

Dog Dark Lamps

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Three

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Dog Dark Lamps
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In the direct sequel to *Saint Of Cats*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence discovers that the term safe house can be somewhat misleading. Their personal ghosts are out for blood, and tensions between their colleagues aren't helping matters. Then there's the matter of the missing boffin.

Meanwhile, GETEC Supervisor Greg Hull has embarked on a whole new chapter in his life. Given his health issues are behind him, surely it makes perfect sense to find someone that he can have a little fun with...

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Chapter One – Lethally Direct

“I’ve never had to resort to a safe house on my own behalf before.”

Nightingale Spence shrugged and closed the door of the hover vehicle behind them. “Pembleton wouldn’t have insisted if it weren’t necessary, Craig.”

“I know that, canary.” Campbell shook his head; wincing as the tension grumbled through the muscles in his neck and shoulders. “Still, it would have been nice to have had access to a safe house that wasn’t a six-hour drive away from the nearest vestiges of human civilisation!”

“Don’t forget the desperate boat journey.”

The mirrored windows of the transport threw both their reflections back at them. Campbell scowled and pushed the ends of his dark hair back behind

his ears. He needed a haircut even more than he did a shave. "I promised you a nice relaxing sea voyage. I'm sorry that I wasn't able to deliver."

"Hmm-mm. Perhaps next year, eh?"

"The word that you need there is mañana – and it never arrives."

"Look on the bright side; a day that never arrives means that technically the world can never completely end."

"I'm starting to think that our mini-break has transformed you into an optimist!"

"More likely it's the side effects of very strong pain killers, coupled with plenty of decent gin."

The Lancashire safe house commanded a fine view over the surrounding fields. It had originally been the heart of a thriving organic dairy farm; the impact of WWII having seen it made available for military purposes. British Intelligence had acquired it in the aftermath of that conflict, and fashioned a genteel nest for those assets in need of shelter. It wasn't quite as indulgent as the Caribbean, but the walls were thick and the windows small. *Defensible*. The current password for the automated security on the main door was apt, in Campbell's opinion.

Spence led the way into the front hall, where the

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weary figure of Paul Benedict stood waiting. He lowered his gun with a sigh. "Ashley's in the living room; Quincy has been entertaining her. Had you any trouble along the road to here?"

"No, but the marina security noticed someone sniffing around an hour or so after we'd left the *Angry Canary* back at her mooring. They called me to say that they'd had to see them off." Campbell set down the suitcases. "The security cameras appear to have malfunctioned. All we know is that the fellow spoke English and was just a little too average, if you get my meaning?"

Benedict nodded. "A professional then – probably under the employ of whomever decided that it was perfectly fine to have me assassinated!"

Spence had finished resetting the door. "We don't know that yet. Where's everyone else; has Pembleton been in contact?"

"She's sent Doris Weaver to pick up Dr Rosa from whatever Godforsaken pit that those in charge dropped the poor girl into. They'll be joining us here apparently. The others are all spinning their wheels in London for now."

Nineteen-year-old Tanya Darnell spent a lot of

her time wishing to be ordinary and boring again these days. Waking up to find that you and your roommates had been the only four survivors of a massacre wasn't an easy form of celebrity status to adjust to. Finding the freak that had been responsible for the killings had been scary enough.

He'd been left in their bathroom – his neck broken in what the cops had described as a deliberate manner. That meant that someone else had been in their apartment as well – someone stealthy, and capable of breaking necks. The authorities were still investigating.

Whoever the mystery hero was, they hadn't been in time to save the rest of the guests in the resort, or the staff for that matter. Fifty-three people were dead, aside from the creep in the bathroom. There was a theory that an erstwhile accomplice might have killed him; maybe an apprentice who lost the taste for what they were doing.

If she were to be honest, Tanya didn't care who had intervened or why: she was just grateful to be alive. She didn't get why Matt and Leo were so obsessed with the guy who'd done the killing. It was morbid the way that they insisted on dwelling on every horrific detail of what had almost happened

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to them. At least Kassie was willing to gloss over the gory stuff whenever she gave an interview!

Tanya didn't talk to anyone who wasn't her therapist. Her parents had booked her in for counselling before she even boarded the flight home from Capoliveri. It sucked, but then everything sucked now. Her whole life was a matter for public scrutiny. No matter where she went, somebody recognised her as being one of the Fortunate Foursome. Prior to the vacation, Tanya had been nobody: the plain one in her friendship group. Now she was the mysterious one, at least according to the media. It seemed that refusing to talk to them just made her more interesting. *I never thought that I'd miss being a wallflower.*

"Sir, you shouldn't push yourself like this; you know what the medics said."

Greg Hull awarded his well-meaning senior administrator a cheerful thumbs-up and continued scanning through the assorted news reports displayed on his screen. "Relax, Mellor – I'm exerting my brain, not my body. Which is exceptionally healthy, I might add."

"But Sir, we still can't be sure of the potential

after effects of the full body transfer process! It's been less than a fortnight since your treatment. There might be unidentified hazards."

Hull glanced down at the backs of his new hands. He was still himself; they had used stem cells to generate the replacement body. "I'm fine: they wouldn't have allowed me to come back to work if I were incapable of a little light reading."

Mellor sighed. "So, what exactly are you reading about, Sir?"

The supervisor zoomed in on one of the hundreds of images. It was a still from a news report concerning the Capoliveri massacre. "I'm still getting my head around the fact that we were there that night. I find it worrisome that our sensors failed to pick up on the murders."

"Sir, you can't blame yourself for that. You took out the person responsible – if not for you then there would have been no survivors at all."

"Housekeeping would have made it; just like they did from that mess on the space station."

"Perhaps, Sir, but those four college kids would be dead. I'd bet that their families would be pretty grateful to you if they knew the truth."

"GETEC is supposed to lead the field in

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technology; that crazy bastard's actions should've been picked up when we were sweeping the resort looking for Spence. For Christ's sake, there were corpses in all of the other apartments!"

"R&D is looking into it, Sir." Mellor knew that his superior had a point. "It seems that the killer planted jammers in each apartment as he went along."

"See if we can get hold of one for further study. Oh, and inform the relevant bean counters that Nightingale Spence is still on our payroll. The last time that I checked, faking your death wasn't a valid form of resignation."

"I'll see to it immediately, Sir."

"Hullo, Craig? It's me – your father. I got your postcard. What's all this nonsense about your having met someone? Ring me back when you hear this message."

Campbell wondered where exactly the cantankerous old rogue was. Most likely, he was hip deep in snow - April always saw him enjoying the rigours of his annual trek from Zermatt to Chamonix in preparation for the subsequent Hebridean marathon season. It seemed unlikely that he would

have changed the habits of a lifetime just because his only legitimate offspring had started a serious relationship!

The field operative swiped back to the main menu on his phone and decided that Thomas could wait a while longer for his reply. One positive of being in hiding was that you could avoid communicating with others without it being unreasonable.

Darren Jolley brushed away some of the embers from the shoulders of his pea coat. The field operatives had scrambled clear of yet another near miss; their erstwhile opponents had been less fortunate. Behind them, the London townhouse was already starting to collapse inwards beneath the flames.

"You know, something tells me that this isn't what Pembleton meant by observe and report, Ollie."

"So we got fucking proactive about rooting out the greedy bastards who tried to have one of our own murdered – how's that a problem?" As usual, Dobos was adhering to his own lethally direct form of justice.

"I'm just saying that she might be angry, that's

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all, mate! It might piss Mr Moxton off too."

"Fuck the pair of them."

"Language, Oliver." The lanky shape of Maurice Leister ambled clear of the smoke and nodded at Dobos. "You really ought to rein in that attitude, darling. It's doing your career no favours."

The younger man shrugged. "What can I say? I'm inherently honest – ow!"

Leister kept on walking: dragging Dobos along by his right ear and nodding for Jolley to accompany them. "Let's not dilly dally, gentlemen. Daniel is waiting for us at the car – he's already summoned the fire brigade and informed Pembleton of the situation."

Jolley winced. "Ah, that's not going to end well for us!"

"Don't fret, darling; Edith's no fool. She knows how these things tend to play out."

"Then I suppose she wanted this fucking bastard dead after all, eh?" Dobos had quit trying to tug free – mostly because he liked having two ears. "That's why she sent us, isn't it, Leister?"

"I wouldn't dream of presuming to guess either way, darling – and please, call me Cob."

"Where's that from, by the by?" Jolley had

enough financial incentive to enquire. "Me and Ollie have a bit of a wager going, you see."

Leister chuckled and loosed his grip on Dobos' ear as they came in view of their transport. "It's short for Jacob, of course: Maurice Jacob Leister."

Dobos rubbed at his mistreated cartilage and smirked. "Pay up, Darren!"

"Ah, you jammy ginger bastard!"

They poured themselves, soot and gore included, into the back seat of the hover vehicle. Moxton tossed them a box of disposable wipes and a couple of hydration packs before looking to Leister for feedback. "Was there seriously no way that you three could have brought our target in alive?"

"I'm afraid not, darling. Still, I dare say that Paul shall rest a good deal easier now."

"Speaking of whom, Pembleton said we're to head to Lancashire ourselves. I got the impression that she was hoping to minimise the risk of any further explosions."

The side of the ice cream carton was that stinging kind of soggy, and Ashley Jenkins' fingertips stuck to the frosty cardboard as she peeled back

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the lid. The label had promised coffee and pecan, with swirls of real maple syrup. It looked as if the contents had already been defrosted once too often, but Jenkins was hungry enough to settle for it. She was good at settling for imperfect situations, and it wasn't as though her current situation was so very awful.

Really, she was lucky to be here at all. A gap in her mind notwithstanding, this was what she had wanted – freedom from GETEC and reunification with Paul Benedict; retired spy turned absentee biological father of the year. He was all that remained of her family. She ought to be grateful to have him in her life; to have any sort of a life. *I was dead. Now I'm not – that's good, isn't it?*

It didn't feel good. Still, there were pills for that, and therapy. She'd be alright; it was just a big situation to get her head around. The nightmares were to be expected. PTSD did that to people. Dr Rosa probably had the same problem. *Maybe when she gets here, we'll be able to talk about it.*

Doris Weaver picked her way across the remains of the security barrier and stared back at the still burning shell that had once been England's most

prestigious private cybernetic research facilities. It seemed that someone else had already broken Dr Rosa out – leaving nothing but chaos and perhaps justice in his or her wake. Of all the situations that the field operative had planned for, this had remained firmly at the bottom of her list.

Some unmitigated bastard has stolen our ruddy boffin!

There were no survivors among the staff, and the data from the security cameras was as absent as the technician whom Weaver was there to find. The destruction had occurred prior to her arrival, perhaps by as much as an entire day – ensuring that it hadn't been Dobos related. That was a small comfort, but might take the edge off Pembleton's inevitable fury.

Chapter Two – Preventative Measures

Hull fantasised sometimes about bringing them all together - Kellie, Nightingale, Ashley. The latter being very dead meant that she was beyond his reach, but he missed her. Although thinking about it, he did have access to her cryospace records. Downloading a copy of her neural map would be easy. All he would need was another Perfect10 to house it. *I could even reset her memories – tweak her personality a little. Machines have some serious advantages. Just look at Kellie!*

Rosa 2.5 could run as fast and as far as she wanted to. Ultimately, all Hull needed to do was activate the sleeper program that he had implanted within the Perfect10 to bring her back to heel. If the technicians back across the pond had managed to re-integrate her personality, then so

much the better. A robot brain was still just a robot.
You're mine, Kellie, and you always will be.

"This is a lovely home – I especially like these hardwood floors." Bernard Vetch smiled at the bewildered looking couple sitting on the couch. "I'm sorry that we had to interrupt your evening, but our analytics suggest that your daughter may be crucial to one of GETEC's ongoing projects. We're going to have to take her with us."

"Like fuck you will!" Graham Darnell scrambled to his feet. "This is nothing but a damned home invasion, and I'm calling the cops!"

The unquestioning bulk of David Saunders loomed immediately into preventative measures, and both Mr and Mrs Darnell screamed; the latter merely from terror as opposed to actual pain. It was loud, but that was what the sonic nullifiers were for: nobody outside of this room would hear a thing.

Three cheers for modern technology! Vetch pulled up the relevant forms on his tablet; raising his voice over the unpleasantness. "You know, I'd much prefer for us to do this the easy way, people! GETEC can offer Tanya a lot in terms of her future. As her parents you should want that for her – you

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do want her to have a good life, don't you?"

Graham wasn't up to answering him at all, and Carlotta was somewhere in between stunned and hysterical. Vetch figured that their thumbprints would do in lieu of actual signatures. After all, it was purely a formality: technically, they could sign Tanya as an adult without any next of kin referrals.

He nodded to the SCO. "Okay then, home invasion it is. Make it believable please, Mr Saunders. I'll go find the asset."

Lydia hated having to discipline her grandchildren. Under any normal circumstances, such unpleasantness would naturally fall to Horatio. After all, he was the head of the family. Darling Jasper's loss had cost them even that level of peace. Doubtless, it had influenced the children's mood too – but she couldn't afford to make excuses for them. It would do them no favours in the long term.

Val was proof of that: give a child enough rope, and they would hang everyone else within reach! Not they themselves though no, for children were inherently selfish. Jasper had been such a rare exception in so very many regards. It was

unfortunate that Barnabas and Kathryn echoed their mother instead. Lillian had never really been a good fit with the family traditions.

They were snivelling again. Lydia detested the noise. Really, she would need to ask Horatio to improve the soundproofing on that door. He always chuckled at her hearing. It was the only good quality that Val had laid claim to.

Mondays were definitely getting worse around here. It was nine in the morning and there was a sobbing, pyjama-clad ball cowering in the opposite corner of his office. Hull recognised her as Tanya Darnell - one of the teenagers from the apartment in Capoliveri. Those four had become minor celebrities over their survival.

GETEC's analytical department had postulated that whatever mysterious agency had supplied the thrill killer's equipment might be keen to see that fame extinguished. Hull grimaced. He had a sudden theory regarding the security team that Vetch had scouring the building. *I really do need to see about firing that guy!*

The supervisor closed the door behind him and set down his coffee on top of the nearest cabinet.

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Crouching down in the hope of lessening the girl's panic, he pulled out his phone and texted Mellor to have medical on stand-by. "Hey there, sweetheart – are you alright?"

"They...they killed my parents!"

"Who did?" *Scratch firing: I'm recycling him for fertiliser – the roof garden could use a boost.*

She whimpered and let him pull her into a hug. "Those two men...Vetch...Saunders...please you have to help me, mister!"

"Hey, it's alright; you're safe now. I have you. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Tanya...Tanya Darnell...who are you?"

"My name's Greg Hull; I'm a supervisory operative with GETEC."

That made her start struggling. "That's who they said they worked for...if you work for the same corporation...how do I know you aren't helping them?"

"Why would GETEC want to hurt your parents? Think about it, Tanya. Doesn't it seem much more probable that whoever did this was actually abusing their position?"

"I...I guess that makes sense."

"Those two men will be in a world of trouble, I

guarantee that. Now how about we go down to medical and make sure that you're not hurt?"

The Rosa household was still pinned to that horrific moment last November. Pembleton eyed the holo-cards lining every surface with messages of support for Philippe and Eva. "I know this hasn't been easy for you. Please be assured that British Intelligence is doing everything that is feasible to find Kellie."

Philippe shook his head and knocked back another measure of brandy. "You still haven't explained why she went missing. She was at her job, and then nothing...gone, like smoke. How does that happen, Edith?"

"It wasn't intended. The restoration process meant that there were medical tests needed. There was an incident beyond my control, and by the time that it was resolved, she was already gone. That's all that I can tell you, but I do promise that we'll bring her home."

Eva looked away, gesturing towards the door. "Aunt Edith, please – you've broken enough of your promises to us. We don't need any more lies. Just go."

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The spymistress took a final moment to memorise the faces of her family before she stood. "I am sorry, Eva."

"You always are. It just doesn't make anything better."

"How's Miss Darnell holding up, Dr Kenlow?"

"Well, obviously she's psychologically traumatised but there's no significant physical damage, Supervisor Hull – just a few minor bruises and a scraped elbow. I understand that she gave building security quite the run-around – seems to be a scrappy enough little madam."

Hull nodded and signed off on the usual GETEC medical release. "I'll be managing her from now on. If there are any concerns then you bring them straight to me, understood?"

"Yes Sir." The senior medic hustled away to see to another patient.

Tanya was sitting cross-legged on the gurney; her pyjamas exchanged for one of the standard intern jumpsuits. She looked up at him. "So what's going to happen – have the cops arrested those other guys yet?"

"It's in hand: SCO Saunders has already been

appropriately reprimanded for his misconduct. GETEC will see to it that you receive financial recompense in line with the severity of your loss."

"What does that even mean – and how about the other creep...what's going on with him?"

"Mr Vetch will have to face a tribunal."

"I thought they'd both be in jail by now. They killed my mom and dad...!"

The tears were inevitable. Hull squeezed her shoulder gently and handed her another tissue. "GETEC will arrange counselling for you."

"You mean he's going to get away with it, don't you? They both are – what good's a reprimand, anyhow?"

Kid gloves, Greg; she's just a teenager. "Tanya, do you know what an SCO is?"

"Weren't they the special kind of troops that got used during the Martian Uprising? My history teacher told us that they were clones or something."

He could work with this. She was the right kind of clever: malleable, open to new information without asking too many questions. "That was the first major use of the concept. Nowadays SCOs are commonplace within private security. GETEC has

led the field in developing them. My point is that Mr Saunders only does what he's ordered to do. He has no concept of acting independently."

Tanya scrunched up the tissue and dropped it into the waste reclamation unit beside the gurney. "So this was all Vetch's fault really, but he probably won't be in trouble, is that it?"

Hull quirked his eyebrows warily at her far too quiet reaction. "I'm sensing some resentment. Do you want to talk about that?"

"What's the point? Nobody gives a crap."

"Mr Vetch insists that he was acting in your own best interests; our analytics department had expressed concern that you and your friends might be targeted in relation to the Capoliveri incident."

"We didn't do anything wrong...!"

"I know that, Tanya. It's complicated – the killer had access to some unusual technology. We don't know who invented it yet, but there's a risk that whoever it was might want to get rid of any possible witnesses. Mr Vetch was only supposed to offer to provide additional security."

The girl shook her head. "I want to talk to the cops."

"I'm afraid that isn't an option."

"Yeah, well I don't think my family's attorneys will see things that way. I'm going to sue for – for whatever I can sue for!"

Hull sighed. "Tanya, here at GETEC we don't sue our fellow employees. It's against company policy."

"Oh my God, what is your damage? I'm not going to join your creepy corporation, and you can't make me!"

"Well, actually there are a number of ways that we can do exactly that, but none of them are pleasant. End story is that you work for GETEC now, and I'm responsible for supervising you."

Tanya blinked. "Why would I ever agree to do what you say?"

"Because right now doing what you're told will be the deciding factor in whether the authorities will find two bodies or three when they investigate the fire that I'll be arranging to cover up Mr Vetch's mess."

"You can't do that!"

"Oh I do stuff like this every day. I'm actually really good at it. Believe me, there'll be no questions asked – which is just as well, given that home invasion never makes much of a cover for these kinds of things."

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She stared at him: half-addled with grief. "What - you mean murder and kidnapping draw too much attention?"

"Don't snark at me, young lady. I don't think that you'd like my idea of a time-out."

"I'm *not* a child, Mr Hull!"

