah, we won't be coming back to this store again.*

The sales assistant grinned back at Hull. "Thank you for your purchases! Would you like to buy one of our home smoothie making packs? They're half price for new customers, and include a recipe book that shows you how to recreate all of our drinks right in the comfort of your own kitchen!" He aimed his next sentence at Tessa, who was busy choosing which colour of straw she wanted from the dispenser in front of her. "You'd enjoy doing that, sweetie, wouldn't you?"

Hull shook his head, still smiling coldly at the now confirmed asshole behind the counter. "I'll thank you not to use the hard sell technique on my little girl. As it happens, she's deaf, and not currently looking at you, so it won't work anyhow, but you still shouldn't try to pressure parents like that. It makes us leave terrible reviews on every available platform."

His opponent stuttered for a moment, not smiling

so cockily any more. "It's...it's just company policy, sir! I get paid on commission...!"

"Get a better job." Placing his left hand on Tessa's right shoulder, Hull steered her gently but firmly out of the store. "Okay, baby bird. Let's go find somewhere that sells ice cream makers."

Darren Jolley practically tiptoed from the safe house's main bathroom to the bedroom that he was sharing with Tanya Darnell. He smiled ruefully at his girlfriend as he joined her on the bed. Both of them were still fully dressed, despite having claimed that they intended to have an early night. "Dinner got a bit rough there, eh?"

BlINT's youngest handler grimaced. "Ugh, don't remind me! I almost thought that Spence was going to murder someone for a while, and if it was Craig or Zoe, then honestly, I'm not sure I'd have blamed them! I mean, seriously – did she *really* need to tell us that he'd flirted with her a couple of times back at the marina when nothing else had even *happened*? Like, great work, Zoe! Way to stir things up for no freaking reason whatsoever!"

"Aye, she's a bit much to take, that one." Jolley settled back against the pillows, draping his left arm

around Tanya's shoulders. "Mind you, Craig shouldn't have been sniffing around her to begin with, not if he's serious about fixing things between him and Housekeeping!"

Tanya rolled onto her side and snuggled into his chest. Her left hand traced the line of his abdomen through his shirt. "I'm starting to wonder if he *is*, you know. Serious about Spence, I mean. Not gonna lie, Darren; between that evil bitch Vasnetsova and now Zoe, it kind of feels like they're just his fallback option."

"Ollie said something similar earlier. Mind you, he reckons that Spence has moved on anyhow, so it's not as bad as it might have been."

"Whoa, moved on, really?" The young American woman blinked. "Damn it! Why hadn't I heard about *that*? I guess we'd better stock up on some post break-up supplies for Craig instead of Spence, then, huh?"

Jolley mused for a moment before answering. "So, we'll still need a big bottle of gin, and a few dozen Irish terrorists to assassinate, then?"

"I don't think Brendan and Jasmine would appreciate that last part. Maybe we can persuade Craig to swap out killing people for just binge

eating ice cream or something." Tanya slid her hand steadily lower as she replied, smiling at the inevitable physical response. "Although right now, it looks as if we have more important things to attend to, huh, handsome?"

The Welsh sniper grinned as his girlfriend shifted position to straddle his lap. "Here, have I said lately how much I love you, lass? Only, because it's a lot, like."

Tanya arched her eyebrows suggestively in reply. "Hmm...so, do you mean like a *big* lot, or just a *little* lot?"

"Ah, you're a minx, you are!" Jolley grabbed Tanya and pulled her down for a kiss, rolling them both over as he did so to be the one on top. "And in answer to your question, I'd say that it's a very big lot."

Tanya squirmed happily beneath him, and then glanced towards the door. "Did you remember to lock it? Given what happened last time, I don't trust this place not to spit out another crazy assassin or three."

He pouted as he scrambled to his feet; hurrying to do as she wanted. "I thought you liked crazy assassins! After all, what else do I have to bring to

this relationship?"

"Let's see, you give really good back rubs." Tanya pretended to check off a list on her fingers. "And you always remember to put the seat back down on the toilet. So that's two more things, anyhow."

Jolley chuckled as he stripped off his shirt. "But the crazy assassin part's still my finest quality, eh?"

"Um, well maybe after your abs."

"What, you mean these old things?"

"Oh yeah, those are *definitely* the things."

Flexing the muscles in question, Jolley slowly unbuckled his belt. "You're acting as if *I'm* the pretty one in the room."

She shrugged and toed off her sandals. "Can't we both be pretty?"

"Well, you know technically us blokes are supposed to be handsome instead, or rugged. Those are nice manly sorts of words."

"Uh-huh." Tanya finished wriggling out of her jeans and peeled her t-shirt off over her head. "Does helping me out of my underwear count as manly or would you rather just watch?"

Chapter Three – All The Rest

Clacher found Spence sitting alone outside on the bench by the byre again, a little before two o'clock on Thursday afternoon. This time, he brought coffee instead of cigarettes: an oversized green and white striped porcelain mug for each of them. "Here – Heidi says that this is how Cob would make it, whatever that means. Jasmine confiscated all my smokes and told me to stop enabling other people's self-destructive tendencies."

Spence sighed and accepted their mug. "The responsible adult in me says that your colleague is right."

"Aye, me too, I suppose. It's all the rest of my personality that doesn't like it."

The non-gender ignored his attempt at levity and sipped at their coffee. "This is perfect; Miss Hedturner must have asked the old swan for his recipe at some point."

Clacher eyed the contents of Spence's mug with curiosity as he sat down to their left at the other end of the weathered old bench. "To be fair now, I only saw some of what she added, but Jesus, the sugar levels! Does this Cob fellow own shares in plantations or in dentistry?"

"One doesn't drink it constantly."

"Oh, doesn't one? Excuse me then, I'm sure." The Irish operative feigned a haughty sneer. "Anyhow, how are you keeping?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Ah sure, I'm collecting wee dribbles of information in order to work out how best to harvest your kidneys!" Clacher frowned when his deadpanning failed to garner any hint of amusement. "Well, tell me this at least: are you naturally this miserable, or is it only because of Craig? I mean, I don't like to pry or anything. It's just that you could nearly have spread the atmosphere at dinner yesterday on toast and this morning was hardly much better."

Spence scowled. "You noticed?"

"No harm to you now, but I'm pretty sure that everybody noticed. Even the kids have been asking what's wrong." Clacher steeled his nerves for the next part. "You'd know that already if you took to do with them though."

His companion's thin face tightened at the rebuke. "I'm not child centred; I never was!"

"Says the one with *how* many now?"

"Stop fucking judging me over something you don't know the first bloody thing about, Mr Clacher!" Spence's coffee sloshed over the rim of their mug as they slammed it down on the empty bit of bench between them and the Irish operative. "For your information, the older twins belonged to my late brother. They'd both still be in specialist care if it had been left up to me, but Mr Campbell *insisted* that he knew better than everyone! The younger set weren't planned either; that was one of GETEC's multitudinous schemes, even if we did mistakenly think that Mr Campbell had fathered them initially. Don't even get me started about the state of my abdominal muscles! As for the situation with young Mr Bingham, why those in charge can't arrange a more appropriate foster placement is

beyond me. Even if anyone here ought to have care of him then again, it's Mr Campbell, since *he's* the one who was so bloody taken with the boy's supposed mother in the first fucking place!"

Clacher's voice softened. "Feel better?"

"I...actually, yes, I do." Spence sucked in a ragged sort of breath, resisting the urge to start laughing and sobbing at the same time. "Like lancing an abscess, I suppose. All the crap must have needed letting out."

"Aye, it sounded like it." The Irish operative set his mug aside and patted Spence's shoulder. "So he more or less just keeps on adding to your problems then, eh?"

The non-gender shrugged off his hand. "What's it to you, or to Ireland, for that matter? You wouldn't be acting this solicitous unless you had an endgame planned, so what is it?"

Clacher pointedly folded his arms across his chest; seeking to defuse some of the fresh tension in the situation. "I promised Tanya that I'd give you the chance to vent, that's all. She's worried about you. They all are; even Craig, in his own way, I'm sure."

"So they all sent you to talk me down?"

He smiled. "Eh, sure, it was either me or young Oliver, and I'm more expendable, you know! Besides, I've great people skills. You must have noticed that much by now yourself, aye?"

Spence sniffed. "I suppose that it explains how you're already on first name terms with everyone here."

"I can't help noticing that *you* aren't." Clacher began toying with his cufflinks: a pair of matching pewter fox heads. "Maintaining a professional distance is one thing, but calling your lover by his surname isn't great, you know – especially not right in the middle of an argument."

"It's a tad more complicated than that. For one thing, we aren't lovers." Spence closed their eyes wearily. "You overheard some of what he and I were discussing earlier this morning, didn't you? I *thought* I heard footsteps out on the landing!"

Their companion hesitated. "Eh...well now, you see, it wasn't *only* this morning. Jasmine and I have the wee attic bedrooms right above you and Craig. Now, I'm like a log at night myself, but that woman hears *everything*. She's half-bat, I swear to you! Anyhow, she woke me to go down and stand sentry outside at around midnight. She had it in her

head that things might escalate.”

“Obviously she was wrong.”

“Aye, this time, anyhow.” Clacher pressed on as Spence’s eyes snapped open at what he’d just implied. “Look: lovers or not, two highly trained killers alone in a room, pushing one another’s buttons until somebody snaps? You’re not going to be telling me that *that’s* safe.”

“I assure you that your degree of concern outweighs the actual risk. We haven’t killed each other so far, and I hardly think that we’re about to do so any time soon! I’ll thank you not to meddle any further in this, Mr Clacher.”

“Okay so, but answer me one thing first. Are you *maybe* feeling just a wee bit worried about how Craig will take us talking about it?”

Spence couldn’t quite manage to say *no*.

Lottie Drake sprinted into the London office that she shared with Byron Caulfield, her mentor and long-term partner at NIT. “Byron! We’ve found a potential lead on the whereabouts of the rest of Miller’s three surviving associates! The facial recognition software on Chelsea Bridge flagged up the last member of the recent cell they’d put

together. His hover van is caught up in the usual afternoon traffic there."

Caulfield looked up from his report. "The young driver we missed at the golf course?"

"Yes, that's him. Gilbert Reidy, aged twenty-two, and originally from County Offaly, but he's lived and worked in and around Dublin for the past four years. According to his employment records and social media, he usually divides his time between hauling freight and playing amateur rugby."

"I wonder when he decided to take up international terrorism as an additional hobby." Caulfield frowned at the footage playing on Drake's tablet. "And what's he doing in London?"

"I suspect that we'd be better off finding out both of those answers in a more controlled environment, Byron. Interrogation Room Four springs to mind."

"Ah yes, it's just been redecorated in that lovely shade of maroon!" The older NIT operative bounced to his feet, reaching for his hat and lazrella as he did so. "Well, let's go pick him up, shall we, Lottie? To judge by this surveillance footage, he's already far closer to Maurice and Ashley's apartment than I'd like."

Maurice Jacob Leister sat by the window in a quiet restaurant at the northernmost end of the Queenstown Road; gazing across a scarcely touched late lunch into the pale hazel eyes of the incredible young woman who shared his life, his heart, and his current grief. "You're quite sure about this, darling? It's what you want?"

Dr Ashley Jenkins gazed back tearfully, as she nodded. "I'm sure. I'm sorry, Maurice. You...we work so well together in every other way, I know, but...but not in *this*, and I can't get past that fact. I want to have children of my own someday. I always have."

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I understand, darling. I'm only sorry that I can't give them to you."

It had been ten days since the discovery of the loss of their unborn child at the twelve-week scan. The medical data provided to them afterwards by the clinic indicated that the foetus' heart and other major organs had failed to develop correctly due to an incurable genetic malfunction within a key part of the paternal DNA. Premature death would be inevitable from the instant of any conception: in

this instance, at only a week before the scan. A *missed miscarriage* was the term used, but that wasn't remotely adequate, in Leister's opinion. *Unfair, cruel, and wrong* – those words all fitted a damned sight better.

She sniffled, dabbing her eyes with the corner of her sleeve. "Thank you, Maurice, for everything. I've already told Dad and Cerise that I'm coming to stay with them for a little while. I'll find somewhere else to live; you don't need to worry about holding a room for me or anything."

Leister shook his head. "You'll always be welcome in my home, Ashley. Still, I can see to packing up your things if you'd prefer not to have to be near the...near the unused room?"

"Yes, please, that would be better."

The two settled their bill soon afterwards, and exited the restaurant together. Leister stood by the kerb and waved down a passing hover taxi for his now ex-lover. He kissed her lightly on the cheek as he helped her into the back seat of the vehicle. "Goodbye darling."

"Goodbye."

The car whisked her away; bound for her father's home in Kennington. Leister watched it disappear

into the distance before he turned to begin his walk home. *Perhaps I might downsize to a smaller property once she's collected all of her things. Although, I suppose that Nightingale might occasionally wish to visit London with the children.* At this moment, it was only the latter possibility that kept him from handing over his keys to his solicitor with instructions to sell up on his behalf. *I could go back to Dubai otherwise.*

He wouldn't indulge that pang. One couldn't simply abandon everyone just because things had gotten unpleasant! No, he'd muddle along somehow. Selling the nursery furniture, or perhaps donating it to a charity. That was a sensible place to begin. It ought to help him to keep from wallowing too. *Onwards and upwards, old chap. Stiff upper lips at dawn, and so forth.*

A hover van with Irish plates glided clear of the northbound afternoon rush, and pulled up alongside him as he approached his building. Something in the set of the driver's jaw had Leister diving for cover even before the young man in question's window finished lowering; the subsequent crack of a bullet against the pavement where he had been seconds before confirming

that as the correct decision. Since the best cover to hand had been the blind spot of the hover van itself, Leister was by now clinging onto the rear ladder. Locking his left elbow through the rungs, he drew his gun and prepared to fight. "I really must warn you that you've picked a *terrible* day for this, whoever you are!"

A string of expletives accompanied the next shot. Leister realised that his opponent's weapon wasn't automatic. It sounded like a small calibre too. Good – both of those things were likely to decrease the amount of risk faced by innocent bystanders. Better yet, the fellow wasn't taking pot shots at any of the people currently fleeing the incident. *I wonder if that's out of decency, or a simple lack of ammunition to spare?*

He had already discounted professionalism as being a potential factor. His would-be killer was very clearly out of his depth. Leister could use that to his advantage. He'd need to do so, if he wanted any chance of offsetting the fellow's physical advantages. *Seventy-two...there's a jolly good reason that spies aren't supposed to get to my age and still be in the damned field!*

There was no third shot, presumably because the

gunman had opted to retreat. Leister based that theory on the fact that the ladder he was still clinging onto was attached to a vehicle which was now swerving back out into the remaining traffic. By now, the authorities would know about the incident. Indeed, London's anti-terrorist activity protocols had likely kicked in even as the first bullet exited the gun. Holstering his weapon again, Leister shifted his position slightly on the ladder to use both hands. This was *technically* safer, but not by much. *Certainly not given the speed we're doing now!*

At least they were travelling north and therefore away from Ashley's destination. Not that the driver should expect to get far, the gates at either end of the bridge had slammed closed, trapping the van. If the fellow had an ounce of sense, he'd have chosen a different route in the first place. Now his best option would be to surrender before NIT's defence drones arrived. Speaking of which, an unmistakable buzzing sound had reached Leister's ears. It was getting louder by the second. The grey haired BIINT operative grimaced, and yelled at his inadvertent abductor. "Pull over, you fool, and get out of the damned van! You need to lay down that gun before those drones open fire – this is your last

chance!"

He couldn't tell whether or not the young man had even heard him. Regardless, the vehicle suddenly altered course: zipping upwards and to the left as it accelerated. Glancing down despite himself, Leister caught a glimpse of two familiar faces pushing through the mob of members of the public fleeing the bridge. *Ah good, Byron and Lottie are here! Perhaps they can rein in those drones before – wait, why are we over the water?*

The driver must have supposed that his van's hover function would carry it to safety. It was a popular theory amongst non-engineers, but it was also, as the rapidly approaching surface of the Thames proved, wholly *inaccurate*. Leister, having already known this, did his level best to spring clear of the doomed vehicle. With no time for a properly structured breathe up, he utilised the first few seconds of his fall to empty his lungs by screaming at the driver. "You utter *lemming* in human form!"

He knew, even as he expanded his stomach and sucked in fresh air for the first stage of his attempted last breath, that he was out of time. A heartbeat more and his ribcage began expanding for the second stage. The central region of his lungs filled

LIVE, DIE, KILL

too slowly: the water had already claimed both van and driver, and now, dead slow and yet sudden, it slammed and split around the aged spy too, devouring him feet first. Left arm wrapped tightly across his chest and chin firmly tucked down to protect his neck, Leister pinched his nostrils shut with his right hand. Bubbles streamed past his eyes, and everything grew roaring dark.

Chapter Four – On The Outs

Bryce signed for the letter shortly after ten on Thursday morning. It was a plain cream A4 sized envelope; taped shut, and apparently crammed full with some sort of documentation. The return address caught her eye as she closed the front door. *Who could be writing to Greg from Nebraska?*

At that point, Greg was upstairs finishing off packing for tomorrow's mission. She didn't take it up to him right away. Fisher needed to go potty, and then Tessa wanted help with making posters advertising her missing APSU. Bryce, who might have taught art professionally by now if not for that one stupid mistake, spent a good ninety minutes drawing with both kids. By the time that they

finished, it was almost noon, and the kids needed lunch. Tessa had to have her new medication too – a single pale-yellow pill crushed up and hidden in her juice. There had been a blue one at breakfast, and there were three more scheduled for the rest of the day: yellow again for dinner, and two larger red ones for just before bedtime. Greg had said that it was better not to tell her about the pills. Bryce supposed that the specialist paediatrician he'd met with late yesterday afternoon must have advised that approach because of how phobic the girl was about healthcare. *Maybe we can explain it to her when she's a little older.*

At least it wasn't needles. Bryce hated those. She always had done; back when Greg first bought out her bail contract, he'd had to tie her down before he could administer any such treatments. She'd hold out her arm for him without even a murmur of complaint nowadays, of course, but that had literally taken years of training. *I don't even want to imagine ever forcing a kid to submit to regular shots!*

Bryce rubbed reflexively at the band-aid on her inner right arm. She and Greg were planning to use her recently approved secondary FIL to have

another baby together. Greg was confident that doing so would help to heal their relationship. He'd drawn a little blood last night to use as a baseline in charting her hormone levels. They'd start tracking her ovulation patterns together once he got home from space. In the meanwhile, there were prenatal pills in the medicine cabinet with Bryce's name on them. *When we get Rayne back, that's eventually going to mean that we'll have three aged under four at the same time.*

She was still adjusting to calling the baby by her official name again. Greg hadn't liked her accidentally saying Ellie-Rayne instead; back on Monday night in the ANI safe house. He'd allowed that it was just a bad habit that she'd picked up whilst in England, but even so it would confuse their kids, and grant Susan unnecessary influence. Because of how serious the consequences could have been, he'd had no choice but to discipline her. *I screwed up so bad! He really hates it when he has to make me cry.*

At least they hadn't had any further instances since then. Everything was going smoothly here in their new home. Greg made the rules, and Bryce followed them. That was right: it was how things

ought to be. It kept everyone involved safe and happy. She just needed to stop screwing up, that was all. *Oh, crap – that letter from earlier! I almost forgot to give it to him!*

She ran upstairs with it immediately, trying desperately not to start crying. Her fiancé had finished his packing, and was sitting at the computer in his home office, checking through his emails. “Greg, this came for you in the mail this morning! I’m really sorry I didn’t bring it up any sooner – I got distracted with taking care of Fisher and Tessa.”

He frowned at her as he opened the letter. “How long a delay was it, baby?”

