

Politics Of C.A.K.E

Codename: Housekeeping

Book Six

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In the direct sequel to *Inherited Stealth*, socially non-gendered British International Intelligence operative Nightingale Spence struggles to balance their hard-won maternity leave with the vagaries of spycraft. Meanwhile, GETEC is finally under official investigation for its policies, and Greg Hull has seized the opportunity to reinvent himself.

The actions of a sociopathic bodyjacker lead to a tenuous alliance between ANI and the combined branches of British Intelligence. Whether or not it will withstand the pressure of old ghosts is another matter entirely...

Contents

1	Dibs On The Sofa	Pg 1
2	Rather Locked	Pg 14
3	Plenty Of Teeth	Pg 26
4	Orchid And Lavender	Pg 40
5	Quite So Insistent	Pg 54
6	Grab A Spoon	Pg 68
7	No Difficulty	Pg 79
8	Sans Use	Pg 92
9	Never Let On	Pg 104
10	Technical Term	Pg 118
11	Very Bad People	Pg 130
12	Something More	Pg 140
13	Safe Spot	Pg 152
14	Is What It Is	Pg 165
15	Zero Signal	Pg 178
	About the Author	Pg 189

Chapter One – Dibs On The Sofa

“It's been less than forty-eight hours, Craig!” Nightingale Spence gestured at the bandages cocooning the spy's battered torso. “So, no – I'm *not* going to convince the doctors to let you out yet. Do as you're told and hopefully, you'll be home by Christmas.”

Campbell pouted. “I'm sure that I'd be absolutely fine on the sofa, canary.”

“Don't be so stubborn; I've read your chart. Anyhow, Barnabas already has dibs on the sofa.”

“How is he?”

“He's meeting his recovery targets so far.” The non-gender sighed. “I'm more concerned about Kathryn.”

“Why?”

“For a start she thinks that you left because you

blamed her and Barnabas for my being abducted; that silly row they had in the cafe. She reckons you shan't forgive them unless they can prove that they're strong enough."

"But that's not true!"

"Well, it's hardly surprising that the twins think it is. My parents always were good at damaging other people's psyches."

Campbell gazed into the pale blue eyes in search of any hint of an emotional response. "Spence, are you sure that you don't mind what happened with Horatio and Lydia?"

"Not even for a heartbeat. You saw how many bodies NIT found at Lackey Hall, Craig. I only regret that it didn't happen far sooner, and that I still don't know the identity of whoever killed Jasper. I'd like to thank them."

"Maybe GETEC know who it was. Hull did snatch you whilst the massacre was in progress."

"If you're right then perhaps it's in the data that I streamed to Headquarters." Spence stopped thinking about their off-planet incarceration before the latest cold sweat could crawl any further up their spine. "I'll stop by on my way out and ask Whitby to check."

“Do you suppose that your brother even knew you were there that night on Capoliveri?”

That question did hit something. “I haven’t the foggiest, to be honest. Christ, do you think he was after *me*? All those people that he slaughtered...!”

Campbell caught the thin wrist just in time. “Please, canary: don’t run away again. I can’t get up to follow you now – doctor’s orders and all of that nonsense.”

It took several minutes for Spence to calm fully. “Alright, I shan’t bolt, I promise. It’s done now anyhow. There’s little sense in laying blame.”

“That’s the spirit. So how are our babies?”

The pair of infants whom you haven’t seen since you went gallivanting back to bloody Dublin? “Well they’re still considerably less mobile than your eldest, so there’s that.”

Now it was his turn to feel guilty. “I’m sorry to drop him on you at such short notice. Sarah insisted that I have him whilst she’s in America, covering the fall of GETEC.”

“Perhaps you ought to have told her about your injuries?”

“I would have done if she’d been home! Poor Heidi must feel as if she’s been co-opted into the

role of messenger."

Spence scowled at the au pair's name. "Ah yes – the lovely Miss Hedturner. Did you really have to bring her along too?"

"I'm not allowed to drive within the UK."

"That rule *used* to seem very sensible."

Campbell cast about him for a positive spin to put on the situation. "She's helping with all of the children though, isn't she?"

"Yes, but your estranged wife's only paying for her to care for Sam, not the other four. I have no idea how we'll make up the shortfall in her wages. On that note, the bill arrived for your yacht this morning. Monsieur Dupont assures me that the transporters are en route to your usual marina in Le Portier."

"Now how the heck did *that* happen?" Martian Marine Corps Captain Susan Kennedy sat back a little on the coffee shop's couch and frowned at the number displayed on the screen of her phone. The balance in her account was significantly higher than it should have been. "I sure hope this ain't some kind of a money laundering scam!"

"Oh no, it's nothing like that." The man whose

clone she had loved stepped into view and settled himself on the opposite side of the table, smiling fondly at her bump. "I just wanted to take care of you, and our baby."

"I already told you to stay away from me, Hull!" The Martian glared. "And she ain't your baby – Yuudai was a person in his own right!"

Hull shook his head. "I'm afraid that the current cloning laws say otherwise, Captain Kennedy. As do the FIL regulations. Like it or not, you need me."

"On the contrary: I've got all of the support that I need in place, courtesy of the Corps. You and your money can crawl back underneath whatever damn rock the International Interests' reviewing board forgot to flip over."

"You're being unreasonable." He held up his hand as she made to rise. "Wait – hear me out, please. You need to realise that a lot of what I've done for GETEC over the past thirty odd years *wasn't* of my own volition."

"What are you talking about?"

"The short version is that ANI sent me in as their mole. They deliberately let me be conditioned, the better to gather data on GETEC via a secret transmitter that had been attached to my ID chip."

"Damn." Kennedy blinked as Hull produced his ANI issue lanyard. "All this time you've been a spy?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. I'm trying to make things right: compensate people for the stuff that I did whilst GETEC had me conditioned. Part of that is making sure that you and – and *your* baby are both okay. It's the least I can do, especially with how you saved Bryce."

"Forget it." The Marine gulped down the last of her hot chocolate. "Secret spy or not, I still don't want your help."

"Well, why not?"

"Let's start with how you're still the kind of guy that thinks it's okay to access someone's bank account without their permission." Kennedy edged clear of the table and pocketed her phone. "I can't reverse that deposit but I'll refund you the money. Quit trying to push your way into my life, Hull. You have some serious boundary issues. Yuudai warned me what you're capable of."