The eye roll almost tipped things. "And that's *exactly* why you need to stop butting heads with me. Learn to pick your battles. Do you understand?"

"Please...I want to go home...!"

"Tanya, I'd prefer that you quit whining about that now."

"Fuck you!"

He was already staring down the stubby muzzle before it registered with him that she had gone for his sidearm. One of GETEC's latest designs: 12mm titanium shredder rounds, ten per clip, semi-automatic function. "Biometrics, Tanya. It won't fire for anyone other than me."

The girl collapsed against him as he pried the gun from her hand. "I just want to wake up from this nightmare!"

Dr Kenlow already had one hand poised to press the emergency alarm. "Supervisor Hull – should I

alert security?"

"No, it's fine; I've got it." Hull holstered the gun and waved the senior medic off. "We're good here, aren't we Tanya?"

She cried herself to sleep in his arms instead of answering. The supervisor scooped her up and carried her back to his office. There was enough space on the couch to let her nap. He'd play things by ear after that. In the meantime, it seemed like a good idea to e-mail R&D about really adding in a biometric safety feature to all GETEC issue weapons.

Chapter Three – Falling Apart Again

Leister stepped in close behind Jenkins and closed his hands over hers. “Be careful, darling: we’re slicing potatoes for the gratin, not fingers.”

“Sorry, Sir...I mean, Mr Leister.”

The older operative shrugged and rested his chin on her shoulder. “As much as I prefer being called Cob, you’re perfectly welcome to use Sir if it makes you more comfortable, Ashley.”

She squirmed a little. “But everyone else says not to do that anymore. And the doctors gave me pills.”

“Pills rarely do more than blur things, in my bitter experience.” He adjusted her grip on the knife. “There we go – that’s much safer for all involved. Root vegetables excluded, of course.”

“Thank you...Cob.”

He patted her ribs gently as he backed away to attend to the cheese sauce. "We simply must get you smiling a bit more readily, darling. Lovely young women ought to be happy."

"Supervisor Hull says that I don't take things seriously enough."

"Ah, yes; that bastard – never mind his opinions, Ashley. He's not entitled to say anything at all about you."

The young boffin gulped. "He'll find me again, Cob. He always does."

"Well, that shall certainly make my shooting him a damn sight simpler, darling."

Ashley smiled. Her memories were still a blur of secrets, but there was something to Leister's responses that she found to be comforting. "I used to have a microchip in my neck."

"Yes, so I've heard – a horrid little trick, that."

"That's how I died back in the other safe house: just a button pressed and...!"

"Ashley, stop." There was a touch more steel to the tone now. "The first thing that I must insist upon is that you shan't dwell on that, darling."

"I'm sorry, Cob."

"It's quite all right. Now, be a dear and turn

down that pan. We don't want to scald the butter, after all."

In the adjoining hallway, Spence finally let go of Benedict's elbow. "He shan't hurt her, Paul. Overprotective father or not, you must see that?"

"She's hardly capable of making those sorts of choices, Housekeeping."

"That's precisely *why* you need to step back and let Cob do what he's bloody good at. Trust me - he'll put her back together again."

Benedict sighed and nodded. "I'll try anything at this point. Damn Greg Hull and his sick little games!"

Spence leant back against the wall of the corridor and watched him stride away. The windowless cell of the space station hissed from the grey of their memory. *No, don't let him back in your head; not now. Not if you want to keep from falling apart again.*

Tanya huddled deeper into the couch and tried to believe that Supervisor Hull would have already called the cops. *I pulled a gun on him. He has to have reported me.*

The office was dark, aside from the glow of the computer screens. Hull didn't seem to have noticed

that she was awake yet. He sat at the desk with his back to her. The soft clattering of his fingertips across the keyboard reminded Tanya of an old horror movie: skeletons ticker-tackering out of their graves to grab the hero and his girlfriend. *Great, it's not as if you really needed that image!*

There was enough going on behind her eyelids already. The dead guy in the crappy little bathroom on Capoliveri. Matt, Leo, and their sick obsession with what had happened. Kassie texting her to suggest they should both pose nude for the creepy media ghouls. Her parents lying there at home all twisted up and too still.

“Are you feeling better after your nap?”

Supervisor Hull had left his desk. She blinked and shrank backwards. “Where are the cops?”

“I'd guess they're busy processing a tragic accidental fire that killed two people. I understand that it was due to faulty wiring. It's just fortunate that the third member of the household wasn't home.”

Tanya choked down a sob. “Why are you doing this?”

“What – letting you get away with trying to shoot me?”

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"No, keeping me prisoner here."

Hull seated himself beside her on the edge of the couch. "Is that what you think you are?"

"It's kind of obvious, Mr Hull."

"There's nothing preventing you from leaving, Miss Darnell."

That made no sense at all. "Um...are you forgetting the armed security teams all over this place?"

"They're here to protect the staff in the case of any emergencies. Sometimes they have to deal with unstable personalities as a part of that – thieves, industrial saboteurs, those sorts of people."

She decided to risk edging up into a sitting position. "So which of those are you going to say I am?"

The supervisor chuckled. "It isn't often that I get my hands on someone as insightful as you. Most people would have just taken me at my word and bolted."

There was no sign of his gun this time. "You were bluffing earlier, weren't you, Mr Hull? About the biometric stuff, I mean."

"It's good that we both understand our situation, Miss Darnell."

She glared at him. "I'm not going to play along with your sick fantasy!"

"Good to hear it, Miss Darnell. You playing along would take all the fun out of this."

It was raining again in Lancashire. In the main sitting room of the safe house, Dobos and Quincy were engaged in something that was halfway between gambling and simple extortion, whilst the others at the table were merely playing cards. Leister had excused himself and Jenkins; opting to teach the young woman how to crush a man's larynx with her elbow instead. They were by necessity elsewhere - making use of the gymnasium for their practice.

Benedict kept glancing vaguely in that direction between hands. "Are you sure this is going to help her?"

Spence glowered at him from across their cards. "I'm sure that your distinct inability to focus is helping Mr Dobos' efforts to bankrupt us. Either play cards or go and supervise them. Quincy, it counts as poor form to count the cards."

"I wondered what he was up to!" Campbell wagged his finger at the little robot. "Didn't your

partner in crime tell you not to get caught?"

Dobos shrugged. "He's doing fine – he's supposed to be the distraction. You know, like a pretty girl in a posh frock, only with lasers and shit instead of tits."

"Could Whitby build one of those?" Jolley helped himself to another beer.

Benedict shook his head. "Why aren't Weaver and Rosa here yet anyhow?"

Moxton stared morosely at the hand that was mocking him. "Dr Rosa's gone missing from the medical facility. The whole place was destroyed, but she wasn't amongst the remains and neither was that robot. Pembleton has Whitby digging. The last text that I got from Weaver was that she'd regroup with us here to organise a proper search."

Spence eyed Dobos again. "Normal human beings have *tells*, you know."

He bared his teeth in an exaggerated, manic sort of grin. "Fuck that, andro!"

"Watch your mouth, Dobos." Campbell edged a little closer to the non-gender and tried to sneak a glimpse of their cards.

Spence elbowed him. "And they say that gallantry is dead!"

"I thought that was chivalry?" Jolley folded and wandered off in search of something to eat. "I'm going to make sandwiches. Is anyone else hungry?"

Dobos was in his element. "Andro definitely fucking needs feeding up...!"

The non-gender's eyes were as sharp as the edge of the knife that they had pulled. "Shut up and play cards, Mr Dobos."

<advisory-notthecorrectwaytocutcards>

Dobos swept away the confetti that had been his previous hand. "You're a fucking horrible loser, Housekeeping."

The soft buzz of the perimeter alarm finished all their bickering and set everyone to full alert. After ten minutes of nothing on the night vision aside from rain and a bedraggled hedgehog, Moxton sent Quincy to investigate. "Be careful – whoever it is might have stealth tech."

"Assuming they're not just another fucking hedgehog, you mean?" Dobos crouched and bumped his knuckles against the chassis of the little robot. "Fist bump for luck, bro'."

<gratefulcelebratoryoutpourings>

The others gathered in the main sitting room to wait. Jenkins huddled on one of the overstuffed

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sofas with a mug of caramel infused warm milk. She could almost grasp what was happening. The finer details still slipped away from her when it was least convenient.

Leister stood to her left with an elegant rifle cradled in his arms. "It's a foul night for whoever it is."

"Is it Mr Hull?"

"We can certainly hope so, darling. It would make for a well-deserved abrupt conversation."

Benedict was at the window. "I somehow doubt that he'd dare to set foot in England himself, Cob. Still, he might send minions."

"Then we'll shoot them and post the bodies back as a subtle hint, darling."

Spence smiled a little at their banter. "I'll be glad when this bloody rain lets up."

Moxton was tracking Quincy's route via a combination of GPS and video link. He frowned at the monitor in front of him. "There's a car broken down by the main gate – elderly male driving. He's on his way up to the house looking for help, by the looks of it."

Jolley grinned and headed back to the kitchen. "Panic over then! I'll make some extra sandwiches

for when our guest arrives."

Dobos snorted. "If it's all the same with the rest of you, I think I'll go and give Quincy a hand getting back here. His hover function's acting up and I don't fancy the little bugger's chances in that mud if it gives out completely."

Whitby had been elbow deep in wiring when the call came through. He answered his phone almost automatically. "Yes?"

"Nathaniel...sorry...so bloody sorry..."

The senior technician felt his stomach drop. "Doris – what's happened?"

A ragged sob that he never would have thought believed possible to connect with Weaver echoed in the background as an unfamiliar voice replied. "Doris can't talk right now, Nathaniel. If you want to see her again then you'll do precisely as I say."

The tracer program needed a few more seconds to do its job. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing so very much - I just have a little message for you to pass on. Can you do that for me?"

"I can. What's the message?"

"Tell Val that Daddy sends his love."

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The line went dead, even as co-ordinates flashed up on the screen. Whitby snatched up the emergency line and demanded Pembleton.

The spymistress sounded tired. "What is it?"

"Weaver's been captured by an unknown party. He just called me from her phone – left a cryptic message for someone named Val. The signal was coming from inside the main security boundary at Lancashire."

"For pity's sake, we don't even have anyone named Val on our books! What's Weaver's status?"

"Alive at last point of contact, ma'am. However, she sounded as if she were enduring severe levels of physical duress. I suspect torture."

"Inform those at Lancashire of the situation immediately. Tell them to take whatever action may be necessary."

"Yes ma'am."

Chapter Four – Such A Thing

“So here we are together again at last. An old dairy farm – how very apt this is! Tell me, does the dashing Mr Campbell know the wormy bones of what my little Val is yet?”

Weaver lifted her head slightly from the bloodied straw. The wire still locked about her throat kept her from managing anything above a weak rasp. “I don’t know...don’t know anyone...no Val...!”

The poaching lanterns that were her captor’s eyes gleamed in the dark of the ancient byre. His voice was eerily pleasant: lilting and refined. “Would he really want to keep such a thing beside him if he knew? I doubt it very much, Dory.”

She sucked in an agonizing gulp of dank air, her ribcage shifting by another fraction of a millimetre. “People...will...come...!”

“Of course they shall, Dory. That’s the point of

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this exercise: baiting the snare for my quarry. You don't mind that I call you Dory, do you?"

"Go to Hell...!"

He chuckled and tangled his leather-gloved fingers in her hair. "My pretty little Dory – such a brave toy soldier, aren't you?"

"Who *are* you...?"

The only response was another dry laugh; followed by the now familiar slice of that awful knife through what remained of her thoracic vertebrae.

The old bloke scowled at Dobos as he approached the main gate. "Is this damned tin can anything to do with you?"

"His name's Quincy, mate – and this is private property. You're trespassing."

"Then maybe my son ought to answer his bloody phone!"

Dobos frowned, but kept his gun trained on the fellow to be safe. "Who's your son?"

"Craig Campbell, of course – didn't the fool mention that I was on my way here?"

"No."

"Huh. Just like his damned mother, that boy." The intruder shook his head. "I'm Thomas Campbell –

British Intelligence, retired. I'll assume that you've never fucking heard of me, to judge by the constipated look on your face."

Older people weren't generally this aggressive. Dobos glanced at Quincy for confirmation. "Is he telling the truth?"

<identityaffirmed-thomascraigcampbell>

"Well? Does that bloody beeping mean that we can get inside out of this Hellish weather?"

"Yes, Mr Campbell. This way, please. I'm sure your son will be delighted to see you here."

"No he fucking won't. He's avoiding me. Stupid little shit's gone and taken up with one of those non-sexed types. It's disgraceful."

"Oh. You must mean Spence." Dobos wasn't sure if this was hilarious or terrifying. Maybe it depended who you were: Campbell certainly wasn't likely to be happy. "They're alright, really. Pretty fucking nasty at cards, mind."

Thomas huffed and pulled his hood tighter about his head. His eyes were blackbird sharp under the grizzled brow. "Well, I suppose that's something."

They trudged on through the storm. Quincy was just about managing to remain airborne. The crosswind wasn't making it any easier. Dobos

placed himself between the little robot and the gale. "Not far now, mate."

"I'm going to pretend that you aren't talking to your pet robot again. Have you got a name?"

"Oliver Dobos, and he's *not* a fucking pet."

The older man grinned: a sharp flash of white against the weather-beaten tan of his face. "You young pups are all the damned same, Oliver! Nothing but over-sensitive technophiles – it's beyond me how anything gets done nowadays. Sappy little pricks, the lot of you."

A sheet of lightning silhouetted the byre as they approached it. It was hard to determine which of the curious trio spotted the soft glow emanating from beneath the doors first. Quincy was the one who detected the unexpected bio-sign inside it. His sensors identified it within seconds as Doris Weaver.

Dobos gestured for their companion to go on to the main building. "You'd best head for the house, Mr Campbell. Quincy will escort you. I need to see what Agent Weaver's doing in the cow shed."

"Don't be bloody stupid, Oliver. If you're surprised to see someone in that byre, then I'll guess that they aren't meant to be there. In this line of work, surprises are very bad things."

<advisory-lifesignsnotstable>

"Fuck." The field operative sighed. "Fine – it seems one of our operatives is in there, and she's hurt. We need to investigate. Can you handle a gun?"

"Yes." Thomas was already attaching a sleek suppressor to a truly beautiful vintage revolver.

"Okay then, cover me. Quincy, hold back for now and signal the others about what's going on out here."

<warning-communicationsseverelylimited>

"Fucking typical! Keep trying – use the flare gun if need be." Dobos padded forwards and eased the nearest door open. "Agent Weaver – can you hear me?"

The machete still took the tips of his hair despite Thomas' abrupt intervention. Their headlong dive resulted in both men sprawling across the straw. A series of worryingly sharp objects thudded into narrow misses all around them.

"Someone wants to kill us, Oliver."

"It must be Tuesday."

Their newly brokered camaraderie was disturbed as the glow stick that had caught their attention from outside illuminated the broken form of Doris

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Weaver. Hurrying forwards, Thomas dropped to a crouch to check for signs of life. Dobos hung back slightly and peered about him in search of those responsible.

"She's certainly tough." Thomas peeled the wire away from Weaver's throat. "Someone intended her to die slowly. We can't risk moving her without an ambulance. Get that robot in here to stand guard whilst we find whoever is responsible."

Spence and Campbell had slipped away upstairs together, ostensibly to apply another layer of regenerative salve to the non-gender's injuries. It was a valid excuse for them to lock the bedroom door. More importantly, Spence found that having the salve rubbed into their skin was less than panic inducing.

Campbell, aware of how difficult his companion generally found physical contact, kept his fingers light. "How's that, canary?"

"I think we both know that I'm making excuses for you to keep applying it, Craig."

"I'm not complaining." The field operative risked pressing a kiss into one of the pale wrists. "It does smell rather too lovely for something medically

necessary."

"Hmm - maybe I should stick with it in lieu of my usual moisturiser?"

"That could work." He traced the line of their lower arm with his lips and nuzzled the soft skin of the inner elbow. "Are you still okay, Spence?"

"Not completely. I'm sorry, Craig."

"It's not your fault." Campbell smiled as he stepped clear. "I told you: we'll go at your speed."

"Thanks for that."

Jenkins had never liked conservatories and this one was no improvement. The ancient collection of potted plants stood withered and festooned with cobwebs. Even during the day, it enjoyed a disappointing view of the rear wall of the main byre. Late at night and with the storm raging, the young technician felt reminded of the interior of a cryospace unit. *Don't go there!*

She shivered and continued her search for the source of the draft that was rattling through the entire ground floor. *If I can find what's causing the cold air, then I'm not imagining it.*

It was a sort of logic. Jenkins was by now painfully aware that she couldn't rely on her

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judgement properly. Her father assured her that being aware of the issue made things better. She could only hope that he was right. At least the nightmares had stopped. *I'm sure Dr Rosa will have some idea of how to work on the rest.*

The floor was wet: a faint spattering of something dark covered the pale tiles. Jenkins backed up a few steps and reached for the overhead light switch. The sudden shift in brightness dazzled her for a moment. She blinked clear of it impatiently. "Who left this door open? There's mud all over the conservatory floor!"

Her voice echoed strangely. The hallway behind the conservatory seemed bereft of noise: as though it was somehow much farther away. Even the howl of the storm beyond the open door was missing. Jenkins closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. *It's just another panic attack...it isn't real!*

"Don't worry: nobody out there can hear a thing going on in this little glass box of ours."

The voice came from right behind her. Jenkins screamed and spun to look. "Who are you? How did you get in?"

"My name is Horatio." The man smiled and held out his right hand. "I came in by that door, my dear.

I suppose that I really should have knocked first, but it is terribly wet outside."

Living under Hull's whims had taught her how to spot quiet threats. Jenkins kept well away from the proffered handshake. "Are you the man who was at the main gate?"

"I came in by that route, yes."

"So...so the field operative escorted you here?"

Horatio nodded. "The lovely Agent Weaver – she had to see to something out in the byre. I came on in to find the rest of you."

There was a small transmitter clipped to his upper right arm. The technician recognised it as a sonic nullifier. She backed slowly towards the open doorway. "No...Mr Dobos was the one who went down to the gate. Agent Weaver isn't here yet."

His eyes hardened abruptly. "It's very rude to refuse a handshake. Agent Weaver and I arrived here together. We didn't encounter anyone named Dobos on our journey."

"Dr Jenkins, don't move!" Strong hands closed on her shoulders as Dobos' voice continued. "There's a tripwire across this doorway. It's armed."

She whimpered as the red-haired field operative slipped past her into the conservatory. "Mr Dobos,

what's going on?"

Horatio snarled as his left hand came into view; the knife already rushing into flight. "I've no more time to waste on this!"

Dobos dropped and spun, taking the blade with his shoulder instead of his stomach. He grimaced as he regained his feet. "You picked the wrong target, you stupid old fucker."

The glass of the conservatory windows splintered away from the path of the bullets that Thomas emptied into his target's head. Jenkins screamed again and cowered against Dobos. "Who else is out there?"

Thomas saluted her almost merrily: touching the tip of his silencer to his brow as he clambered in through the ruined window. "It's just me. Thomas Campbell: retired British Intelligence, at your service."

"We need an ambulance for Weaver, and the communications aren't working properly." Dobos shook Jenkins off and limped towards the hallway. "Why isn't anyone else here yet?"

"He...his arm...there's a device that blocks sound waves." Jenkins pointed.

"Well shut it off then! You're the boffin, not us,

after all." Dobos scowled and went in search of his colleagues. "Where the fuck is everyone? We've got a bloody emergency!"