“I...the mail came a few minutes after ten. It's twelve forty-five now; I've only just finished cleaning up after giving the kids their lunch. Tessa's had her pill too; in her juice, like you said. I'm really sorry, Greg.”

“Okay.” Hull pointed at a spot on the rug by his feet. “Kneel there and think it over quietly. We’ll talk once I’ve read my letter. *Breathe*, baby. Just breathe for now.”

Bryce dropped to her knees and bowed her head immediately. By the sounds of it, he wasn't

mad at her. The feel of his left hand starting to card through her hair a moment later heightened the reassurance. Suddenly, she remembered that nobody was watching Fisher and Tessa. "Greg, the kids are...!"

"Shush, baby. I'll tell Nadimiche to keep an eye on them, just this once." He rose to his feet, still holding the letter. "You stay put. No more talking for you today, unless it's to our kids, or to Nadimiche; I don't want you making this any worse for yourself. Tomorrow, *maybe*, if you're a really good girl until then, I'll let you speak to me before I leave."

He wasn't gone for more than ten minutes according to the clock on his desk. Bryce had to wonder if the latter object was running out of synch with actual time somehow, given how it felt to her as if an eternity had passed. Then his hand was once again on her head: the familiar nudge of his fingertips against her scalp triggering all of the right endorphins. *Everything's fine. I can stop thinking now.*

Clacher, having ambled out behind Moxton and Dobos to greet the latest arrival to the Lancashire safe house, blinked in surprised amusement when

he recognised the man who disembarked from the Cygnus Bello XII ERA. "Didn't I leave you tied up in a nightclub bathroom a few days back?"

BIINT's most recently hired operative glared at the bearded Irish spy. "I'm Greg Hull. I work for British Intelligence, Mr...?"

"Ah, so you're the theoretical peat bog fellow then!" Clacher grinned at the American. "It's Clacher, by the way, but sure just call me Brendan! We can't be expected to stand on formality after Friday. No hard feelings, I hope?"

Hull twitched, and turned his attention to Moxton instead, deciding to ignore the delighted looking smirk on Dobos' face. "Pembleton sent me up here to collect Nightingale. There was an incident in London about three hours ago now, on Chelsea Bridge. NIT accidentally chased a hover van driven by a suspected terrorist named Gilbert Reidy off the road and into the river. Leister was caught up in it somehow; he's unconscious in the ICU at BIINT headquarters. The doctors say it's touch and go for him. He was still damn lucky – Reidy didn't even make it out of the water alive."

His explanation had wiped all humour from the situation. Moxton turned on his heel and ran back

into the farmhouse. Dobos followed him; hissing something in a language other than English – probably swearing in Hungarian, based on what Hull knew of the younger man's background so far. As he recalled from Bournemouth, the still disgraced operative was close friends with Nightingale. *I wonder if it's wholly platonic between the two of them. His BIINT personnel file says that he goes both ways. Gender neutral could fit well with that. I bet I can do a better job of meeting his need for domination though. Someone sure needs to!*

Clacher interrupted his thoughts. "Is it anywhere even near to appropriate for you to be staring at his arse right now?"

"Hey, he's a good-looking young guy. I wouldn't mind getting to know him better." Hull shrugged, allowing himself to smile slightly. "Sorry if that bothers your sensibilities, Brendan. I thought Irish Intelligence prided itself as being open to diversity nowadays."

"Aye, we do. Sure, look at me, just for the one example!" Clacher beamed affably even as he punched Hull hard in the gut, catching the American by his suit lapels and dragging him close before he could collapse from the unanticipated

strike. His voice dropped to a soft growl as he continued speaking. "We *also* pride ourselves on our skills with information gathering. You see, I know all about why young Oliver is on the outs with BIINT. Your other self is a nasty wee shitbag, Greg, and you're no fucking better yourself." He threw in a second punch for emphasis, and then a third. "This is your one warning. I watched you the other night in that club, and I'm watching you now. I don't like what I'm seeing. Stay the fuck away from my new friends, or you won't be around *at all* anymore."

Shovel talk over and done with, he let Hull drop to the ground. Stepping over his still gasping opponent, the Irish operative nodded politely to the ERA's pilot. "Nice wee aircrafts these – I always think they look very handy! Can you keep yon discussion to yourself, maybe?"

The pilot, a wirily built woman with neatly bobbed brown hair and a distinctly Oxford sounding accent smiled from behind her goggles. "What discussion was that? Sorry, but I was busy checking my control panel!"

"As it should be, and cheers for doing such a grand job!"

It was another ten minutes before Spence

arrived with what looked like a hastily packed duffel bag. The non-gender glanced at where Hull was slumped. Clacher had manhandled him back aboard the ERA and buckled him into a seat, before claiming one himself. "I take it that you're both intending on coming back to headquarters with me?"

Clacher nodded. "Someone needs to represent Irish Intelligence given who was driving that van, and Jasmine *hates* flying, bless her. Don't be worrying if we've to stay overnight, by the way; I've a travel toothbrush and a few of those dehydrated wipes in my pocket!"

Stowing their luggage carefully first, Spence opted for the seat furthest from Hull, which put them in the one on Clacher's right. "What's wrong with *him* anyhow?"

The Irish operative gestured vaguely. "Ah, you know; just his stomach! He might have picked up one of those worms that you can find in undercooked pork. The ones that make rats run headlong at cats and so forth."

"Oh." Spence pulled out their phone. "He should probably see a doctor about that. I'm going to contact headquarters and ask how Cob's doing."

It's an hour-long flight between here and London, so there might well be news by now."

The ICU in BIINT's headquarters could really do with refurbishing, Lady Edith Pembleton reflected, as she entered the grim little waiting area. So could the rest of medical, for that matter. Several walls throughout the department still bore signs of damage from the November 2095 incident. Worse, there were cabinets and items of equipment pre-dating her time as an operative, never mind her twenty-seven years in command! *I must take a better look at our budget. These facilities shan't do.*

The spymistress had made such resolutions before. One day, she might manage to adhere to them. It would help considerably if her operatives could go for more than a week without say, almost sinking Venice whilst impregnating the wife of the Australian Prime Minister's senior advisor. Spence had successfully averted the potential tsunami in August of 2086, but BIINT was still paying out child support, albeit anonymously. There had been good cause for Leister to create the position of Housekeeping, and the role was no less important now. *Thirty-six years ago – it appears that I was*

correct when I told him that our operatives would never grow out of causing havoc!

The comatose old man whose bedside the gender fluid neurosurgical expert led her to seemed incongruous with his own achievements. Pembleton shook her head tiredly. "What are his chances for a decent recovery, Dr Hoy?"

Thirty-eight-year-old Morgan Hoy's current choice of shell looked distinctly feminine, with tightly braided bleached white blonde hair and bright pink lip-gloss. She pulled up Leister's notes as a 3D projection before answering. "Honestly, ma'am, it might have been kinder not to have resuscitated him. He's unlikely to regain consciousness. If he does, then we're talking severe loss of mobility, and probable brain damage resulting in difficulty with processing speech and language, and loss of bladder and bowel control. I wouldn't anticipate his ever living independently again."

Pembleton inhaled slowly. The smell of antiseptic prickled her sinuses. "That isn't acceptable. This man is important. He deserves a second shot at things, and he'll have it. I want his full neural map copied and transferred to a cloned body. Oh, and age the latter down a tad whilst you're at it – about

forty or so should suit. We might as well do this properly."

Hoy nodded. "I'll speak with Whitby and Rosa about the mapping immediately, ma'am. With your permission, I'd prefer if they could both assist with the procedure, as per Dr Jenkins' resurrection last year. The finer aspects of FBT are still above and beyond any of our more usual cloning techniques, and...!"

"Do as you see fit, doctor." Pembleton didn't have the time or the energy right now for one of Hoy's rambling discussions. "Just make bloody sure that it works."

Chapter Five – When To Give In

It had occurred to Campbell that his participation in Operation White Ferret had a great deal to answer for when it came to disrupting his life. The ghosts of the mission – an undercover operation that had seen BIINT put a stop to the illegal salvage of weapons and other such risks from Beaufort's Dyke by the late Sean Patrick Miller and his allies – just wouldn't seem to let him go. From the guilty debacle that had been Campbell's fake relationship with and subsequent marriage to Sarah Marie Tresweld, to the young son whom he'd inadvertently abandoned and almost never known of, to the current matter. Ireland, and her inhabitants, appeared set on haunting him. Frankly, he was about done with the lot of it. *Just how*

bloody long can these people hold a grudge anyhow?

He could see Clacher and Finn far enough too right now, if only that were an option. There were enough well-meaning opinions floating over his relationship with Spence already, without operatives from rival Intelligence agencies throwing in their penny's worth! Not that it was reasonable to expect spies to mind their own business, but still. Observing was one thing, actively meddling quite another. *Who does Clacher think he is; volunteering himself to tag along to London yesterday evening like that? He could just as easily have spoken with NIT and Pembleton via video, or by email. If Spence wanted company, then they would have said so!*

Campbell sighed and checked his phone for the tenth time since waking. It was now twenty past nine on Friday morning; almost fifteen hours since the ERA had departed from Lancashire. The non-gender still hadn't been in contact, not even with Heidi. Clacher had rung Finn late last night, with a recap of what exactly had happened on Chelsea Bridge, and the troubling state of Leister's health. Apparently, Spence had been holding vigil at the old man's bedside ever since getting there. *I hope*

someone thinks to remind them to eat and drink. On second thoughts, perhaps some company wasn't a bad idea after all. It's hardly as if that bastard Hull shall be of any support!

Medical had treated Hull's injuries with something that he suspected wasn't *really* just a simple arnica gel at all, and then kept him in overnight for monitoring. The doctor in charge of the morning shift cleared him for duty, but cautioned against engaging in any strenuous physical combat or heavy lifting for the next twenty-four hours. After sampling what passed for breakfast in BIINT headquarters' main canteen, he made his way back down to medical and into the ICU. Someone clearly needed to keep an eye on Nightingale. *I'd far rather it's me than that Irish guy; not that he should even have unsupervised access to this building anyhow.*

Spence was still sitting exactly where they had been yesterday evening: hunched over the edge of Leister's bed, with their fingers clenched around a fold of the blanket. From the looks of things, they hadn't budged all night. Someone had at least switched off the harsh overhead lighting in favour

of a single wall lamp by the doorway. Hull frowned as he took in the situation. "You know, I get the impression from his file that Leister here would want you to take better care of yourself."

"Go away, Mr Hull." The non-gender's voice was a low rasp in the dimly lit room. "This doesn't concern you."

He walked over to stand directly behind their chair instead. "Did I mention that I still use the anti-sub harmonic device that I told you about? My uh, younger self has his own copy of it too."

"Why should I care?"

"It means that you can't use your voice against me." Hull closed his hands over the thin shoulders in front of him; gripping even more firmly when Spence made to flinch away from the contact. "Stay put, Nightingale. We aren't done talking yet. Besides, you could do with a little one on one attention."

They squirmed in his grasp, wincing when that effort resulted in him pressing both of his thumbs into the soft tissue just above their collarbone. "Piss off...!"

Hull squeezed a little harder, smiling as he felt the non-gender quit struggling. "I'm glad to see that

you know when to give in, Nightingale. Trust me; a simple little neck massage will make you feel a whole lot better."

"So would my *stabbing* you."

"Yeah, but you won't. It would be unprofessional." Hull set to work properly then on the tense muscles beneath his hands. "I hear that Pembleton has ordered FBT for your friend here. That's something that he and I will have in common. Who knows, maybe we'll bond over it."

Spence scoffed. "You seem to have confused yourself with your newer version, Mr Hull! In case you've forgotten, you're merely the backup copy nowadays."

Hull made a vague sound in agreement. "I guess you could see it that way, for now at least. I'm already listed for another round of it though – FBT, I mean. Pembleton wants to keep me in prime condition now that I'm one of BIINT's essential workers. Good point about the backup copy. I think I'll arrange to have this body put back on ice just in case anything goes wrong with the process." He stooped forwards, murmuring his next words directly into Spence's left ear. "You know, it really is too bad that *Leister* doesn't have that option. I heard Dr Hoy

is concerned that we still might lose him.”

The non-gender snarled. “We’ve already lost him, you bastard! This isn’t him, this is just what’s left over! It’s only the machines that are keeping him alive right now. The *decent* thing to do would be to switch everything off as soon as everyone has said their goodbyes, not to bloody well copy whatever fragmentary soup is left of his personality into a fucking *clone*!”

Hull jerked back before they could bite him, but it was a close thing. More amused than shocked, he yanked the thin figure closer to him, chair and all; wrapping his right arm around their waist in the sort of hold which, if need be, he could claim as being closer to comfort than threat. His left hand closed around both of their wrists. “Okay, I think it’s time for you to let go of that blanket now, Nightingale. You’re obviously not coping with this situation. You need to get some rest. We don’t want to risk you making any *unfortunate* spur of the moment decisions while you’re in this kind of state.”

An unfamiliar sounding male voice came from the doorway then: smooth and deep, with the refined accent that came from a very particular sort of English education. “I rather suspect that they

shall be a good deal better at self-regulating once you let go of them."

Spence was already scrambling to their feet; twisting free even as Hull loosened his hold. Kicking the tatty old plastic chair clear, the non-gender ducked past the American and skidded to a halt in front of the newcomer. "Cob...? Leister, is that really you?"

The tall, long-legged man in the doorway smiled politely in response, his light blue eyes crinkling slightly at the corners as he dusted off the lapels of his cream linen dress suit. He was clean-shaven, and his thick, strawberry blond hair, although neatly combed, hung slightly longer than what was currently fashionable for men in their late thirties to early forties. "That's right: Maurice Jacob Leister; or Cob to my friends and an assortment of expletives to my enemies. In the flesh for the second time or at least so I'm told. It's been a frightfully busy sixteen hours for medical! Now, I'm terribly sorry, darling, but you appear to have me at a bit of a disadvantage. I don't believe that we've met?"

Hull moved forwards to introduce himself. "I'm Greg Hull...!"

Leister stepped neatly around him, ignoring the

proffered handshake. "If it's quite all right with you, I'd really much prefer to make the acquaintance of this delectable young – ah, young person? I'm presuming that your attire represents you being non-binary in some way."

Spence's ice blue eyes went flat, along with their intonation. "My name is Nightingale Spence, and yes, I prefer singular they. I'm not young; I turned forty last year, so don't waste flattery on me. It shan't work anyhow, given my training. I apprenticed under you from September 2081 to March 2084, whereupon you retired from Housekeeping, and emigrated to live in Dubai for the next twelve years."

"Well, that sounds as if we must have enjoyed a pleasant two and a half years as colleagues, at least! It's good to hear that I trained you properly in the handling of field operatives." Leister gave Spence a slight bow. "I'm afraid that the last thing I remember it was Christmas of 2067! The team here in medical tell me that I'm missing approximately thirty years of my memory, but that it may well come back eventually. Something to do with the transference of my neural map coupled with my having managed to drown. Good old Royston's

replacement – chap named Nathaniel Whitby? Anyhow, he tried explaining the process to me.”

Hull decided it was time to rejoin the conversation. “Were you able to understand anything of what he told you, Cob?”

The rejuvenated operative raised an eyebrow at his interruption. “I think that you’ll find that it’s only my *friends* who call me that, Gregory.”

“It’s Greg. And seriously, there’s no need for us to stand on ceremony here; I’m sure that we’ll be real good friends soon enough.”

Leister shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. I saw enough of how you were behaving towards Nightingale for me to know *that* much. On which note: goodbye Gregory. Try not to let the door stay open behind you when you leave the room.”

Spence watched as the fuming American stormed out of the room. “I suspect that you’ve just made an enemy there, old swan.”

“The price of being particular about one’s social circle, darling. And a little less of the *old*, if you please; I’m only forty-two!”

“That version of you might be.” The non-gender looked back at their mentor’s original body. “So...did they leave any of you in there? I mean,

are you a copy of your consciousness, or a straight transference?"

"Ah, yes, Edith mentioned that you'd likely be concerned about *that* aspect." Leister sighed. "First off, I definitely am still *me*. As I was saying, young Nathaniel tried explaining it. He told me that they'd felt it best to make a clean break of things on my behalf. It was growing the body that took the most time, whereas they had the consciousness side of things all done and dusted with in less than an hour! They essentially uploaded me from my former self into a special sort of computer storage bank. Did you know that there are computers designed specifically for doing that nowadays? Something called cryospace; I'm told that it's used for everything from online gaming to improving health and safety for medical staff. It's incredible stuff! Anyhow, they eventually downloaded me from the computer into this body, and left the rest of me on life support just in case anything went pear shaped while they were stabilising all of the neurological connections. Now that I've gotten the all clear, I intended to pull the plug, hence why I came in here in the first place."

"It would have been useful to have known all of

that sooner!" Spence smoothed the blanket out a little. "Why didn't anyone involved bother to read me in? I've been here since seven o'clock last night; waiting for them to either start the FBT process or let you go. Now it turns out that I was sitting vigil over an already empty shell!"

"I can hazard two guesses as to the reasoning, darling. The fellow who came in with you and Gregory works for Irish Intelligence, yes?"

"You mean Brendan Clacher."

"That's the name that Edith mentioned, yes. Anyhow, BIINT possibly doesn't want to risk him knowing that I'm alive just yet, in case it should turn out that there's a leak somewhere between his ears and those of the dissidents involved in my near demise. That would have meant that no one could risk discussing the truth where he might overhear. Since he apparently spent last night and most of this morning lurking in the corridor outside, they couldn't have told you."

"Oh." Spence nodded their understanding. "What's your second theory?"

Leister shrugged. "Perhaps they were simply afraid of getting your hopes up in case the process didn't work. You *did* wait by my bedside all night;

that rather implies that we're close to each other on some level." He smiled again. "And you were awfully pleased to see me when I first walked in here!"

The non-gender scowled. "Don't do that!"

"Do what, darling?"

"You're openly flirting with me. It's not appropriate. We're just friends nowadays, Cob. You have a steady girlfriend named Ashley Jenkins. She's twenty-seven, and she works for NIT as a biochemist."

Leister's expression was caught somewhere between intrigued and bemused. He took a long hard look at his original body before he spoke. "You aren't by any chance pulling my leg now, are you, darling?"

"No, I'm serious. You first met her when you returned from Dubai, and you've lived together in London since last May. You were even preparing to start a family, but unfortunately, she miscarried just before the end of her first trimester. The loss was only discovered during her twelve-week scan, so eleven days ago now."

Their mentor drew a sharp sort of breath, and sat down abruptly on one of the plastic visitors' chairs.

"Is Ashley...that is...how is she? Where is she? Please tell me that she's not been expected to cope *alone* at a time like this?"

Spence paused. "I'd honestly expected that she'd be here long before now herself, actually. Perhaps she's still recuperating. She must be at home, or else with her father and his partner. They'll be looking after her, you needn't worry."

"That's good to know, thank you, darling."

"You're welcome."

Chapter Six – Eggshells

Zoe Rusdyle was a woman on a Friday afternoon mission today. Striding purposefully into the safe house conservatory with Primrose balanced on her right hip, she found her target slumped on one of the wicker settees. "Craig Campbell, you are going to stop all this ruddy moping around right now! Nobody else seems able to say it, so I will: you're being a complete and utter pain in the bum, and we've all had quite enough of walking on eggshells around you. Spence will be back whenever they're back; there's nothing you can do to help from here in Lancashire. Put your phone away, give me Sam, and go take a flipping shower! Honestly, look at the state of you – it's already gone two o'clock."

Campbell blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

"No, I won't; for all of the reasons which I've just listed. Come on, up you get." The freckle faced artist held out her left hand. "You can lean on me if you really need to, but I'm sure you can manage. I've brought wall chalk for Sam and Primrose to play with."