"Hey, being ironic much? He was my *clone*...!" He stared after her as she padded away. It seemed that his flash clone really *hadn't* been a team player. "I kind of wish I'd insisted on that asshole having an even shorter lifespan."

"It's only four days until Christmas, old swan." Spence paused in folding the ironing to eye their mentor as he set down his keys and hung up his coat. "Have you talked to Ashley about where she wants to spend the day yet?"

"It isn't appropriate for me to ask her about that, darling." Leister sighed. "Paul is against it. He's her father: I can't simply ignore his wishes."

"You're not in the Emirates any longer, so yes, actually, you *can*." The non-gender picked up another shirt. "Tonight would be a perfect opportunity."

"Why tonight?"

"Because I've invited everyone in our social circle that isn't currently hospitalised, incarcerated, or on assignment to round come here for drinks."

"Won't a house party be a tad too noisy for the babies, darling?"

"I wouldn't worry. They seem to have conspired to sleep in shifts anyhow; one or other of them is generally grizzling away regardless. At least with guests there shall be additional people available to help with them." Spence glanced at the playpen. The two youngest infants were still drowsing quietly,

but Sam had woken up. "Speaking of which, Miss Hedturner, your charge is awake and very probably hungry!"

The au pair emerged beaming from the kitchen, with Kathryn and Barnabas tagging close behind her. "Not to worry, we have just finished making the macaroni cheese!" Heidi scooped up Sam and checked his nappy. "I will be serving the meal as soon as I have got the babies ready, everyone!"

"Ah, just let my two keep on sleeping, Miss Hedturner. I'll tend to them once I've eaten."

"Barnabas kept crowding me, Aunty Val!" Kathryn pouted. "Look – I've got sauce all over my nice new dress!"

"It was an accident!" The boy glowered at his twin. "Stop trying to get me in trouble...!"

"That's *enough*, both of you!" Spence pointed to the dining area. "Barnabas, go and set the table. Kathryn, stop fussing. Go upstairs, change, and bring that dress back down to me. Cheese sauce is perfectly easy to wash out."

Eleven years and four days on from his birth, ANI Senior Agent Laine Volker still could not fathom her son. This morning's meeting with his head teacher

was an especially clear reminder of that. Emotional motivations always had been a mystery to her: even before she was first prescribed her daily cocktail of blockers. She had somehow assumed that mothering would be different – that the innate biological tie would ensure some measure of connection.

That was not the case. Worse yet, Brett had inherited far less of her psionic capability than he had of his father's unerring knack for finding trouble on the behalf of other people. His altruism was generally less than admired, but Brett never learned. By this stage, Volker only wondered why his teachers still bothered couching their concerns over his behaviour so politely. *My son is clearly the problem. Why do you not just say that?*

Instead, the balding man smiled at her from across his desk. He rumbled on about potential, capacity for great things, inherent decency. All the same terms that he had used on each of the last five times that they had had this conversation. Only the dates and times ever changed. That proved that she was not experiencing another temporal loop, at least. *Once is enough for anyone.*

Doris Weaver gazed out of the window of the passenger jet, and watched the day get younger. She would be in Miami within ninety minutes. Beyond that, all outcomes remained unwritten. A standard sort of beginning, she supposed. How coincidental that the mission that had seen her invalidated out should also be the one that returned her to the field! *I hardly thought the matter would have dragged out so bloody long.*

No one else had either. Under usual circumstances, Kellie Rosa's fate would have played out within hours of her defection to GETEC. Forced recruitment or not, there was little quarter permitted for that sort of action. There were agreed measures and procedures in place, yet somehow, they hadn't been enacted. *Anyone thinking that Edith won't make allowances for family has certainly been proven wrong.*

At least it had all worked out. With GETEC's power broken, there was nothing preventing the young boffin from returning home. ANI had already confirmed that much. If no one kicked off, she might even be able to bring her current research along with her, which would certainly be a feather worth boasting.

It also made a fine distraction from the real objective. Weaver cast her mind back to the details of the mission briefing. The reasoning was sound, but the action distasteful – a common enough blend in this game. One did what one had to; it was that, or let the opposition gain the benefit. The latter was no choice at all. Eventually, someone would claim the asset. *It might as well be us as any of the others, I suppose.*

“Ah, will you look at this, Ollie?” Jolley prodded unhappily at the steaming dish of chakhchoukha on the table in front of him. “They’ve only managed to forget my egg!”

“No they haven’t, Darren.” Dobos mumbled a tired reply around his food. “You’re thinking of *shakshouka* – it’s a different meal, mate.”

“Oh. Never mind then.” The blonde man wolfed down half of his meal before continuing. “Do you reckon Mr Moxton has forgiven us yet?”

“That depends, do you mean for the thing earlier on at that factory, or for the thing just now with the car?”

“Either, really.”

Dobos glanced towards the main door of the

restaurant. The clamour surrounding the local fire fighters attempting to salvage what remained of Moxton's vehicle was barely audible in here. "He'll calm down eventually."

"Aye, you're probably right. Here, there's soggy bread in this!"

"It's fucking rougag, Darren: it's *supposed* to be there."

"Well it tastes like semolina to me." Jolley abandoned the remains of his meal in disgust. "What's so funny?"

"Rougag's fucking made using semolina flour, you daft bastard!"

"How do you even know all this stuff, Ollie?"

"I like cooking."

Beneath the table, the final member of their party emitted a staccato of beeps. <observation – everybodyneedsahobby>

In the field operatives' collective opinion, the best thing about Algeria was the acceptance of robots. The nation ranked as second in the top three for AI development. As such, Quincy was free to trundle about without engaging his holo-emitter or pretending to be an item of luggage. It was almost like a holiday. Of course, there were still

POLITICS OF C.A.K.E

those terrorists to consider. Having disaffected British citizens running amok with pipe bombs was bloody awful for their home country's reputation.

Chapter Two – Rather Locked

Jenkins wiped away her third attempt at mascara and sighed at her reflection. Everything had fallen apart again. Her job, her relationship with Maurice and even her tentative friendship circle – all ruined now. The last thing that she wanted was a party. Staying huddled beneath the duvet in her father's guest bedroom with a family sized tub of coffee flavoured ice cream was far more appealing! Cerise, who argued that this was the closest that Spence would get to a baby shower, had put her foot down about it – they were all going.