Dr Kenlow appeared less than pleased to see them back in medical. "Supervisor Hull, I'd really prefer to contact security about this intern now – she's clearly dangerous!"

Hull ignored him and opened the nearest emergency supply kit. "Hold still, Miss Darnell. We don't want you to bleed out."

Tanya flinched away from his ministrations. "Leave me alone, you creep!"

The supervisor shrugged and tossed her the salve. "Fine – see to that gash on your face yourself then. Dr Kenlow, I may have a concussion."

"Can you inform me as to how you were injured, Sir?"

"I tripped over my shoelace and hit my head off the corner of my desk. It's actually a pretty funny story." Hull leaned back against the wall of the cubicle and closed his eyes. "Miss Darnell is an innocent party in the matter."

Kenlow glanced at the teenager. "So, what happened to your face, Miss Darnell?"

"A rat tried to chew it off."

The senior medic blinked. "Wait – what?"

Hull pointed vaguely towards the nearest ventilation duct. "The building has a rodent problem, Dr Kenlow. I've already informed the janitorial department, and they're organising an exterminator."

"But...but why did a rat attack Miss Darnell?"

The young woman winced as she wiped at her injury. "I guess I scared it when I climbed into the vent."

"You climbed into a vent...? Actually, no, never mind. I'm not paid enough to ask these sorts of questions. Here's a broad-spectrum antibiotic. I'll go book you both in for the standard vaccinations."

Chapter Five – Never Go Home

It had become evident to Rosa that Perfect10 Incorporated took the misappropriation of their technology extremely seriously. What remained unclear was why their retrieval team had taken her alive. So far, aside from the unpleasantness at the facility and the rough handling during the subsequent journey, her captors had treated her courteously. This didn't negate the fact that she was indeed a prisoner here.

The attack on the facility had been all but silent, just a few terse commands from the man leading the group. Rosa shivered as she remembered how the researchers had begged for their lives. For one horrifically long moment, the weapons responsible for the slaughter had aimed at Rosa too. Then the attackers had grabbed her; loading both she and

the Perfect10 into their hover transport.

The technician squirmed futilely against her restraints. There was still no hint as to why she was alive. No one had interrogated her, and it seemed most unlikely that there was a ransom involved. *If only I'd had time to complete the neural upload before the retrieval team arrived! Perhaps I should have done that first and then worried about reactivating the military grade aspects of the robot.*

To judge by her luck so far, the latter course of action would have resulted in her captors mistaking her for a genuine AI. That might have been better. As things stood, Rosa ended up handcuffed to a pipe inside a warehouse filled with rows of inactive Perfect10s. Her mechanical doppelganger was somewhere amongst them –primed to fight and frustratingly inactive.

Supervisor Hull had a flashy house. It was also inescapable. Tanya had confirmed that much already. She wasn't sure why he'd decided to bring her back here instead of leaving her in the intern accommodation at work. He had to be planning something – did he think that living in luxury would overwhelm what GETEC had done?

"This is your idea of bribery, isn't it?"

He glanced at her from where he was preparing dinner. "I told you, Miss Darnell: the janitors aren't happy with the idea of there being interns crawling around in the ventilation ducts."

Tanya scowled. "Then let me go!"

"I can't risk you doing something regrettable. It's best for everyone involved that you're kept under watch for now."

"Do you even get how creepy that plan is, Mr Hull? You're holding me prisoner here – forcing me to work for GETEC! It's not normal!"

"Modern corporations do a lot of stuff that the average citizen would find disturbing. That's why they have people like me around to keep things quiet for them."

"So you do see my point about this?"

The supervisor nodded. "The world isn't as simple as most people like to believe, Miss Darnell. You know that now."

"Why are you going along with their madness? Why don't you call the cops, or tell the press?"

"Whistleblowers don't live long enough to give their statements. That's a free tip from me to you, by the way."

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She eyed the back door; wondering if he'd slip up and make the security code obvious. "That's what you do, isn't it? You keep people from telling anyone what they know."

"That's certainly a part of it. They pay me a really nice salary." Hull reached for the garlic. "I hope you aren't a picky eater, by the way."

"How do I know that you aren't planning on drugging me?"

"Don't worry: if I decide to drug you, I'll be injecting it. I prefer needles; far simpler to guarantee the dosage levels are kept steady."

"I really hope that was meant to be a joke!"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Darnell. I do what I have to do. Sometimes that involves chemical-based intervention techniques."

Tanya backed away from him. "I want to go home, Mr Hull!"

"Yeah, I know. I'm just not going to let you. Mostly because GETEC hate it when their interns quit without notice."

Something about that turn of phrase scared her even more than his casual explanation of how he'd be prepared to drug her. "What do you mean by *mostly*, Mr Hull?"

"We'll get to the details later, Miss Darnell. Suffice to say, some people never go home. Anyhow, your parents' house is gone. They're both dead, and your nearest living relatives believe you to have been institutionalised due to the trauma."

"But they'll still want to see me! And so will my friends – you can't just make me disappear!"

"Your friends are nothing beyond a pair of morbid teenage boys and a cheap media whore. I'm quoting your private blog with that last one."

Tanya felt sick. "You read my blog?"

"It was hard not to; it's front-page news today."

"There's no way; it was encrypted! How did the press get hold of it?"

"Not from me, Miss Darnell. I'd guess they hacked your computer." Hull closed the oven and wiped off his hands. "Your friends haven't taken it well. They left some unpleasant messages on your social media, and on your phone. Dinner will take about an hour."

"I want to talk to my other relatives."

"Well, if you're very good, I guess that I could arrange one carefully monitored phone call." He smiled at her. "So – are you going to be good, Miss Darnell?"

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Ugh...creep! Okay, I can do this. I can use the phone call to hint that I need help – say something they'll know isn't accurate, maybe! She forced herself to smile back at him. "I suppose that I have to, Mr Hull. I don't like the idea of my family worrying about me."

"That's a very mature attitude, Tanya."

Oh crap...now we're on first name terms?
"Um...thank you...?"

"Come on – I'll place the call for you. That way you can't misdial. Oh – and Tanya?"

"Yes?"

Suddenly he was right in front of her: pressing her back into the corner of the kitchen and cupping her face in his hands. "I'll be providing you with a script of what you're allowed to say. Stick to what's on it. You so much as breathe too fast during this call, your next of kin die. Don't even think about trying to fuck with me, now or ever – got that?"

She gulped. "I...I got it. I'll behave."

"Good girl."

Quincy had destroyed the last of Horatio's jamming devices, enabling Whitby to reach those at the Lancashire safe house via radio

communications less than five minutes previously. By then, the ambulance had already departed for Lancashire Century Medical Centre, with a barely stable Weaver clinging on by little beyond sheer tenacity. Leister and Benedict had ridden along with her for company.

"What the fuck was that mad bastard playing at?" Jolley broke the silence in the living room. "And what do we do about his remains?"

Dobos hunched himself further into the corner of the sofa. "That part's Housekeeping's job, not ours, Darren. Let them fucking sort it."

Spence, who hadn't uttered a word since seeing the mess in the conservatory, nodded tersely and left the room, closing the door silently behind them.

Campbell flinched at their departure. "Mr Jolley makes a good point. Does anyone know who this Horatio fellow was, or why he came here?"

Jolley shook his head. "According to Mr Whitby, the ransom message just said that he wanted Val to know that Daddy was on his way."

Thomas snorted. "So who's Val?"

"We haven't got a Val on our books, Dad. We have a Veronique, a Victor, and one or two Vivienne's."

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Quincy proffered another small packet of tissues to Jenkins. The young technician sniffed. "Thank you, Quincy."

Moxton bounced to his feet. "I don't think we should risk splitting up. I'll go and see if Housekeeping needs any help."

"There's nobody else here: we checked." Dobos wasn't keen on the idea of yet another sweep of the grounds. The stitches to his shoulder ached despite the synthetic morphine. "It's fucking pissing down out there!"

"Aye well, I'm going to grab Ashley another cup of coffee." The blonde operative smiled at Jenkins. "Do you want to tag along, miss?"

"Yes thank you, Mr Jolley."

"And in the meantime, Craig might want to stop ignoring the fact that his bloody father has crossed the globe to come and speak to him!" Thomas glowered at his son. "Care to pencil me into your diary somewhere, lad?"

Campbell rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I suppose I have to. Mr Moxton, can you tell Spence that I'll be along presently?"

"Not a problem." Moxton padded off; leaving Dobos and Quincy to witness whatever familial

argument might transpire.

He found the non-gender back in the conservatory. They were staring at the body. "You're clearly not alright, Spence."

"I really thought that it was all safely behind me, Mr Moxton."

"I'll need a few more details, I'm afraid."

"Cambridge." Spence was paler than ever and too quiet. "Horatio was from Cambridge. He came here looking for me."

"Okay. Come here."

"Which means that Weaver almost died because of me."

"Spence – come here, *now*."

For a horribly long pause, it seemed as if the non-gender might ignore his command. Finally, they sighed quietly and moved to stand in front of him. The ice blue eyes tracked upward, challenging him to risk caring. "What?"

Moxton wrapped his left hand around the nape of the pale neck and traced his right thumb along the edge of the jaw. "No secrets, no revelations. You just stand there, and you let me give a shit about how you're feeling. Understood?"

"Yes Sir."

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“Good. So – you’re Val, and Horatio was your father. That’s *not* your fault. Neither is what happened to Weaver. Got that, Spence?”

“I tried to pretend that it was finished...!”

“Shush.” He stroked their jaw line again, waiting for them to calm. “Campbell will be joining us in a bit. He’s pan, with leanings towards Dominant, isn’t he?”

“Yes, although to the best of my knowledge, he doesn’t do poly.”

“But you do, don’t you?”

“I...I might. The whole fear of physical contact thing tends to get in the way. Craig understands that side of me.”

The handler pulled the slight figure closer: resting his chin on the top of their head. “Then we’ll discuss the finer details of how this is going to work once he gets here.”

“Good news, Sir – one of our surveillance drones has located Nightingale Spence.”

Hull smiled. “That is indeed good news! Okay, Mellor – clear my calendar for the rest of this week and have Saunders prep the appropriate transportation.”

"Yes Sir. What about Miss Darnell?"

"I'll bring her along. She could do with the field experience anyhow."

Tanya kept her eyes on the data packet that she was cataloguing. Whoever Nightingale Spence was, GETEC being interested in finding them had to be a bad thing! *Maybe we can help each other out somehow.*

Admittedly, this seemed unlikely. Supervisor Hull had been utterly candid in his walkthrough of the mega corporation's recruitment policies. They covered everything short of reluctant employees flat out murdering those in charge of them. In her more cynical moments, Tanya theorised that there was probably a form for that instance too.

Smooth fingers caressed the nape of her neck. "I trust you won't be difficult about this?"

She choked down the urge to whack the creep around his slimy face with her keyboard. "No, Sir."

"That's my girl. It's encouraging to know that you're prepared to work alongside SCO Saunders despite your initial conflict."

"Yeah well, it's like you said, Mr Hull: he only does what he's ordered to."

"That's commendable, Miss Darnell. You keep

that up and you'll go far in life."

Far away from you, I hope! Tanya gave him her best attempt at enthusiasm. "Thank you, Sir!"

He reached forwards and tapped in a few corrections. "Whoever put this together made some frankly disgraceful errors. Mellor, have Colleague 39544 report to their line manager for assessment – I think their recruitment panel must have missed an issue regarding basic numeracy."

"Yes Sir."

Hull returned to his own console. There was a new e-mail from Perfect10 Incorporated; apologising for the delay in returning his stolen unit. Redelivery was now available, as per the supervisor's earliest convenience. *They've released the party responsible...well now, talk about good things coming in threes! Welcome back to Miami, Kellie.*

Chapter Six – Worrisome Things

Leister had finally returned to the safe house. He had travelled back by taxi, leaving Benedict to keep watch over Weaver at the medical centre. Quincy greeted him enthusiastically upon entering the farmhouse. The rapid beeping and catlike orbiting caused Leister to pause. "Whatever has gotten you so very excited, Quincy?"

Dobos waved from where he lay stretched out on one of the sofas in the living room. "You missed all the fireworks, Cob. How's Weaver doing?"

"She'll live, Oliver. Paul's waiting there to be safe. Now what do you mean by fireworks?"

"Thomas and Moxton got into a scuffle – fuck only knows why. But apparently andro had some

kind of a panic attack over it and legged it out of the conservatory window. Craig lost the plot, decked Thomas for starting it and went after andro. Moxton and Thomas were both out cold, so Darren and I put them to bed whilst Quincy vaporised what was left of Horatio."

"I see. What about Ashley?"

"She's holding up. Darren's looking after her." Dobos winced. "Quincy reckons that my shoulder's infected. I think it's just a cramp."

"Very well, first thing first: Quincy, the taxi hasn't left yet. Take Oliver straight to the medical centre. If he argues about going, knock him out first. If he argues with the doctors once you get there, knock him out again. Oliver, listen to Quincy, or he'll knock you out. And be polite to the taxi driver."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to have a damned shower, and then to sleep. I'm only human, darling. Darren seems a decent young fellow, so I expect that Ashley's safe with him. As to the others, well since they've clearly opted to be unreasonable, they shall have to survive as best they can until I have enough energy to nanny them further."

The sun felt good after having spent so long sealed away from the world. Rosa tilted her head back a little to smile up at the azure sky. She was free again, even if there would be a hefty fine to pay for tampering with the Perfect10. *They'll receive ten percent of my salary for the next fifteen years! I was lucky.*

She looked around her for some idea as to the best course of action. Her erstwhile captors had seen fit to drop her within civilisation at least. The drop-off point was on the corner of a busy street. It was obviously a city – but which city, and which country? *Where am I?*

There was a kiosk to her left offering hot drinks and sandwiches. The green and red of the menu screen listed the prices in dollars. A passing commuter's accent confirmed Rosa's fear: she was once again in Miami. The importance of contacting her family heightened keenly. *I certainly daren't risk phoning anyone at work!*

Unfortunately, she didn't have her phone, or indeed any personal belongings. If the local authorities became involved in this situation, they would class her as an illegal alien. The possibility of ending up imprisoned whilst awaiting deportation

was far from appealing. Rosa had heard rumours of ill-prepared travellers who vanished under similar circumstances. *And none of them would have been regarded as being less than fully human either.*

The shelter that had aided her the last time that she had been here was likely the safest option. Decision made, Rosa pulled her by now scruffy lab coat closed and set off. She knew the address – any of the numerous interactive maps available to commuters would be sufficient to plan her route. *Mum and Dad will bring my passport...assuming that it hasn't been seized.*

She had travelled four blocks, as the Americans would say, when it became evident to her that her feet were carrying her the wrong way. To her gradual horror, Rosa discovered that she couldn't seem to alter her course. She walked on silently: her face betraying no hint of the inner battle waged. *What's happening?*

The streets began to look familiar. Slowly, the featureless contemporary buildings gave way to more classical structures. The traffic eased and there were gardens and suburban families laughing and chatting across their fences. The

neighbourhoods became steadily more exclusive.
Oh no - please God...please not here...!

Spence knew that they had far too many worrisome things rattling around on the edges of their life. There was Cambridge and those who dwelt there; the ongoing obsession of Supervisor Hull; the general oh-so-subtle raising of eyebrows at someone who simply didn't fit into the expected sort of gender related box. It wasn't feasible to be loved with all of that as baggage – and the non-gender wanted love. More specifically, they wanted Campbell.

"Why are you leaving, canary? Why can't we fix this together?"

"Because you didn't break it, and I won't risk it breaking you, Craig. Please – trust me?"

"I do trust you. You know that."

"Then let me go."

His eyes had hung on longer than his hands. That lost sort of gaze that people always seemed to have when things finished too soon. It had looked wrong on him twenty years ago, and it was even worse now. He wasn't the sort of man that grieved easily or safely, not for things that mattered

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properly.

"I love you, Craig. I will come back. I promise."

"No. You won't come back, canary. You can't; because you're not actually really here to leave, and you never were. I can't hold on for both of us. I'm sorry. I'm done with knocking."

He meant it, and they understood the why. Everyone had limits. There wouldn't be another chance for what they'd wasted. Perhaps it was better that way. Drawing a line beneath all of this; starting over fresh...alone.

"I understand. I'm sorry too – I'll never forget what we had together."

"We tried to have something, canary, no more than that. Goodbye."

Spence shoved their hands deeper into the pockets of their jeans and pressed on through the rain. They had things to do: nightmares to wake up from, people to kill. If sorting all of that cost love then fair enough. One could bury a lot of regret with sufficient alcohol.

Campbell trudged back to the old farmhouse alone and slumped into his preferred seat at the breakfast table. "Spence is gone."

Moxton shifted uncomfortably. "They've taken off before now and - !"

"Don't." The field operative shook his head. "Please – just don't."

Leister raised an eyebrow. "Well, when you do feel up to explaining, I'd like to hear the details, darling."

"I'll bear that in mind, Cob."

Jolley cleared his throat. "Mr Benedict rang from the medical centre half an hour ago. Weaver's awake, and Ollie's ready to be released."

"I'll see to that, darling. I can drive there and swop with Paul: he's probably keen to get back and rest up."

"So where's my father gotten to anyhow?" Campbell had finished counting heads. "I noticed his car's gone from the main gate."

"The emergency garage came and towed it." Moxton's voice was lower than usual. "He went with them - said to let you know that that he'll call you."

"Same old Dad then...blows in, wrecks my life, leaves; damn him. And damn you too, Moxton – why couldn't you just have left us be?"

The handler scraped up a glare from somewhere and levelled it at Campbell. "I was trying to help!"

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Blue eyes met brown as the field operative stood. "Keep your help, you controlling arse!"

Leister sighed. "Darren, Ashley, go get your coats and meet me at the car, please. I doubt that we'll be any less safe at the medical centre."

Moxton and Campbell were still circling one another when their companions departed. Neither man really had the stomach to push beyond that stage, but nor were they prepared to back down. An angry silence filled the dining room. Outside the safe house, a fresh wall of rain began hammering the already sodden ground.

"That vicious bastard Horatio was from Cambridge." Moxton was determined to avoid keeping these secrets. "I got the impression that Spence had been hiding from him."

Campbell didn't want any more reasons to go looking for the non-gender again. Things weren't healthy between them. He asked anyhow. "How do you know any of that?"

"They had a somewhat hysterical moment back in the conservatory. I settled them – well, I tried to. Your old man interrupted. I think he got the wrong end of the stick when he saw us together."

"This has something to do with that little place in

Soho that you're so bloody fond of, doesn't it?"

Moxton nodded. "I'm a Dom; Spence is a sub, or mostly a sub. They're complicated."

"I know that."

"Did you know they were Val?"

"Val? You're saying that Horatio was Spence's father?"

"I'm saying that Housekeeping clearly has history that none of us are read in on, mate. And the roots of it seem to be in Cambridge."

The refuelling station offered everything from simple electricity to Hydrochoice Pro for one's motoring needs. Choices were somewhat less broad for food: fried chicken with chips, or chips without fried chicken. Spence eyed the possibly genuine battered poultry warily and then requested the largest portion available. It would save having to stop off again along the way. *I could probably stretch this to last me the week if need be.*

It was somehow far less appetising once they were back inside their vehicle. In the enclosed space, the fatty coating smelt rank. Spence attempted to eat some of it before tossing the

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container into the back seat and lurching clear of the car for air. There was a toilet available for customers behind the main building. It couldn't hurt to use the facilities, and the fresh air had already lessened the nausea.