"Uh, but...!"

Zoe sighed and set her daughter down on the tiled floor, handing her the box of chalk. "Look sweetie, there's a great big white wall over there! Go and show Sam how to make it pretty, that's a good girl. Sam, you go and play with Primrose, good boy."

"I hope you know that I'm not helping to clean any of that off the wall afterwards!" Campbell scowled as he clambered to his feet. "And I wasn't moping!"

"Why would it need cleaning off? They're expressing their creativity! I expect that wall shall look far nicer than it ever did before by the time they've finished." Zoe ignored Campbell's denying having been moping. "You and Sam missed lunch earlier. I'll get him a snack if he needs one, but you'll just have to wait until dinner. Heidi's got a chicken and cheese bake thing in the oven right

now – it smells delicious!”

Campbell couldn't help smiling at her enthusiasm. “I'm glad to hear that you're getting along with her better now.”

“Oh, I never said *that!*” Zoe wrinkled her nose slightly. “She's a great cook, but it's obvious that she doesn't approve of Primrose and my being here. Honestly, none of them does. I expect it's because I'm not a spy. Well, that or they think I'm trying to steal you away from Spence.”

The former spy frowned. “That's not...!”

“Not the case at all, yes, I know, but apparently you have a reputation for taking up with horrible evil man eaters or some such. Which is just *stupid*, really, because it takes at least two people to cheat, and given how you're this world-famous spy who everyone's frightened of, it hardly seems likely that you were *coerced*.”

“Now hang on a minute!” Campbell finally managed to get a word in edgeways amid her rambling. “What makes you say that everyone's frightened of me?”

Zoe shrugged. “Isn't it obvious? Just look at the way that nobody else around here dares pull you up about your behaviour! It's as if they expect you

to snap at any moment and run amok, or something."

"Oh. I see." The irony of this conversation caught Campbell. "But you're completely fine with lecturing me, eh?"

"Well yes, of course I am. I'm not in the spy cult. I'm *normal*." Zoe flapped her hands in his general direction. "On which note: shower, now; before you end up teaching poor Sam any bad habits about personal hygiene!"

"Yes ma'am!" He saluted her, grinning when she pretended to swat at the back of his head on his way past. He was still smiling as he exited the conservatory. *First Tanya this time last year, and now Zoe – I'm beginning to suspect that spending time living in this safe house does something to so-called normal people!*

Nadimiche had dyed her hair *purple*.

Hull glowered at the steering column in front of him. It was nine thirty in the morning here in Miami, and the ANI agent wasn't having the best day so far. Today, presuming that his damn hover car ever agreed to start, he and Senior Agent Volker would leave for Deimos Base to help assess the alleged

aliens found on Ceres. On a personal level, Hull was counting down the seconds to seeing his youngest child again. *No way am I leaving her with Susan! One way or another, Rayne's coming home with me.*

He'd pulled strings with his enigmatic boss to see to it that Nadimiche got to go along as an intern. Sure, it wasn't even close to the career in marine geology that she wanted, but it would look good on her personal record, and it kept her well away from PID's questionable interest. The eighteen-year-old dampener couldn't hope to go back to college any time soon, not with them trying to scoop her up. This meant by default that she needed other options. He'd gotten her a major head start on those with this frankly golden opportunity. Nadimiche *knew* that. She'd even seemed grateful. Yet how was she choosing to present on her very first day at work? Why; with freshly dyed bright purple hair, of course, because teenagers were *stupid*. Hull reminded himself of the latter truth for the sixth time in the two and a half hours since his young charge had appeared at the dining table late for breakfast and eager for compliments about her bold new look. *Don't yell at her, Greg. She*

wasn't being malicious with this stunt; just eighteen. Don't be like either of your dads over this. You're better than that.

He was sure as Hell *trying* to be anyhow. Today however, was really pushing his buttons. It wasn't only the purple hair situation, or that Nadimiche had forgotten her backpack and had to run back inside for it, or his continuing nightmares about Cassandra, or even the car's last-minute betrayal. On top of those, Bryce still seemed rattled by her time in England. Yesterday's mistake with the letter should have been a red light for him about that, especially coming so close on the heels of Monday night's need for an impromptu punishment session. His precious angel was floundering. She'd even struggled to keep to their family's carefully determined breakfast routine today: setting out the wrong kind of cereal and therefore denying herself the chance to talk to him before he left Earth. *At least I spotted it in time to intervene! Why do we even have that stuff in the house?*

It was one of the more popular mainstream brands aimed at kids. Perhaps the team who'd stocked their kitchen pantry ahead of the move simply hadn't known that it wasn't supposed to be

included with the groceries. Perhaps Nadimiche had snagged a box along with that horrific dye when she'd tagged along to the local convenience store with him yesterday evening. *It's my own fault. I should have kept a closer eye on her shopping.*

Focusing on the positives in all of it, Hull supposed that if nothing else, the hair dye had given all three kids a lesson in natural consequences. You randomly decide to trash your appearance, well then, you can expect people to laugh at you. Even the people who love you – or maybe especially the latter group, if any of them were toddlers. Back indoors, he knew that Fisher was still chattering excitedly about funny hair, albeit it interspersed with the occasional use of the word pretty. *Guess we'll need to break out the picture books about only using kind words to express our feelings again.*

It had been good seeing Tessa smiling a little though. The medication prescribed by Dr Hunt had already levelled out the worst of her mood swings; thankfully just in time for her social worker flat out vetoing the proposed video chat with Zahn. If anything, the young Martian had been presenting

a little *too* quietly for the last couple of days; most likely due to shock triggered by the abrupt removal of her APSU. She wasn't even bothering much with her faith. Honestly, that only served to confirm Hull's feelings about the robots in question. Kids got excessively dependent on them. As for grown adults lauding the things as perfect protectors, there just weren't words for *that* level of stupidity. *Wake up, people! Don't trust the welfare of your most precious gifts in life to a bunch of heavily armed spy bots disguised as cute animatronics!*

The car's engine finally hummed into life just as Nadimiche appeared with her backpack. Hull huffed out a sigh of relief. With luck, it wouldn't quit on him between here and work. To be on the safe side, he'd leave it with ANI Miami's engineering team for a full auto inspection whilst he was off planet. *Bryce shouldn't need to drive anywhere while I'm gone anyhow. The store is in walking distance for extra groceries – the kids will enjoy the exercise. If need be, she can call a cab, or worst-case scenario, an ambulance.*

Cerise Aldermere tapped gently on the door of what until yesterday had been the spare bedroom.

She'd promised her partner Paul Benedict that she would keep an eye on Ashley for him while he was at work. "Ashley, honey, do you want another cup of tea or anything? I usually do some yoga in the afternoon before collecting Jamal-Kristoff from his school. You can come downstairs and join me if you'd like."

The door flew open, revealing a flustered looking Jenkins still buttoning up her blouse. "I just checked my phone whilst I was getting dressed after my shower and I found a missed call and a text from Byron – it's Cob, he's been hurt! He's been in a coma in the ICU at BIINT headquarters since yesterday afternoon! I need to go and visit him...!"

Cerise held up her hands soothingly. "Okay, honey, just slow down for a minute. We'll go see him together, I promise, but you need to keep it clear in your head that you *broke up* with him."

The younger woman blinked. "I know *that!* I still want to see him. He'd do the same for me."

"I know he would. Cob's great that way." Cerise picked her phrasing carefully. "It's just that if he's in a coma, then chances are that somebody will need to make decisions on his behalf for a while. Do you still want to be that person if the doctors

ask, or would you rather I tell them to pick someone else?"

Jenkins shook her head. "I don't know. I suppose it isn't really appropriate for me to offer, all things considered. Still, who else is there?"

"Spence will probably do it. They've known him longer than any of the rest of us, well, aside from Doris and Byron, that is." The freelancer led the way downstairs to the coat rack. "Thinking about it, I guess old Lady Pembleton might have something to say too. Come on – we'll take my car. I can go pick up Jamal-Kristoff afterwards."

From what Leister could see, BIINT's main canteen hadn't changed much in the preceding thirty years. The tills were sleeker looking, and the people dressed a little differently, but aside from that, it could easily have been 2067. Even the food was familiar. He peered curiously at his portion of lasagne: wondering if the ratio of garlic and onion to other ingredients was still off. *It certainly smells as if it is.*

Setting down his cutlery, he turned his attention back to the thin non-gender sitting across from him at the table. "I appreciate your giving me this tour

of the facilities, Nightingale, but perhaps we might be better fed elsewhere. I remember several delightful restaurants in this part of London. I'm sure that at least one of them must still be in business! Why don't we go out to one or other of them, and I shall treat us both to a proper dinner?"

They shrugged. "We can do that if you'd prefer. I just thought that you'd rather stay here at headquarters until you were fully reacclimatised."

"On the contrary, darling: I feel confident that my adjustment process can only benefit from such an excursion." He rose to his feet. "Perhaps we can discuss how best to broach the news of my rejuvenation to Ashley. From what I can make of this mobile phone contraption, she hasn't yet attempted to contact me. I could be wrong, of course. The touch screen is a tad fiddly."

His companion gave a surprised sort of laugh at his complaint. "Sorry – it's just that you were living in Dubai when mobile phone technology was first reintroduced back in 2087. By the time that we met next, you were an expert. I missed seeing you learn how to use one along with the rest of us. To be honest, I'd never pictured you struggling."

Leister smiled. "Well, you know how it always is

with swans, darling! It only appears effortless on the surface."

Try as he might, he still hadn't managed to shake off the intense feeling of attraction that he had towards the non-gender. He knew from what they had told him that it was inappropriate, and so he really was *trying*, but surely, there had to be some reason for it! Their earlier phrasing kept coming back to him. *We're just friends nowadays, Cob – so does that mean that we were more once; perhaps before I moved away to Dubai? Lord only knows that I wouldn't have done anything that drastic without a damned good reason! Perhaps we were intimately involved, but then it all went wrong between us. Yes, I expect that's it. Nightingale could come straight out and say so though; I wonder why they don't.*

He was still pondering this mystery as they exited the canteen together. A tall operative, who looked to be somewhere in his mid to late fifties, with black hair and hooded eyes, strode up to Nightingale. "Housekeeping, oh good, you're here! Is it true? They're saying that Leister is in the ICU! I just got off the phone with Ashley; Cerise is bringing her here to see him."

Nightingale nodded. "He was targeted by one of the late Sean Patrick Miller's lot yesterday afternoon; an attempted assassination, from what NIT saw happen. They both ended up in the Thames. Cob was the only one who survived. He's fine now though; in fact, medical has already released him. Sorry, I ought to introduce the two of you. Paul Benedict, this is...!"

The man – Benedict – waved off the attempt at social niceties. "I can't stop to chat, Spence. I need to let Ashley know that she didn't accidentally drive Cob to his death by breaking up with him!"

Leister's throat went dry. He turned away from the tail of the conversation: pretending to look at something on his phone. *Ashley finished things with me before I ended up in the river!*

Behind him, Nightingale was hissing at Benedict. "She dropped him? Why?"

Benedict's reply hid teeth in its soft tone. "She lost the baby, Spence!"

"So did Cob!"

"Yes, well my primary concern is Ashley. I'm her father, not his, and right now she's worried sick about him!"

The non-gender scoffed. "Then why wasn't she

there at his bedside during all of this?"

"She wasn't there because she didn't bloody well know what had happened!" Benedict caught himself then, and drew a deep breath before he continued. "It's my fault. I told you; they broke up yesterday. She rang me in tears from a taxi, just after their split, and after everything else that she's been through recently, I told her to switch her phone off for a while to give herself some space. She missed the call from NIT. Now, if you'll excuse me, I promised that I'd call her back once I learned anything further."

He strode past Leister and off towards the lifts; evidently not recognising the other man's new body. Leister stared after him for a moment. Then he turned and looked at Nightingale. "I suspect that I oughtn't to try contacting Ashley just yet after all, darling."

They nodded curtly. "That's likely correct."

"Well, at least now we know, I suppose." Reaching a decision, Leister tucked his phone back into his pocket. "Come along, darling! I promised to buy us dinner, so that's what I'll do. Where might you recommend these days?"

Chapter Seven – Even The Kinky Ones

The ANI cruiser *Ithaca* broke clear of Earth's orbit at two o'clock on Friday 17TH May 2097, bound for Deimos Base. Aboard her, in the shared quarters assigned to them and Nadimiche, Hull and Volker were deep in conversation. Their recently acquired intern had already gone exploring, excited about her first time in space. Volker had handed her agent a data chip the moment that the door closed, instructing him to review the contents immediately.

Hull was pacing the cabin; still struggling to process what he had learned about Cassandra. "I can't believe she survived! That girl must have the luck of an entire *bagful* of cats, ma'am! Do we have any clue as to *why* she took off to London, or

why BIINT kept it quiet until now?"

"Miss Shelby's motivation was not stated. I am given to understand that the delay in reporting her presence there was merely due to paperwork." Volker, sitting cross-legged atop the foot of her bunk, studied her agent's facial response to the blatantly false excuse. "It is unlikely that any other explanation shall be provided to us, Agent Hull."

"Great, so we're expected to just accept whatever crap they deign to offer us! It's nice to know where we stand with our supposed *allies*."

"Your pacing is heightening your tension." Volker gestured for him to join her on the bunk. "Perhaps a guided meditation session may help you to regain your emotional equilibrium."

Hull sighed, smiling ruefully at the psionic. "Thanks for the offer, but I've got a funny feeling that it might not produce the kind of outcome you're intending, ma'am."

"If you are referring to the ongoing low-level sexual tension between us, I can assure you that there shall not be any inappropriate conduct on my part, Agent Hull."

He almost choked at her response. "Okay! Don't let anybody from Employee Welfare and Resources

hear you saying stuff like that, ma'am! Not unless you really want to spend six months in one of their Improving Conduct Via Increased Social Sensitivity classes!"

She raised one slender eyebrow at his warning. "The theory behind the ICVISS scheme has largely been debunked."

"Sometimes I wonder how you managed to make it to the rank of Senior Agent, ma'am." Hull paused then, struck by a disturbing memory. "Uh, please tell me that this isn't about to turn out to be another incidence of possession? I mean, you're really you right now, right?"

Volker nodded calmly. "I am. Your concern is only rational, given our previous experiences. You may engage the psionic nullification emitter in your phone if it will be of any reassurance."

Hull shook his head. "I'll take your word for it, ma'am. The field would render you unconscious, and I wouldn't like the rest of our colleagues here on *Ithaca* to get the wrong idea about me."

"I have been unconscious in your sole presence before now without any mention of inappropriate conduct." She shifted position; moving gracefully from Half to Full Lotus. The thin grey fabric of her

jumpsuit showed every athletic line of her body. "If you do not intend to join me in meditation, then perhaps you can find some other activity."

He swallowed. "Actually, I wanted to ask for your advice about a personal matter. I need an objective opinion on how I should respond to some unexpected correspondence."

"Proceed."

"Ha, not the best choice of phrasing, given what it's about, ma'am." Hull opened his briefcase and took out the letter from Nebraska. "I'm sure you remember Cassandra's cousin, Callista Meadows."

"The young woman who accused you of attempted sexual assault during our stay in ANI's New Tallahassee facility." Volker studied the thick sheaf of paperwork that her agent handed to her. "This is a marriage contract."

"Yeah; her parents sent it to me, in lieu of financial remuneration for the damage caused to my reputation, or something like that. I guess ANI's legal department must have gone ahead and pressed charges for the false accusation, or maybe just for wasting their time. It arrived yesterday." Hull gestured at the document. "Miss Shelby never bothered to mention that her aunt and uncle are

members of a fundamentalist anti-feminist cult! Mind you, she still hasn't told me that she isn't dead yet either, so maybe she's just inconsiderate like that."

Volker continued reading. "It would appear that they believe their daughter to have wronged you with her – and I quote – *wanton and lewd behaviour*. They then go on to blame her cousin for *leading her astray with wild stories of city life and college*. The wording used throughout is extremely concerning. Agent Hull, if this document is genuine, then you may well be Miss Meadows' best hope for a normal life."

"Her parents seem to believe the opposite of that, ma'am! Why else would they have made this offer to me? I mean, they're *literally* offering me legal ownership of their daughter, for as long as I deem to keep her!"

"Mr and Mrs Meadows *also* believe that girls and women should not receive a formal education. It seems reasonable to surmise that their opinions are at best poorly informed."

"Huh, so it pisses you off too then, ma'am?" Hull sighed as he sat down next to her on the bunk. "Good to know that I'm not alone there. I thought

maybe I'd missed a memo about basic human rights no longer being required, or something."

The red-haired psionic set down the marriage contract. "The law in North America does not currently stipulate that equality of the sexes must, or indeed even *should*, be upheld. You know this to be true, Agent Hull. If it were not, then the system which enabled you to already purchase the bail contracts for both Ms Lenard and Miss Prado Wang could not function."

Hull blinked. "Are you criticising me or the system, ma'am?"

"I am stating the facts, nothing further." As usual, Volker's expression revealed nothing. "If the situation revealed by this contract has caused you to examine your previous life choices, then that is outside of my control."

"Well, I definitely *feel* criticised."

"I am not responsible for your feelings."

Hull snorted. "Yeah, okay, no; sorry, ma'am, but I call bull on that! You know *exactly* the kind of influence you wield. I'm just never sure whether or not there's some complex long-term strategy involved in the way that you mess with people's heads."

"Are you insinuating that I am engaged in a personal vendetta of some kind, Agent Hull?"

"Actually, the word I'm more inclined to use is *insurrection*, but let's just put a pin in that for now, ma'am. What should I do about this damn marriage contract?"

"That is something that only you can decide. You have been engaged to Ms Lenard for several years now, Agent Hull. Presumably, you wish to continue that relationship?"

"Well, yeah, of course I do! I love Bryce!"

"Then why did you engage in flirting with Miss Meadows in the first place?"

He looked down at his feet. "I guess because she was young and hot, ma'am? I mean, at the time I thought that maybe I could introduce her to Bryce on a temporary triad basis."

Volker shifted out of Full Lotus and rose to her feet. "Using complex phraseology does not change the meaning of your excuses, Agent Hull. You attempted to seduce that girl because you found her physically attractive and wished to engage in a casual sexual encounter with her. I would also hazard that learning of her sexual inexperience was pleasing to you, perhaps even arousing. Now your

actions in New Tallahassee have had consequences, and you are panicking about the resultant impact on your status quo."

Hull stood up, not liking to grant anyone the height advantage over him in this kind of discussion. "I'm *not* panicking, ma'am! I'm genuinely concerned for Miss Meadows' wellbeing if I decline the contract, but I won't ditch Bryce for her."

"Then perhaps you should consider using her parents' beliefs to your advantage. Demand that they alter the proposed contract to one of indentured companionship instead of marriage. Given their views on equality, they are extremely unlikely to refuse. You can then continue your relationship with Ms Lenard, without any risk to Miss Meadows of being compelled to return to her parents' control. Helpfully, there is no legal requirement whatsoever for you to engage in any form of sexual activity with her as an indentured companion, which frees you from the risk of inadvertently adding to her no doubt already considerable psychological trauma."

"When you put it that way, it sounds simple." Hull sighed and moved to the room's computer terminal. "I'll contact my legal team about altering

the contract. I need to check in with them again about this whole mess with Susan anyhow."

Volker nodded, and returned to her spot on the bunk. "I shall be here meditating if you require any additional guidance."

Leister's still unremembered former partner had sent him flowers to mark his recovery. The bouquet was waiting for him at the front desk of his apartment building when Nightingale brought him home after dinner on Friday evening. To the uneducated eye, it was a strange sort of mix, with purple and red sweet peas, pale blue hydrangeas, and pink carnations. Leister smiled as he translated the petals: *goodbye; thank you for a lovely time; thank you for understanding; I'll never forget you.* That settled things then. He and the mysterious Dr Ashley Jenkins were indeed finished. *No one sending a bouquet like this has doubts over ending things!*

Nightingale pointed at the envelope attached to the bouquet. "She's sent a card too. That's her handwriting."