It was strange thinking of Spence as a mother now. Admittedly, just thinking of them as still alive was taking some getting used to. Seven months of grieving for someone rather locked one's thinking in that regard. *Goodness only knows how poor*

Kathryn and Barnabas are rationalising the situation!

Campbell looked up from his tablet just in time to see his unexpected visitor all but sprint into his room. "Sarah – what are you doing here? I thought you were still busy in America...!"

Tresweld pulled back from the kiss eventually. Smiling at him tearfully, she traced the line of his brow. "Craig, love, I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner! Heidi rang me last night and I jumped on the first flight to London. Are you okay? Are they taking care of you properly? I can get you moved to a private clinic if you'd like: there's a lovely wee one out near Sligo with views over the Atlantic!"

"No, no, I'm fine; just waiting for our doctors to agree so that I can leave medical."

She frowned as he tried to duck aside from her fussing. "What's the matter? Are you not glad of the company? Ah, wait – do I stink after the flight, is that it? I didn't stop to change, sorry. Sure, you must think I'm a right manky baggage!"

He sighed. "It's not that, Sarah, but I'm with Spence now. All this affection isn't appropriate."

"Ah, sure get away on with you!" His wife snorted

and busied herself tidying the bedside cabinet. "I don't see your other woman here taking care of you in your hour of need! Anyhow, I'm still legally your next of kin, you know."

"I already told you that I want a divorce."

"And I already said no, so give over."

"Sarah...!"

"Don't you 'Sarah!' me, Craig Campbell!" Tresweld put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "We made our vows before God: until death do us part, and not before! I even gave Seamus your surname when everyone tried to tell me that you'd abandoned us both!"

"Sarah, I told you, that was all part of my cover! Yes, of course I want to be involved with our son, and I'll pay you whatever you need to provide for him, but...!"

"Oh, I don't want your money!" She straightened the edge of the bed sheet almost savagely. "I want my husband back. I want *you*, Craig. The Liffey will freeze over before I let anyone come between us."

"What do you mean you aren't coming back?" Weaver blinked at Rosa's announcement. "It's all been arranged! Pembleton pulled rank with ANI."

You're *free* now, dear."

"It's very complicated, Doris." The younger woman shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Please can't you go now?"

"This is because of Hull, isn't it?" Weaver paused and took stock of their surroundings. It was quite the charade. The perfect suburban home set in a perfect suburban community. She wondered how many of the neighbouring houses were hiding nasty secrets. "Look, whatever he claims to the contrary, he can't keep you if you don't want to stay...!"

"She *does* want to stay, Agent Weaver." Hull stepped into view from the adjoining hallway. "I think we've established that already. Now, unless you'd like to join us for dinner, I'm afraid that it's time you left. Do give my best regards to Pembleton."

The British operative settled back more comfortably on the sofa. "Have you got any messages for the rest of my colleagues, Gregory? Perhaps you'd like to send a quick hello to Spence; or better yet, an apology for abducting them?" *That* threw him off kilter. "Yes, we know what you did, all of it. We found them and brought them home. Miss Armstrong has been extremely

forthcoming about your activities."

Hull gathered himself and met her gaze. "Yeah, well I wasn't acting under my own volition. Brainwashing and so forth – just ask ANI if you need any details. To be honest, I'm surprised that you hadn't heard about that already."

"Oh, we've *heard*, Gregory." The blonde woman had finally risen to her feet: the gun seeming almost too large for her slim hand. "We've heard ever so much. In fact, it's only a matter of time until there's word given for one or other of us to put a bloody bullet through your skull. I'd be perfectly happy not to wait for the official order – how about you?"

By ten o'clock, the party was in full swing, and the three eldest children had decamped upstairs to watch a film and bemoan their respective adults. Sam – or whatever arrangement of names that one ought to call him by – was asleep in his grandfather's arms. Thomas was holding court on the largest sofa: regaling Heidi with tales that would require her to sign a variety of forms once all involved were sober enough to care about such protocols.

Leister and Benedict were on the balcony: engaged in an elaborate avoidance of anything approaching an honest conversation. Jenkins and Cerise had left them to it in favour of playing poker with Caulfield and Drake around the dining table. All four players had agreed to IOUs in lieu of cash three hands in. The older NIT operative was writing a painful looking number on a napkin as Spence retreated to the kitchen to make another attempt at nursing.

Tanya looked up from where she was perched in the window seat, texting Jolley. "Hey, thanks again for the invite! It's great to see you again. Sorry I haven't had time to visit sooner, but, well, you know what it gets like. I mean, Darren was due to fly out to this thing in Algeria, so I was just helping to prep for that, but then...!"

"Please don't rattle on, Miss Darnell. I'm already painfully aware that virtually *everything* other than babies is far more interesting and enjoyable than they are."

The young handler in training blinked. "But that's not true! Spence, I swear, it was just work stuff got in the way!"

"Enjoy it whilst it lasts." The non-gender grimaced

and wondered again about the alleged perils of formula. "And use protection."

"Huh?"

"You're sleeping with Mr Jolley."

Tanya blushed. "Kind of...?"

"It wasn't a question, Miss Darnell. As I said, use protection. Pembleton won't approve if you end up needing maternity leave this early on in your career."

"So, is that you giving me the sex talk, or saying that I have your blessing to date Darren, or that you're cool about me being a handler?"

"I'd forgotten how much you talk."

"Yeah, well I'd forgotten how much of a bitch you are, so I guess we're even." The American stuffed her phone back into the pocket of her jeans. "Why'd you even bother to ask me over if you hate my guts so much?"

"I don't hate your guts, Miss Darnell."

"You're kind of acting like you do."

"Don't be so bloody overly sensitive. The field operatives shan't respect you if you show weakness." Spence nodded towards the nearby kitchen table. "Pull that chair out will you? We can talk shop whilst they feed. From what I've heard,

you're doing fairly well so far."

"What the actual fuck was that about?" Agent Cully gesticulated wildly back towards the house. "Weaver, you just shot one of our top undercover operatives at point blank range! ANI didn't agree to let you do that!"