Unfortunately, the toilets compensated for insufficient lighting with too much air freshener. Spence made an abrupt turn and headed back towards the car park again. Long drives were always worse when you had someone else's absence to regret. Post Cambridge, the next concern would definitely be the acquisition of decent gin.

A tall figure loomed out of the late April fog. "Count the little red dots before you react, Nightingale."

Spence looked down: three at chest height, another two tracking their right thigh, and a sixth lining up with their navel. "I didn't expect to see you within the borders of the United Kingdom, Mr Hull."

"I go wherever my work takes me, Nightingale." The supervisor gestured for them to turn around. "Wrists behind you, please – that's right. Everything's going to be fine now."

"You left me to die on that space station. I feel

somewhat disinclined to trust you."

Hull chuckled. "I can think of two very significant reasons to put that behind us." He took their elbow to escort them.

"Given your usual approach I can only suppose that you're referring to hostages. Who else have you taken?"

"Why don't you tell me their names?" The ramp for the small jet was damp from the fog. Hull slipped his left arm around Spence's waist. "Careful – you're carrying some precious cargo, after all."

"Whatever technological wonders you're hoping to steal from me, you'll only be disappointed." For the first time in this impromptu vendetta, Spence was relieved not to be in possession of any official equipment. "I'm travelling light."

"So I can see, Nightingale. Not even a waterproof coat - I'm surprised. It's almost as if you wanted to catch your death out there."

The interior of the GETEC jet was warm at least, and it didn't stink of either rancid chicken or chemicals. Spence settled back into their designated seat. "I didn't think you cared, Mr Hull."

"Clearly someone needs to, Nightingale. Besides, I'm still your supervisor – nothing's changed there."

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"I can't help but think that GETEC needs to learn that employment isn't always for life."

Hull had taken the adjoining seat. "Job security is important, Nightingale. It gives peace of mind; especially to people with dependents."

"You've lost me there, Mr Hull."

The supervisor rested his palm against the still flat belly beside him. "Three weeks and two days gone – you and Craig must be pretty excited."

The pale blue eyes widened abruptly. "Get your bloody hand off me right now, Mr Hull!"

"Ah, ah – I'm immune to that little trick, remember?" Hull smirked and tapped the side of his head. "GETEC has technology too, Nightingale. We came here fully prepared for anything you might choose to throw at us."

"Sir – the, um pilot guy needs to see you."

Hull glared at the nervous looking intern. "Not your finest moment, Miss Darnell." He stalked out of the passenger compartment.

Tanya unlocked Spence's cuffs before she could chicken out. "Most of the security team are up front in their own section. It's just one guy between here and the exit ramp...!"

The British operative was already gone. Not liking

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the idea of being present when Hull returned, Tanya sprinted after them. *I sure hope English superspies can manage SCOs!*

Chapter Seven – Home To Roost

Weaver had that horrid papery look to her skin. The pallid glare of Lancashire Century's lighting seemed to deepen every line on the operative's face as she turned her head to see her visitor. "Hello again, Cob. I'm sorry I missed the get-together up at the farm."

"And I'm sorry that we came so damnably close to losing you, darling. How are you feeling today?"

"Well, I can't complain. I mean they want to keep me in, obviously. And they're intending on pushing for cybernetic interventions too. Not that they tell me anything, of course."

Leister nodded his understanding. "It's a fairly standard attitude amongst medical sorts, in my experience."

"I'd find it easier if I actually had a next of kin for

them to report back to." She sighed. "Do you suppose that Nathaniel might be amenable to stepping in? Or would that be a little too much of an ask?"

"I'm quite sure that our young Dr Whitby shall be more than happy to help. You're very dear to him, Doris."

"Perhaps I'll phone him later today and discuss it. Now, enough about me – what's been going on with the rest of you, Cob? All Paul would tell me was that that bloody lunatic was extremely dead. I need details!"

"We're still scraping them together, darling. What we do know is that the mysterious Val was none other than our very own Housekeeping."

Weaver frowned. "Housekeeping's related to that maniac? Where are they?"

"That's where it gets complicated." Leister checked his phone for further word from Campbell. "Nightingale is in the metaphorical wind at present. Young Mr Campbell has even roped in his father to help search."

"God help us – both of them on the same operation?" The conversation had begun to tire Weaver already. "Do you...do you remember how

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Thomas...how he used to bemoan that poor boy's efforts...?"

"Hush, darling; please, don't strain yourself. I promise that we'll keep you informed." Leister bowed to press a gentle kiss to one of those elegant hands. "And yes – I remember it all too clearly. Craig's come a long way since then."

"I'm sorry that I can't be of better use, Cob. Where will they start digging?"

"According to the official records, Horatio lived in Cambridge, with his wife Lydia, so they'll start by talking to her."

Hull stared aghast at what remained of David Saunders. The rear half of the jet was a charred shell. "What the fuck happened back here? Somebody pull up the damned security footage!"

Spence and Tanya were both absent, and the explosion had drawn too much attention to risk immediately trying to locate them. The supervisor scraped his hand back across his scalp anxiously. This situation would need careful handling if GETEC were to avoid embarrassment. His personal ambitions had to take a back seat for now, but that wouldn't be the case forever.

Once Hull had buried this mess, he would find them. Moreover, if Tanya decided to levy accusations, then perhaps she would turn out to be the one responsible. The latter would certainly be easy for him to arrange. Hull had already taken pains to discredit the young woman socially. *Not even her own family will support her once she's been declared as a violent anarchist!*

The problem was that he didn't want to lose her to the brutal vagaries of an official investigation. There was no leniency granted to those found guilty of terrorism. Whatever emerged from prison, it wouldn't be *his* Tanya. Perhaps he was getting soft, but he rather enjoyed having her around as a project. In addition, catastrophic engine failure involved a good deal less paperwork than terrorist attack.

Housekeeping's vehicle was gone from the refuelling station. It didn't matter: there was already a micro tracking device under the driver's seat. *Have a nice road trip, both of you. I'll see you again real soon.*

Tanya huddled deeper into the passenger seat and tried to think of the safest way to talk to the

enigmatic British operative. "So...you're like, a cross-dresser or something then? I mean, you dress like a dude but obviously if you're pregnant then...!"

"It's generally considered to be extremely unsafe to drive with one hand across your passenger's mouth. I'd much prefer not to find it necessary again, Miss Darnell."

"Yeah, well speeding's pretty unsafe too!"

Spence sighed but took the hint. "If you must know, I self-identify as socially non-gendered. It has nothing to do with cross-dressing."

"But you aren't wearing any cosmetics. And those are totally guy boots."

"These are standard issue fieldwork boots made exclusively for British Intelligence. They're unisex."

Tanya frowned. "Is that like bisexual?"

"Evidently GETEC is taking the equal employment thing somewhat too bloody far."

"Hey! That's so not acceptable, Spence – you can't say things like that to people!"

"My apologies, Miss Darnell, I shall rephrase. Your conversational skills thus far do little to enamour one towards the standard of education within the Americas."

"Are you always such a total bitch about stuff?"

The teenager wriggled around under her seatbelt to retrieve the takeaway container. "Can I have share please? It's been literally hours since breakfast and I didn't eat much then; just like, some cereal."

"Be my guest."

The next ten miles passed comparatively silently. Then Tanya finished eating. "So, did GETEC abduct you too? I mean, when they first signed you up as an employee - obviously you weren't there willingly today!"

"It's classified. Ask me again in fifty years."

"They murdered my parents you know." Tanya's voice hitched a little. "That big guy who tried to stop us on the jet - he and this other creep named Vetch broke into our house. It's something to do with how me and my friends survived the Capoliveri massacre."

"I'm unfamiliar with that particular event. I did try to have a holiday there once though."

The intern was too busy recounting her own misadventures to pay much attention to Spence's response. "My whole life has been turned inside out! I'm an orphan, my other relatives think I'm locked up in some kind of psychiatric facility, and my

friends all totally hate my guts. It's so unfair – I mean they're going to get away with it!"

"Who is?"

"Well, Vetch for starters. Apparently, he was still operating within his remit or something - as if that makes murdering my parents okay!"

"Have you considered taking legal advice?"

Tanya snorted. "I totally like, can't go to the cops, Spence; I've been labelled as mentally unstable. And Mr Hull would be beyond mad if he found out. He said he'd kill the rest of my family."

Spence knew this tune all too well. "Forgive my bluntness, Miss Darnell, but what makes you think that he won't do that now anyhow?"

"I kind of got the impression that he'd only do it if I tried to get the truth out about him and GETEC. He's weird, you know? It's like he's totally obsessed with being in control all the time."

"I'd noticed a few red flags to his attitude myself. He also seems to have gotten younger since our last encounter. Any thoughts on how he managed that?"

"Um...I think Mr Mellor said something about needing to arrange more tests? Like if Mr Hull had been having treatment for something."

“That will probably be relevant. My superior will need to talk to you about all of this. We can make arrangements to protect your family.”

The teenager nodded reluctantly. “I guess I don't have much choice. It's not like I have anyone else to help with this.”

“Don't worry; British Intelligence is very good when it comes to protecting assets and their loved ones.” The non-gender pulled their phone out of the side pocket of the driver's door. “Put that in the hands' free thing, will you? I need to make a few calls.”

Tanya busied herself setting up the device. “You know, for a total badass superspy, you sure have a crappy phone, Spence.”

“Sometimes basic is safer, Miss Darnell. For a start, it's less attractive to thieves.”

“That sounds kind of like victim blaming, really. I mean you wouldn't avoid wearing heels and lipstick just in case some creep got turned on by it and wouldn't take no for an answer. Unless that's why you do this whole not being female thing – oh crap, I didn't mean to be insensitive!”

Spence repressed the urge to dump the girl by the side of the road. “It's quite alright, Miss Darnell.”

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“Okay. So, where is it we're headed to anyhow, Spence? Are we going to a safe house?”

“Not just yet, I'm afraid. I have a personal matter to resolve first.”

“What kind of personal matter?”

“It's complicated. I suppose you might say that some of my nastier ghosts are finally coming home to roost.”

Lydia couldn't sleep. Horatio had promised that he would be home the day before. There was still no sign of him, and it wasn't like her husband to deviate from his plans. Once again, the search for Val was causing disharmony for their family. The silly little fool was nothing but bad luck!

She allowed herself to sigh quietly. It was a silly little indulgence – she never would have considered it had Horatio been present! Still, he was the head of the household. As such, he was always there in some small manner. By breaking silence, she had broken a rule, and in Horatio's absence, penance was her own responsibility.

Leister answered his phone with no small amount of relief. “Nightingale, thank goodness you've

decided not to simply disappear! Where are you, darling? Have you talked to Craig yet?"

"Craig doesn't want to talk to me, Cob. But that isn't why I called."

"Alright, I'm listening, darling."

"I ran into Greg Hull and a few of his associates, including the SCO that Mr Benedict buried alive." Spence paused. "Oh, buggering fuck...!"

The call ended abruptly, and to Leister's consternation there was no response when he rang back. "Damn. This won't be good."

Rosa had tried and failed to exit the house six times now. She wasn't having any more success at communicating with the outside world through either phone or e-mail. This was not because of Hull's security system – bizarrely, the young technician had found that she knew the code for the front door. *I know it but I can't seem to write it down. I can't speak at all and I can't leave this building. There's something very wrong with me!*

After the first four hours of her inexplicable confinement, hunger had taken priority over panicking. The main refrigerator and kitchen cabinets were a little too welcoming: all of her

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favourite meals could be easily prepared. Rosa hoped that this was coincidental. *It must be – there's no possible way for Hull to have anticipated my being here!*

The difficulty with this line of reasoning was that she knew that the supervisor was the most likely suspect for her strange compulsion. The mystery was in how he had managed to induce it. Some form of mental conditioning was clearly involved. *No – not conditioning – this has to have been recoding! My own country has declared me as being less than human. I suppose that makes me fair game in his mind.*

Rosa wiped at her eyes with the corner of her sleeve. To judge by what she had experienced so far, Supervisor Hull's mind was clearly not a safe or pleasant place. It had been horrific enough when she was within the chassis of the Perfect10. Now even that small mercy was gone. It was imperative that she wasn't here when Hull returned. *My best hope would be for him to still be confined to medical with his heart.*

That was actually likely to be the case. Coronary surgeries generally required weeks of recovery. Perhaps someone else was keeping his house

ticking over for him - a friend, or a relative, or a hired help of some sort. In that case, they would probably be surprised to see Rosa there. *They might even call the police! I could be charged with burglary!*

The risks faced within the official prison system paled in comparison to what Hull was inclined towards doing. Rosa had begun to regret exploring the house further. Aside from the usual living accommodation, she had discovered a room that simply didn't belong anywhere in her life. *Not now, and not ever, thank you very much! What right thinking person would be interested in that sort of stuff?*

Admittedly, her own sexual experiences thus far had been sadly limited. Between the pressure from her parents to concentrate on her studies as a teenager, and her subsequent fast tracking by British Intelligence, Rosa had enjoyed little free time. Finding the time to nurture a relationship was something that she had kept intending to get around to doing: soon, once there's time. *If I make it out of this nightmare, things shall be different.*

Chapter Eight – Lacking In Etiquette

“Whilst we wait for Ashley and Quincy to finish checking those motorway surveillance records, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you, Daniel.” Leister smiled and handed the younger man his coffee. “It’s about Nightingale. I realise that you mean well, darling, but your approach to the situation is all wrong.”

Moxton blinked. “How do you reckon that?”

“Well to be fair, it’s typical of most Dominants nowadays. The entire sorry lot of them are lacking in etiquette, push, push, push. Moreover, the submissive types have come to expect it. The whole Scene has gone awry! Therefore, I don’t *blame* you, darling. Nonetheless, it’s past time that you back off.”

“I can understand why you’re concerned, but I

think you'll find it's Craig who messed things up, not me."

Leister sighed. "In my day, one didn't need to give instruction twice. Let my sub alone."

His companion nodded slowly. "My apologies – Spence hadn't mentioned that they had someone over them already. Do I at least get an explanation over how they're your sub?"

"Sorry, darling, but a gentleman never gossips. Suffice to say, it's not the usual cut of leather where we're concerned."

Tanya was screaming and kicking at the inside of the boot when Spence drifted back into consciousness. The non-gender groaned and attempted to sit up. A makeshift harness constructed from three of the vehicle's five seat belts prevented them from succeeding. The confinement rattled loose some bad memories. *Now is not the time to panic.*

"Hey there again, sleepy head!" An unfamiliar voice came from the driver's seat. "You've been out for almost four hours. Given how hard you've been fighting the sedative, I figured it'd safest for all involved if I just kept you in the back seat."

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"Am I supposed to be grateful not to be in the boot instead?"

The hijacker shrugged. "Hey, Tanya lost her shotgun privileges when she bit me."

"I'm starting to like her."

"Glad to hear that. You're probably going to be spending plenty of time together during your respective internships. Speaking of which, Supervisor Hull sends his regards. We'll be rendezvousing with him at one of GETEC's UK facilities. The perks of belonging to a multinational corporation, am I right?"

Spence closed their eyes again and listened as Tanya's frustrated screams faded to whimpering. They wondered how long it would be until the girl broke down completely. Their overly chatty captor seemed immune to the noise. Chances were that he did this sort of thing often enough for it not to affect him. Perhaps he wasn't the type of person to be troubled by the discomfort of others to begin with. GETEC didn't appear to recruit based on empathy. *I expect that I won't be able to sway him in that regard. But did Hull bother to warn him what I can do?*

There was only one way to find out. The non-

gender swallowed hard and shifted the register of their voice a little. "So, what should I call you?"

"Bernard Vetch; I'm what GETEC calls an asset management retrieval technician."

"What does that involve, precisely?"

He smiled back at them via the rear-view mirror. "I find assets and bring them in for full evaluation and processing."

"That sounds somewhat tedious, Mr Vetch."

"Are you kidding? It's awesome – I get to meet some of the most amazing people! Just look at you, for example."

Spence looked away from the mirror. "I'm hardly amazing!"

"That's not what your file suggests." The technician shook his head. "Housekeeping! You know, most people think you're an urban legend."

"I was under the impression that Supervisor Hull was just my personal stalker."

Vetch laughed. "Yeah, he's a creepy old dude, isn't he, Nightingale? I can call you that, right?"

"I don't see why not, Bernard. And I agree regarding the creepiness. Have you noticed that he seems younger?"

"Oh that? Ha – would you believe that he stole

credit for an asset that I acquired? Full body transfer technology: one of your scientists invented it. A Dr Kellie Rosa; she's brilliant, by the way – I'm a huge fan of her work! Anyhow, yeah, good old Supervisor Hull had himself transferred into a cloned body to get around his heart condition."

"Am I correct in suspecting that you and I are both hoping his new body malfunctions horribly?"

"And then some!" Vetch thumped the steering wheel appreciatively. "Hey, can I get you anything, by the way?"

Time to see if this is working or not, I suppose. "I'm feeling a tad nauseous. May I have some water please?"

"Not a problem, Nightingale; just let me find somewhere to pull over safely."

"Thank you, Bernard."

The leather itself was butter soft with age, which only sharpened the thrill of it. Jenkins could barely remember the last time that she had worn a collar. It was something that she enjoyed and so of course, Supervisor Hull had forbidden it. He had forbidden many things over the four years that the young technician had spent with GETEC. The denial of her

sexual identity had been the worst though. Enforced obedience was worlds away from consensual submission.

She traced her fingertips along the edge of the collar and smiled again. Cob was synonymous with safety to her by now. In his absence, the symbolic item had attained a near totemic value. As long as she wore his collar, no one could harm her. It wasn't an especially logical sort of belief, but that hardly mattered. *I might as well make the best out of being mad.*

It was just Mr Dobos and Quincy here in the safe house with Jenkins now. Mr Leister had departed along with her father and the other operatives almost three hours ago. Dr Whitby was on his way up from London, but was just as likely to stay at the medical centre with Agent Weaver. That made sense, even if Mr Dobos seemed annoyed by it. The red-haired operative was easily riled. Jenkins had felt intimidated by him until the events in the conservatory. She had seen another side to him then: brave, and selfless. He clearly didn't like people to know that he possessed the latter quality. Perhaps he was afraid of seeming weak, or of letting anyone risk relying on him. *On the other*

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hand, maybe he just likes to avoid taking knives for other people.

“Why are you wearing a dog collar with fucking ducks on it?”

Jenkins flinched and adjusted her turtleneck sweater to hide the leather. “You startled me! Dinner isn't ready yet; the potatoes...!”

“Oh, fuck the spuds; I'm not hungry anyway.” Dobos loomed closer. “Or perhaps I shouldn't risk suggesting that sort of thing – what with you obviously being into kink.”

“Please don't.”

He frowned down at her. “Don't what, exactly? Do you even know? Or are you just concerned for the sanctity of the mash?”

The technician averted her gaze. “You're scaring me, Mr Dobos.”

“In my defence, scared does seem to be your default state, Dr Jenkins.” His index finger hooked neatly underneath the collar. “So back to my initial question, boffin: what's with the ducks?”

“...swans...”

Her pulse throbbed in a panicked staccato against his knuckles as he tilted her head up. “Swans...ah – male swans are cobs, our Cob. I get it

now. You and Leister have an arrangement."

Jenkins nodded in affirmation. "Yes Sir."

The field operative snorted. "Well they still look like fucking ducks to me, boffin!"

She gulped back a disappointed sob when he let go. "What do you care anyhow?"

"I don't." Dobos blithely ignored the line he'd steamrolled across and smiled at Jenkins. "It's not my cup of tea; all that szorgoskodott."