"I expect I'd best open it then, darling. Could you hold these for me, please?"

Handing off the flowers, he slit the envelope with his left index finger and opened the get well soon card within. The message, written in neat blue ink, was brief:

So glad to hear that you're already out of medical! Sorry I didn't visit you – I tried to once I heard, but you were gone by then. Hope you're doing okay. Take care please, and thank you again for everything, Ashley x

It only confirmed what the flowers had already told him. Tucking the missive away inside his jacket, Leister took back the bouquet. "I'm not even sure that I have a vase for these."

Nightingale showed him how to access the lifts. "This one takes you to the penthouse level. That's where you live, and where NIT have arranged to meet with us later. To my knowledge, you own a number of vases. I certainly shan't judge if you'd rather *not* keep the flowers though."

"I appreciate your candour." Leister walked back to the desk, and handed the bouquet to the attendant. "Please do whatever you'd like with these, darling – the combined scent isn't quite to my tastes."

He rejoined Nightingale and entered the lift with

them; inwardly wondering which flowers one might send to such a person, were one ever to dare attempt such familiarity. It would require something with a little more edge to it than mere roses, for a start. *Orchids, perhaps – yes, black orchids, tied with a dark grey ribbon, to leave no doubts to what I am, and what I'd expect from them! I could have the florist add gardenia foliage and maidenhair fern for the remainder of the message. Jonquils would likely translate as much too needy, and besides, they wouldn't look quite right next to orchids.*

It was nearing seven as they entered his home for the first time in Leister's current memory. He looked about him with interest at the trappings of his former current life. "Do we have time for coffee before our guests arrive, darling?"

Nightingale nodded. "Byron said to expect them at half past eight. I'll go and sort the coffee whilst you take a proper look around. I know your preferences anyhow, and it might take you a while to figure out how to work the controls on your coffee maker."

Leister arched his right eyebrow. "Is it anywhere as deucedly awkward as the phone, darling?"

“Worse, in my opinion, but you always seemed to like it well enough.”

He left them to it, and explored the rest of the penthouse apartment; putting his skills as a spy into full use as he studied where the man he had been until yesterday had lived. It was a large, bright sort of home, with high ceilings and rather a lot of glass. Two of the four spacious en suite double bedrooms appeared intended for guests. A third contained nursery furniture, and oh, wouldn't *that* need removing post haste? Moving on before he could risk dwelling on such sad events, Leister found the main bathroom, and then his study. *Oh good – my book collection has grown! I expect that I can be surer than average of enjoying all these new titles.*

Finally, he entered the master bedroom. It was much the same in shape as the other three rooms, but larger, and with a full bathroom and dressing room attached as opposed to the facilities in the previous en suite areas. Half of the wardrobes and other storage had been given over to his now ex-partner. *I shall have to arrange to have her things sent along to wherever it is that she's living now.*

He paused at the sight of a familiar black suitcase, housed inconspicuously on the shelf

above his dress shirts. Smiling, he lifted it down and set it on the bed to open it. Yes, there it all was – his kit, almost exactly as he remembered it, save for a handful of new items. The condoms, for example, were a different brand, and he could only hope that the brightly coloured device in the right-side corner had an instruction pamphlet! *Nothing appears to be missing, at least, although I might need to see about replacing the buckles on a few things.*

His best quality collar had only improved with age. That was the value of good leather for you. Tracing his fingertips across the embroidered swans with reverence, he recalled how the Italian artisan responsible for creating the item had boasted that the collar would likely outlast its owner. *Hmm, come to think about it, that statement has certainly turned out to be prophetic of her!*

Putting everything back where he had found it, Leister made his way downstairs again, and into the kitchen. “How’s the coffee making going, darling?”

Nightingale, a pale wraith wrapped in practical black twill, handed him a cupful. “Careful, it’s hot.”

He sipped the coffee appreciatively. “Thank you, darling. It’s perfect.”

They shrugged. "I told you: I know your preferences."

"All of them?" Leister couldn't resist. "What; even the kinky ones, darling?"

"I've bought you a few little things for your suitcase over the years, if that's what you mean. One of the perils of taking part in **unDer**'s annual Secret Santa." The response was deadpan. "You've taken care of me on occasion too, emotionally, anyhow. I'm not keen on physical, and you never pushed me on it."

"I'm sure you must know that I don't go in for ignoring limits, darling."

"Then don't start now, Cob."

He inclined his head slightly. "Very well, darling: just friends it is. Now, what else can you tell me about the NIT team who we're meeting with this evening?"

Chapter Eight – Take Care Of You

It was four hours into the *Ithaca's* two-day journey to Deimos Base, and Volker had just exited from the cabin to visit the galley for her evening meal when Nadimiche got the official email confirming her parents' deaths. The young dampener went to pieces instantly. Sobbing, she stumbled away from the cabin's computer terminal to collapse on Hull's bunk, huddling into him in search of comfort. "ANI finally finished doing the forensic checks...! My mom and dad were both...they...I'm never going to see them again, Greg...!"

"Oh, my poor baby girl; come here!" Abandoning his tablet, Hull wrapped his arms around her, easing them both up into a sitting

position. "There, there, it's all going to be okay. Bryce and I will take care of you, I promise."

She kept crying. "They were the only family I had left! Mom was found abandoned when she was a baby, just like me, only she never got to be adopted, because nobody wanted a psionic. Dad's parents died when I was still little."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Hull stroked her hair; absently wondering whether the purple dye would look any better if he could persuade her to try styling it differently. Maybe she'd need to go for a sleek bob instead of her gorgeous natural curls. *It would be an awful shame for her to have to give those up though.* "You aren't alone, Nadimiche."

"I will be though, won't I, in six months; once my bail contract runs out with you." The teenaged sniffled. "You and Bryce won't want to have to keep on paying out for me forever! You've got your own kids to think about."

Hull hugged her a little tighter. "As far as we're concerned, you're one of those kids. There'll *always* be a place with us for you."

"You...you mean that...?"

"Cross my heart, kiddo." He would have to check whether eighteen *always* counted as being

too old for an official adoption. Presumably, there were exceptions for vulnerable teenagers like Nadimiche. There *had* to be; it was hardly as though the girl had the capacity to live independently yet! *Even if she did, she's much too precious to risk in the wild. Besides, Nadimiche Lenard-Hull has a nice ring to it.*

Leister had rather enjoyed the evening debriefing. The two NIT agents, Lottie Drake and Byron Caulfield were both excellent company, and quite obviously consummate professionals. He still remembered Byron as the lanky fourteen-year-old son of his old friend Mortimer Caulfield, struggling to learn how to manage his extraordinary olfactory system. It was gladdening to discover that both Mortimer and his wife Emma were still alive and well: retired to Oxford and exchanging cards and gifts with Leister at birthdays and other such occasions.

The Irish operative, Brendan Clacher seemed a decent enough fellow too, happily trading anecdotes with Leister and Byron once there was nothing left to discuss about the Chelsea Bridge attack. Admittedly, the taller sorts of tales had crept

in well before the end of the evening, but that was inevitable in their circles, and Nightingale and Lottie had very kindly humoured them. *On balance, it wasn't a bad way at all for one to get back up to speed!*

He smiled as he closed the front door of his apartment behind his three departing visitors. "I think tonight has gone swimmingly, don't you, darling?"

To his surprise, Nightingale was busy shrugging into their coat. "Yes, you're adjusting well so far."

"Are you off somewhere?"

The non-gender nodded. "My address in Bournemouth is still too high a risk, so I'll bunk down at headquarters for tonight. I'm going back to the safe house in the morning."

Leister frowned. "You could sleep here."

"I don't like to impose."

"Nonsense, darling; it's no imposition! I have more than enough space for guests. There are a few items in one of the spare wardrobes that look to belong to you anyhow."

They hesitated: contemplating his offer. "I've stayed with you on previous occasions, but we knew one another better then. Besides, I left my

overnight bag back at headquarters. I don't have my toothbrush."

"There's a veritable hamper of guest toiletries in the main bathroom. Help yourself to whatever you need, darling." He held out his hand for their coat. "I'll go and hang that up for you. Don't argue. We're friends, and friends don't let friends wander off alone late at night when there are murderous terrorists attempting to target them."

"It's not *that* late." Still, they surrendered their coat. "It's only just gone eleven."

"Well, I didn't say that it was *bedtime*, darling. You can teach me how to work that fancy home entertainment system. I want to see what my music collection is like nowadays."

He didn't want to be here alone, not yet. The apartment was still alien to him, and full of another man's ghosts. Leister wasn't at all sure if he would keep the place on in the longer term. He missed his old home: a narrow, terraced house up in Earl's Court, with oak panelled walls and elegant antique lighting. Nightingale had said earlier that as far as they knew, he still owned it. Whilst the property lacked a balcony, the heavily converted cellar space more than made up for *that!* One could

bring a sub home and well and truly look after them down there. Better yet, it was perfect for storing wine. Then again, apparently, he didn't drink alcohol anymore; a sea change left over from his time in Dubai. *What in Hades was I thinking?*

Drake nudged her partner gently with her left elbow as the two NIT agents exited the hotel where Clacher was staying for the night. "So – ready to talk about what it was that you and Spence were murmuring about in Leister's kitchen earlier?"

Caulfield sighed. "They still weren't sure if they wanted to inflict their self on me as anything more than friends."

"That sounds normal enough. After all, you only started discussing it as a possibility a fortnight ago."

"I know; that's what I said too! Well, not the part about *inflicting*, obviously: that was their choice of words, not mine." The older agent shook his head. "Someone somewhere taught Spence some very wrong things about relationships, Lottie."

"Hmm. Do you suppose it was Campbell?"

"In part, yes, but not all of it. No, there was someone other than him; someone worse, if I'm deciphering what's between the lines correctly."

The augmetric frowned. "Did Leister ever mention anything about that? I seem to recall it being his idea to introduce the two of you."

"Ah yes, back during our investigation into Dr Finch's murder, and what came out in the wake of that about she and young Mr Campbell! Not that Leister came out and said as much then, of course." Caulfield opened the front passenger door of his hover car for Drake. "And not that he recalls *any* of it *now*."

"Obviously, Byron, but did he mention the *other* thing?" Drake waited until her partner settled himself behind the wheel to continue. "You know; about Spence possibly having had a dodgy relationship at some point."

"Aside from Campbell, you mean."

"Yes, of course aside from...hold on! Byron, are you saying that Leister came right out and called Campbell dodgy?"

Caulfield started the ignition. "Just the once, Lottie, and you didn't hear it from me. It was back at the start of February this year. Leister and I had stopped off at a bar with my dad while he was in London for the day. You know how the two of them are close friends. Anyhow, Dad asked him if he was

still in touch with either of his old apprentices, and whether Spence had gotten, as he put it, *any flipping better at picking them.*”

“So, your father knows Spence too?”

“Not in person, but apparently he'd heard a fair bit about them from Leister back in the day.” Caulfield paused in his story to lean out of his window and wave his parking ticket across the automated scanner for the exit of the hotel's car park. The barrier rattled open as he continued. “I said that I certainly *hoped* they were good at picking now, since they'd just moved away to Bournemouth with their significant other.”

His companion winced. “Had you been on the brandy? You always get a bit mouthy on that.”

“Alas, yes. Leister wasn't drinking, of course, but perhaps the fumes had gotten to him, because that was when he said that *he* reckoned that Spence could do a damned sight better than Thomas Campbell's dodgy excuse for a son.”

“He said that?”

“He did indeed.” Caulfield pulled out carefully into the late-night London traffic. “He was annoyed about a couple of things that Campbell had done to be honest, but primarily his unacknowledged

marriage to Sarah Marie Tresweld. In Leister's book, a decent fellow doesn't let the honey trap go that far and then abandon the mark. It was a tad awkward really."

Drake whistled softly. "And then Campbell went and cheated with Vasnetsova and proved him right."

"And the rest is history." Caulfield smiled sadly. "As is my attempt at romancing Spence – it seems that Campbell's managed to claw his way back into their life, and I'm afraid that I draw the line at dating someone who's so enmeshed with their ex that they're not prepared to tell him about me in case it *upsets* him. Especially not when their reason for not wanting to upset him is likely directly connected to his destructive capabilities."

"There's nothing wrong with having healthy boundaries, Byron." Drake leaned across and pecked him lightly on the left side of his face. Her nose bumped against the leg of his sunglasses. "Sorry it didn't work out between you."

"So am I, but still, at least we've broken it off on civil enough terms to stay friends."

Campbell tapped one handed at the screen of

his phone as he limped downstairs with Sam in his arms for breakfast early on Saturday morning; frowning when the online emergency florist's menu he was scouring revealed that the business in question didn't offer wisteria in any of their bouquets. "Damn!"

Zoe bustled past him in the direction of the safe house's dining room with Primrose once again balanced on her hip. "What's the matter now? More spy stuff?"

"No." He followed her to the table. Breakfast had clearly just been set out: there was a covered tureen of creamy porridge for the two toddlers and four large platters of freshly fried eggs and perfectly cooked bacon ready for everyone else to take from. Jacamar and Honeyguide were grizzling contentedly in their travel cot over next to the window. He overheard Heidi and Moxton discussing toast as they approached from the kitchen carrying the tea and coffee things. "I want to order some flowers for Spence before they get back today, but I can't find wisteria!"

"Then just buy them something else instead. It's not the end of the world, Craig!" Zoe finished settling Primrose into her highchair. "Here, let me

help you with Sam. Tanya, can you pass us over a couple of bowls of that porridge, please."

"Yeah, sure." The only other person already at the dining table looked upset about something as she complied.

Campbell smiled at her as he took his seat. "Is anything the matter, Tanya?"

She shrugged. "Just stupid ex-best friend stuff! I found out late last night that Kassie...ugh, sorry, I mean *Kassandra* isn't dead after all. She called me from some fancy club she was at in London. Your dad was with her. I guess he likes hanging out with snide little queen bees or something. Hey, did you know that apparently only *immature* people still use nicknames at our age?"

"Oh. Congratulations on your friend's continued health, at least?" Campbell, not having heard about the attack on Desdemona Falls yet, hadn't even known that the young handler was grieving. "And I'm going to guess that apologies for my father are in order too."

"Ugh, at least it's not *me* he's hooked up with!" Tanya shuddered as she loaded her plate with food. "Like, no offence, but your dad's *kind* of a sexist creep, Craig."

"Yes, I know." Campbell shook his head resignedly. "It's embarrassing, but I'm afraid that by this stage, he's too old to change his ways."

The rest of those present in the safe house arrived at the table then, and the conversation shifted to things more appropriate for a family breakfast. Campbell smiled; glad to be back among true friends. *Now, if only I can prove to everyone that I've learned from my mistakes!*

Spence awoke slowly for once, their usual instincts lulled into inactivity by the familiar steady heartbeat rumbling against their right ear. It took a moment for them to register that the decadent red silk sheets weren't those of their mentor's guest bedroom. Another heartbeat went by before the reason for the latter anomaly came back to the non-gender. *A nightmare, sometime in the small hours; and a bloody awful one at that for me to have...oh...Cob...clone or not, I went straight to him, just like I used to...!*

They hadn't kept up that aspect of their relationship with Leister after moving to Bournemouth. It hadn't seemed fair on Craig, who really didn't get the Scene *at all*. Spence, having

chosen to respect his preferences, had distanced themselves from their mentor and occasional Dom, and opted not to replace any of the kit lost in the wake of their supposed death last year. *Of course, the moment that my back was turned, the twat cheated anyhow. That's how my life goes – I always bloody well pick the wrong one! At least Craig didn't hurt me physically, and Byron was decent enough all round, for as far as things got between us. Perhaps I've learned something since – no. No, this isn't the time to think about any of that.*

Beside them, Leister stretched languorously. “Nothing untoward happened between us last night. Before you fell asleep, you wanted me to confirm that to you this morning. Now, I'll just go and put some coffee on for us before I take my shower. See you downstairs once we're both dressed, darling.”

“Thanks, old...hmm. I suppose that I need to think up a different term of endearment.” Rolling clear of the bed, Spence wandered back to the guest bedroom to make their morning ablutions and tidy up the bedding there. *Cob shall no doubt prefer to see to the master bedroom himself; he's never liked to have anyone pick up after him,*

especially not guests! I might just sit quietly and let him make us both breakfast as well. I've rather missed eating those shirred eggs of his.

Downstairs, whilst Leister busied himself with their request for eggs, Spence checked in with Heidi via video chat. "Good morning, Miss Hedturner. Is everything still in order there?"

The au pair nodded, angling her phone so that Spence could see their infant twins drowsing contentedly in their travel cot. "Good morning, Spence! The babies are just now down for their nap after bottles, and everyone else is doing okay! Oliver, he is teaching the older three how to make the hiding suits for the sniping or just perhaps for the bird watching, whichever."

Spence privately decided that they might need to pick someone other than Dobos as a babysitter in the longer term. "Well, everything here in London has levelled out. Mr Clacher and I shall be back at the safe house in time for lunch today. Cob's coming with us. Pembleton says that he might as well start as he's likely to continue."

Heidi was confused. "I thought that he was in the coma?"

"He was, but they managed to transfer his

consciousness into a replacement body via FBT." Spence quashed the urge to shudder at the thought of how close their mentor had come to dying. "The process took about thirty years off, in total: physically and mentally. He has a fair bit of catching up to do."

"Oh, so he is having the memory problems? That is very sad! I will make him something extra good for lunch today!" The au pair paused. "And Dr Jenkins...?"

"They broke up shortly before the attack on Chelsea Bridge. She's staying with her father and Ms Aldermere for the time being."

"Okay." Heidi nodded her understanding. "I will pass the news, and we will see you later today then! Have a safe journey here, all of you."

"Thank you, Miss Hedturner. Goodbye."

Chapter Nine – Extra Special Things

Barnabas Horatio Jasper Lackey – albeit that he was thinking about changing at least a *part* of this name – would cheerfully admit to having often yearned for a brother. In some other life, one where he and his twin sister had experienced fewer dark rooms and sharp objects, this might simply have been down to the normal frictions between opposite sex siblings. As things stood, the rivalry between the pale faced eleven-year-olds had a far more toxic edge to it. There was chillingly good reason as to why the two received such close supervision, and their still favourite *game* remained banned.

Overall, Barnabas much preferred his new pseudo brother. Although still a couple of months

away from turning eleven, Philip Bingham had already seen and read enough violent media to know random interesting things about the ways in which people could die. His pretend mummy Carol hadn't minded him learning about that, which was *brilliant*, since it meant that Phil didn't so much as flinch whenever Kathryn went off on one of her moods. In fact, the younger boy often muttered something about John having been nastier even on a *good* day. The latter claim made Barnabas wonder why the older Bingham son hadn't come to live with Aunty Val too. Perhaps it was because John and Phil hadn't been siblings by blood; perhaps the former's birth relatives had turned up and claimed him. Phil still didn't appear to have any of those. Then again, perhaps Aunty Val had simply refused to take on responsibility for any additional children.

Soft footsteps outside one of the covered conservatory windows interrupted his musing. Pausing in threading leaves onto his share of the nylon mesh fabric that Uncle Oliver had provided to the three of them earlier on this morning, Barnabas glanced at his sister and his pseudo brother. The three children were alone for once, since the adults

apparently reckoned that they got along well enough to trust them to their own devices for a little while. "Did you both hear that?"

Kathryn nodded. "There's someone creeping around out there. We ought to see who it is; just in case they need dealing with."

A thrill of excitement went through Barnabas at her suggestion. "We could lay a trap!"