"Oh, do at least *try* to calm down, Michael." The ageing SCO tossed Rosa's suitcases into the backseat of the hover vehicle and nodded for their owner to follow them. "I was told to do whatever I deem necessary to bring Lady Pembleton's great-niece safely home to London. Besides, it's not as though Gregory was even badly hurt; I used low-yield concussive rounds."

"My boss really isn't going to like this." Cully shook his head again as he slid back in behind the steering wheel. "Agent Hull's kind of her special project."

"Your boss can go and ruddy swivel." Weaver clambered in beside Rosa and slammed the door closed. The young boffin was trembling. "Kellie needs to rest after her ordeal. Take us directly to the British Embassy and...!"

The car lurched suddenly up and across to its

left: the roof crumpling inwards by several inches upon landing. Not yet buckled in, all three of the occupants went tumbling into one another. For an instant, the entire world seemed comprised of the sounds of metal scraping over road and glass cracking.

Weaver, having instinctively angled herself to protect the others from the worst of the impact, was the first to speak. "Michael, get your face out of my lap. How precisely did you manage to flip the car without even having started the engine?"

He groaned and dragged himself around into a less embarrassing position. "It wasn't me – some big guy just ran up to the side of the car and grabbed us! He looked kind of familiar."

Rosa pointed out the rear windscreen towards a pair of booted feet. "It's Saunders!"

The former GETEC security chief ripped away the rear drivers' side door and dragged his British counterpart out by her hair. "Mr Hull never told you that you could leave!"

"Oh, fuck off, David!" Weaver emptied her gun into the larger SCO's chest, twisting free and kicking him hard in the throat as he went down. "Really, you're unconscious already? Honestly, I despair of

this generation, I really do. They've got no manners, and even less staying power."

Behind her, Cully was helping Rosa out of the wreckage. "Mind your head, doctor."

A crowd had gathered: neighbours startled from their quiet evenings at home. Hull stood at the front of it, his arms folded across the singed fabric of his shirt. "Good to see that no one's been seriously injured. I hope none of you three are considering leaving the scene of this accident before the authorities arrive?"

"Bullshit." Cully glared at him. "This wasn't an accident, and you know that. You need to keep that maniac on a leash, Agent Hull! He just damn well carjacked us."

"What a shame the security cameras are on the fritz today." Hull shrugged. "It looked to me as though David was trying to help get everyone out. It's not his fault that Agent Weaver is so trigger happy."

"That's utter bollocks, and you know it, Gregory." Weaver finished reloading and calmly holstered her gun. "Michael, be a dear and get Kellie's luggage. We'll wait for the police. ANI shall have to send us another car anyhow."

Eighty percent – the statistic just kept on cropping up. The Martian woman lay propped up in the soft white nest of her hospital bed, staring helplessly at the tiny form within the adjoining incubator. *Please hang in there, Ellie.*

Her daughter seemed more life support than she did infant right now. Eighty damn percent. The doctors mentioned it at every turn. It equalled everything that mattered right now: from the chances of survival after delivery at twenty-six weeks, to the likelihood of developmental or physical problems. Kennedy hadn't known before that you could come to hate a number.

Labour had begun barely three minutes after she had exited the coffee shop. A traffic cop spotted her collapse next to her car in the parking lot. He managed to reach Miami VA in less than twelve minutes. Whilst peeling off her gloves post-delivery, Major Berkeley had affirmed the guy's driving had saved both of their lives. Looking back, Kennedy sorely missed that initial optimistic version.

It could be years before the complications of being so extremely premature were fully identifiable. Blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy,

epilepsy, non-mobility – the damn list just kept on growing. Every new professional to stop by voiced another layer of misery. They meant well, but that didn't make it better.

Kennedy kept both eyes on her daughter and waited for Saturday morning. She wouldn't contact Deimos Base until then. There was no point in interrupting Woods' sleep cycle. He'd insist on arranging cover to come and visit her as soon as he knew. *No, he'll visit us both. Think positive, Marine.*

But she couldn't think of anything right now beyond the tubes, and the wires, and the percentages.

Chapter Three – Plenty Of Teeth

Volker sat quietly in her car for ten minutes before going indoors and relieving the babysitter. Jana assured her that Brett had been no trouble. “He came straight home from school, ate dinner with me, did all his homework, and then went to bed at nine thirty, just like you put on his schedule. I tucked him in myself.”

“Thank you, Miss Ross.” The clock on the wall of the den had just turned midnight. “My apologies for keeping you late today: there was an unavoidable reason.” Although technically speaking, smoothing relations between ANI and British International Intelligence was not actually her responsibility. *I cannot keep avoiding my son. I must attempt to connect with him.*

“It’s fine, really.” The co-ed beamed as she gathered up her laptop and car keys. “I had an

assignment to finish anyhow. Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jana." Volker watched from the front porch as the younger woman drove away. The locks on the door took fourteen seconds to reset. With no other viable excuses remaining, she climbed the stairs to check on Brett.

His room was in darkness. The light from the hallway behind her only spilled as far as the edge of his bed. She stood in the doorway, waiting to see the familiar rise and fall of the quilt as the boy breathed. It was so much easier to be his mother when he was not awake. There were no bruises to worry about, no fights to apologise for, and no detentions. He was safe and no one was angry with either of them. All she had to do was watch and count the seconds to make sure that his breathing was regular.

Something was wrong. The fact dawned on Volker slowly. *His bed is too still.* Edging closer, she peeled back a corner of the quilt, and then yanked it clear. "Brett?"

There was no one there. The quilt, no longer heaped up to feign the shape of a sleeping child, was cold to the touch. The sheets beneath it were perfectly smooth. Her son had not slept in this bed

tonight. *Why did Jana lie to me?*

More importantly, where was Brett? Had he gone out and persuaded Jana to cover for him? Worse, had he convinced the girl to *believe* that he was there? Did he have that talent, or had something more commonly wrong occurred tonight, whilst his mother had been avoiding coming home? *No. This is not my fault. I am never home before ten on Fridays.*

That was why Volker had employed a babysitter to begin with. She had been careful too: ANI's family services department had vetted Jana Ross thoroughly. A postgraduate in child psychology, with a steady boyfriend and no criminal record, her references were impeccable. She had seemed perfect in her application and at interview. There had been no issues for the past six months. Brett obeyed her, which was more than could be said for any of his previous sitters. *I had supposed that to be a positive sign. Was I wrong?*

Jana might well be involved. Volker deleted the half-finished text to the co-ed and dialled the number for the Miami Field Office instead. "This is Senior Agent Laine Volker. My son is missing."