"I...I don't know what that means."

"It's Hungarian for fussing about – my grandparents came over during the war."

"Oh."

"You get off on it though, don't you, boffin?"

His poppy petal blue eyes seemed the brightest things in the universe just now. Jenkins wondered if they were natural. "I don't expect you to understand it. Nillas hardly ever seem to."

"That sounded a bit not very polite, in my opinion." If he were to be honest, the mousy little technician was growing on him. "Isn't nilla one of those derogatory term things?"

"It's a recognised descriptor within the Scene. I can't help how you feel about it."

"Kikapós nó!" Dobos chuckled and ambled over

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to ransack the fridge in search of beer. "Leister will have his fucking hands full with you, Isten irgalmazzon neki, a szerencsés öreg kutya!"

Jenkins stared after him as he left the kitchen. She wasn't sure if she should be flattered or offended. *Perhaps relieved is the best middle ground to take.*

"You know we can't keep them, Barnabas." Kathryn poured some more gravy over the mashed-up pieces of bread on the plate. "Nana and Granddad shan't permit it."

Her twin scowled at her from where he was crouched. "We don't have to tell them, Cattie! It can be our secret."

"Don't call me that – only Granddad calls me Cattie!" The girl stomped her foot. "I hate it!"

Barnabas ignored her tantrum and gestured impatiently. "Oh, just give it here, won't you? We don't want the poor things to starve!"

"Fine then, but you'd better not blame me for the idea if we're caught!"

"I won't, Kathryn – I promise." He smiled up at his sister. "Which of them do you want?"

Kathryn frowned as she knelt beside him to peer

into the makeshift cage. "I like the younger one – look how bright his eyes are!"

"I shall have the old one then."

"Thank you, Barnabas. I suppose we'd best hurry back to the house. Nana will be done with her penance soon."

They pushed the plate of scraps in beneath the door of the pen and draped the old blanket over the front to keep out the worst of the chill. The icehouse wasn't really designed for housing anything alive, but at least it was out of the way of their elders. They locked the door behind them on the way out to be safe. After only four hours of ownership, they couldn't risk allowing their secret to scamper off!

It was pitch dark in the icehouse with the door shut. The plate rattled against the wire of the cage: porcelain against metal, a vague ghosting sort of echo. "Those two little monsters are out of their minds, Craig!"

"I noticed that myself, Dad." Campbell continued to chip at the latch. "It was as if they didn't even hear us speaking. We may as well have been rabbits!"

"Rabbits would have better sense than to be

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overpowered by a pair of ten-year-olds, lad."

The field operative grimaced. "That snare of theirs was very inventive. I think I'm starting to understand why Spence didn't want me to help them deal with this."

"You should just find a different lover - ideally someone without sociopathic relatives."

"Since when do you even give a damn about what I do in my free time?" The cage door swung open abruptly. Campbell yelped as he fell forwards, narrowly avoiding impaling himself on the remains of the plate. "Come on - they dumped our gear over by the door."

The two men scrabbled about in the dark until Thomas found the torches. "That's better!"

"Let's be more careful when we catch up to them, Dad. I get the impression that they know how to use those knives they were carrying."

"That's why we'll shoot them before they have the opportunity to react!"

Campbell shook his head. "I'm not going to kill children! It's not their fault - clearly their grandparents are to blame."

Thomas snorted. "Fine - you take care of the old bitch and I'll manage the brats!"

"No – we take them alive, Dad. There might be some means to help them."

"You're soft, lad. You get that from your mum, not me." The older man checked his gun. "Actually, you get a lot of things from her."

"Can we please not have this argument again? We need to work together properly." Campbell levelled his own weapon at the lock of the icehouse door. "Knowing our luck, Lydia will be as dangerous as her late husband."

"Most poor bastards only dream of killing their mother-in-law! Assuming that you do plan on marrying this Val, or Nightingale, or whatever the fuck they're really called?"

The bullet streaked clear of the shattered lock and buried itself in a gnarled hawthorn. Campbell kicked the door open and edged out of the icehouse. "I planned on a lot of things, Dad. Then I got impatient. I fucked up any hope of them happening. I threw away the best person that I'm ever likely to know, and worse they needed me. So I guess that I am like you in some regards - just not for anything good."

Chapter Nine – A Horrid Risk

The young intern shrieked as Spence opened the boot. “No! Oh – it’s you! Thank God; I totally thought it would be Mr Hull or someone.”

“It’s nice to see that you’re alright.” The non-gender sliced through the plastic ties binding Tanya’s wrists. “Let’s get you out of there, Miss Darnell.”

“Thanks. What happened – how did you get free? Where’s Mr Vetch?”

“That’s why I need you out of the boot.”

“Oh my God, is he even breathing?” Tanya’s eyes went wide in horror at the sight of the retrieval technician’s limp form.

“I tend to find that only utterly dead people don’t bother with respiration. Help me get him packed away. He may still prove useful.”

The conversation dropped off whilst they

managed that task. Tanya remained quiet for the first mile and a half of their continued journey. "Um...so are you going to call your friend again?"

"I texted him already; before I got you out. I've let him know what happened, and where we're going." Spence nodded towards the glove compartment. "There's an energy drink in there if you're thirsty."

"Thanks. I'm sorry for freaking out."

"It's alright. You've been through a lot."

"So where are we going?"

Spence pointed at the GPS. "Lackey Hall. It's a manor on the outskirts of Cambridge. Thanks to Vetch, we're now even bloody further away from it than we were. The shortest route will take us five and a half hours, if the traffic is kind."

The energy drink seemed to be helping to calm Tanya's nerves. "You said you had stuff to see to there."

"Regrettably so."

"Back to monosyllables again, great. You don't talk much, do you, Spence?"

"I'm more of an observer, really."

"Well, this is clearly a road trip, and road trips totally mean that people talk to each other."

DOG DARK LAMPS

"You're making that up, aren't you, Miss Darnell?"

"Nope, I swear: it's like, the unwritten law of road trips." Tanya grinned. "So – about the guy boots...have you ever considered a personal shopper?"

The children had been quieter than usual at lunch. Kathryn especially seemed out of sorts: she had barely touched her food. Barnabas had spent half the meal staring out of the dining room window. Presumably they missed Horatio, or perhaps they were still grieving dear Jasper. At any rate, they were no longer whining for their late mother. Lydia supposed that was progress.

Marrying *her* had been the only mistake that sweet Jasper had ever made. Lillian Ashby – oh, how the creatures loved their silly little family names! The pure knew better of course: names meant nothing. Blood was what counted, and how well one spilt it. Lillian had never understood that. *Silly little whore!*

Lydia looked hard at Kathryn yet again. She didn't particularly like the girl. There was something sleeked about her. Too winsome for her own good,

that one – just as Val had been. Jasper hadn't seen it, and Horatio thought that it was charming. He knew best, of course. Lydia would never challenge his decision. Nevertheless, she dreaded a repetition of Val's antics.

It was a horrid risk to bring the nasty little freemartin back amongst them all. Perhaps that was the reason behind Horatio's delay. He had decided not to endanger their peace. Val was dead and Horatio had to relish that correctly. The possibility was comforting, but even then, there would still be Kathryn.

Her fingers itched to close around her granddaughter's pale neck. Not to kill; merely to warn the girl off what wasn't her right! Kathryn was growing far too pretty. A lesson might well be in order for her. One had to maintain discipline in these sorts of things.

Hull frowned at the screen before him. Housekeeping's vehicle was once again heading for Cambridge. That wasn't what he'd instructed Vetch to do. Was the younger man deliberately sabotaging his efforts? *I wouldn't put it past him! Still, I guess there's only one way to find out.*

DOG DARK LAMPS

He made his way to the facility's main hangar and nodded to what remained of his team. "Is our new jet ready?"

"Sir; the sonic nullifiers are in place. Medical is still working on patching SCO Saunders back together. They're confident he's salvageable, but full regeneration will take time. "

"That's okay; we can do this without him. Let's go and see what's delaying Mr Vetch with this retrieval. He appears to have wandered off course somehow."

"Yes Sir."

Jolley was doing his best to ignore the tension within the car. Between Benedict's morose brooding, and Leister and Moxton's acidic bantering, it was a far cry from comfortable. Dobos and Quincy had gotten bloody lucky with their boffin minding duty! The Welsh operative envied them. *Although Christ knows what's going to happen once Dr Whitby arrives.*

"All I'm saying is that it's double standards, in my opinion." Moxton shifted gears. "You can't expect monogamy within a three."

Leister's smile got ever so slightly tighter. "I'm not

expecting anything of the sort, darling. I just don't approve of your way of doing things."

"Spence seemed happy enough with it."

"That's always been an issue for them, darling. They react in whatever way they think their partner wants them to. It isn't submission so much as mirroring, and it's gotten them hurt far too often already."

Benedict finally deigned to join the conversation. "Is that what Ashley does – mirroring?"

"No, darling, Ashley has an extremely healthy approach to things by comparison. She just needs to get past her weakness for traumatic bonding."

"Sorry to interrupt, only I think we just missed our turnoff, Mr Moxton." Jolley pointed back towards a heavily overgrown laneway. "That's young Mr Campbell's car parked back there."

They soon understood why their colleague had abandoned his vehicle. The laneway was simply too narrow for anything broader than a hover cycle. The British operatives clambered out and readied their weapons.

Leister tried to reach Campbell by phone as they walked. "Strange – there's no signal. I wonder if it's more of those confounded jamming devices."

DOG DARK LAMPS

It was almost a full mile before the manor came into view. Lackey Hall was a dank shell of a place, with cracked windows and sagging rooftops. Moss and half-grown saplings choked the gutters. A forlorn line of statues still marked the edge of the lawn. In the main, whatever plan the landscaping had once followed was long lost.

A pair of familiar figures emerged from what looked to be an icehouse. Benedict waved to them. "There they are!"

Campbell senior was attempting not to limp. He glowered around at his companions. "I'm fine, before anyone starts bloody pestering me about it! It's just a sprain."

His son was a tad more open. "We were ambushed by what appeared to be the two youngest residents. A boy and a girl aged about ten – they've clearly been heavily influenced by their older relatives."

"Where are they now, darling?"

"Inside the manor, at least that's where they were headed to when they left us in that icehouse."

Thomas accepted a couple of synthetic morphine capsules from Moxton. "Their grandmother was busy with her morning penance,

whatever that is. I somehow doubt that it's the bog-standard sort of catechism!"

"Have you heard anything from Spence yet?" Campbell's face was wan beneath the stubble.

"Leister had a text nearly four hours ago saying that they were on their way here." Benedict smiled at his fellow spy. "They had a run in with GETEC and had to take the scenic route. Apparently, that bastard Greg Hull now has a rather expensive jet to account for. It's probably too much to expect that his employers might fire him for incompetence but we can always hope!"

Behind them, Jolley was sighting out the windows of the manor with his rifle scope. "Holy shitting fuck - there's a little girl being strangled in that end room!"

All six men sprinted forwards, Thomas sucking back his obvious pain behind a snarl. Jolley dived shoulder first through the window of the end room, followed by Campbell. Leister took the steps in three strides, kicked open the front door and ducked inside. Benedict and Moxton were hard on his heels, with Thomas hobbling behind them.

The end room had most likely been a parlour at some point. Now it was bare, aside from a tattered

rug and an old wicker settee. Campbell hurled the former squarely at Lydia. "Let her alone!"

The woman screeched and scrabbled clear of the unexpected missile. For a moment, she looked as if she might lunge at them. Then she sprang backwards and fled along the corridor. Jolley darted to the doorway to guard against any sudden reappearance. "Bloody Hell, she's fast for an old bird!"

Campbell had managed to unfasten the garrote from Kathryn's neck. "It's alright now, Kathryn. You're safe."

The girl sucked in a ragged gulp of air. Her thin form trembled beneath the half a size outgrown dress that covered it. "Nana...!"

Leister edged in past Jolley. "Is she alive, Craig?"

"Just about, Cob, but she's clearly terrified."

"Stay with her, darling. Darren, hold this room. The rest of us will see to Lydia. There's a young lad too, isn't there?"

"Yes – Barnabas, he's just as scrawny as poor Kathryn here. Be careful though: he had a knife the last that Dad and I saw him." Campbell tossed a thin blade to Leister. "It matches this one."

"I'll warn the others." The older operative left

them to manage Kathryn's hysterics. "Daniel, Paul – you two go left. Thomas, we'll go right. Watch out for Lydia of course, but don't underestimate the boy. Craig says he's armed."

The hover car powered down abruptly on a quiet back road less than an hour's drive from Lackey Hall, and the phone signal went with it. Spence knew the game too well to entertain the notion of this being coincidental. "This is the part where we ditch all our electronics and run, Miss Darnell. Follow me – it shan't be long until another retrieval team arrives."

Tanya glanced back towards the vehicle as the non-gender led the way over a barbed wire fence into the narrow woodland bordering their route. "What about weapons and stuff?"

"I don't have any with me, aside from my pocket knife."

"So how come Mr Hull seemed to think that there would be some kind of huge fight? I mean, the security team, the jet?"

"Perhaps he had extra funding to justify before the end of the current tax year."

The intern yelped and staggered forwards. "Who

thought planting a load of thorns was a good idea?"

"It's a wildlife buffer. They don't design them as such, they just leave them be and let nature take its course." Spence ducked left under a low hanging bough. "The birds appreciate it."

"Well, I don't! Can't we go back and follow the highway instead?"

"Do you want GETEC to find us?"

"No." The teenager swatted frantically at what she hoped was an imaginary spider in her hair. "I just hate trudging through the wilderness! I'm actually starting to envy your guy boots."

"I told you they were practical."

"Yeah, well they're still so not pretty. I mean it – I'm taking you shopping for actual female clothing!"

"That might be interesting, I suppose."

Tanya grinned. "It'll be fun, Spence! Jeez, don't English people even have that word in their spellcheckers?"

"We use dictionaries."

"Wait – is this like irony? British humour?"

The urge to smile was pricking at Spence. "You're halfway correct, Miss Darnell. Now, we

need to be quiet. Americans can do that, I assume?"

"Oh, we can do a lot of things, Nightingale." Hull's right arm rippled clear of its stealth field and wrapped around the British operative's neck even as his left hand closed over their mouth.

"Leave us alone, you creep!" Tanya was sobbing. "Please, just go away!"

The supervisor shifted his weight to counter Spence's inevitable struggling. "Miss Darnell, this is your one chance to prove that you were an unwilling party in what happened to our jet earlier."

His gloves were too thick for Spence's teeth to have any impact, and their knife skittered across the body armour protecting his arms and torso. Short of the unlikely event of Tanya walloping the bastard over the head with a tree branch, they were out of options. *I never expected to end up fighting to get back to Lackey Hall!*

Chapter Ten – Still Salvageable

Whitby had brought a holographic bouquet of flowers to brighten up the hospital room. Weaver was amusing herself by altering the colour of the petals to impossibly vivid hues. “These are far better than grapes, Nathaniel.”

“I’m glad you like them, Doris.”

“Thanks for stopping by to see me. I can’t get the staff here to tell me a damn thing! It’s ridiculous – don’t they realise that some of us haven’t got families to advocate on our behalf?”

The senior technician was already pouring over her medical notes on his tablet. “I suspect that most people aren’t cleared to know those sorts of details. You were one of the last from that project, after all.”

“Me and half of the other bloody field operatives, you mean!”

"There aren't *that* many, Doris."

"Ah, but how many of the rest aren't related to someone from it, Nathaniel?" Weaver's voice softened. "Still, I suppose that line breeding is better than growing operatives in vats."

Whitby sighed. "It's hardly as if the former happens on purpose! It is bloody tricky to keep tabs on which of them have offspring though – even with the familial increase laws. Too many random love affairs in the name of duty."

"You're talking about Paul's daughter, aren't you? The one forcibly recruited by GETEC."

"Yes; she's still up at the farm with Dobos and Quincy. Everyone else has broken cover and decamped to Cambridge to see to the people connected with Horatio."

"I'm not certain what's more worrying, Nathaniel: that monster having associates, or Oliver being trusted to act as a bodyguard!"

"Hopefully Quincy shall keep him in line until I get there. I'm looking forward to speaking with Dr Jenkins. She's the only other person aside from Rosa to have recovered properly from the restoration treatment."

"Is there still no word on Kellie?"

DOG DARK LAMPS

“Not a beep so far – it's more than likely been a planned abduction. Pembleton wants to throw a team at it once she's soothed enough of the ruffled feathers within Government.”

Pembleton emerged from the hearing with mixed emotions. It didn't bode well for the next year's funding. Those in power were disinclined to reward her agency for being quite so *proactive*. On the other hand, they appreciated the need to root out corrupt officials before the public had cause to complain about them. *Just make sure that your operatives are less blunt in future, Lady Pembleton!*

It could have been worse. The bastard responsible for ordering Benedict's assassination had been planning very big things. Dobos' instincts had been right on the mark once again. He had talent to burn beneath his damnable attitude. If only someone could persuade him to stop setting so many literal fires! Perhaps it would be prudent to ship him off to assignments outside of the UK until he settled down in his approach. At least the Lancashire safe house was well out of the way. There wasn't too much trouble for Dobos to dredge up there.

Leister's last message had indicated that the other field operatives were running off book. The spymistress wondered what they would uncover in Cambridge. It had been a huge risk: recruiting someone with no known background. Still, how better to make a ghost? No dependents, no outside connections, utterly devoted to their duty. Until recently, Spence had been perfect. In Pembleton's view, they were still salvageable. The messy blurring of personal with professional was all due to Campbell. As such, his removal from the equation would settle the matter.

Leister found the boy locked in one of the many windowless side rooms within the manor. Barnabas' initial reaction was to cower silently, before realising that it wasn't his grandmother in the doorway. After that, the encounter sharpened abruptly, until the operative managed to disarm his frenzied young assailant. "Barnabas, calm down – we aren't here to hurt you. We're British Intelligence operatives. My name is Cob, and this is Thomas."

"No, no; it's supposed to be in its pen! Nana and Granddad shan't like to see it loose in the house!"

Thomas was unsympathetic. "I did say it would

be simpler to just shoot the little shit!"

"I don't have a polite response to that, darling, so I'll need to ask you to simply stop offering advice." Leister had resorted to sedating the boy. "Let's get this poor little chap back to his sister."

Campbell was showing Kathryn one of his many orang-utan related selfies when they returned. "This is a photograph that I took in Borneo. It's a wildlife sanctuary."

Jolley nodded to Leister. "I see you found the other one then? Is he hurt?"

"I gave him a sedative, darling. I'm not happy that it was necessary, but at present it's the safest option."

There was a staccato of gunfire then. The crash of splintering glass echoed from somewhere in the heights of the old manor. A piercing sort of a shriek went with it, only to vanish into an all too sudden quietude. None of the men present had to guess at what had transpired: they were long enough at this job to recognise death. They could tell a man's cry from that of an old woman too – Lydia was no longer an active concern.

Campbell did his best to distract Kathryn from it all. "Here; why don't you try these headphones

out? I'll bet that you can work the music sampler on this thing far better than I can anyway."

The girl seemed fascinated by the phone. She snatched up the earpieces greedily and began tapping at the various options on the menu. Her thin fingers alternated between skittering over the little screen and toying with Campbell's sleeve. If she was at all concerned for her unconscious sibling, there was certainly no outward sign of it.

Moxton joined them soon afterwards. "The mad old bint went out fighting, but she's definitely out. Paul's seeing to the mess as best as he can. We should probably still avoid letting either of the kids get a look at the front patio."