Phil sighed. "We *should* tell a grown-up."

Kathryn got to her feet. "They're all too busy at the moment. Craig said so; he said when he left us here that we weren't to bother anyone."

Barnabas felt torn. He did so enjoy laying traps, and it had been absolutely ages since they'd got to do it last! On the other hand, that action meant siding with Kathryn over Phil. Worse than even that though, by *not* going to a grown-up, then even if they all stayed right here in the conservatory, they were *Doing What Craig Had Said*, which, in Barnabas' opinion, was by default *A Bad And Terrible Thing*.

He didn't like Craig. He never really had done to begin with, but the man's repeated abandonment had still grated. The first time that he'd left them, he'd made Kathryn upset, but at least he'd found

Aunty Val again. The second time that he'd left them, he'd made Aunty Val get all stressed over being on their own with the babies, but at least he'd brought Heidi back with him, and *she was wonderful*. Sam was okay too, for a proto-toddler, as Aunty Val would say. The third time though – well, that time Craig hadn't exactly *left* them so much as Cob had thrown him out, but whatever he'd done to deserve *that* had to have been really bad! Kathryn kept on insisting that it was all Carol's fault, of course. His twin was still dotty about Craig, despite him leaving them. Perhaps it was because she was the man's favourite. *Barnabas had certainly never gotten a giant teddy bear from him! Actually, he never buys me anything. Aunty Val does, and Cob does, and so do Uncle Oliver and Uncle Darren, and Aunty Tanya sometimes too, even though we did get off on the wrong foot! Heidi can't really afford to buy us things, but she makes all those lovely cakes and biscuits instead. Besides, she gave me a hug. Nobody else but Cob ever even thinks to ask if I need a hug. I miss Cob. I'm glad that he's going to visit us today. Perhaps if we're most awfully good then he might agree to let us live with him again, once his memory gets better.*

Phil appeared to share Barnabas' view of *Doing What Craig Had Said*. "Shouldn't he still be here? I thought Mr Dobos asked him to look after us while we finished crafting."

Kathryn glowered at both of them. "Yes, but then after he left, *Craig* said that he had some extra special things to see to before Aunt Val gets back! Honestly, weren't either of you stupid boys even *listening* to him?"

"Not really." Phil shrugged, setting down his piece of half-finished ghillie suit. "I suppose it shan't hurt for us to go and take a quick look around. We'll tell someone right away if there's anything dangerous though, right?"

"It's very nearly lunchtime anyhow." Barnabas had just checked the time on his phone. "Perhaps if we're lucky we'll get to see the ERA landing this time! I'm sure that it must be almost here by now."

His sister brightened immediately. "Heidi said that Cob was coming too! I want to see what he looks like now! Do you suppose that he at least remembers his recipe for hot chocolate?"

Barnabas hadn't considered that yet. "I'm not sure. We know it anyhow, so we can teach it back to him if need be!"

Phil had only ever seen the man in question from a distance. "Is he nice? I mean, was he nice, before he lost his memory? Craig never seemed to like him whenever he and Mum...whenever he and Ms Vasnetsova talked about your family."

His words failed to line up with Kathryn's shared affections for both men. She snarled at him in response. "Shut up, Philip! You don't know anything! Cob's lovely – I can't believe that Barnabas thought that you and John ought to have gotten to live with him!"

Barnabas shrugged. "It was only because I thought that Aunt Val mightn't have the time!"

Phil looked mutinous, but said nothing. Deactivating the security alarm, the three children made their way out into the yard. They blinked as their eyes adapted to the strong sunlight. Craig had closed all the conservatory's venetian blinds before he left. It slowly dawned on Barnabas that perhaps none of the other grown-ups even knew that he had left them alone yet. An all too familiar sinking feeling began in his stomach. *Craig's being wrong in his thinking again. He oughtn't to have left us! Why does he have to keep on leaving us?*

Phil nudged his shoulder a little. "Are you alright?"

You've gone a horrid colour – almost like in that episode of *Captain Mars* where the Marines are attacked by space vampires!"

Then there were hands, a man's hands, black gloved and tight gripping hands, closing from nowhere over Barnabas' wrists: twisting his arms up and around behind his back until the pain of it drove him down onto his knees. A voice, male, and sounding a little, but not exactly, like Mr Clacher's, hissed in his ear. "Don't you fucking *move*, do you hear me, aye? I'll break both of your fucking arms, so help me!"

A second man, his face hidden behind the dark wool of a balaclava had caught hold of Kathryn by her hair; the barrel of his handgun jammed into her mouth. "The same goes for you, my wee bird!"

For a moment, Barnabas thought that perhaps his pseudo brother had managed to get away during the scuffle. Then a third masked and gloved intruder moved into his line of sight, hauling a still struggling Phil by the scruff of his neck. The newest man sighed. "Ah, come on now, lads! They're only *kids*, for fucks sake! Liam, take your gun out of her mouth, at least."

Kathryn's assailant grinned behind his balaclava:

his mouth and eyes the only features visible. "Sure, it's good practise for her, Stevie!"

"Don't even fucking joke about that, Liam!" Stevie had raised his own gun now, and strangely, he was pointing it at the man still holding Kathryn. "There's a line, boyo, and you're crossing it right now!"

Barnabas felt his joints twist slightly further, and choked back the desire to speak. The man behind him gave a satisfied sort of grunt at the faint sound. "This wee shite here learns fast enough anyhow! Bring the other pair – we'll find somewhere quieter to interrogate them. That old byre over there would do the job."

Stevie and Liam stared at each other for a few more seconds before moving to obey Barnabas' assailant. Liam didn't bother to take his gun out of Kathryn's mouth, but Stevie appeared to be letting that argument go for now. Barnabas, making himself go limp as he was dragged back onto his feet, wondered if and when any of the three men would notice that his sister had pocketed one of the three knives on Liam's belt. *Shall it be before or after she slices them?*

It was cooler inside the byre, but there were

enough clear panels dotted throughout its roof to provide light to see. Barnabas found himself tossed into a corner along with Phil. The dusty concrete floor added a fresh layer of pain when he slammed into it. Stevie stood nearby, covering them with a different gun; this one a semi-automatic energy based heavy assault weapon. Neither boy was stupid enough to chance moving with it trained on them.

Barnabas' still unnamed assailant, who appeared to be the man in charge of all of this, nodded curtly to Liam. "Okay, but do it over there, behind that partition. We don't need Stevie here having a conniption!"

Liam grinned again and dragged Kathryn out of sight. "Don't wait about on us, lads; we're probably going to be a while!"

Stevie grimaced. "You shouldn't let him do it, Davie! For fucks sake, she's only a wee bit of a thing – sure she can't be more than ten or eleven!"

Davie growled at him. "You shut up and do your job! As for you two wee shites, I want you to listen to her screaming. Liam's not a very nice man, you see. But don't worry: the sooner that you pair cooperate, the sooner I'll call him off."

Phil vomited. Barnabas stared down at the resultant puddle of halfway digested bacon and eggs as a high-pitched squeal of pain came from behind the partition. He only *just* made out the whisper of the ERA's engines over it, and that was even though he'd been listening out for the latter noise for the past several minutes now. "You shan't get away, you know."

Davie yanked him onto his feet by his elbow and slapped him hard enough across the face to knock him straight back down. "Did I say that you could fucking *speak* yet? Get over there and shut your mouth! Liam, will you crack on with it already? It's gone awful quiet back there, boyo!"

The screaming, a terrible, inhuman sound, began again, echoing through the byre. Stevie spun away from the two boys, glaring at the man in charge. "Tell him to *stop*, Davie! If for no other reason, then because at this rate *somebody* out there's bound to fucking well hear her!"

Davie scowled and stomped off to speak to Liam. Stevie huffed out a slow sigh and turned back to resume covering the boys. His eyes widened as Barnabas swung the rusty old billhook that he'd snatched from one of the nearby shelves up into his

abdomen. An agonised gurgle slipped from the man's lips as he toppled forwards, dropping the gun in favour of attempting to hold in his guts. "Huhggh...!"

Barnabas kicked the assault weapon well away from Stevie as the background screaming intensified. "I did warn you that you weren't going to get away. It's not *our* fault that *none* of you are very nice men."

Behind him, Phil had scrambled to his feet. "Barnabas...your sister...we should...!"

"Yes, I suppose that we ought to at least *try* to keep these three alive." The gore coating the billhook glistened as Barnabas raised the tool to his lips. "Aunty Val and the others shall probably want to question them. Do you suppose they were here looking for Craig? I mean, I thought they *sounded* Irish, but it's not very nice to presume things like that."

The other boy gulped. "I...you just...that's not Kathryn who's screaming back there at all, is it? And *don't* put that near your face; it's gross! You might catch something!"

Barnabas shook his head as he lowered the dripping billhook. He beamed proudly at his pseudo

brother's speed of deduction. "Of course not; she sounds *completely* different to *that!*"

"I...how did she get away from him, though?"

"Oh, I expect he must have put the gun down so that she could scream, or something equally stupid. She already took one of his knives without him noticing." Barnabas led the way towards the partition. "Kathryn, it's me and Phil. Are you done with playing slices yet? I heard the ERA arriving whilst you were getting started on the first of your two, and we really ought not to be late for lunch."

The noise lessened slowly: shifting gradually from screaming to a mixture of ragged moaning and sobbing. At last, his twin stalked out into view, tossing the borrowed knife aside into a musty pile of straw. Her face was starting to bruise from where Liam had forced the gun between her jaws. From the looks of it, the weapon had damaged one or other of her teeth when he did so. Blood dripped from her mouth, merging indivisibly with the rest of the gore spattering the front of her pale pink sundress. "Let's hurry then! I want to see Cob, and find out what Craig got for Aunty Val, and put my dress in the wash before the blood sets!" She glanced back at the partition almost wistfully.

"Perhaps we can play with them again later, though."

Barnabas shook his head. "Aunty Val and the rest shan't let us. They worry."

"They worry...!" Phil shuddered, his voice pitching as if he were fighting back laughter, or tears, or both. "Barnabas, you should probably leave that rusty hook thing in here too. People...uh...some people might get the wrong impression if they see you waving it around."

"He's not wrong, Barnabas." Kathryn dabbed at her mouth with the back of her hand, frowning when it came away bloody. "Bother! Do you suppose that I shall need the dentist?"

Chapter Ten – Directly Connected

The *Ithaca* was now ten hours into her voyage. Curled up in the bunk assigned to him for what counted as Friday night's sleep cycle, Hull fantasised about what Volker might be like in bed. *No, better yet – on her feet; stripped naked and chained to a Saint Andrew 's cross. Damn it, I knew I should have just put mine in storage until Tessa's social work team finished inspecting us!*

He let his mind wander to the time in the van, when he'd had the chance to run his hands all over Volker. She'd felt slim and hard; the usual dedicated runner's build. He honestly wouldn't mind forcing her to drop a few of her daily miles and eat a little more in the way of healthy fats instead of plant-based protein. His boss at ANI was

healthier than many other vegans were but there was still some room for improvement. *I mean, if I ever do manage to get her strung up, then I don't want her to pass out mid-session!*

Hull grinned into the dark in the direction of where Volker was currently meditating as he recalled her words from earlier today. The ongoing tension between them, as she called it, was a whole lot of fun in its own right; so much so, that he suspected that acting out his fantasies of dominating the psionic would ultimately prove anticlimactic. *It's just as well that I had time to use the facilities at GETEC to copy her neural map during our last run in with Howard and his goons.*

He was planning to upload that copy into his Perfect10 whenever he could next earmark enough time to use it. You could do things to one of those machines that nobody should ever even *attempt* to try out on a human being. Then, if necessary, you could make the Perfect10 forget all about what you'd done to it and start again from scratch. Eventually, Hull supposed that he might even figure out a way to bend the real Senior Agent Volker to his will without spoiling their dynamic. *Eh, or you know, maybe just stick with breaking the robot*

version as and when my inclinations get the better of me. That way I can keep on enjoying the best of both worlds. Maybe it'll even count as me engaging in therapy for work related stress. Come to think about it, I could probably claim expenses.

He glanced down at the unfortunately still purple haired teenager asleep in his arms. Nadimiche hadn't wanted to be alone after the news of her parents' deaths. To be honest, Hull hadn't tried very hard to convince her otherwise. He wanted the chance to strengthen her attachment to him. In addition, if he was going to be stuck sharing quarters with Volker, then the young dampener was as good as any psionic nullification device. *I wouldn't want to chance having my fantasies accidentally be revealed to our Level 12 pyrotemporal boss via my dreams or something. Even if I do sometimes suspect she feels the same way about me.*

As the unfortunate Stevie had feared, everyone in the safe house had heard the screaming. The four adults who had the most combat experience – having left the others with Quincy to guard the house and the non-combatants therein – were

already on their way to the byre with their weapons drawn as the three children exited its doors.

Some five hundred metres away, Spence peered out of one of the just landed ERA's windows at the scene. "Something's happened. We'd best prepare for trouble."

Clacher took point, stun pistol at the ready. Leister, flanking the Irish operative nodded to Spence and Hull as they disembarked. "Nightingale is right. One of us ought to stay here and protect the pilot from whomever our colleagues are hunting. We might need emergency transport."

Hull took up position in the lea of the ERA's landing ramp. "I'll do it. It's painfully obvious that none of you wants me watching your backs yet."

He hadn't failed to notice how Leister didn't refer to him as darling. Evidently, Hull had somehow made a poor first impression back in the ICU. He had plans for fixing things, but for now, his main priority was getting their pilot on side. The Oxford accented aviatrix was the only person to have witnessed Clacher's assault on him on Thursday, and Hull fully intended to see that bastard penalised for his attempt at intimidation. *If need be, Warrant Officer Turner here will be getting to know*

me on a very personal level. I'm sure I'll find the means to make her see sense eventually. That, or bury her career. Either works.

Whatever was happening over at the byre, it appeared to be evoking some interesting responses from his colleagues. From the looks of things, the three kids had gotten into some kind of accident – Hull could see what looked like blood on two of them; the Lackey twins, he realised. *On second thoughts, given what I know about those two, I guess it's a little premature to presume that the word accident applies!*

Campbell was crouched down, talking earnestly with little Kathryn. As Hull watched, the expression on the former spy's face changed abruptly at something the girl had said. The man stumbled upright and backed away from her in obvious shock. He turned away, but in the instant before Hull lost view of his features, he looked revolted. Hull raised his eyebrows a little. *What the Hell did Little Miss Plays With Knives Instead Of Dolls just say to him?*

Nightingale had briefed Leister thoroughly on the people whom he would meet here at the safe

house, something that was already proving to be of benefit during the current crisis. Nodding to the shaven headed fellow whom he recognised from BIINT file footage as Daniel Moxton, he moved forwards to speak with the children. "I think it's best for you three to wait here with me and Daniel whilst your aunt and the others secure the men you've told us about. Perhaps Craig might pop back indoors and let everyone there know that the situation is in hand."

Craig nodded and limped away without as much as a backwards glance. The children's assorted reactions were telling. The Bingham boy, Philip, looked scared, and perhaps even a tad angry. Beside him, Nightingale's nephew Barnabas was blank faced and bloody handed. His sister Kathryn looked stunned initially, but swiftly began hyperventilating when Campbell gave no indication of altering his course. "W-why's h-he g-going away from m-me...?"

Leister dropped to his knees and began cleaning her face with his handkerchief. "It's best that someone familiar take the news, darling, and Craig is the only one of us grown-ups who can't help with any of the heavy lifting that might be

needed out here. You'll see him again later."

She blinked, taking in his appearance and voice. "Cob...? Is this your new body?"

"Yes, darling, it is. I'm afraid that I have rather a lot of catching up to do, but let's start with the important things. What flavour of ice cream do each of you like best? Daniel, I include you as well, of course."

Barnabas' face lit up at the mention of ice cream. "I can't choose between triple chocolate fudge and honeycomb, so you always buy me a scoop of each whenever we get cones! Kathryn only ever wants strawberry, but that man hurt her teeth with his gun, so she can't have any ice cream now anyhow, can she, Cob? That's what you said before: if you have bad teeth, you can't eat ice cream. It's why we have to brush them and not bite the dentist!"

Leister smiled at him. "Quite right, Barnabas, but let's not presume the worst right off the bat, eh? Kathryn, darling, might I look at your teeth?"

She nodded, scowling at her twin. "Two of them were getting loose anyhow, Cob! Those are supposed to grow back, aren't they?"

Daniel fielded the question, tight jawed and

ashen faced beneath his nonetheless blessedly unshakable professionalism. "Milk teeth – they've both been shedding them in reverse order to standard. Spence says they did the same thing. The family dentist finds it intriguing, but says not to worry about it."

"Rather lucky, given the circumstances." Leister took out his spare handkerchief and scrunched it into a ball before handing it to Kathryn. "Here you are, darling: bite down on this to stem the bleeding. From what I can see, your adult front teeth aren't quite ready to make their debut yet, and the ones that have come through at the back seem to have avoided any damage. We'll have a dentist look at them for you too, just to be on the safe side."

Barnabas edged closer, nudging at Leister's right arm. "And then we can all have ice cream, can't we, Cob? Even Phil, although I don't think he *likes* ice cream, but still, he lives with us now too, and he might be sad if we leave him out."

"I do so like ice cream!" Phil had apparently reached his limit on stoicism for the day. "John just never lets me have anything nice!"

"Oh." Barnabas tilted his head in thought. "But he lives with a different foster family. Aunty Val said

so. He shan't be going with us."

The other boy threw up his hands. "I know! That's why I can *finally* have ice cream in peace!"

An odd look of surprise coupled with sudden peace flickered in Daniel's eyes as Phil complained about his erstwhile lack of ice cream. Leister recalled that the handler had unwittingly witnessed the lifelike child shaped drone – John – exploding during an MRI scan, and not long ago either, according to Nightingale's account. Doubtless, the fellow had been agonising over the varied levels of awfulness involved. Learning that Phil hadn't enjoyed his supposed brother's company was likely a relief.

Things had gone tellingly silent inside the byre by now. Nightingale – no, they clearly preferred that others call them *Spence*; he ought to acknowledge that – emerged first, just as Phil and Daniel finished agreeing that they would both prefer to have mint flavour. Leister rose to his feet and greeted the non-gender. "I trust that everything is in hand, darling?"

Spence nodded. "Very much so, Cob; the others are just tidying up a little – something about giving me the day off to be with family." They turned to the children. "You've already told us some of what

happened here today; the parts in the byre. Would anyone like to explain what happened *before* you all ended up in there with those...those men?"

The three children recounted the rest of the incident. It was a cobbled together sort of a narration, as was often the case with witnesses of any age, especially when questioned in groups. Still, the gist of things soon became clear: young Craig had abandoned his post as babysitter for reasons yet unknown, and then the children had stumbled onto some intruders. Leister couldn't help but feel reminded of the time when Craig's father, Thomas Campbell, had wandered off mid mission in Cuba; a selfish, spur of the moment decision which had cost the injured operative he left behind in the hotel her life. *I'd hoped until now that young Craig might turn out to have taken more after his mother.*

Brendan's arrival interrupted his musing. The Irish operative walked straight over to the three children and scooped them all into a collective bear hug. It took him a moment or two to speak, but when he did, it was with a perfectly level voice: carefully gutted of any extraneous emotion. "Okay. You listen to me now, you three. None of you did *anything* wrong in there. Any fucker ever says

otherwise, you tell them to come and speak to your Uncle Brendan about it."

The boys both seemed relieved, but Kathryn hung her head and sniffled into his shoulder. "Can Craig come and talk to you? I don't think he likes me anymore, but I don't know why!"