At only twenty-eight inches tall and weighing barely forty-six kilograms, Grisha was considered small for his breed. The Ovcharka temperament ran true nonetheless. Zima Kazimirovich Bogomolov supposed that the young man pinned on the floor of his currently empty establishment understood that by now. He snapped his fingers at the red and white dog to call him back. "As you see, I am not alone. Perhaps now we can continue our discussion more reasonably?"

Grisha's erstwhile quarry scrambled to his feet. "Your fucking dog's ripped my shirt!"

It was true. The expensive vermillion and turquoise striped fabric hung in tatters: revealing pale flesh of the kind that had scant familiarity with physical exertion. "Look at it this way instead. He left your pathetic skin unbroken. That was generous, considering that you waved a gun at his master."

The fool made a grab for his weapon even as Zima mentioned it. Grisha was still faster. The would-be enforcer squirmed helplessly beneath his bulk. "Ah, fuck, get him off me, mate!"

"What would be the point? I already did so, and you called him straight back to work." Zima picked up the gun and walked away to fetch the cleaning

materials. The sounds beginning behind him were undeniably gruesome but the dance floor would not scrub itself. "Perhaps it is best to let him decide when his shift is finished."

One could not be stupidly patient with one's enemies. This man had come here to **unDer** with the gun because someone had instructed him to do so. His employers would send others readily enough once they learned of his failure. Such was extortion: what *they* called business. It was only prudent for Zima to make troubling him as unattractive to those others as was possible.

Hull and Cully arrived simultaneously at Volker's address: their vehicles gliding into the street from opposing directions. Neither man had forgotten their dispute regarding Saunders' behaviour. Their boss' missing child report meant that now just wasn't the time to continue arguing. Instead, the two agents nodded to one another politely.

"Greg."

"Mike."

They entered the house just as the ANI forensics team left it. Cully glanced at his watch: twelve fifty-two am. "Hey! Volker reported her kid missing less

than an hour ago. How can you guys be finished here already?"

"There's nothing here for us to process." The lead SOCO shook his head. "That's if there's even been any abduction. Volker suspects the sitter, but the kid's another psionic, with a history of acting out, so who knows? He could've snuck out and wiped the sitter's brain or something."

"Does Senior Agent Volker feel that's likely to be the case...?" Hull blinked as the technicians elbowed their way past him. "Wow. Great bunch of people to work with."

Cully snorted. "I guess you're still used to everyone at GETEC jumping to attention when you say so!"

"I expect a certain level of professionalism from my colleagues. What's wrong with that?" Hull made a mental note of the forensics officers involved. He'd clearly need to have a chat with them at some point. "Let's go talk to Volker. Did you ever meet her son?"

"Are you serious? I didn't even know she had a house up until tonight! To be honest, I kind of wondered if she was an android."

Hull decided not to mention the Perfect10 unit

that was stored in his attic. With Bryce back in his life, he hadn't gotten around to reactivating it. The real Kellie Rosa was more fun to play with anyhow, even if she did insist on keeping him at arm's length. *She chose to stay. I wonder how Weaver will explain that to her boss.*

Volker was perched on the edge of her couch, scrolling through files on her tablet. "According to our records there are no known concerns living or operating within twelve blocks of here. To be safe, I have requested further data from the local police and children's services."

The edge to her voice made Hull glad not to have joined in with Cully's comments. "You should know that forensics seem to think that your son may have staged this whole situation."

"That is understandable, given his history."

Okay – let's see if I can help you to stop adding credence to Cully's robot theory. "So what do you think happened?"

"All that I can confirm is that my son's bed has not been slept in, and that Miss Ross assured me that she had tucked him in personally. I have not contacted her to query that discrepancy yet in case she is involved."

"A couple of our other agents have been dispatched to her home address." Cully brightened a little. "Hey, maybe we can trace your son using his phone. Or even his gamer band, you know, through the online ID. What version does he have?"

"I do not permit Brett to own those sorts of devices. He is too young to need a phone, and electronic gaming is a meaningless distraction from academic study."

"Children can learn a lot through play, Senior Agent Volker." Hull wondered briefly whether the Level 12 had ever had the chance to do that. There were rumours that more powerful psionics often got hot housed into adulthood. "It's been scientifically proven."

"It is an *opinion* supported by some members of the scientific community." She was tapping at the screen again. "This is a recent photograph of Brett. I believe that we should cross reference it with the predilections of all relevant known offenders within the Miami area."

"Okay!" Cully clapped his hands together. "Greg, I'm going to put some coffee on. You want to try and remind our boss that she can't be actively involved in any investigations or

prosecutions relating to her son?"

"I'll try, Mike." Hull stared at Volker as the other man exited. She hadn't so much as glanced up from her tablet since they had arrived. "Hey. Did you hear Agent Cully just now?"

"Yes." The tapping intensified. "I am not breaking protocol, Agent Hull. I am merely assisting by recommending the most efficient course of action."

"You're acting as if this is already a homicide. We're still inside the initial twenty-four-hour window for receiving a ransom demand. There's every chance that we'll find him safe and well."

Volker pulled up another image. "This is his school. He takes the bus home every afternoon; it drops him on the corner at four thirty, and he walks from there. It is a ten-minute journey by foot, but sometimes he dallies. Miss Ross claimed that he arrived home on schedule...!"

Stop talking and put the tablet down. Don't you understand the real reason Cully left the room? He's giving you a chance to act independently of ANI regulations – to use your psionic capabilities to find Brett.

That is against federal policy.

Yeah, you told me that almost two weeks ago,

when Bryce was missing. I get the impression that you feel very differently now that it's personal.

I cannot prevent myself from feeling, Agent Hull. All that I can do is moderate my responses to those feelings.

He's your son, Laine. Do you really expect me to believe that you won't do whatever is necessary to find him?

I will not break the law.

You won't be. They won't let you help with the investigation. Anything that you find through your psionics will be completely off the record. You're not an agent right now – just a mother doing her best for her child.