The handler's right arm hung limp at his side: the dark grey sleeve of his jacket stained to a wet black that would wipe away as scarlet. Leister motioned for him to sit on the now righted settee. "Let's get you patched up, darling. It's a long walk back to the car – we don't want to risk you bleeding out."

Hull had prepared for almost every scenario this time, but the earth giving way beneath his weight hadn't crossed his mind. By the time that he regained his balance and staggered clear of the

collapsed sett, Spence and Tanya were gone. The supervisor punched angrily at the nearest tree. His left ankle was almost certainly dislocated. "God damn these stupid badgers!"

The remainder of the retrieval squad were slow to arrive. They had not fared well against Housekeeping. The non-gender had snatched up Hull's own gun as they fled the scene. It was yet another reason why R&D needed to add biometric controls to GETEC's weaponry. Admittedly installing better security on their aircraft might be more of a priority: Hull supposed that he should add piloting to Spence's already impressive list of skills.

He would catch up to the pair of them eventually. Like it or not, they were both legally regarded as GETEC employees. The supervisor held all the cards here. Aside from the state-of-the-art hover jet card, of course. Two aircraft gone in under half a day: one incinerated and the other hijacked! It was going to be tricky to write up the expenses for this operation. *Maybe I'll just pin it all on Vetch instead.*

"Are these tests conclusive, Dr Kenlow?"

The medic nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr Mellor. The

deterioration to the neural map is negligible at present, but as you can see on the computerised projections, that won't last."

"How long does he have?"

"Our best estimate is six months. It's more likely to be half that, I'm sorry."

Mellor stared at the holographic display before him: desperately seeking a better outcome. "What about his original brain?"

"Well, it's still viable, of course – we kept the entire body in cryonic storage. There's no reason that we can't simply resort to a less experimental treatment path."

"You mean thaw him out and give him a replacement heart instead?"

"I realise that it isn't what he wanted. Sometimes we have to do what's best for our patients regardless of their preferences." Kenlow patted the young administrator's shoulder. "It's your call, Mr Mellor. We can let him be for now – see how the deterioration affects his behaviour."

"Would that be of any particular value?"

"It could offer us some unique insights into the human brain. That's always important."

"Fine – let the cloned body run for as long as it

remains viable, and see what your team can glean from the experience. Make sure that the cardio surgery is scheduled. I'll clear things with the board. I suspect that it's best to avoid too many people knowing the truth for now."

The GETEC craft loomed into view above the main lawn as the British operatives began their exit from Lackey Hall. The thrum of the engines was deep enough to draw Kathryn's attention despite the headphones. She ducked behind Campbell and gawped up at the approaching jet.

Jolley sucked in a worried hiss of air between his teeth and dropped to one knee to line up his rifle. "I've only got two micro-implosive rounds with me, Mr Moxton. Do you want me to wait until they land?"

His handler grimaced. "Take them down before they get the opening salvo, Darren!"

They watched as the exterior turbine of the left engine folded inwards onto itself in a snarl of ruined metal. The blunt curve of the wing ripped open: tearing a fifteen-foot gash along the side of the aircraft, out of which tumbled a pair of slight figures. Unidentifiable amidst the smoke, they hit the roof of

the manor seconds before the wreck did. The resultant explosion swallowed up any cries for help. It was just as well – none of the field operatives were inclined to risk themselves for the well-being of the enemy.

Leister frowned at his phone. "I can't seem to reach Nightingale. It's just going straight to voicemail."

"Shouldn't they be here by now, Cob?" Campbell regretted having been so short with Spence during their last conversation. "I mean, you told us that they were on their way."

"Don't worry, darling; they told me what route they're using. We can split up – Daniel needs medical attention, and so does your father. There's no reason that you and I can't backtrack to wherever Nightingale may be."

"What about the children?" Benedict looked at where Kathryn was crouching beside Barnabas. "They clearly need professional help."

Jolley gestured sharply then. "We've got movement at the back of the house, gents! Looks like one of those two GETEC operatives made it out of the crash site after all."

The survivor staggered towards them, coughing

and rubbing at their eyes. Their uniform was lost beneath a thick layer of soot, and the long dark hair had started to come loose from its practical French plait. "Help...somebody; please...we need help...!"

"That's far enough – stop where you are, and drop whatever weapons you have." Leister had run out of patience where the corporation was concerned. "What are GETEC doing here?"

"Please...we crashed...!" Another bout of coughing racked the girl. "Spence can't get out!"

Campbell's world stretched away from him as the words sank in. "I'm coming, canary!" He scrambled back into the inferno that was devouring Lackey Hall from the roof down.

Leister caught Moxton's arm before the handler could follow. "You'll be of no use in there with that arm, darling. Give me your re-breather; Spence shall likely need it. Stay here with Thomas and call the fire brigade. Darren, Paul – you two come with me."

The rescuers fought their way through a dual risk: fire and an already decrepit structure. Campbell risked peeling off his re-breather to call out for the non-gender. "Can you hear us?"

"Here...up here...!" Spence was sprawled on the upper landing - pinned beneath one of the rotten joists from the roof. "I can't get this bloody thing off my leg!"

It was a four-man job to lift the beam. They dragged it clear of Housekeeping and let it fall. Campbell scooped Spence into his arms and Leister manhandled the spare re-breather onto them. By the time that the little group had gotten fully clear of the manor, sirens were audible on the approach from Cambridge.

Spence nodded towards the intern. "This is Tanya Darnell - another of GETEC's reluctant employees. She's agreed to testify against them."

"Well, that should certainly be helpful, darling." Leister wiped the soot from his face. "So, would you care to tell us any of the finer details surrounding this dreadful place? We've already gathered that you had plenty of reason not to be in contact with your mercifully late parents, but how the deuce did you manage to turn out so very well-balanced?"

"I got out whilst I was still young enough to disagree with them, old swan. It was nothing more than luck. My twin brother was less fortunate. Did you find him yet?"

DOG DARK LAMPS

Tanya had finally recognised what remained of the building. "Oh my God – this is the house that the press keeps showing! It's the family home of the Capoliveri killer!"

Chapter Eleven – Dangerously Close

Rosa flinched awake as the front door slammed shut. She had only meant to rest her eyes, but the clock on the wall opposite the sofa confirmed that almost nine hours had passed. The technician gulped and scrambled to her feet. There might still be time for her to hide – behind the curtains was an option. *It's worth trying, I suppose.*

“Audio on.” Hull’s voice echoed from the front hall. “Sorry I wasn’t home when you arrived, Dr Rosa, but you know how it can be with work. I stocked up for your visit in advance though. Did you find everything okay?”

She sank back down onto the sofa; defeated before she had even tried to best him. “Yes, thank you, Mr Hull.”

“You’re very welcome. Really, it was the least that I could do for the person who saved my life.

Thanks for calling that ambulance." The supervisor limped into the living room; peeling off the jacket from his uniform as he walked. "I have to admit that it's a nice change of pace having someone to come home to like this."

"I'm not here by choice! This is abduction – false imprisonment! You shan't get away with it!"

"Still so very naive about how the world works, huh?" He smiled and patted her head. "I know where you were; where your agency sent you. They see you as nothing more than a particularly clever little robot...and no one cares what happens to robots."

"I'm not a machine!"

"No, you're far superior – the missing link between human and android. I'm sure that you've already noticed that I took the precaution of recoding your neural map just a smidgeon."

She tried not to worry about that. "Why are you limping?"

"I had an accident. The doctors have repaired the worst of it already, but I'm supposed to take things easy for the next few days." Hull sat down beside her. "Enough about me: how have you been doing?"

Rosa choked back something dangerously close to hysteria. "My life has been turned upside down, Mr Hull, as well you know. I'm managing – mostly because the only other option was to curl up and die."

"Well congratulations on a change in your luck. I have a proposal for you – how would you like to be counted as fully human again?"

She blinked. "What are you suggesting?"

"Your full body transfer process, of course. GETEC want to make it financially valid, and for that, we need you on board. If you sign with us, this whole robot status goes away."

"That seems most unlikely! Why would GETEC make me that kind of an offer? Don't you usually prefer employees to have no rights?"

"My boss appears to be feeling charitable."

"You have a boss? I somehow hadn't thought of that being the case."

Hull shrugged. "His name is Carson Howard, and he's the CEO of GETEC. I suppose you could regard him as being equal to Pembleton. Anyhow, he really likes your work."

"But the process isn't fully reliable! It keeps on destabilising post restoration. We've only had two

successes so far, and one of them is me."

That was very bad news. The supervisor wondered if there was an additional factor in Kenlow's overly thorough medical examination. *Perhaps it wasn't just about my ankle after all.* "Are you saying that you can't make it work properly, Dr Rosa?"

"I don't know, Mr Hull. There simply isn't enough data yet."

"Let's assume that GETEC has the means to enable you to collate sufficient data. What then?"

"Well...it's all extremely experimental, but yes. I believe that I can stabilise the process."

He huffed out a relieved sigh. "Good!"

"I just don't believe that I ought to do so." The young genius started to pick at her cuticles. "It's not for humanity to decide."

"Dr Rosa, I like you, so this is a bit of free advice. Now is not a good time for you to develop religious leanings. Not unless you want to lose Mr Howard's patronage." He closed his right hand around the nape of her neck. "Then again, perhaps that wouldn't be so bad."

Rosa whimpered and tried to squirm loose. "I won't compromise my principles!"

"We'll see how long you stick to that view." Hull pushed his personal concerns aside. He needed to focus on the job at hand – besides, if there were any issues with his FBT, Rosa was the best person to fix them. "Audio off: nymph mode on."

The technician's protests ceased, her pupils dilating as she straddled his lap. Hull smiled and let her fumble with his belt buckle. "You can't have it both ways, Dr Rosa. If you won't be a team player, then my boss won't want you around. That puts you back in – well, whatever I want to put you in, really. Audio on: nymph mode off."

Rosa scrambled away from him immediately. "Stop – I'll do it! I'll take the project!"

"I think that's a wise decision." He pulled out his mini tablet and brought up the relevant forms. "Here we go – just initial and enter your thumbprint and retinal scan where stated."

She followed his instructions, trembling as she handed the device back. "I'll really be counted as being human again?"

"Absolutely, and I think that you'll be pleasantly surprised when you see your salary. Still, do feel free to let me know if you happen to change your mind. We can take up where we're leaving off any time."

DOG DARK LAMPS

It was impossible, and so Spence had spent the past fifteen hours not mentioning it to anyone. Three weeks, two days, and twelve hours – give or take – no, still impossible. In an ideal situation, the non-gender would simply have drawn a line beneath the matter and concluded that the supervisor was playing mind games. However, this was real life: rarely ideal in its outcomes. Even without the inevitable paperwork, Miss Darnell's well-intentioned curiosity seemed likely to create issues. The intern was exceptionally chatty. Eventually, she was bound to raise the subject. *Perhaps I can distract her by agreeing to that shopping trip. People like me can't have children! Why did Hull say it? Why did he have to say it in front of Tanya?*

Of course, it had been nothing more than malignancy! Because it simply wasn't true: it couldn't be. No number of positive tests could prove otherwise. Spence knew that - they had known it since puberty. They were sterile. Hull had lied, that was all there was to the matter. There was nothing to discuss, especially with Craig. He was busy anyhow: sitting with Kathryn whilst the child

psychologist sent up from London assessed her. Barnabas was still unconscious. It seemed unlikely that he would be any less disturbed than was his sister. Two more lives picked apart by Lydia and Horatio. It had become clear that Jasper hadn't ever managed to fly the nest. Worse yet, he had married – Lillian Ashby, an accountant from Bournemouth. She was dead too, apparently.

The other operatives couldn't fathom it. A family of killers, lurking on the edges of Cambridge, and no one had ever realised. Nevertheless, why should they, when there had been no hint, no error? Horatio taught applied genetics at the university. Lydia, although never seen in public, was a dedicated mother to her son. Jasper was everyone's angel until his abrupt breakdown in Capoliveri - blamed by the family solicitors on the tragic death of his wife. The explanation had seemed valid: who could fail to sympathise with the frail couple in the press release, blinking away tears?

Spence knew better, but then they could cry at will too. It had been the first trick that they learnt, even prior to cutting. Lydia had drilled them on how to cry, when to be quiet – basic things that no child

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should need to know. Years of therapy had clarified that, but failed to lance the details of who harmed them to begin with. Instead, they ended up written off, just one more unplanned waif running feral on the streets of London. *No one would have believed me if I had talked. I suppose that I can't blame anyone - it takes a monster to know its own kind.*

Even if they had told, Jasper wouldn't have stood a chance. He was the good child: the one who loved their family. That was the main reason that they had fled, and never dared to speak about the secrets of Lackey Hall. Jasper and his little midnight visits – brotherly love, indeed! Spence knew the word for it now, and it wasn't any sort of love. God help little Kathryn if history had repeated itself. *I got out, and I stayed out. That's what you do in a fire – what else could you call that family?*

It was time to fill in the gaps between the unmarked graves under the front lawn, and everywhere else besides. Lackey Hall was ashes now, and the monsters that had laired there thoroughly dead. Spence would have to tell the whole truth. Doing so merely made them culpable by omission for all the evil that had kept happening. Not doing so left their niece – and possibly their

nephew; he wasn't his father – to carry the burden. That would be inexcusably worse and cowardly too. Spence wasn't cowardly. Mad possibly: for no one sane would have gone back to that damned place, but never a coward – except for that one instance, up on the space station; throwing the whole operation to the wolves.

This test read as positive too. The non-gender tossed it aside onto the two-dozen other plastic sticks that littered the bed. There were no more in the safe house. British Intelligence hadn't expected anyone to need so many in such short order. That was understandable: it was a safe house, not a fertility clinic. All twenty-five being faulty was the bigger concern. *We should change our medical supplier. Christ only knows whether the penicillin is functional.*

They had taken Weaver to surgery twenty minutes earlier. Whitby sat alone in the hospital's restaurant, drowning his concern with pallid tea and stale tasting egg substitute sandwiches. He had brought his laptop with him to pass the time. Currently, he was pouring over the disappointing results from the attempted restoration of the medics

back at Headquarters. By any reckoning, it ought to have worked. What made them different from Rosa and Jenkins?

The most likely explanation was the nature of their deaths. Rosa's neural map had not included her near-death experience, and Jenkins' last update had occurred prior to her assassination. In contrast, the medics had been in active cryospace sessions during their massacre. Perhaps the reality of dying had embedded that trauma into their neural maps. If so, then it might never be possible to fix them. Earlier saves were overwritten with each new cryospace session. There wasn't an option to restore a previous copy. *People aren't machines, even if I do believe that some machines should count as people.*

He wished that he knew where Rosa was. Weaver hadn't found any clues before Horatio ambushed her. It was as though some unseen force had taken an eraser to the truth! For all they knew, there might never be any answer. That was the hardest part for Whitby: not knowing. Alive, dead, worse than either – his mind kept finding new ways to torment him over it. He couldn't even share his concerns with her parents. Philippe and Eva had

cut contact with everyone they deemed remotely culpable in their daughter's disappearance.

There was a new e-mail notification demanding his attention. Whitby sighed and opened it. The name of the sender dropped his jaw: K. Rosa. It couldn't be her! No, either he had finally snapped or this was a decidedly cruel hoax. Reminding himself of that, the technician opened the message.

Dear Nathaniel,

I'm safe, but I'm not coming back. Please don't risk anyone by looking for me.

Kellie

There was an attachment too: an official resignation form stating that Rosa had left them in favour of private sector employment. She had cited untenable treatment as her reason. It seemed all too plausible. Whitby thought again of the unsmiling experts who had spirited his colleague away. What had those monsters put her through in the name of study?

Clinging to the hope that this situation wasn't as it appeared, he clicked on the option to reply.

Dear Kellie,

Where are you?

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Nathaniel

He didn't really expect an answer, or at least not one that he could trust. Such communications were hardly proof of life. Anyone might be behind the e-mail. It might even be one of Pembleton's insanely convoluted long games!

Dear Nathaniel,

I'm in Miami – I've accepted a position with GETEC. I promise that they're treating me well. In fact, they've even found me accommodation that allows pets, so I can finally get a dog! I'll be in touch as and when I can, please don't worry. Sorry to leave at such short notice, but it's what I need to do.

Kellie

Whitby stared at the e-mail. Rosa didn't like dogs – she preferred cats – but that was a detail that no one aside from her immediate family and close friends would know. Which meant that this wasn't anything to do with Pembleton, and nor was it likely to be Rosa's own choice. She was clearly acting under duress. Really, there was only one acceptable response.

Chapter Twelve – Blunt Reminder

It was hardly surprising that the task of hunting down those responsible for the attack on Mars had fallen to the Marines stationed at Deimos Base. The fact that the bloodthirsty killers were all made-to-order SCOs was less expected. Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy found herself hoping that her superiors weren't serious. "I trust that we're one hundred percent positive on the validity of this Intelligence, because storming a *monastery* isn't going to be popular with the general population either way."

"Duly noted, Captain – rest assured that there is to be no storming, *per se*."

"Well, I ain't green enough to suppose that this is about to become a happy conversation, Sir, so let's have it."

At the far end of the communications' channel,

General Gavin Palmer-Hewitt gave his version of a smile. The cybernetics of his replacement jaw glistened under the stark overhead lighting in his office. "The monastery is really just a private retreat on Pluto: a bunch of retired geneticists went looking for the Almighty and ended up trying to outdo Him instead. They turn a healthy profit by cloning unthinking muscle for anyone who wants to buy it. The only difference now is that they supplied troops for the purposes of terrorism."

"So, we're the blunt reminder of where their loyalties ought to be, Sir?"

"It doesn't have to be blunt, Kennedy. Martian Intelligence identified the SCOs by their micro tags, but only the scientists who cloned them can say who requested it."

"It seems to me that we generally use hackers for those questions, Sir."

"Unfortunately, those involved have denounced the keeping of computerised records. Apparently, God doesn't like them writing that kind of thing down. We need you to go in and talk to them in person."

"If they don't use computers then how did anyone manage to hire their services, Sir?"

"They have connections; an office here, a lay preacher there. Under the Equalities Act we can't touch any of them, and we don't know where to start anyhow."

Kennedy nodded. "It's easier to go direct to the source."

"Affirmative, Marine: talk to the cult, and find out who wanted to attack Mars. Maybe it's connected to what went down at that GETEC station, maybe not – that's for you to clarify."

"Message received and understood, Sir. I'll get right on to buttering up those Plutonian zealots."

With Dr Rosa now housed in one of GETEC's secure tenancies in central Miami, Hull was free from his responsibilities as a host. He marked the shift in obligations by bringing home a pseudo celebrity. He had spotted her by chance in one of the city's less safe nightclubs. There were no such things as security cameras in that sort of place. Exceptionally drunk and more than a little high, her sense of personal danger was long gone. It hadn't taken much effort for Hull to persuade her to leave with him.

Now he stared down at the spectacle: on her

knees with the stark white of her mascara painting cobwebs across her face. Her long dyed blonde hair felt brittle in his grip as he tugged her head back. "You've made a real mess of yourself, haven't you, Miss Shelby?"

Kassie moaned and swatted at his hand. "Stop it...!"

The synthetic nails, painted a lurid shade of neon pink, matched the colour of the barely there PVC mini-dress that she had been wearing. There hadn't been anything else underneath it, so now she only had her stilettos. The latter were a snapped ankle just waiting to happen, and the thick layer of glittery pink lip-gloss felt sticky as he levered open her jaw. Her breath was the usual post party stench. The pupils of her eyes remained dilated enough that the overhead lighting was uncomfortable for her. Closing her eyes was obviously too complicated a process right now. "First thing first: let's get your system flushed."