Spence seemed to wind even tighter at their niece's complaint. "That's *not* why he went quiet just now, Kathryn. If anything, he was barely holding himself back from finishing what you started. On which, note, I'd best go and find him. Mr Moxton, perhaps you might like to check on how Mr Dobos and Mr Jolley are getting along with things in the byre. I'm sure that Cob and Mr Clacher can manage the children between them."

"Of course we shall, darling."

Gregory wandered into earshot not long after that, with the pilot of the ERA in tow. The American looked oddly smug about something. "It looked as if you guys had everything under control, so I thought I'd bring Warrant Officer Turner here along with me and let her clarify a few things. Maybe she should start with how it wasn't really her flying the ERA on Thursday evening. What was it you said had happened to you, Turner? Oh yeah – a nasty bout

of sudden and unexplained food poisoning, that's it."

Turner looked wretched enough beneath her goggles that Leister half wondered if she weren't still ill. She swallowed hard before speaking. "I rang in sick that very morning, honestly I did! I know the protocols; it's not as if I just dropped off the ruddy map!"

There was a very odd expression on Brendan's face now, Leister noted, as the Irish operative stepped clear of the children. "If it wasn't you piloting us that evening, then could you maybe be explaining to us how it was that she looked and sounded *exactly* like you?"

Gregory, drat the fellow, was all but smirking. "Yeah, that's what I asked her too. Well, that, and how someone *claiming* to be WO Jenny Turner managed to waltz into the hangar at BIINT's headquarters and *not* get caught out! It seems that our unfortunate aviatrix didn't just take sick. What was the other piece of bad luck you had on Thursday?"

The pilot flinched. Her voice had dropped to a near murmur. "After I stopped throwing up, I found that I'd misplaced my security lanyard."

Leister lost rather a lot of the sympathy that had been gathering for her. "Are we to understand that you didn't report that fact, warrant officer?"

She shook her head, unable to look any of them in the eye. "I would have done eventually, I promise! It's just that I'd dropped it a few times before whilst getting changed in the locker room at the hangar; the safety release on the strap keeps giving out. I thought it wouldn't do any harm not to report it until I was completely sure that it was actually gone – the paperwork for those things is mental, everyone knows that!"

There was a muttered oath, and then Brendan led the children off towards the house. "I doubt I've any polite words for this, Cob! I'll get these three on in for a wee cup of tea."

Leister waited until they had vanished through the door to the conservatory before asking his next question. "WO Turner – did you, or did you not ultimately follow official BIINT protocols and *report* that you had even *temporarily* misplaced your security lanyard?"

Gregory nudged the miserable looking woman. "Go on, Turner; answer the man."

She gulped. "No, sir, I did not report it, but you

have to understand; when I got in on Friday morning, it was lying on the floor in the locker room of the hanger just as I'd thought that it might be, so...!"

Leister interrupted her frantic attempt at self-justification. "Shut up. There's nothing that you can say which would even begin to excuse such a dereliction of duty! Thanks to your unforgivable lapse in protocol, someone was able to assume your identity, enter a secure government site, take control of a heavily armed, stealth capable aircraft, and then use it to travel to a top-secret location! Today, less than forty-eight hours later, a team of three known terrorists made their assault upon that same location: this safe house. Do *not* begin to tell us that those events aren't likely to be directly connected!"

Chapter Eleven – Just A Kid

Nadimiche couldn't think *why*, but there was something about the famous commander of Deimos Base that felt *safe*. The young psionic had experienced similar feelings around Greg upon first meeting him too; it was why she had risked naming him as her point of contact during her second arrest. The latter decision had proven smart enough, and Captain Kennedy was literally a *superhero*, so the definition of safe person. *Maybe I'm developing some kind of empathic abilities as well as my dampening talent!*

Much more likely, of course, was that she'd gotten lucky regarding Greg, and the two of them coincidentally wore products that used the same base notes in their fragrance. That would probably

be Senior Agent Volker's reaction. Deep down, Nadimiche knew that it made far more sense than her own silly daydreams about learning how to sense other people's intentions and feelings. Only a tiny handful of psionics ever developed multiple talents; all of them super powerful, like Volker herself. *People like me don't get to be that special; no matter how much we could do with the boost to our social skills.*

She'd knew that she'd never been what was classed as good around people. She was too blunt; too sensitive to the wrong things. Micro expressions and other subtle stuff tended to go straight over her head. Although, that just made it even *weirder*, really; not the way in which she'd felt so sure that she could trust the stranger who liberated her from Carson Howard, but that she'd turned out to be *right* about him. *Bah, it was probably just a one off!*

Her mind was likely just playing tricks on her where Captain Kennedy was involved; buying into the whole *Captain Mars* thing. The Martian woman hadn't acted even remotely heroically in the briefing that had just finished. To be fair, Greg hadn't either. In fact, the two of them had barely gotten through saying hello before the argument

over custody started seeping into their conversation! Senior Agent Volker had somehow kept steering things back onto the right track without needing to set anything on fire. Nadimiche privately thought that the older psionic was *awesome*. She was still glad to scurry out ahead of Greg and Captain Kennedy when they, Senior Agent Volker, and Kennedy's second in command, Gunnery Sergeant Woods, hung back at the conference table to discuss things above her clearance level. *They're totally fighting about the baby again in there. I guess they'll only agree once the chickens have teeth!*

One of the younger female Marines had gotten assigned to wait here outside the conference room with her. Private Alonzo, who had dark olive skin and fierce eyes, looked to be in her mid-twenties. She was a good bit shorter than Captain Kennedy and Senior Agent Volker, but she still had a couple of inches on Nadimiche. This seemingly equalled permission for her to poke fun at the younger woman. "Saw you checking out our base commander in there!"

Nadimiche almost choked. "Eskize m?!"

"Huh? I don't talk whatever freaking Earth

dialect that was, kid."

"Haitian Creole." The young dampener felt herself blushing. "It's from – it was from my dad's side of things. He and Mom both died in the Miami outbreak."

Private Alonzo looked away. "Oh – sorry for your loss then, kid. I still only speak English and Spanish."

"That's okay." Nadimiche sniffed. "It just means *excuse me*."

"So, you were what, apologising for crushing on Captain Kennedy?" The Martian woman grinned. "Not judging, but I just don't think she'd really go for an itty-bitty little kid like you."

"I *wasn't* crushing on her!" Nadimiche took a deep breath. Thanks to her time at college so far, she knew of one sure-fire way to make people stop teasing her about how young she looked, and Private Alonzo *did* look kind of hot in that uniform. Besides, nobody else was in this stretch of corridor just now anyhow. It couldn't hurt to try, right? *Screw it – she already said that she wasn't judging me, so maybe she's guessed anyhow! Maybe she even likes me. I mean, come on; why else would she even have been teasing me about looking at Captain Kennedy in the first place?*

Standing on her tiptoes to reach, she kissed the still smirking Marine full on the lips. "Still think I'm just a kid?"

Private Alonzo blinked for almost a full second, and then nodded. "Uh, yeah, I do, and a stupid kid, at that! You could get yourself in a real bad situation pulling stunts like that with strangers."

Nadimiche scowled. "I'm not stupid, or a kid – I'm eighteen, and if it wasn't for PID being such creepy assholes, then I'd be back at college right now, studying marine geology!"

"Huh, good for you, I guess." Private Alonzo glanced at the door of the conference room. "You know, they'll probably be a while. Do you want to try making out for real?"

"Okay." Nadimiche tilted her head back a little. "I'm not seeing anybody back home right now, so it's not cheating or anything."

"Yeah, me either." Private Alonzo grinned and pulled her close. "Come here and let me show you how to *really* kiss!"

The Martian's spit was sticky: her tongue tasting both sour and too sweet all at once as, not content with kissing, she pressed on to second base. This was all completely cool, in Nadimiche's opinion, or

at least right up until when Private Alonzo's left hand snaked lower between their bodies. *Woy! Sa a twò vit! I should... wait, how do you tell someone to stop without being mean to them?*

It dawned on her that she had absolutely no idea, especially not with Private Alonzo's tongue still invading every recess of her mouth! Her previous experiences, making out with girls she liked on campus or even just with random girls on a dare at parties, hadn't gone as far as this. Pressed up against the wall, Nadimiche tugged sharply at Private Alonzo's uniform, trying to pull out of the kiss so that she could speak; failing when the Marine's right hand left her breast and wrapped around the back of her head instead. *Sa pa bon! I don't even know her first name yet!*

One thing was clear: tugging at her uniform had been the *wrong* thing to do. The Martian woman was even more enthusiastic now. Her left hand pushed insistently against the gusset of Nadimiche's jeans for another couple of increasingly uncomfortable seconds, before her fingers found the zipper. Suddenly, third base was at best millimetres away from happening, and *no*, that wasn't okay at all with the young psionic. *I'm not*

having my first time going this far be in a freaking corridor!

Mean ended up being the only way that Nadimiche could think of getting her feelings across. Private Alonzo sprang backwards away from her, cursing and clutching at her own mouth. "What the fuck? Kid, that *isn't* what people mean when they talk about nibbling each other's lips!"

Nadimiche shrugged and wrapped her arms around herself. "You weren't taking any of my other hints and I wanted you to stop! I don't even know your first name yet."

The Marine glared at her. "Do you want it so that you can send flowers after I die of tetanus or something? Freaking idiot Terrans and their...!"

"Private Alonzo!" Gunnery Sergeant Woods' shout didn't merely echo along the corridor as he stalked up to them, it *reverberated*. He glanced once at Nadimiche, and then returned his attention to Private Alonzo. "You want to explain to us just what *exactly* it was that you believed you were doing just now, Marine?"

"She fucking *bit* me, Gunny!" Private Alonzo caught herself, and straightened to attention. "Sir, I screwed up again, sorry about that, Sir!"

By now, everybody else who had still been in the briefing room was standing there too. Nadimiche cringed at the looks on their faces; even Senior Agent Volker's blank seeming stare. Then she realised that Captain Kennedy and Gunnery Sergeant Woods had only just lowered their respective weapons. "Oh! I'm *not* infected! That isn't why I bit her, honest! We were just making out, and um...!"

"Relax kiddo. We already know that pseudo zombies don't talk." Greg walked over to her and pulled her in for a hug; fussing over her rumpled clothing and glowering at Private Alonzo. "Maybe your Marine needs a refresher course in how to interact like a civilised human being, Susan! Or does the MMC not bother with consent?"

"Ah, shut up, you smug jerk! You heard her: they were just making out. They're both old enough to decide who they kiss." Captain Kennedy, who was carrying her daughter in a sling against her chest, still didn't look any *less* mad at Private Alonzo than Greg and Gunnery Sergeant Woods did though. "As for you, Private, count yourself damn lucky that young Miss Prado Wang here ain't turned out to have been an asymptomatic infected after all!"

With the established threat largely resolved, but the Lancashire safe house nonetheless now well and truly compromised, by Sunday morning, those residing there were preparing to depart. NIT had repaired Campbell and Zoe's respective yachts and Zoe's campervan on their behalf. The latter, presumably unnerved by what she had witnessed of Campbell's reaction to what had all too nearly happened to Kathryn, had already left. A joint BIINT and NIT removals team was still busy emptying the Chelsea Bridge penthouse apartment; taking Jenkins' personal belongings to her father's home and Leister's to his house in Earl's Court. He had also decided to keep the bedding and some of the smaller and most interesting modern household appliances, but for the most part, his older property, unliveid in since just before his departure to Dubai, already contained everything necessary. The apartment would likely sell better fully furnished anyhow.

The problem, according to the ten-page long BIINT report displaying on the screen of the phone now clenched in Spence's hands, was in Bournemouth, with the Latimer Hill house, or more

precisely, the wiring. Number 12 was without power. The NIT team assigned to monitor the property had flagged this on Friday night, when the automatic lighting failed to activate. A BIINT approved repair crew had duly visited, only to pronounce the building unfit for habitation. Apparently, the recurring issues with the oven and other kitchen appliances had been symptoms of an underlying and potentially deadly fault.

Alone for now in the safe house's front sitting room, the non-gender sank down onto the edge of the largest sofa and closed their eyes. "Well. Fuck that then. We're bloody homeless."

Hull's voice came from directly behind them. "There's plenty of room at my place. I bought it with Ms Lenard and the kids in mind, but it kind of looks as if my younger self has won that round. I hate that guy. Anyhow, I picked up the keys yesterday morning. We can go straight there with Heidi and the kids, and have BIINT bring all your stuff from Bournemouth."

Spence, eyes abruptly wide open, was already scrambling clear of the sofa, inwardly cursing the too soft cushions as they felt the American's hands close on their shoulders. "Again: personal bloody

space, Mr Hull!"

"Shush, you." The amused edge to his voice added insult to injury as he forced them back down into their seat and started massaging their shoulders. "You *really* need to learn to quit pushing me away like that, Nightingale. First, that silly little tantrum you threw back at headquarters, and now this. I guess you're backslid some since our time together on GETEC's space station, huh?"

The bastard had nerve, at least. Spence grimaced at the forcible releasing of some of the tension in their shoulders. "You shouldn't make your colleagues uncomfortable, Mr Hull. It's frowned upon."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't get me any kind of an official reprimand even if you did report it." Hull dug in his thumbs and kissed the top of the pale hair. "Which you won't consider as an option; well, at least not unless you *want* Pembleton doubting your ability to handle our field operatives. After all, we both know how uh, *insistent* some of them can be, especially post mission. Don't think that I don't know why it is you keep your hair this short. It's not only in case of *enemy* combat, that's for damn sure."

Spence held still; refusing to grant Hull the

satisfaction of seeing them struggle, even when his next kiss was to the nape of their neck. "I really must thank our boffins, you know."

"Oh?" Hull leaned in closer, nuzzling the left side of their face, before kissing their jaw. "Why's that then?"

"Didn't you manage to read that part of the email?" Spence closed their eyes again and held up their phone, angling it in carefully front of their assailant's face as they thumbed the miniscule additional button on the side of the handset and activated what Whitby had innocuously called the phone's *ultra strong torch feature*. The resultant scream from behind them as Hull staggered back rubbing at his eyes was well worth the preceding minutes of forced closeness. "It certainly brightened my day."

Bouncing to their feet, the thin non-gender slipped past the temporarily blinded American and out into the hall. Leister, leading the general rush to investigate the screaming, almost bumped into them. The strawberry blond-haired man lowered his gun and surveyed the scene before him. "Is there trouble here, darling?"

Spence smiled. "Not at all, Cob – Mr Hull is simply

LIVE, DIE, KILL

struggling to embrace the fact that he isn't the brightest bulb in the shed."

Chapter Twelve – Sent Some Along

Four hours after arriving on Deimos Base, Volker and Nadimiche were busy interviewing the seven survivors from Ceres. Meanwhile, in sickbay, Hull finally held his infant daughter for the first time since New Tallahassee. That he'd needed to resort to having his legal team back in Miami approach USMC General Gavin Palmer-Hewitt via the JAG office for backing first was still bothering him. *I hate having to use Susan's Martian heritage against her like this! Why the fuck can't she just be reasonable? Rayne's obviously better off living on Earth with me and Bryce. Besides, if Susan really wanted to be a part of her life, then she would have stayed on at her Miami posting instead of coming back out here.*

He blamed his older self for at least part of it. That version of him still denied any wrongdoing, despite the forensic evidence proving who had signed the custody papers. The latter proof was what had swung things with the JAG office. After all, the last thing that the USMC wanted was a scandal connected with their poster child for the MMC. The *Captain Mars* franchise was far too valuable a resource to allow that kind of thing! *Especially not when they've only just released those damned Secret Agent Yuudai action figures. Can't have anybody knowing the messy truth, can we? It might affect sales – or worse, recruitment!*

Pushing such matters to the side for now, Hull smiled down at the precious bundle in his arms. "How are you doing, princess? Daddy's missed you so much! Look how much you've grown!"

He didn't let his feelings about how she was dressed show on his face, or in his tone of voice. Someone – probably that asshole Woods – had seen fit to put her in a tiny set of MMC combat fatigues. *What next; a cuddly toy shaped like a plasma rifle?* "Let's get you changed into a nice new outfit, huh? Mommy sent some along for when I got you back."

General Palmer-Hewitt had ordered Deimos Base's CMO, Lance Corporal Janie Barrows, to act as chaperone during the handover. Now, having overseen the goodbyes, and quietly but firmly escorted Susan and her meddlesome old gunnery sergeant out, the grey-haired senior medic indicated towards one of the pristinely made-up gurneys. "You can use that bed there as a changing station."

"Thanks, doctor."

She grunted and left him to it, returning just as he finished dressing Rayne in the pink and white striped romper. "You know, there's one thing that you and Captain Kennedy both seem to be forgetting in all of this."

Hull frowned. "What's that?"

Barrows handed him a memory stick. "I took the liberty of putting together some reading material for you. Attachment Disorder ain't something that ever really gets fixed; just patched over and managed as best as possible."

"Hey, I...!"

The CMO waved off Hull's attempted reply. "Yeah, yeah; you've read about it already, blah, blah! I had this same damn argument with my CO

earlier today, and I'll tell you exactly what I told her: reading about it *ain't* the same as living with it. You two really care about this baby, fine: now quit screwing over her chances at growing up to be a reasonably functional adult. I didn't put myself through fourteen years of therapy only to stand by and let the cycle repeat itself when I can intervene to help."

With that, Barrows turned on her heel and stalked off to her office. Hull stared after her, cradling Rayne against his chest. *Maybe I pass as less damaged than I thought after all.*

Bryce sighed with relief as the petite, black haired woman in charge of the removals company handed her Tessa's currently inactive APSU. "Thank you so much for bringing him back like this, Karen! Our foster daughter will be over the moon to know that he's okay."

Thirty-nine-year-old Karen Bell beamed at her. "It's no trouble at all, Ms Lenard! We find all kinds of misplaced property when we're unloading our vans. I guessed right away that this wasn't something that would've been thrown out on purpose – not with how popular they are. Sorry it

took so long to get around to contacting you, but it's been a very busy week for us. A whole lot of people have been moving house after the outbreak."

Bryce nodded. "That's okay. At least you were able to drop him off here. My fiancé is away with work, and our car is in the shop while he's gone."

"Huh. That's inconvenient for you." The removals operative's smile wavered as she glanced past Bryce into the front hall of the house. "Are you and the kids managing okay for groceries and such? I only live like a couple of streets over from here, so if you need any help, you're welcome to shout out. You already have my contact details."

"Thank you." A spark of rebellion skittered into life within Bryce as she recalled how Greg had insisted that there was no way that Vinnie could have ended up mixed in with the packaging. *He was so sure he was right that he wouldn't even call and ask about it; not even when Tessa was crying herself to sleep for the first couple of nights! I bet he'll be embarrassed once he finds out how wrong he was.* "Do you suppose you could pick up some *Rainbow Buddies* cereal for me? Greg bought one of the healthy options instead, and well, you can guess

what the kids think of it.”

Her new acquaintance chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, that’s no problem. I’m not a mom, but I’ve got enough relatives with kids that I know how grown-up cereal must have gone down at breakfast! I’m headed to the store now, so I’ll grab a couple of boxes along with my groceries and drop them off with you on my way home.”

Once more ensconced in the shared cabin aboard *Ithaca*, Nadimiche sat cross-legged on her bunk as she peered at the screen of her tablet. She was proofreading the closing paragraph of her notes on this afternoon’s interview with Dr Kenlow. “I can’t believe those assholes released that biohazard on purpose!”

Volker, who was working at the cabin’s computer terminal, didn’t so much as glance up from her task. “Evidently acquiring the individuals who were taken from Miami during the outbreak was of prime importance to the late Mr Howard. Our task is to determine why.”

“Um, do you not think that maybe there’s nothing to determine, and it’s just because he was a crazy murderer?”

"You are over-simplifying the situation in order to manage your personal feelings. That is not a habit that ANI agents should permit themselves to indulge in, Miss Prado Wang."