...

Come on, Laine. You know that I'm right.

...

You've seen the kind of people that might have him. Every second that you delay, is another second that they have to...!

She screamed, and Hull had just enough time to wonder if he'd gone too far, before the room, and what seemed like the rest of everything else in the universe, fell away completely.

One side of Battersea Park was within twenty minutes' walk of the Chelsea Bridge penthouse. Two hundred acres or not, Kathryn was almost positive that it oughtn't have been possible to get lost whilst so ridiculously close to home. Cob and Aunty Ashley had brought her here with Barnabas lots of times. *I'm almost eleven years old – surely that's much too old to get lost!*

Her watch read as nine fifteen, so she had been walking in circles for an hour. The muffins would be cold by now, which meant that breakfast was ruined. *Maybe taking a shortcut back from the bakery wasn't such a clever idea.*

A group of four older boys were watching her from beside one of the climbing frames in the adventure playground. They looked bored enough to be cruel, so Kathryn made certain to glare at them. *As long as they know I'm strong, they'll stay away. That's the rule, after all.*

It seemed that the teenagers didn't know about that rule. They glared back over their scarves and shuffled towards her. One of them shouted something that Kathryn couldn't make sense of. Then he gestured, and the others laughed enough that her instincts began to rattle. A small bit of her

stomach hissed at her to run away. That was *completely* opposed to all of the rules, so she ignored it and stamped her foot at them instead. "Go away!"

They jeered and moved into a loose sort of circle around her. The one who had shouted snatched off her hat and waved it above his head triumphantly. Kathryn's fingers twitched automatically for the knife that wasn't kept in her sleeve any longer. "I *said* go away!"

"Hey! All you boys – what are you doing crowding around there?" A man with short dark hair and fierce eyes strode towards them, carrying a shovel. There was a large red and white coated dog trotting close behind him. "Let her alone, and go be useful somewhere!" The gang hesitated for a moment, and then slunk away. The man grunted. "Barking dogs: their teeth only look so big because they are unworn."

"But he wasn't barking." The girl crouched in front of the dog. "So has he no teeth left?"

"He has plenty of teeth, and you will be in them if you peer so very closely, *devushka!*" He moved to stand between her and the dog. "No, it is an old saying in Russia. People like those boys, they only

ever bark instead of biting, so don't be scared of them."

"I wasn't scared! And I'm *not* called Devushka, either, so there."

He looked amused but kept it to the corners of his mouth. "Devushka isn't a name. It just means girl, in my language. A young girl; like you. What is your name, little one?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

"That is stupid advice: how will you ever meet new people without talking, eh?" The man sighed. "Okay. I am Zima, and this is Grisha. Now we are introduced, and not strangers."

It obviously wasn't what Cob or Aunty Val had meant by 'not strangers', but it would do well enough. "I'm Kathryn."

"What are you doing out alone so early?"

"We had a party last night and everyone else was still sleeping when I got up. I wanted muffins for breakfast, but there weren't any left, so I thought I could buy more with my pocket money." She held up the plain white carton. "The fat woman in the bakery said that it would be quicker to go home through the park, but all the paths look the same and the silly trees are too big to see over!"

Zima made a clucking sound with his tongue. "It is a big enough park when the routes are well known! Well, not to worry. Grisha and I will walk you back to your home."

Chapter Four – Orchid And Lavender

“Doughnuts for breakfast – that has to be my favourite thing about this assignment, Ollie.”

“They’re called sfenj here, Darren.”

“Suf...sven...?” The sniper fumbled his way around the word for a moment; still straining against his bonds. “Nah, I can’t pronounce that!”

“And there I thought that the Welsh *invented* difficult words.” Tied to the opposing chair in the cramped cellar, Dobos smirked behind his own blindfold as Jolley’s foot at last connected with his shin. “You do realise that you could also get that shakshouka you were after yesterday?”

“Aye, but you know: *doughnuts!*” Jolley grunted. “They’re miles better than a poached egg.”

The operation had derailed somewhere between midnight and dawn. They couldn’t be sure: there hadn’t been any opportunity to confirm the time. Too much unanticipated violence had

been raining down on them, in the wake of the explosions at their hotel. The tear gas hadn't helped either. It was next to impossible to check your watch whilst your eyes and lungs were screaming for an end – really, any fucking end would do – to hostilities.

“So, where the fuck do you reckon our fucking handler's fucked off to anyhow, Darren?”

“He's probably pissing about choosing the design for the seat covers in his new car, isn't he, Ollie?”

“Yeah, that's probably it.” Dobos finally inched his by now bloody wrists clear of the rope. “That or he's fussing about what fucking air freshener to go with.”

“I like the orchid and lavender one.”

“Yeah, but you're a soft bastard.”

“Ah, fuck off, Ollie.”

“You first, mate.”

The two men staggered upright more or less at once, and leaned on one another whilst the feeling returned to their relative extremities. If there happened to be one or two gentler phrases exchanged, well, that would stay behind them in the cellar, just as it always did. Being a field

operative wasn't *all* shooting and stealing planes. There was generally a fair amount of hanging on by the tips of your sanity too.

"Here we are: New Chelsea Towers." Zima glanced down at the little waif he had escorted home. "You must not wander away again, Katenka. The next time that you are in trouble there may not be any help for you."

"Those boys were the ones in trouble, not me." Kathryn edged closer to Grisha as they approached the main door of Leister's building. "I like your dog. He reminds me of my bear."

"You have a pet bear?"

"Not a real bear; a stuffed one – Craig bought him for me. Sam threw up all over him last night so Aunty Val had to wash him in the machine. I left him in my room today to finish drying, so that the babies can't get any more germs on him. Do you want to come up and see him? We could have a pretend picnic!"

"That will not be necessary. Also, any grown up who agrees to such an invitation is very likely a person whom you should stay away from." The Russian had several concerns for this child. "Does

your family not teach you these things?"

"Aunty Val hasn't got time to teach me and Barnabas anything. Anyhow, you said that not talking to strangers was stupid! Can't you make your mind up?"

"Asking for directions home when you are lost is very different to inviting people up to your bedroom to play with you."

The girl sniffed. "I don't see how!"

"Clearly I will need to speak to your aunt about that too."