She wasn't keen on the taste of the concoction that he syringed into her mouth. "Ugh...!"

"Good girls don't complain about taking their medicine, Cassandra."

She smiled up at him: clinging vacuously to his

every word. "I'm good...!"

"Okay, it's time to get you cleaned up." He dragged her back onto her feet and sponged her down from head to ankles with tepid water mixed with cleanser. "Stand still, Cassandra."

She squeaked when he reached between her thighs. "Too cold...!"

He stroked her hair. "The guest bedroom is right across the hall. You'll be nice and cosy beneath the blankets." With that, he turned her around and whacked her sharply on the behind to get her moving. "Off you trot!"

She giggled and tottered off obediently.

Hull tidied up the mess in the bathroom and went downstairs to dial Rosa's home number. "Put on the tallest heels and the tiniest dress that you have and get your ass into a cab and over to my place immediately, doctor. Don't make me have to come and fetch you."

"So, what's the story behind the ducks then?"

Leister met Dobos' query with a perturbed smile. "What ducks, darling?"

The field operative shrugged. "You know; the embroidery on that fucking collar. The one that

Jenkins has been wearing under her jumper ever since you left for Cambridge."

"I had no idea, Oliver – did she mention where she got it from?"

"I assumed it was from you."

"Well, no, not exactly. I think I'd best have a chat with her about that. Excuse me, please."

He found Jenkins in her room, lost in the questionable depths of an e-book. "Ashley, it's come to my attention that you've been wearing my collar without my permission."

Jenkins shrank back into the heap of pillows that she was sitting on. "I'm sorry, Cob! I found it in your suitcase and I couldn't resist!"

"Darling, I'm not angry, I'm concerned. Why were you looking through my things?"

"I couldn't cope! I just wanted something that smelled like you. But then I found the collar instead."

"And you decided to keep it."

She nodded miserably. "It was only supposed to be until you came back. I was going to return it, Cob."

Leister sighed and held out his hand. "Give me the collar, Ashley."

The leather was just as worn as it had been when he packed it before leaving for the fateful mission in Dubai twelve years ago. It had remained undisturbed in the side compartment of the luggage all throughout his ten-year incarceration. The hotel had kindly held on to his belongings until his release. Leister hadn't had need for the collar in the intervening two years. He had abstained from more than just alcohol during his retirement. Now a wealth of memories came whispering back.

Jenkins had dropped back to her makeshift nest on the floor. "I know I shouldn't have done it, Cob."

"In fairness to you darling, it needed doing. One has to keep breathing eventually." He tucked the strap into a neat coil and placed it in his pocket. "Still, it's troubling that you felt unable to cope with my absence. I was gone for less than a day, Ashley, and you weren't here alone. We need to work on reclaiming the brilliant young woman that you really are."

"What if you don't like her, Cob?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Something fierce had lit in the pale hazel eyes. "Maybe she's just not very likeable."

His knees grumbled a little as he seated himself

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beside her. "That sounds like a label that someone else put on you, darling. If it wouldn't be too presumptuous of me then I'd dearly like to peel it off."

Rosa approached the clear glass of the front door with no small measure of trepidation. She knew that refusing this invitation would only make things worse for her. *Maybe it will turn out to be work related.*

Hull was dressed down for once, in an extremely tight pair of black jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt. "Please, come in, Dr Rosa."

She shivered and followed him, pulling her coat even closer around herself as they entered the main ground floor living area. "What's this about, Supervisor Hull?"

He ripped off her coat and tossed it aside. "Put both of your hands palm first against this wall and keep them there until I say otherwise. I want your ass out, and your legs spread - no, much wider than that." He manhandled the technician into position and kicked her legs apart. "Perfect - don't move an inch from there."

With that, he walked away and left her. Rosa did

her best to remain posed against the wall. It hurt. Her shoulders and wrists ached more with every second. The high heels strained her knees and ankles, and the small of her back began to twinge. She heard the antique clock in the hall chime through midnight and then the next two of the quarterly hour markers. Her limbs began to tremble from exertion. "Supervisor Hull, please – I need to rest!"

His voice was much nearer to her than she had expected when he replied. "Very well, Dr Rosa: come and sit with me on the couch."

She straightened up painfully, and then staggered over to him and collapsed on the adjoining cushion without another word.

"I understand that British Intelligence hacked our cryospace records and stole Ashley Jenkins' neural map. I was wondering why, but then you mentioned that there's another successful FBT subject." The supervisor took another sip of his scotch. "I did some digging, and found further medical records for her, dated after she was killed. You brought her back to life. My question is: why?"

"Her biological father requested it. His name is Paul Benedict. He's one of our best operatives, so

he has a certain amount of leeway." Rosa sighed. "I'm sorry that I ever invented the method, to be honest. I only wanted to help understand how human consciousness works. It was all theoretical; it wasn't intended as a means to raise the dead!"

"You were Patient Zero, weren't you?"

"I was brain dead – machines were keeping me alive...I...Nathaniel meant well...but..."

"But now you wish that he'd pulled the plug."

"Yes."

Am I going to end up like this? "Well, I'm confident that GETEC's therapists will be able to resolve those negative feelings, Dr Rosa."

"It doesn't matter if I play along or not, does it? You'll still abuse me; just like poor Dr Jenkins, because that's what you do. You're a predatory deviant and GETEC enables you!"

"What makes you say that?"

The technician had hit her stride now; anger overwhelming self-preservation. She turned to face him, glaring, and jabbing him in the chest with her left index finger. "You know perfectly well what I mean! You terrorised her – her internship within GETEC was nothing short of slavery! I mean really, who thinks that it's acceptable to implant a micro

explosive tracking device in someone? Don't even get me started on the drugs, and the deliberately induced cryospace addiction! You're a *monster!*"

"Then maybe a prissy little nun like you shouldn't be rattling my chain so hard."

Rosa shrank backwards but not fast enough. His hands closed around her wrists and dragged her forwards to lie face down over his lap. She shrieked as his left palm connected with her buttocks. "Stop it!"

"No, Dr Rosa, we're going to play properly now." He chuckled and smacked her again; his other hand wrapped firmly around the nape of her neck. "As for Ashley Jenkins, you clearly don't know a damn thing about that duplicitous little bitch! I did everyone a favour by putting her onto a secure internship. She got some much-needed boundaries; GETEC got a competent computer technician. Everybody won." He brought his hand down for a third time, relishing the way she flinched. "Such a pert little ass you have. It's made for this lifestyle."

"Get off me!"

"This is what Ashley likes best, by the way: being spanked. Ideally whilst wearing a collar and sweet damn all else. She's a kinky little thing – not like

you." Hull squeezed Rosa's nape a little tighter with the next smack. "Although I suspect you'll come around eventually."

"I bloody well shan't, you pervert!"

He paused in spanking her long enough to yank her dress up over her hips and her panties down to her knees. "I hope you're right. Because just between us, I like it best when I'm the only one who's having any fun." His palm collided with bare skin this time, eliciting a horrified squeak from the now mortified young woman.

"Please, just let me go! I won't tell anyone!"

"You can tell whomever you want to; I know I will. This is definitely one for bragging about around the water cooler." He shifted from spanking to stroking for a moment. "There's no shame in liking it, Dr Rosa. Why don't you give your baser instincts a little freedom for once?"

"I don't want anything to do with this sort of thing!" She squirmed. "It's unnatural!"

"I guess that I'm going to have to shake you down from that pedestal that you're hiding on." Hull bent his head and kissed the small of her spine. "Don't worry – I won't be gentle."

Chapter Thirteen – Simplicity Itself

Dobos deposited himself on one of the elderly chairs at the kitchen table and stared balefully at Jenkins. “What the fuck did you put in Leister's fucking coffee this morning, boffin?”

The technician blinked at him from where she was loading the dishwasher. “I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Dobos.”

“Bollocks you don't fucking know – you made him coffee this morning, I saw you bring it to him at breakfast! It's all he fucking had. Twenty minutes later, your dad took Moxton to the medical centre to have his arm seen to. Around the same time, Craig volunteered to escort those two little serial killers in training to the nearest secure facility for damaged children. His old man got roped in to help with the driving, because Craig's fucking barred and the fucking shrink who assessed them

arrived by fucking taxi. Andro then got fucking pissy about Craig having left, and stormed off to go fucking shopping with that American bint, Tanya whatever her name is. Darren lost the fucking coin toss, so he's babysitting them, and the rest of us are all stuck here; waiting to hear from Whitby about the outcome of Weaver's surgery. I fucked off back upstairs for a shower and a wank: when I got back down, Quincy was keeping Leister alive. He's almost certainly been poisoned, but whatever it was isn't in the database. The fucking ambulance is now en fucking route. So, I'll ask you again, boffin – what the fuck did you put in his fucking coffee?"

Jenkins slammed the machine shut and dusted off her hands. "I didn't put anything in Cob's coffee! I would *never* do that!"

"Sorry for fucking accusing you then."

"Thank you." She pulled up a seat opposite him. "Is he stable?"

"Yeah, of course he fucking is. I wouldn't have fucking left Quincy alone to manage otherwise!" The field operative sucked in a breath. "Sorry for being so hard on you. Cob's a tough old fart. I'm sure he'll bounce back. Try not to worry yourself too much."

"Oh no, I'm not worried; I'm surprised. He *should* be dead."

Dobos was upright and pointing his gun at the woman before she had finished her second sentence. "For fuck's sake, what the fuck did you give him and how?"

"You won't shoot me if you want me to help with any of that, Mr Dobos." Jenkins rested her chin in her hands and grinned impishly at him. "Put the gun away now. If you're nice to me, perhaps I'll give you a clue."

The bullet ended up in the wall above the sink and below the window. Jenkins screamed and collapsed onto the tiles; clutching her ruined shoulder. Dobos holstered his weapon, then stepped around the end of the table and kicked her square in the stomach. "This *is* me being fucking nice. Now - what did you do to Cob?"

She laughed at him: an empty, almost hysterical sort of sound. "You're worried about entirely the wrong person...!"

"Why? Have you poisoned someone else as well? Have you poisoned *me*? Oh fuck - you bloody have, haven't you? Damn it!" He scraped his fingers through the still damp mess of his hair.

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"You crazy *bitch*; how fucking long do I have?"

Quincy trundled into the kitchen: alerted by the fracas. <advisory-errorincode>

"Not the time, little bro'; I'll have Whitby take a look as soon as possible."

<warning-unsafeprotocolsimplemented>

Dobos looked hard at Jenkins, and then slowly back at the little robot. "Quincy, why the fuck are you pointing that turret at me?"

<error!unsafeprotocol!error!>

"Fuck's sake, Quincy – stop firing!" The field operative dived for cover. "Quincy, it's me; it's Oliver! We're friends!"

Jenkins was still cackling. "He's not your *friend*; he's a *machine*, nothing more! It's simplicity itself to make a machine switch sides, Mr Dobos – I should know; I'm a programmer."

Dobos had hunched himself into the corner formed by the refrigerator and the rear wall of the kitchen. It was a tight squeeze, and he didn't feel particularly safe. "Quincy, I really need you to prove her fucking wrong right now, mate!"

<error-recalibratingdata-filenotfound-error>

"Oh, just shoot him already, you stupid thing!" The technician was weakening now from the pain

and blood loss. "Kill them both, so that I can tell everyone how you malfunctioned and ran amok!"

"I don't bloody think so!" Whitby's voice echoed across the frantic beeping emanating from his creation. "Quincy – enact emergency shutdown protocol; 0-12-crisis-90-avert."

<protocolaffirmed-shuttingdown>

British Intelligence's senior boffin turned and nodded to Dobos. "I need to see to Leister now, so I trust that you can manage to deal with *her*?"

"That will be an extreme fucking pleasure, Dr Whitby." The field operative scowled as he moved back to guard Jenkins. "I already sent for help, by the way, sir."

"Yes, I know; they were pulling into the driveway when I got back, and not a moment too soon, by the look of things." Whitby was already halfway along the corridor, and choosing to ignore Dobos' uncharacteristic deference. "Can you imagine what Housekeeping is going to say about all of this?"

Tanya eyed the contents of her companion's shopping basket. "Um, are you sure you need all those test kits, Spence? I mean, given that you

already know that you're pregnant anyhow."

"In case you haven't noticed, Supervisor Hull has a nasty habit of manipulating other people for his own ends."

"Oh, okay – so you're just wanting to be sure?"
The teenager grinned. "You must be so excited about it!"

"I'm nothing of the sort, Miss Darnell."

"But you're going to be a mom!"

"No, I'm not. Hull was lying; it's what he does. I'm buying these tests to restock the medical cabinet at the safe house for other people. All the tests in it were faulty. It's really just as well that this happened."

"What do mean they were all faulty? Did you like, try all of them?" The girl frowned. "How do you know they were faulty anyhow?"

The non-gender shrugged and eyed another brand of plastic stick. "Because I can't be pregnant and they all state that I am."

"But...but doesn't that just mean that you actually are pregnant?"

"I told you already that's not possible."

"How come you're so sure about that?"

Spence closed their eyes and wondered how

young people nowadays weren't punched in their overly nose-y faces more often. "Do you know how to spell insensitive, Miss Darnell?"

Tanya blushed. "I'm sorry, Spence. That really sucks – do you suppose Mr Hull knew? I mean, that would be horrible even for him!"

"You have a delightful lack of understanding when it comes to what that bastard would regard as being horrible."

"Are you mad at me? I kind of find it hard to tell the difference."

"No, I'm not mad." *Although sane was an island that drifted past on my horizon quite some time ago.* "I'm just tired after all the running around, crashing stolen aircraft into the lairs of mass murderers."

The liberated intern shivered. "Yeah, that too, I guess. Did you know what they were then – your family?"

"I had some inkling of the matter. I ran away when I was still quite young though, and no one listens to scraggly urchins whimpering about their parents liking knives. The consensus was to lock me up and see to it that I attended group. So, I learned not to mention it, and I suppose that after a while I

stopped believing that it had happened in the first place."

"Aw, Spence, that's horrible! No wonder you're so paranoid about stuff."

"Miss Darnell, if you try hugging me, I shall bash you over the head with my basket."

"But you need hugs!"

"Stop that – people are beginning to stare."

Tanya backed off and shuffled her feet. "I just wish there was something I could do to make up for all the crap you had to go through."

"I'm alive, they aren't, that's enough."

"What about Kathryn and Barnabas?"

Spence really didn't want to peer into that dark corner. "Time will tell. At least they'll be listened to properly. Craig shall see to that."

"He's the guy that Mr Hull pretended was the father. Are you guys dating?"

"We're complicated."

"That so means yes. I really need to help you with this whole dressing like a normal person thing, Spence – especially the guy boots."

"I thought you changed your mind about those? Back whilst we were wandering through that badger sanctuary."

"Yeah, well we're totally out of the woods now, so shoe shopping next!"

"That will have to wait. Mr Jolley shan't like being dragged around too many shops."

"You're just making excuses now." Tanya paused to try one of the latest adaptive lip colours. "We can leave him in the car; like we did this time."

"He's a field operative; they can't be relied upon not to blow things up if left to their own devices for too long."

"So, tell him to go back to the safe house or something – he can always pick us up later. My friend Kassie would look amazing in this colour. She's way prettier than me."

Spence gave up. "Fine – we'll go to one shoe shop. I make no assurances that I'll buy anything."

"Cob said to remind you that you need a new phone. He gave me money for one too."

"That's your way of hinting that you want me to purchase that lip thing for you, isn't it?"

"Well...yeah...kind of? I mean , it's not for me – it's a gift for Kassie. I really want to make things up with her."

"Just put it in the basket, Miss Darnell."

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Kassie opened her eyes and struggled to understand why everything looked so different. Then she realised that it wasn't her bedroom. "Oh my God, what did I do last night? My parents are going to freak if they find out about this!"

Admittedly, the latter event wasn't much of a risk. Deanna and Evan Shelby were skilled in the art of absentee parenting. Kassie hadn't seen either of them in person for well over a year now. Holographic chat was just as good. She was used to the distance, even if the horror of the Capoliveri incident had made her wish that she still had a nanny. As if anybody over the age of sixteen needed one of those!

Her feet hurt. Pushing away the blankets, she saw that she was still wearing her shoes from the night before. "Fuck! Where are my clothes?"

The room was bare, aside from the massive bed. It was also windowless, but whatever. Clearly, she had gone home with someone from the party, or maybe from that club that people had said she should try. Had she gone along to that? Everything after the tequila was a blur.

She tottered upright and immediately overbalanced: crashing down hip first against the

polished wood of the floor. "Damn it! I am so going to sue the crap out of whoever owns this dump – why are there no carpets in here?"

It took another three attempts at walking to convince her that removing the stilettos was going to be necessary if she ever wanted to reach the door. The straps had dug into the flesh around her ankles and lower calves whilst she slept. Just unfastening them was agony, and there were ugly welts on her feet when she managed to slide them free. "Ugh – great; crippled for life!"

No one seemed to have heard her moving around. Either she wasn't the only one nursing a hangover or the room she was in was way off in some isolated guest wing. In the absence of sympathetic hosts, Kassie dragged herself to her feet and hobbled to the door. She paused – maybe wandering around naked would be a bad idea, not that there was any choice. Grumbling, she made her way back to the bed. The sheets were thick enough to use as a makeshift robe. Dragging one off, Kassie folded it as best as she could and draped it around herself. Then she limped to the exit again and twisted the handle. To her horror, the door wouldn't open. It rattled against what

sounded like a deadbolt. She'd been locked in here – sealed in a windowless room, with no clothes and no phone!

Panic took over entirely. "Hey! Let me out of here! Open the door!"

Screaming and banging got her nowhere, and now her fists hurt as badly as her feet. Kassie slumped to the floor, exhausted. There was no way to know how long it had been since she woke up. It felt like a lifetime though, and her stomach had begun to growl. Would whoever was behind this leave her to starve?

The door swung open abruptly, revealing a tall figure silhouetted against the bright glare of a well-lit hallway. Kassie squinted up at them. She hadn't realised how dark the room was. "What's going on – where am I?"

"Go back to bed, Miss Shelby."

"But I want to go home...!"

He was gone again. Kassie heard the lock click behind him. She howled angrily, then wrapped her arms around her knees and whimpered. Whoever the weirdo was, he knew her name. Maybe it was all just a prank.

Chapter Fourteen – Fun While It Lasted

Rosa stared at herself in the mirror, and silently hated Greg Hull. He refused to leave her thoughts. The spanking had given him a physical reminder to haunt her with - sitting down was still uncomfortable even the day afterwards! The journey home to her sleek apartment had been excruciating. Walking anywhere in Miami at that hour was too stupid to risk, so she had taken another taxi. The driver had said nothing, but his face implied that he guessed at her discomfort.

Perhaps he had seen it before; perhaps Hull was what was normal here. There were certainly innumerable garish advertisements for deviant activities along the bustling streets on their route. The technician wasn't certain what would be worse: people knowing that she had been spanked, or assuming that she had willingly

engaged in far worse. *I'm not that sort of person!*

At least her parents had been delighted to hear from her. Mellor had set that up for her today. The relief on their faces during the thirty-minute video conference had almost made her enforced change in career palatable. She hadn't told them the details about the testing facility that had held her, or the deadly force used by Perfect10 Industries in retrieving her. As far as Philippe and Eva knew, their daughter had been headhunted by one of the best employers within the private sector.