Nadimiche scowled. "My parents are both dead thanks to him!"

"As are many other people." The senior ANI agent continued typing. "The most responsible course of action for us to take is to do everything in our power to prevent C.A.K.E from causing any further harm. We have no proof that Mr Howard's passing shall remain permanent, or that even so it shall automatically mean the end of his organisation."

"Whoa, wait a minute!" Nadimiche stared at Volker in rising horror. "You...do you really think that he mightn't stay dead?"

"It would certainly not be the first time that he inexplicably survived. Still, one might hope that the facility on Ceres was his only source of cloned replacement forms."

The door of the cabin slid open just as Nadimiche reacted to that statement. Hull frowned as he set Rayne's diaper bag down; the baby herself nestled snugly against his chest in her sling.

"Is there a reason why my eldest daughter is pacing the floor and ranting in at least three languages at once, ma'am?"

Volker appeared unperturbed. "It is irrational for you to classify Miss Prado Wang as one of your children, Agent Hull. At eighteen, she is highly unlikely to qualify for adopted status. As to your query, she is merely processing the fact that Mr Howard has a recurring habit of surviving."

"Oh yeah, *that*." Hull patted Nadimiche on the shoulder. "Don't worry kiddo. You get used to these kinds of things after a while. Also, ignore our boss' cynicism. Official stamp of approval or not, you're totally my kid."

The young dampener sniffled. "I shouldn't *have* to get used to them! It isn't fair – how come creeps like Howard get to have second chances and good people like my parents...they...they don't even get to have a real *funeral* thanks to the stupid containment rules!"

Volker at last paused in her work and angled the swivel seat of the terminal's built-in chair so that she was facing her companions. "The method of disposal for those deceased who were exposed to the biohazard was not chosen lightly, Miss Prado

Wang. Secure cremation followed by sterilisation of the resultant ashes is the best way to avoid complications such as those associated with the burial pits used for plague victims during the Black Death. Unfortunately, the numbers involved preclude there being sufficient time or funds to provide individual disposals."

Hull grimaced and pulled Nadimiche into a hug, being careful not to crush Rayne between them. "What Senior Agent Volker means is that the entire city of Miami faces the exact same feelings of denied grief that you do right now. We'll still hold a remembrance service once we get home though, okay, kiddo?"

"Okay. Thanks, Greg." The young psionic sighed deeply before continuing. "Sorry for losing control like that, Senior Agent Volker."

"I have long since come to accept that such incidents are inevitable with most people." Volker's tone remained emotionless despite the obvious implications behind her words. Returning her attention to the computer terminal, she pulled up a holographic display of what had been C.A.K.E's facility on Ceres. "The Marines were able to provide us with detailed schematics of the entire facility,

including the stasis chambers found by the Szenoldyans. It would appear that Mr Howard's organisation has been engaging in human cloning using the genetic material of the people they abducted."

Hull frowned as he studied the data. "This is hardly cutting edge. Seems weird for C.A.K.E to bother throwing time and money at such a basic flash cloning project, ma'am. They haven't even attempted any genetic augmentations."

She nodded. "Your observation is correct, Agent Hull. None of the clones found are anything more than copies of the individuals whom they are based on. Since each of the clones is fitted with a Neural Mapping Uplink Port, the most likely explanation is that C.A.K.E simply intended to replace the originals as and when necessary."

"I guess that fits with Howard's version of a safe working environment – hey, wait!" Hull pointed at the list of names. "Scroll back, ma'am. Why is my name on there?"

Nadimiche squeaked. "They must have been planning on abducting you too! Do you...do you think this means that they're going to release another biohazard as a distraction?"

Volker shook her head. "This data was retrieved from the computer in the cloning laboratory. It is a record of all of those whom C.A.K.E has already made copies of – the column to the right indicates how many copies have been made of each so far."

The three ANI agents stared at the data stream. Hull swallowed quietly. "They'd cloned me seventeen times before the Szenoldyans overran the facility. That's disturbing."

"More precisely, they cloned your original body." Volker zoomed in on another section of data. "According to this, the real reason for his unplanned defrosting was that C.A.K.E broke into the GETEC storage facility and copied his DNA along with his neural map."

"So, does that mean no more distractions?" Nadimiche sounded hopeful. "Only I *really* don't think that Miami can take another biohazard."

"There isn't any mention of one here at least." Hull tried to shake off the rising sense of dread that the data had unleashed in his gut. "Why would Howard want so many copies of me anyhow, ma'am? Are they all still there in storage on Ceres?"

"No." Volker had already finished cross-

referencing the data. "The Marines only found clones of the abducted scientists, all of them at varying stages of development. We shall need to arrange a separate line of enquiry."

"Great." Hull tried not to think too hard on what kind of use Howard might have made of his clones. *Better them than me any day.* "Well, on the bright side, at least some of those killed by the Szenoldyans can have a do-over. I'm guessing that part of our report should go down well with the diplomats. Nobody's likely to care much either way about the ones who were working for C.A.K.E of their own accord anyhow."

Chapter Thirteen – The Cool Parent

Tuesday evening was drawing slowly in across the rooftops of Earl's Court as Dobos tucked his phone away and returned to the business of unpacking the remaining items from Leister's penthouse kitchen that the other man had wanted to keep. "Just got a random text from Brett – he reckons Laine's the cool parent now, since she's the one off talking to fucking aliens."

Leister glanced up from his seat at the elegantly carved mahogany breakfast bar, where he was signing the final few pages of the documents needed for tomorrow's exchange of deeds. "You'll need to remind me of who both of those people are I'm afraid, darling. And thanks again for dropping those boxes off."

"Eh, it's no bother. Brett's my son. He's eleven, going on eleven and a half, going on sixteen, you know how it is with kids. I only actually found out about him last December. Laine – Laine Volker – is his mum. She's in command of ANI's Miami office. We split up, and she didn't tell me she was pregnant. She didn't want to get in the way of my career. Anyway, Brett's gotten wind of it being her team that's featured in all the news about Ceres. He says his mates at school all want her autograph."

"You meant to tell me that you used to go out with the redhead in charge of the Ceres matter?" Leister stared at the younger man; recalling what he'd seen in the news of the woman in question. "And you picked your *job* over *her*? Are you on better medication now at least, darling?"

Dobos snorted. "Older you would have smacked you upside the fucking head for coming off with that one, Cob!"

"Wonderful, so I'm doomed to grow old and boring sometime in the next thirty years." Leister shook his head, smiling as he took out his phone and pulled up the latest article on Volker. "To be clear, this is the woman that I mean, darling: this

one; here, on the screen – the perfectly gorgeous one, with the obviously high intellect. I already know that you're bisexual as opposed to gay, so since it can't be due to that, there *had* to have been madness on your part."

"What – it can't just have been her being fucking sensible for once?" Dobos grinned back at Leister. "She was too fucking perfect for the likes of me; we both knew that from the start. It just took us a while to admit it, that's all."

"Well, I suppose it's not quite so bad if she did the dropping, at least." Leister sniffed daintily and put his phone away. "Tragedy is so much easier to accept than incurable insanity in one's friends. Incidentally, is she single now?"

"Shut it, you!" Dobos laughed and chucked a neatly folded dishcloth at his companion's head. "Seriously, how the *fuck* did you ever become the bloke you used to be?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea, darling. Old age perhaps, or some mercifully forgotten trauma."

"Better hope it was fucking trauma. If it's age related, then it'll kick in again eventually. Probably in the next fourteen years too, as opposed to thirty; given how Spence hasn't ever mentioned this side

of you.”

Leister shrugged and picked up his pen again. “A man can change, darling.”

“Isn’t that what Craig’s arguing?”

“Ah yes – him.” Leister’s tone hardened ever so slightly. “I do hope that Spence doesn’t make any rushed decisions about whether or not to let him move in with them and the children.”

Dobos folded down the box that he had just finished unpacking. “Maybe you should add a caveat or something into the deeds.”

“Tempting, but it would be inappropriate, darling. Besides, I’m technically swapping home ownership with young Kathryn and Barnabas anyhow. Who their aunt is or isn’t involved with bears no impact on that process.”

“It matters to you though, doesn’t it?” Dobos gestured vaguely at the walls of the townhouse’s galley style kitchen: as if expecting the terracotta tiles to take his part in an impromptu chorus. “All of it; the apartment in exchange for Latimer Hill, it’s a massive thing to do. Don’t try fucking pretending to me that you’re only looking out for the kids’ wellbeing, mate.”

Leister drew in a slow, deep breath, and turned

away from the paperwork. He stared at the pen for a moment before setting it down. "I once killed three men and a cybernetic barracuda with a pen rather similar to that one. I feel that it's only fair to advise you of that fact before we have this discussion, darling."

"So fucking what?" Dobos peeled back the tape sealing the last box, and lifted out the coffee maker. "Spence is my friend. You were too, and I think you still are. I hope so, anyhow. Either way, I give enough of a shit about both of you to want to know what the fuck's really going on."

"Ah, so then this isn't intended as some sort of warning off after all, darling?"

The younger man grinned. "I fucking *knew* there was more to it! Is that why you've stopped calling them Nightingale?"

"No." Leister blinked at that: confused at the turn in the fellow's logic. "They told me that we were just friends nowadays. Since everyone else in that category calls them Spence, I thought I ought to do likewise."

"You've *always* used their first name though." Dobos frowned slightly as he considered the possible implications. "They probably think you've

fallen out with them or something. Oh, and excuse me the fuck for asking, but what exactly does *nowadays* mean?"

"Well, from what I've gathered so far, I was their mentor, and I topped for them occasionally, but not once they moved to Bournemouth. Obviously, I can't be the former to them with amnesia, and as I say, the latter element was already over anyhow."

Dobos closed his eyes, letting his talent feel out the other man's emotions for a moment before he continued speaking. "There's more too though, isn't there? Deeper feeling stuff; it's boiling away in there, like pus from a rat bite."

"Your symbolism needs work, darling."

"I'm empathic, not a fucking poet! On which note, stop trying to change the subject, mate. The deeper stuff – how long has that even been there, I wonder?" Dobos scratched almost absently at the stubble along his jaw. "It doesn't feel remotely like a mentoring energy to me. Do you suppose there was something going on between you and Spence at some point?"

"Not based on what they've said, no. Although that doesn't preclude my having had feelings that they weren't party to, I suppose." Leister frowned.

"Perhaps it's as simple as that: an unrequited sort of fancy. I might not have let on about it to them given our professional involvement together."

"Okay, so who would you have told instead?"

"Quite possibly nobody at all, darling, especially if I were attempting to keep it a secret for whatever reason."

"Yeah, but if you *had* told someone, anyone, who would it have been?" Dobos snapped his fingers. "I don't suppose there's any chance that you keep a diary?"

"Keep a diary, in this line of work?" Leister chuckled. "I'm starting to suspect that you're a tad over invested in all of this, darling."

"I've been hanging around Darren too long. Daft fucker's a hopeless romantic." The younger man finished untangling the coffee maker from its shroud of bubble wrap and set it on the bench next to the kettle, underneath the rear window of the kitchen. "Eh, it doesn't matter now anyhow. Pretty sure Spence is seeing Caulfield."

"Nightingale and Byron are involved?" Leister tamped down on the spark of jealousy in his gut. "I honestly hadn't realised. Have they been together long, darling?"

"It's been a couple of weeks or so, now. You and Lottie Drake were the ones who organised the matchmaking, funnily enough." Dobos plugged in the coffee maker. "Didn't you say Byron was here on Friday?"

"Yes; he and Lottie brought Brendan to discuss the van incident. I must say though, darling, I didn't see so much as a *hint* of a romance between the two of them at the time. One certainly can't fault their discretion. Consummately professional behaviour, that."

"Well, that or Spence is self-sabotaging again!" Dobos sighed, shaking his head resignedly. "Yeah, it's probably that, to be honest. They've a bad fucking habit of not thinking that they're entitled to be happy."

Leister stood up. "It's been too long a day! I need a drink. Would you like anything, darling?"

"I'll take a beer if you've got any in, thanks."

"I ought to have, but apparently the removals team from BIINT didn't get any of the alcohol I requested when they did my shopping!" Leister glared at the contents of the refrigerator. "I shall have to owe you that beer, I'm afraid. There's definitely still plenty of wine downstairs, though. Or –

and this is the option that I much prefer, darling – we can head out for the evening, find a decent bar, and finish this conversation whilst getting thoroughly inebriated together.”

“I vote for that last one, mate.”

“Right then, let's get our coats!” Leister strode towards the relevant cupboard in the front hall. “I think it's well past time for me to become fully read in on the myriad personal details that Edith didn't see fit to put in the information pack that she gave me. We can start with what *exactly* happened between Nightingale and Craig, since he seems so damnably set on moving in with them! I don't know why that bothers me, but it does.”

“Oh trust me, mate, there's a reason!”

The latter topic took the two men the better part of an hour to cover, by which time they had arrived at their destination, secured a table, and downed their first round of drinks. A halfway eaten basket of Buffalo wings sat between them. Dobos gnawed carefully at one of the spicy joints as Leister finished voicing his opinion on Campbell's behaviour. “I can't understand why Nightingale didn't tell me any of this!”

“Knowing andro, they probably just wanted to

avoid putting you under any unnecessary stress." Dobos set the finished wing aside and reached for another. "You *had* literally just been drowned, after all."

"Well, yes, but I'd also made a full recovery, darling." Leister sighed. "They still think of me as *old*, don't they?"

"Force of fucking habit, isn't it?"

"Be that as it may, I don't need coddling!"

"Not even over what happened with Ashley and the baby?"

Leister shook his head. "I don't remember her, or any of our time together. Of course, I'm saddened that we lost the child, but even the feelings around that are...well, it's...let's just say that it's all very distant. Besides which, she broke things off with me, and nothing's changed there. I have to respect her decision."

"Right then: so, you're *definitely* single." Dobos prodded at the holographic menu floating next to their table; ordering a second round of drinks. "And Craig's *definitely* a fucking prick. The only question left is what's going on with Spence. Do you want to ask them, or shall I?"

"We can't simply come out and ask Nightingale

whether or not they're still with Byron, darling! No, no – we need to be subtle about this." Leister took out his phone and tapped at the screen. "I shall ask Mortimer."

"Who's Mortimer?"

Leister didn't answer him, speaking into his phone instead. "Hello, Mortimer? It's me; Maurice. How are you and Emma? Good, good, I'm glad to hear it. Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Well, yes, but I'm fine *now*. Oh nonsense – it doesn't count as *really* dying, darling! No, I'm not just quoting films! Yes, really: an entirely new body. Oh, definitely, darling, yes; I'd thoroughly recommend it. Perhaps not the part with the river, no; that can't have been pleasant. Eh? Oh no, no, I don't remember that part, thankfully. Actually, Mortimer, that's why I rang you – I'm missing a block of stuff in terms of recent memories, and I hoped that you might be able to help fill in some of the gaps. Oh, about thirty years, give or take; the same amount that I've gained in terms of youth. Yes, they do say that it might come back eventually."

Dobos settled back in his chair and waited for Leister to finish chatting. It soon became clear that Mortimer was none other than Caulfield's father,

but the conversation took a good forty minutes to get around to the original aim of the phone call. *I suppose they've a lot to catch up on.*

Finally, Leister broached the subject. "Anyhow, it's got to do with an apprentice of mine – Nightingale Spence. Ah, you've heard of them, that's good. What can you tell me about them?" He paused then, and listened for a while: the faint murmur of words from the phone not quite audible to Dobos. "Gracious. I see. No, I wasn't aware of any of that. Byron? Yes, yes he was. They were, yes. From what I've heard it was only recently, yes. Oh, so he hasn't officially mentioned it to you yet. Well, he might be waiting to see whether it works out or not, I suppose. No, no, there's no bad feeling on my part! I don't even remember *knowing* them before now yet! You know what I mean, darling. Yes, it is a tad confusing at times. Thank you, yes, very helpful indeed. All right, Mortimer. Give my best to Emma and the rest of the family. Yes, talk soon, goodbye, darling."

"Well?" Dobos leaned forwards, cradling the remains of his second beer. "What gives?"

Leister put his phone away and took a sip of his gin and tonic. The ice cubes rattled as he set the

glass back down on the table. "Byron hadn't told his parents that he was seeing Nightingale to begin with, so I'm afraid that we're no clearer on what's going on there. I do have an answer to one of our other questions though. Mortimer says that I took quite the shine to Nightingale when we first met, but I didn't act on it back then because not only were they my apprentice, they were also already involved with someone else."

"Ah, right. That makes sense." Dobos raised his glass in commiseration. "Sorry, mate. At least it's nothing fucking complicated, eh?"

"Apparently I buried him."

Dobos spluttered, all but dropping his glass. "Okay, what fucking part of this story aren't you telling me, Cob?"

Leister's expression had hardened. "The part where I found out that Nightingale's then Dominant was abusing them in every possible way and calling it *training*. He almost killed them. I used my position within BIINT to make sure of it never happening again."

"Fuck." Dobos shook his head slowly. "Did Spence know what you did?"

"Mortimer didn't say. I'd appreciate it if you

don't mention this to anyone before I have the chance to find out the details, darling."

"Not my story to tell, mate." The younger man downed the dregs of his beer and set the glass aside. "One thing though – if Spence *has* split up with Byron, then you'd fucking well better make sure and admit how you feel about them this time around!"

Chapter Fourteen – All I Ask

Having spent most of the preceding sixty-four hours seeing spots thanks to Nightingale's truly *spectacular* levels of ingratitude on Sunday morning, Hull hadn't anywhere near finished setting up home yet. He felt that this needed highlighting to his impromptu houseguest. "I wasn't planning on bringing anyone home with me tonight. As you can see, I'm still living out of boxes at this stage. Although I guess if you wanted luxury, you would have just gone home with the guy I found you dodging, so maybe it doesn't matter."

Hoy, the real one for once, as opposed to one or other of the shells back at BIINT medical, giggled and stood on tiptoe to kiss the tip of his nose. The neurosurgical expert was presenting as male

tonight: his bleached white blond hair hanging in soft bangs across his dark hazel eyes. In Hull's opinion, between the longish hairstyle, the heavy black eyeliner, and the androgynous cut of his clothes, Hoy could have readily passed for being either sex, but the doctor had been *extremely* clear on his current pronouns. Back at the club, on the street outside of said club, in the cab on the way to here...yeah, all the signs were there of someone who was just *done* with people not listening. "As long as there's a bed with clean sheets, Greg; that's all I ask."

"You might want to consider upping your standards a little, Morgan." Hull wondered what the doctor's blood alcohol was right now. "Not that I'm complaining, of course."

Hoy pouted. "Didn't we already agree on this being simple? I just want a shag, damn it! Hard, filthy, meaningless shagging, with someone who isn't my horrible ex-boyfriend! So, uh, let's have less...um, no, *fewer* words and feelings, and much, *much* more of the shagging, *please*."

"You're either drunker than you claimed, or having some kind of neurological event right now." Hull stepped backwards carefully, leading Hoy

along with him by both hands. "It's better if you just sleep this off."

"Oh, for fuck sake...!" Hoy dug his heels into the hall carpet. "I thought you were supposed to be the sort of bloke who'd be more than pleased to take full advantage of me! And...and anyway, you don't let someone having a...having a poxy brain event *sleep*! Well, not unless it's a coma."

"Hey, you're the expert, not me." Hull switched from coaxing to actual dragging; manhandling Hoy upstairs and into the bedroom. "I'll keep an eye on you and dial for the emergency services if you look like you're dying."

"I *am* fucking dying!" Set free to wander again, Hoy immediately flung himself down onto Hull's bed. "Dying of not fucking...gah...!"

The American smirked and ruffled the pale hair. "Aw, that's too bad. It must suck to be you."