"Ah, will you hold the door there, please?" A woman with a thick Dublin accent came hurrying towards them. "Cheers!"

They entered the lobby of the apartment building together. The door attendant eyed Grisha and then the shovel, before returning his attention to his tablet. Zima cleared his throat politely. "This little girl was lost so I walked her home. Can you please tell her aunt that she is here?"

"Aye, I need you to ring ahead for me too." The Irish woman deposited her oversized leather handbag on the attendant's desk, and started rummaging for her ID. "I'm looking for the penthouse – my au pair's been staying there with

my son?"

The attendant sighed. "I'm only supposed to deal with deliveries, love, not visitors! The lifts are over there – I'm sure Miss Lackey knows the way to them."

Kathryn was staring at the Irish woman. "Are you Sam's mummy?"

"Eh? Ah, do you mean Seamus? Jesus, I should've known that Craig would shorten it somehow! He loves doing that with names. Aye, I'm Sarah." Tresweld beamed at the girl. "You must be wee Kathryn! Sure Heidi's told me all about you and your brother!"

"I doubt that." Kathryn moved around to stand behind Zima in the lift. "She hardly knows us at all, even if she *does* make nice food."

"Well now, and aren't you an opinionated wee madam?" Tresweld turned her attention to Zima instead. "That's a powerful big dog you have there! Is he licensed?"

"Are you?" The nightclub owner merely stared through the woman after that: thinking of nothing in particular. It was a useful skill to have. The remainder of the journey to the top floor of the building passed in silence. "Come along, Katenka.

Do not dawdle."

A once familiar face answered his knock at the penthouse door. They were as thin-faced as ever, but their pale hair had grown in to near chin length. "Mr Bogomolov – whatever are you doing here?" Then the non-gender spotted Kathryn. "Oh, for pity's sake, what now? Was she bothering you?"

"Not at all: she merely went to the bakery and got lost in the park whilst coming home." Zima smiled as he nudged the girl forwards into the apartment. "I hadn't put it together, Solovei! You are Aunt Lera?"

"Yes, but I still prefer being called Spence."

"I had heard that you were very dead. There was a funeral, you know. Many people attended it. The eulogy was most touching. I brought flowers from everyone at the club."

"Ah, Spence, did you say?" Tresweld had caught up. "Grand: this is definitely the right address! I'm Sarah Marie Tresweld. Now, where's my baby, you dirty wee home wrecker?"

"I'd reckon about halfway to Scotland, assuming that they haven't run into any heavy traffic. They left just before eight this morning." Spence smiled at the journalist. "Thomas volunteered to keep him

until Craig gets out of medical. He has a small house up near Kenmore, on the Applecross Peninsula. I don't know the exact address, but Miss Hedturner went along too, so there's probably no need to worry."

Zima refrained from laughing until the lift doors had closed behind Tresweld. "How much of that convenient series of events was true?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Bogomolov, but that's private. Thank you for bringing my niece home safely."

"She has poor instincts and little concept of personal safety. Much like her aunt was, when I first encountered her." The Russian winked knowingly at Spence. "I am glad that you missed your funeral, Solovei. Be sure and stop by the club again soon. We value your patronage."

"As flattering as that sounds, I suspect that it's far more likely that you simply can't find anyone else who drinks so much gin." Spence knew better than to enquire about the shovel. That sort of question inevitably led to one ending up dragged into other people's concerns. "I'll drop by **unDer** when I can. Goodbye, Mr Bogomolov."

"...happened in here...?"

Hull groaned and tried to make out what Cully was saying. "Say again...?"

"I said: what happened in here? How is it now five in the morning?" Cully dragged him upright. "What caused this, Hull?"

"Weren't we on first name terms?"

"That stopped being the case when you did whatever it was that you did! Where's Volker?"

"Ugh, I don't know. We were talking about her son. I tried to convince her to use her psionic abilities to look for him. Maybe I pushed her a little too hard...?"

"Gee, do you think so?" The other agent gestured at the now charred surfaces of the den. "What particular brand of stupid do you have to be to risk freaking out a Level 12 pyrotemporal?"

Volker's a pyrotemporal? "But isn't that why you went to make coffee: so that you'd have plausible deniability if Volker used her talents?"

Cully visibly twitched at his suggestion. "Maybe that kind of thing was okay with GETEC, Agent Hull, but ANI doesn't operate that way!"

"We're wasting time." Hull couldn't fathom the logic behind ANI's insistence on not using the resources available, but right now that didn't

matter. "We need to find Volker, and her kid, ideally before all of Miami ends up on fire or accidentally erased from history."

"Not to be pedantic, but those last two are a damn good example of why ANI has regulations about not using psionics...!"

"Oh, *fuck* the regulations, Cully! They're in place because people are scared of psionics, plain and simple. It's nothing but prejudice. Tell me: do you ever stop and think about all the missing people who could be found, or the cold cases that might finally be solved using psionic intervention?"

"I don't make the rules."

"You'd be surprised how many people used to say that about working for GETEC."

"That's different." The younger man turned his attention to his phone. "I'll alert our Miami field office."

"Do you even think they'll want to help?" Hull closed his hand over Cully's phone; cancelling the call before it could connect. "Come on, Mike. You saw how the forensics team behaved earlier. Don't you think that Volker deserves better?"

The front door opened quietly before Cully could respond. A boy tiptoed in; the hood of his dark grey

jacket still pulled up as if to obscure his features. He froze when he spotted the two men. "What's going on? Where's my mom?"

"Hey there, buddy. You must be Brett. I'm Agent Hull. Agent Cully and I work for your mom." Hull held up his lanyard and smiled at the boy. "She's gone out to look for you. Everyone's been very worried. How about you tell us what you've been up to all night?"

"What I've been up to?" Brett snorted. "How about you two just go and fuck yourselves?"

"Wow, that's quite the bad attitude you have there, kid." Cully squared his shoulders and glared down at the boy. "Maybe we ought to let Children's Services take care of you until your mom gets home!"

The boy rolled his eyes and yawned. "Yeah, right: as if you'd even dare call them, asshole! My mom would *totally* fire you!"

"It looks to me as if your mom needs to do something about your behaviour all round, young man." Hull caught hold of Brett by the scruff of his jacket. "Personally, I think military school might be a good option."