It was a glossy version of the truth: Rosa couldn't bring herself to provide them with anything else. Still, was it even so distorted a reality? She wasn't sure at all any longer. Beyond the massive drift in the salaries that each provided, what was the difference between GETEC and British Intelligence? Both tagged and monitored their technicians. Neither liked it when an employee jumped ship. She was no worse off here in Miami than she had been in London. Yes, there was the looming belligerence of Supervisor Hull, but then again plenty of field operatives did worse whilst coming down from missions. The latter, generally regarded as a hazard of the profession for boffins and other supporting

staff, was no less of an abuse.

Mellor had gently advised her not to file any sort of an official complaint against the supervisor. "Employee Welfare & Resources aren't the saints that they claim, Dr Rosa. Supervisor Hull has his quirks, but he'll go to the wall for his people. That includes you now."

She didn't believe that, but the young administrator clearly wanted her to. Perhaps Hull had some undisclosed hold over him. The argument had seemed too much of an effort however, and so Rosa had simply agreed quietly and excused herself to cry here in the women's bathroom for a while.

In the end, his young guest had slept for another solid five hours. Hull had left her a set of clean clothing in the interim. The next time that he opened the door, Kassie was fully dressed in jeans, a plain sweater, and a pair of comfortable loafers. She cringed back against the opposite wall of the bedroom. "Please don't hurt me!"

"I'm not going to hurt you, Miss Shelby. I found you drugged to the eyeballs at a nightclub and brought you back here to come down. Now – how

about I fix us both some breakfast before I drive you home?"

"You...you aren't a kidnapper?"

"No, I'm just a guy with a sense of duty to his fellow human beings. You got very lucky this time, Miss Shelby. That club is a bad place – I hope that I won't see you anywhere near it again. There's no guarantee that the wrong sort of person wouldn't take a shine to you. Do you understand?"

"Yeah...thanks. Who are you?"

"My name's Greg Hull. I'm a supervisor with GETEC." He led the way down to the kitchen. "You know, we have a great intern scheme. Maybe you should take a look at it."

Kassie sniffed and took a seat at the breakfast bar. "I don't need to work – I'm famous."

"So I've heard: one of the Fortunate Foursome, survivors of the Capoliveri massacre. Tell me, Miss Shelby – does it make you happy?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"In my experience, happy people don't treat themselves so badly." The supervisor smiled and started cracking eggs into the pan. "Besides, work is always better when you aren't dependent on it to get by. It's just something to think about."

"I'll think about it...maybe. Thanks."

I tell you what, you give me an autograph, and we'll call ourselves even. I can't say any fairer than that, Miss Shelby."

She smiled at him from behind her hair. "Okay, Mr Hull...you've got a deal."

They ate breakfast and he drove her home, just as he had promised. The city was wide-awake by then. Hull spent his afternoon alone: people watching in search of potential assets. Mandatory sick leave was boring, but Mellor had already filed the paperwork, and it seemed unfair to make that pointless. In lieu of anything else to do with his time, the supervisor found himself a seat in a coffee shop and ordered a late lunch.

He pulled Housekeeping's phone from his pocket whilst he ate. The non-gender hadn't installed much in the way of additional security features, although the exploding battery element could have been nasty if Saunders' previous misadventure had gone unreported. Humming quietly, Hull scrolled through the contacts until he found Craig Campbell's number. *I think congratulations are in order.*

DOG DARK LAMPS

The therapy room was an odd mixing of high security and soft play, and the brightly coloured interior reminded Campbell of his own childhood bedroom. It seemed a gentle enough sort of environment and the field operative was glad of that. Watching Kathryn's initial session through the observation screen tugged at enough of his protective instincts already. The girl sat hunched up in an enormous beanbag chair. Her skinny arms were wrapped around the stuffed bear that Campbell *hoped* wasn't the first toy that she had ever owned.

There was still an absence of emotion to her responses, but at least she was talking. The therapist, Dr Finch was clearly not about to push too hard. She kept her distance from her young patient – sitting quietly on a low sofa and offering eye contact that never risked staring. "That's a nice bear, Kathryn."

"Craig gave it to me; it's mine. You can't have it, and neither can Barnabas."

"I wouldn't take your bear, Kathryn."

"Good."

Finch tilted her head a little. "Do you understand where we are, Kathryn?"

"It's a hospital; like the one where Mummy went."

"Why did your mummy have to go to the hospital, Kathryn?"

The resultant shrug reminded Campbell of Spence. "She made Nana get cross. Mummy kept saying that we had another name and Nana didn't like that. So then, Mummy had to run and we had to run, but Granddad came and said not to. That's before the accident."

"What happened in the accident, Kathryn?"

"Mummy fell under the lights and the man in the car took her away to hospital. Granddad said we had to stay out of sight until he'd gone. Barnabas kept crying but I was a good girl." Kathryn sniffed. "I'm always a good girl...Granddad says so."

"And what happened to your mummy next, Kathryn?"

"Daddy came home without her. He was sad. He followed the man to the hospital but it wasn't any good. Mummy died – the hospital did it. Nana says that's what they build them for."

Campbell turned away from the screen and stumbled out into the corridor to answer his phone. He was too glad of the distraction to wonder who

might be calling him from Spence's now defunct number. "Who is it?"

"I just wanted to offer my best wishes to you and Nightingale, Mr Campbell. I think that, given the situation, a truce may be in order."

The field operative growled as he recognised the speaker. "Stay away from Spence, Hull!"

"That's exactly what I'm offering to do. I'm not comfortable feuding with someone during pregnancy. It just feels wrong somehow."

"What?"

"You two make a cute couple. I'll be sure to send you a gift for the shower. Don't worry about an invitation – GETEC has the means to get me your home address."

With that, the call ended. Campbell tried to ring back but Spence's phone was no longer active. He called the safe house instead, and got Whitby. "Boffin, put Spence on. It's important."

"Housekeeping isn't here. They're out shopping in the local village with Miss Darnell and Jolley. I'm bloody glad you've rang, actually – Leister's been hurt. They're taking him to Lancashire Century by ambulance. I'm just about to follow them."

"What happened?"

"It's a long story and I'd rather explain it to everyone in person. Can you round up the others already at the hospital and meet us in A&E?"

"Whitby, I'm nowhere near there! I'm at Osprey House – the juvenile care centre. Look, I've got to speak to Spence: do you know where they went shopping?"

"No. I was about to call Jolley anyhow. Do you want them to pick you up at Osprey House, or can your father drive you?"

"He left an hour ago." Campbell was pacing by now. "Christ! Yes, fine, have them meet me here. I'll be out front waiting."

Jenkins stared at the ceiling above her and tried to remember how she had ended up strapped to a hospital bed. Her right shoulder was swathed in bandages and her head ached: the pain insufficiently dulled by a cocktail of intravenous medications. No one had appeared to check on her in the past half an hour since waking up, despite her initial cries for help. She resigned herself to waiting quietly – counting the little impressions on the ceiling tiles to pass the time. At least there were no GETEC logos within view. Perhaps she had had

some sort of accident.

The last thing that the technician remembered was going to sleep in Cob's arms. He had carried her from the cushions to the bed and promised to stay until she got over. It had been the safest that Jenkins had felt in years. Waking from that to this was terrifying: where was she? Why wasn't Cob there, or her father? *I hope they're alright.*

Rosa rang his front doorbell a little before midnight. Hull let her in with a frown. "What are you doing here, Dr Rosa?"

The technician hobbled forwards, appearing utterly shell-shocked. She was shoeless, and the remainder of her GETEC issue uniform was askew. "Mellor said...he said...I don't know who else to go...!"

"You aren't making any sense – why are you still in uniform; your shift ended six and a half hours ago?"

"It wasn't late and I thought I'd just walk back, but...he was...I couldn't...!"

Hull put his arm out for her to lean on. "Dr Rosa, what does Mellor have to do with this? Why did you mention him?"

"Because he said you take care of people...if they're working under you...?"

The supervisor had managed to coax her as far as the downstairs bathroom. "Okay, get yourself cleaned up. I'll bring you a change of clothes."

"Don't...please don't walk in on me...?"

A series of texts to Mellor arranged the delivery of fresh clothing and the necessary medical equipment. Hull knocked quietly on the bathroom door and handed the items to Rosa. "We'll debrief when you feel ready."

"Damn, I lost the signal!" Vetch slumped back in his seat and tossed the control unit aside. "Oh well, it was fun while it lasted. I just hope I got enough data for the testing panel. Now, let's see: run micro drone field test, yeah I've done that. Prepare SCO Saunders for transport, check; shipped him already."

Hull had made certain that Vetch had taken all of the blame for losing Spence, Darnell, and two very expensive jets. His objections to the contrary were cited as more examples of a bad attitude. The AMR technician had a horrible feeling that his future career held nothing but meaningless box

ticking exercises. Testing the micro drone was likely to be the highlight of this year, next year, and the two after that.

It had been a weird experience, really – experiencing at the world through someone else's senses. Vetch had piloted RCS technology before, but that was different. An RCS was an empty vessel, with the micro drone he had needed to suppress the existing consciousness beneath his own. The nanoviral inducers had been good at that. R&D were really on track with this little gizmo.

He ticked off yet another box and smiled as he imagined Jenkins struggling to explain her actions. *Yeah, good luck convincing anyone that you're not batshit crazy - assuming that you even survive that bullet to begin with.*

The only thing that would clear her name was if they found out about the micro drone. By now, it would already be starting to decay. In six more hours, the only evidence would be a few strands of additional protein in the young woman's bloodstream, and the file on Vetch's computer.

Chapter Fifteen – Positive

The small foil wrapped chocolate egg hit Jolley on the side of his head as he entered the main foyer of Lancashire Century. “Cheers, Ollie; I could do with a snack after the drive here. How’s Mr Leister doing?”

Dobos jerked his left thumb in the direction of the lifts. “He’s awake and fucking pissed off that they’re making him and Weaver share a room.”

“What happened to him?”

“Jenkins hacked Quincy and forced him to electrocute the old bastard. It went downhill from there, and I shot her. Now Whitby has some weird notion that she’s innocent. They’ve stuck her in the psychiatric ward for now, in case he’s wrong. You can fucking guess how her dad took that. Moxton’s hauled him off to get some fresh air whilst Whitby finishes his analysis.”

DOG DARK LAMPS

"Ah, shite!" The blonde man seated himself next to Dobos. "It's just one problem after another lately, isn't it? Housekeeping and Mr Campbell haven't said more than three words to each other since we picked him up."

"How are the two little savages anyhow?"

"I dunno, Craig didn't say. The only person talking was Tanya, and she seemed fixated on the bloody weather!"

The ginger field operative smirked. "What – you mean to say that your charms don't work on her, Darren?"

"Fuck off, Ollie; she's only nineteen!"

"Yeah, so she's an adult, right?"

"Not old enough to drink though: she's American, remember? There's no point in chatting up a bird that you can't take down the pub for a pint and a laugh."

"Oh, so you *do* rely on beer goggles to pull! I fucking knew it!"

Jolley's punch was half-hearted. "You're just pissed because I'm the pretty one!"

"Blonde twat."

"Ginger bastard."

"Um...are you guys going to make out or

something?" Tanya had followed Jolley indoors. "Only Spence and Campbell are sort of fighting in the parking lot and I don't know what to do."

"What do you mean by fighting?" Dobos eyed the teenager warily. He wasn't sure how much she had overheard. "Are they actually fucking punching each other or just shouting?"

"No, it's just more of the same not talking thing they were doing in the car. It's freaky."

Jolley shook his head. "Ah, leave them to it, love. They'll figure it out between them."

"It's completely inappropriate, darling – someone simply must put in a complaint."

Weaver relaxed back into the pleasant haze of her medication. "Don't fuss so, Maurice! Blame the economy; there aren't enough private rooms to go around."

"I blame the people running this medical centre. I'm sure if any of their lady relatives or friends were expected to share with a gentleman, there would be an outcry."

"I expect you're right, dear. Look, if you're going to be off filing complaints, then could you bring me back a cup of tea?"

DOG DARK LAMPS

"Alright, darling – two sugars and no milk, wasn't it?"

"Thank you."

Leister pulled on his dressing gown and padded gingerly into the corridor. He supposed that complaining was less urgent than tea, or in his case, coffee. However, everything could wait until he had spoken to Ashley about what was wrong. *There's no way on Earth that she would have willingly chosen to behave so treacherously!*

Hull placed a glass of water on the bedside cabinet. "I found him. He's not going to bother you again." The supervisor had made use of GETEC's access to the city's various surveillance systems to identify her attacker. The bastard was merely one more opportunistic predator amongst the usual tens of thousands within the local area. No one would bother looking for him in any serious fashion.

It looked as though somewhere between the shower and bed, Rosa's mind had decided to curl up and avoid reality. Hull sighed and tried again. "Look, GETEC won't like to see your research delayed indefinitely. I need you able to function within seventy-two hours. Do you suppose that you

can manage that without needing to have your brain completely recoded, or should I get psych involved?"

She uttered a sharp sort of noise that hung between grief and horror. "Involve whomever you like. I don't have it in me to care anymore."

"That was Whitby again." Benedict tucked his phone away and grinned at Moxton. "He says that the tests have confirmed his suspicions: Ashley wasn't responsible for her actions!"

"What happened then – some sort of drug, or hypnosis type thing?"

"No, far more insidious: there was a microscopic drone-based device found in her brain. It was emitting some sort of chemical signal that suppressed her higher brain functions – essentially, she was a puppet. Someone was controlling her remotely. The damned thing is already starting to degrade, so he can't confirm much more. Quincy spotted it just before Ashley hacked him. Whitby only found the data when he was rebooting him."

Moxton struggled to think of an appropriate response. "That's...Jesus. There aren't words for that at all, are there? Will she be okay?"

DOG DARK LAMPS

"Whitby believes so, and the medics are cautiously optimistic. Leister's sitting with her presently, and she seems fully alert – just missing a few hours of memory."

"Let's hope they're right then. She's certainly had a tough run of things." The handler sighed. "Don't worry; I'll have another word with Dobos and ensure that he doesn't do anything stupid."

"I appreciate that. He's gotten very fond of Quincy, hasn't he?"

"Yeah, but for someone like him, any friendship is a positive step."

They had been standing there not talking and not touching for almost ten minutes. Spence was somewhere in a long-ago November, tangled up in wanting and yet failing utterly to hate. Campbell, as always, hung caught between wisteria, coffee, and cool linen. The two still shared an endless year between them: twelve intensely lived months that had since endured two decades and innumerable other distances. Right now, it just felt lonely.

The field operative sighed and brushed his fringe clear of his eyes again. "We haven't done so well at catching up, have we, canary?"

"Things got in the way again, that's all." The non-gender shrugged and reached out to toy with the left cuff of Campbell's shirt. "You're missing another button."

"I never was very good with a needle."

"That's why you need me around – I tell you when to buy a new shirt."

"Does that mean that you'll stay?"

"Either that or that I'd like you to leave along with me."

He ghosted the side of his right hand along the edges of the pale face: studiously avoiding the connection of skin. "You know that I'll follow you forever if you give me leave."

"I do."

"So where do we start?"

Spence closed their eyes and gently nudged their brow into the gun-roughened palm. "I need to tell you the full truth about Cambridge."

"Are you sure that you're ready to do that?"

"I'll never be ready, Craig. That doesn't alter the fact that it's time to do so. Those two children: my brother's children – yes; it's the right decision for them."

"Do we need to find someone official to write it

all up properly?"

"I expect that would be best." The nudge blossomed into a tentatively migrating kiss. Palm, then wrist, and finally stepping close enough to graze their lips together. "It's just that they raised me to be somewhat broken, and I was far from perfect to start with."

"What do you mean by that, canary?"

"I can't have any of my own, Craig. I'm wrong in that regard, I'm sorry."

He frowned and rested his chin on top of the pale hair. "Not even scientifically?"

"Well, cloning might work, I suppose."

"It's not a deciding factor for me, if that's what you're trying not to ask out loud. I love you, Spence. I shouldn't have been so impatient – I'm sorry about that."

"To be fair, it was hardly the first time that I pushed you away. Besides – that whole thing with Moxton...?"

"Shush. He's not important in this."

"Your father thought otherwise, Craig."

"Dad's forever bemoaning how much I take after my mother. He can hardly expect that I'll agree with his opinion on something this important."

"I *think* I may have just remembered why it is that I love you too."

"Is it my honesty?"

"It might be."

Campbell grabbed hold of the moment and hoped that what he needed to admit wouldn't wipe it all away again. "Spence, I had a phone call earlier – that bastard, Greg Hull. He's stolen your old mobile."

"I'll let my provider know about that. Do you suppose that Whitby could activate the self-destruct feature remotely?"

"Canary, are you dodging my telling you about something that you already know?"

Spence skittered abruptly clear of the closeness and folded their arms. "Let's set it aside for now, Craig. I want to see how Cob is doing."

"Hull thinks that you're pregnant!"

The sentence wouldn't go away once it was voiced. The empty car park felt as if the entire world was listening. They stood apart from one another and waited until no one put the matter back into the realm of things best unmentioned. "Craig, he's unhinged – I told you: I can't."

"I heard you, and I believe you. The problem is

that Hull is as you say unhinged. I'm somewhat afraid that he's planning something."

"So?"

"GETEC held you captive on that space station for weeks, Spence. What if they did something to you there – what if Hull knows something?"

"I have the most irksome suspicion that you think that I must have something to add to that horrid theory."

The field operative pushed, because whatever this was, it needed lancing. "Do you?"

"I know that he has to be either wrongly informed or lying." Spence's voice shook. "I suspect the latter. I also suspect that he or someone helping him have tampered with the medical supplies at the safe house!"

"What makes you suspect that?"

"Because all of the bloody pregnancy tests that were stored there read as positive, and that's impossible."

Campbell reminded himself to keep breathing. "Then we need to restock, and check the security features at the safe house."

"That's why I went shopping. I bought every test the chemist had, and it appears GETEC have

tampered with all of them."

"I'm trying very hard not to use the term *denial* right now, canary. It's proving a bit tricky."

"Are you suggesting that I don't know my own body, Craig?"

"It seems more likely GETEC implanted you with something than that they've successfully tampered with every pregnancy test in the precise chemist that you happened to use."

"Perhaps it isn't anything to do with me. It might be global - some bizarre attempt to skew fertility figures. They could have sabotaged them at the manufacturing plant...!"

"Stop it. Look, we're already at a hospital. The medics here can check to see what's wrong with the tests. They can even arrange to have the relevant company recall them by batch number if need be."

"You do believe me then?"

"I trust you above Hull any day, canary. Still, it would mean a lot to me if you'd play things safe and get checked over properly."

Spence huffed out a sigh. "You're really convinced that GETEC have done something to me, aren't you?"

DOG DARK LAMPS

"Yes, I am. I hate medical stuff, Spence! It genuinely scares me half to death. So, if I'm saying speak to a doctor...."

"Alright – I'll ask at reception."

"Thank you."

They made their way across the car park in silence. A small bird shrilled at them from the guttering of the medical centre. Spence glanced up at it. "I thought that species was extinct in England."

"They were, but a group of conservationists started a project down in Wales about four years ago to breed more. The idea was to reintroduce them to the wild."

"It looks as if it worked."

"There are some happy endings, canary."

"However statistically improbable they may appear to be?"

"Those are the very best kind, in my opinion."

The pale fingers laced between Campbell's own and squeezed briefly, before slipping clear again. "We aren't finished yet anyhow. I suppose that we might beat the odds."

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.