"I bloody *wish* there was sucking involved!" The doctor lifted his head and gazed mournfully at Hull's crotch. "I had *one* single, solitary, sad little drink, Greg! I swear to you: I'm wholly competently mental...consensualmalising...argh, whatever! You're not supposed to *care*! Not according to what *I've* heard, anyhow."

"I'm kind of starting to want details on these rumours, doctor." Hull tightened his grip abruptly on Hoy's hair, angling his guest's head up and back to force eye contact. "Who's saying all this crap about me?"

"Ow!" Hoy squirmed. "It's just a general sort of knowledge! You know: at work. Everyone keeps saying that you're a sadist...ow!"

Hull bared his teeth in what technically counted as a smile. "Yeah, that's not *completely* accurate." He tugged again at the pale hair; dragging Hoy up onto his haunches atop the bed. "I like *control*, doctor. Right now, you aren't sober enough to fully appreciate my skills. So – lie down, sleep it off, and in the morning, before we head to work, *maybe* you can convince me to scratch that itch."

Bryce sighed as she turned back the covers on the bed and climbed in. Today, Tuesday, had been the conclusion of a long couple of days, what with Tessa panicking about Vinnie not powering up no matter how long they tried recharging him for, and Fisher sulking about the lack of sugary cereal. At least the latter phase seemed to be finished now. *Greg's right about not letting our kids eat crap. My*

baby boy never acted like that about food before Oliver insisted on spoiling him back in England!

She supposed that it was probably just as well that Karen hadn't ever gotten around to dropping off the promised boxes of *Rainbow Buddies*. The hard part was over now, with both kids back to eating healthily again. Sure, Tessa was still worried about her APSU, but she'd accepted that Greg would know what to do about getting the little robot repaired, and had quit pestering Bryce about contacting Waverly in the meantime. *Her social worker never would have agreed to it anyhow. I'm glad Tessa isn't blaming me for that.*

The medication had certainly changed the girl's attitude, and mostly for the better. Bryce did worry about how sluggish she was in the mornings though. Those two red pills at bedtime really knocked her for six! *Maybe some of her issues up until now have been because of sleep deprivation or something. Oh well, I'm sure Dr Hunt knows best, anyhow.*

In Hull's opinion, Hoy's reaction to waking up already stripped naked and chained, face down, by the wrists and ankles to the four corners of the chrome-plated bedstead, was one to savour.

"What the fuck...?"

"Welcome to Wednesday morning, Morgan." Hull smiled as he sat down fully dressed to the right of his guest's upper torso, tangling his fingers in the pale hair. "It's only six fifteen, by the way, so there's no need for us to hurry. Do you still want – now, how exactly did you phrase it again? Oh yeah: hard, filthy, meaningless shagging, with someone who isn't your horrible ex-boyfriend."

Hoy gulped. "Oh shit."

"Is that a no?"

"Ah, well, no; not a no. I mean, my common sense is yelling at me that it probably ought to be but...!"

Hull had made certain to allow sufficient give in the chains that he could yank Hoy's head up far enough for kissing. "Is it a yes?"

"Um...please...?"

"You're shy when you're sober. It's cute." Hull pressed another rough kiss to the already bruised lips before standing up. His left hand kept hold of Hoy by the hair as he moved, angling the doctor's neck uncomfortably. "Which pronouns do you want today, Morgan?"

"I...um...that is...today feels more...girly...?"

"Okay, sweetheart." He pulled a little harder on her hair and kissed her again, this time nipping at her lower lip with his teeth afterwards. "Your preferences matter to me. I just want to be sure that that's clear to you."

She blushed. "Um, so you should know now that I'm a bit...different. Down there, I mean."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm not going to freak out just because you don't match the supposed regular template." Hull smiled at the resultant choked sob. "I guess some people have though, huh?"

"Oh, you know; only fucking well almost everybody else so far!" Hoy gulped back her tears. "Not that I've been with that many people. I mean, I'm not a slut or anything, just...!"

Hull clasped his right hand over her mouth. "Sweetheart, you *need* to stop apologising for being normal. Can you do that for me?"

Hoy went very still for a minute, and then nodded desperately, before kissing Hull's palm.

"Good girl." He kissed the nape of her neck. "Now, I'm not letting you up from this bed until I'm one hundred percent sure that both of your gender identities are well and truly satisfied, so we'd better

get started if we're going to make it into work on time today."

Wednesday 22ND May was officially dawning as *Ithaca* departed Deimos Base to begin her return journey to Earth. Seated behind the desk in her office, Kennedy watched the ANI vessel glide away via video feed instead of overseeing the launch in person. There was a limit to her self-control, after all. *Not sure that I could've held things together if I had to look that bastard in the eye right now.*

To her right, the holographic image of the Szenoldyan male who had somehow become her friend, groomed his antennae. "The fire thinking female knows what you did, Captain. She told me so during our conversation yesterday. I believe that the human word for her opinion on the matter is *impressed.*"

Kennedy startled more than just slightly at his announcement. "Are you sure about that? She ain't maybe planning on interfering somehow?"

"I am sure, Captain." The mantis like creature sounded amused. "I gather that she considers your actions as the most rational solution to the dispute over who should nurture your nymph."

"Huh. To think, there I was writing her off as automatically being on *his* side instead of mine. It's kind of nice to hear that I was wrong about that." The Martian woman looked to the crib on her left, smiling fondly down at her sleeping daughter. "What he don't know about he can't try and steal, right, Ellie?"

The most difficult aspect had been the moral dilemma of handing over the cloned infant to Hull. Sure, it wasn't *really* Ellie; just a copy, but the hapless changeling would nonetheless have to grow up with that monster for a father. That much was on Kennedy, and to a lesser degree, her Marines too. There was no one on Deimos Base who didn't know the truth. She'd felt it only fair to read them all in beforehand; given how General Palmer-Hewitt had threatened to court martial anyone found aiding and abetting her attempt at securing custody if she didn't agree to the handover. *Every damn one of them took my side! I guess maybe those in command ought to be less quick to throw their weight around if they ain't willing to treat members of the MMC as equal to the rest of the Corps. Time could come when we get tired of accepting scraps.*

Spence had found the contact details for Kathryn and Barnabas' previous counsellor, Doctor Imogene Geddes, tucked away in a drawer of the desk in Leister's erstwhile study on Monday morning. At the time, the non-gender had been rearranging the space to serve as a fifth bedroom, reasoning that infants had no real need of an en suite. That had successfully freed up the existing nursery for Heidi's sole use. Spence had already chosen the master bedroom, since the dressing room attached to it could readily double as a weapons' locker. Kathryn had of course reclaimed her old room, and Barnabas and Phil were sharing the remaining bedroom.

With the logistics of moving home finally resolved to everyone's satisfaction, the legal side of things finished up, and Campbell's interest in combining households fobbed off at least temporarily, Spence had finally scraped together enough time on Thursday afternoon to meet privately with Geddes during what was technically the woman's lunch break. Fortunately, Geddes, a short, middle-aged black woman clad in a vividly patterned twinset and impressively sensible shoes, cared more for

healing her patients than eating. She had grilled Spence thoroughly on the events of the interceding months since the twins' last session with her, before nodding briskly and scheduling emergency appointments with all three of the older children for the next afternoon. "I've cleared my schedule. I'll start with one-to-one interviews, and then hold a group session between all three of them. You just see to it that they turn up."

Which was why, now, a little before two on Friday afternoon, Spence was sitting alone in the waiting room of Geddes' private clinic, silently appreciating the fact that Heidi was available to mind the younger twins. *It's a good thing that she was able to switch to one of the local catering colleges – I can't imagine that commuting to and from Bournemouth would have proved especially practical for her in the longer run of things, no matter what Craig thinks to the contrary!*

Campbell, still living aboard his yacht in Poole, was making the most of being a private citizen again, and had fully embraced his restored right to drive within the United Kingdom. The former spy had been driving Heidi between Bournemouth and London as necessary whilst she met with her

assorted tutors and mentors. The dark red hover car he had purchased via an online auction on Saturday combined elegance with practicality; the low-slung roof avoiding any semblance of a van. With nine seats, it would have made for the ideal family vehicle. Spence scowled as they considered the irony of the latter fact. *He certainly bought the right thing as a surprise. It's just a shame that in doing so, he proved yet again that I can't rely on him to keep an eye on the children in my absence!*

The Irish matter rattled on despite the successful incarceration of the three men from the byre incident. None of them had been in any shape to resist arrest. NIT had taken over custody on Saturday: installing them in the medical wing of a secure holding facility until the doctors there deemed them well enough for interrogation. The woman who had impersonated WO Turner was still at large, hence Clacher and Finn's continued stay here in London. In the best-case scenario, she was an unaffiliated freelancer, but nobody wanted to chance otherwise. *Here's hoping that she isn't secretly the tip of some previously unknown terrorist network.*

Chapter Fifteen – Waiting To Spring

Campbell handed Zoe her requested groceries and followed her below decks to the galley of the *Helter Skelter*. "That supermarket is the missing circle of Hell on Friday afternoons! Anyhow, thanks again for watching Sam for me during the days earlier this week, Zoe. I didn't want to leave Heidi dependent on public transport, but there's no way that he would have coped with spending so much time in the car."

The freckle faced artist waved off his thanks; nodding to where the boy in question was sitting on the rug with her daughter and an assortment of thoroughly unrealistic looking cuddly dinosaurs. "Honestly, it's fine, Craig! He's never any trouble, and Primrose likes having company her own age. I

have to admit that I cheated a bit this afternoon though. I ran out of ideas for activities, so I put the cartoon about the time travelling scientist with the pet brontosaurus on for them whilst you were at the supermarket. Sixty minutes of terrible singing – the *other* missing circle, if you ask me!"

"That explains their current choice of toys." Campbell smiled. "Sam really loves that film."

"So does Primrose, hence why we have so very many cuddly dinosaurs in the toy box!" Zoe held up the bottle of red wine that she had asked for. "Well? Are you and Sam staying to eat, or abandoning me to drink alone after a long week of double toddler wrangling duties? I'm making bangers and mash, with mushroom and red wine gravy for us adults."

"If we're staying for dinner, then the least that I can do is to help make it." Campbell took off his jacket and laid it on the built-in bench style seating that formed part of the small dining area, setting his cane on top of it. "Contrary to what you may have heard, I do actually know how to cook. The kitchen in Latimer Hill was just a death trap waiting to spring."

"Along with the rest of the house, from what you

said on Sunday evening!" Zoe shuddered. "I'm just glad that nothing horrible happened!"

Campbell grimaced and set about pouring nuggets of frozen mashed potato into a saucepan. "I can't claim that *nothing* horrible occurred."

"You being stupid and cheating doesn't fall under wiring related death trap based issues." His host peeled open a packet of sausages. "On that subject, has Spence decided whether or not you can move back in with them yet?"

"They won't even let me broach the subject. I have a sternly worded text warning me not to."

"That's not especially mature of them." Zoe frowned. "Surely it's something that you need to talk about properly, at the very least?"

"I thought so, yes, but then again, my judgement can't be trusted." Campbell was angrier than he liked to admit about that assertion. "Saturday really didn't help matters. When I think of what that monster tried to do to Kathryn, I just...!"

Zoe flung her arms around him, pulling him close for a hug. "Stop dwelling on it, okay? It wasn't your fault – you...you went off, did your job, and some horrible people tried to hurt the people you care about as revenge."

"Thanks, I needed that." The former spy drew in a slow breath. "Ah, we might want to stop hugging now, if you take my meaning?"

The artist backed up a step immediately, glancing down as she did so. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Craig – it was just a friendly hug! Seriously, are all spies this tightly wound?"

"It's part of the training. They uh, tend to encourage certain base reactions to stimuli."

She shook her head. "For all of those honey missions, hmm?"

"Honey pot missions, yes." Campbell busied himself with slicing mushrooms for the gravy. "We wouldn't be very good at them if we had difficulties in performing as and when needed."

"I suppose that makes sense. Still, isn't there any sort of um, rehabilitation provided once you've retired?"

"To be honest, it's not often that any of us live long enough to need something like that."

Zoe blinked. "Well, obviously you have, for one! Didn't you say that your dad was a spy too? He's still alive, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he's not remotely concerned by his base reactions." Campbell smiled ruefully. "If

anything, BIINT probably spent more time reining him in than encouraging him!"

"That's...it's...would you be offended if I used the word disturbing?"

"Not even slightly." He poured a little oil into a pan and set it atop the nearest ring. "I'd prefer it if you and Primrose never have to meet him."

"He's that bad then?" Zoe opened the wine and poured out two glasses of it, before adding half of the remaining contents of the bottle to the pan with the oil. "Well, if it helps you feel any better, my parents are horrid too. Oh, bother – I meant to let that breathe first, sorry!"

"It's fine." Campbell handed her another pan, this one for the sausages. "Here – you use that ring. It should all be ready about the same time."

"Okay. The seasonings are in that cupboard up there." Zoe pointed to the relevant cabinet. "You should try and ring Spence later; see how things are with them."

"Hmm, I might, yes. Or then again, I might just arrange to sign the car over to them and have it dropped off in the designated parking spot for their apartment." The black-haired man reached for the dried sage. "There's not much point in keeping it

just for me and Sam. I can get something smaller instead."

Zoe hummed quietly. "Not to judge, but it almost sounds as if you don't expect to get back together with them."

"Honestly?" Campbell sprinkled in some of the sage, and reached for the paprika. "I don't know if I really ought to keep on trying. The last time we split up, we lost contact for twenty years. When we found one another again, it was entirely by chance. With hindsight, I think possibly I was still in love with the memory of the person Spence used to be, as opposed to who they'd become over the intervening years. I rather suspect that if I asked them, they'd say something similar about what they felt for me. I've started wondering whether we're all that good for one another."

"In that case, you *definitely* need to talk to them." Zoe sipped at her wine. "It sounds like the kind of conversation that needs having face to face too. I can watch Sam for you, if you're worried that there might be an argument."

"Thanks, I think I'll take you up on that."

Having warily agreed via text the evening before

to have Campbell visit for lunch on Saturday, Spence opened the door of the penthouse apartment just as he exited the lift. The thin non-gender raised their eyebrows when they saw that he was alone. "I asked the chap at the desk to let me know when you got here. Where's the small today? And why don't you have your cane with you?"

"Zoe followed me up from Bournemouth in her campervan. She's taken Sam and Primrose to the New National Gallery for the afternoon. They've got an interactive dinosaur themed display on at the moment." Campbell limped into the apartment; indicating the folded cane clipped to his belt. "I thought that it was probably time for me to start trying to manage without it."

"Well, don't overdo things. You don't want to set yourself back." Spence closed the front door. "Is Ms Rusdyle driving you both home today, or were you planning on staying here?"

Campbell blinked. "Zoe's driving us, yes. I didn't like to presume that you'd want guests."

"I don't, but as much as I appreciate your markedly increased consideration for others, it hardly seems fair for Seamus to have to endure

another two hours in the car to get home. Besides which, Kathryn misses you."

"I'm afraid I didn't pack an overnight bag for either of us, sorry. We'll stick with what's already arranged." The former spy glanced around at the empty living room. "Where are the children, anyhow? And it's *Sam* now, I told you that already."

"His mother named him Seamus. If you really *must* anglicise it, then James would make much more sense than an acronym. As for my lot, Heidi took the older three out to the cinema for the Saturday matinee. The babies are down for their morning nap." Spence led the way into the kitchen. "I thought we could just order in pizza for lunch once everyone gets back. Do you want tea or coffee in the meantime?"

"Coffee's fine, thanks." Campbell hung his jacket and satchel up on the already crowded coat rack in the corner of the kitchen. "Pizza sounds nice too. I'm *not* calling my son by an Irish name though; not after everything. I want him to have a clean break from all of it."

"You'd best update his birth certificate accordingly then." Spence tapped in the complex series of commands required by the coffee maker,

growling as it merely beeped. "Damn it – the sales assistant assured me that this model was simpler to use than Cob's machine!"

"Let me try." Campbell peered closely at the control panel. "Ah. Right, I see the problem. The sales assistant lied, that's all. No one human could possibly make sense of this thing. In fact, most robots would likely struggle too."

"Good to know that it's not just me, at least." Spence opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk. "I'll pop the kettle on instead. There's a jar of instant coffee in the top cupboard, if you can grab it for me."

Campbell obliged, handing over the requested jar. "I brought the forms for the car. They're in my satchel, for whenever we run out of topics for this horribly awkward conversation we're having."

"I thought we were doing admirably." Spence set two mugs on the bench, just a little more forcibly than was needed. "We haven't started shouting yet, anyhow. That's certainly progress from how we've been recently."

"It's the yet part that's the worry, though, isn't it?" Campbell sighed. "Okay – let's stop dodging the real subject, shall we? I think we both need to

know where we stand in terms of our relationship."

Spence folded their arms. "Well, for a start, you appear to have dropped the habit of calling me canary. I'd hazard that that's relevant."

"You kept on rejecting me at every turn! I can't be blamed for thinking that perhaps you didn't like me being quite so familiar."

"Oh." The non-gender looked askance. "That's actually perfectly reasonable. Sorry for thinking the worst of you."

"Eh?" Campbell stared at them for a moment, nonplussed. Then he groaned. "For pity's sake, Spence, don't tell me that you thought I'd gone off you in favour of someone else again!"

"Fine then, I shan't breathe so much as a syllable of what was nonetheless an entirely understandable theory based on previous events!" Spence scowled. "Although it hardly helps that you keep mentioning Ms Rusdyle in every conversation we've had since Sunday! You know, the woman who as it turns out *isn't* a lesbian after all."

"She's still just a friend; how many times do you need me to tell you that? Should I start saying it in random languages while I'm at it? Take out a notice in all of the papers?" Campbell dug the car

keys out of his pocket and slammed them down on the bench. "Actually, don't bother answering. I'm going now. These are the keys for the hover car; it's parked in the designated spot for this apartment. I'll leave the forms here for you to sign your part of them. Mine's done already anyhow. So are we, apparently."

For an instant, it almost looked as if Spence were going to reach for him. Instead, they snatched up the keys and hurled them at the coat rack. "If we're *done*, then just keep your bloody car! I didn't ask you for it in the first place, and I don't need charity!"

"Fine – goodbye!" Campbell picked up the keys and grabbed his jacket and satchel before limping out of the kitchen, across the living room, and out into the hall; the sound of the front door slamming shut behind him echoing through the penthouse seconds later.

Left alone in the kitchen, Spence stared at the now empty spot on the coat rack. "Well, fuck."

Behind them, the kettle clicked off as the water reached boiling point. The non-gender swallowed the jagged feeling in their throat and put the still empty mugs back into the cupboard unused. There

seemed little point in making coffee now. Besides which, from the video that was currently showing on the baby monitor, the argument had woken the younger twins. Neither infant was making much noise yet, but Spence knew all too well that that wouldn't last. "I'm coming now, smalls."

It was as good a reason as any not to waste time chasing after Campbell. Climbing the stairs, Spence reflected on how it was just as well that they hadn't mentioned the man's intended visit to any of the older three children. *Miss Hedturner was right to suggest keeping it as a surprise for when they got home in case anything went wrong. Kathryn especially would have gone spare if she'd had her hopes built up and then dashed like that!*

Spence's resolve hardened somewhat as they realised that Campbell either hadn't considered that outcome to his storming off, or else simply didn't care. Neither explanation was acceptable. In fact, they'd likely give the former spy a piece of their mind on the matter as and when they next encountered him. For now, the non-gender knew that life needed to go on, regardless of personal misery. They would see to the babies, and then they would order pizza for lunch, just as planned.

Taking a deep breath, Spence entered the nursery. "All right, smalls, settle down; I'm here now! Let's try to crack on with managing this whole being a family thing."

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.