"Hey! Let go of me, you creep!" The boy

squirmed and kicked out. "I said let go!"

"Agent Cully, why don't you see if you can reach Senior Agent Volker by phone? I'm going to take Brett through into the den and get his statement." Hull dragged the boy to the nearest couch and deposited him there. "Okay, kid: last chance. Start talking, before I decide to agree with everyone assuming that you're nothing but a nasty little freak who brainwashed his babysitter so that he could sneak out."

"Fuck you!" The boy's bravado was flagging however. "I never did anything to Jana! She wasn't even here when I got home from school – she never is on Fridays!"

"Go on then."

"She goes to watch her boyfriend's band playing: she usually only gets here about half an hour before my mom does. I've pretty much memorised both their schedules, so if I need to stay out late, I just make my bed up to look like I'm in it. Jana never checks. She doesn't even hear me let myself in!"

"Your mom was worried when you weren't there. She thought someone had taken you."

"No one took me! I was just...it's...you won't

understand!" Brett slumped back miserably, scuffing his feet against the sooty carpet. "I was trying to *help!* I thought for sure that I'd be home before Mom."

Hull could feel the young psionic's panic scratching at the edges of his own consciousness. "Okay, Brett. So your babysitter is basically pretty crappy, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I take it there's a reason that you never told your mom about that?"

"I didn't want her to worry." The boy glanced sheepishly at Hull. "And it meant I could keep up my patrols."

"What patrols?"

"I look out for people that are in danger. I try to keep them safe; you know – to use my psionics to protect them!"

"What, like in a comic book or something?"

"Oh, so now you're gonna make fun of me?"

"Nope: not at all, Brett. Although it rather sounds as if someone else *has*. How about you tell me about them?"

For a moment, it looked as though the boy was actually going to do just that. Then Cully came

bumbling into the den. "Okay – good news, I talked to Senior Agent Volker, and she's fine! After the uh, the *incident* here, she headed out to look for Brett. She says that we're to wait with him until she gets back."

It was like working with a damn Labradoodle. Just like that, the other agent was prepared to fall back into the usual routine; no awkward questions asked of their boss. *Maybe she made sure of his compliance.* Somehow, Hull managed to retain a neutral expression despite that nagging concern. "Well, how about if I fix us all a little something to eat whilst we wait?"

Moxton gulped back the painkillers with what remained of his emergency hydration pack. Somewhere behind him, Dobos and Jolley were demonstrating why *nobody* messed with their handler. He supposed that really, he ought to call them off, but it was hard to remain professional when you'd just spent four hours being tortured.

Quincy trundled closer: his chassis badly dented after the incident at their hotel. Whitby would have his hands full repairing him. <update – allknowntargetsneutralised>

“Mission complete, eh?” Moxton grimaced as he spoke. His ribs would need weeks to knit. “That’s good to know. I reckon we might be home in time for Christmas after all.”

Chapter Five – Quite So Insistent

Hull slipped wearily into bed and snuggled up alongside Bryce. “False alarm: the kid just snuck out to play superhero and got back later than he planned to. Upside is that my boss now knows that her babysitter hasn't been doing her job.”

“That poor woman must've been worried sick.” His fiancée rolled over to lie nose to nose with him. “I hope Fisher never does anything like that to us when he's older!”

“Don't worry, baby. We're good parents. We'll raise him to understand why acting out's a bad idea.” The alarm clock by their bed read as six forty-five: less than an hour to go before it would be their son's usual time to waken. “Is there any point in our trying to sleep now?”

“Greg, you've been up all night. You need to get some rest, okay?”

"Yeah, but Fisher will be awake soon."

"I'll look after him."

He sighed. "I *promised* you that I'd do weekend mornings!"

"I'm pretty sure this counts as extenuating circumstances." Bryce smiled and planted a kiss on his chin. "Please – stop fighting sleep. Let me take care of you."

"Tell me again what it is that Kassie does around here?" Their so-called au pair would undoubtedly sleep through until at least ten. She always did that on the weekends. "I'm really not too tired to help out."

"That croak in your voice says otherwise."

"Busted, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so." She kissed him again.

"Sweet dreams, Greg."

"There's no other kind with you around."

Medical remained Campbell's least favourite place to be, but at least all of the staff attending to him were real people this time around. Admittedly, they were dreadfully nervous people, for the most part. Dr Knock flatly refused to cross the threshold of his room. The others weren't much braver. It gave

the field operative pause. Clearly, his reputation as a reluctant patient was bloody awful! *I should do something to address that; get to know some of them.*

So resolved, he eyed the lanyard belonging to the nurse who had just bustled in with his mid-morning meal. "Good morning, Beth."

Beth – a new face amongst his carers – frowned at him. "Stop doing that, Mr Campbell. It's very rude!"

"Eh?"

"My chest: you were staring at it."

"What...? No! No; I was looking at your lanyard to see who you were, that's all!"

"I'm Nurse Everett. Now, sit up straight, that's better. Cheese and pickle sandwiches today and Dr Knock said that you were allowed coffee again now too." She set the tray on the pull-out table and rolled it into place. "I'm to remind you to take your meds."

"I'm fine, really. I don't need any more of the pills. They make me groggy."

"That's normal: it means that they're working properly." Beth proffered the little plastic container along with a glass of water. "Your body needs to

rest in order to heal, Mr Campbell."

"I'm healing perfectly well as it is, thank you." He waved her away. She didn't leave. "Was there something else, nurse?"

"Take your pills now please, Mr Campbell."

"Look, I'm not sure if you've heard yet, but I have issues about being in hospital. It makes me uncomfortable. Being drugged merely serves to compound that. Now, if that's everything...?"

Beth set the medication down beside his breakfast and folded her arms. "I don't mind if you want to take them after your meal, but I shan't leave until you've had them."

He glared at her. "I'm afraid that you'll be here for quite a while then!"

"That's up to you."

"You're different to the others." Campbell picked at his food. "None of the rest of them is quite so insistent."

"It's a habit. I have two cats at home. If I can make them take their wormer, then dealing with humans isn't going to be a problem." She raised her eyebrows at him. "Well?"

"Are you even allowed to compare your patients to cats, Nurse Everett?"

"Well, there's nothing specifically banning it." There was a hint of Yorkshire to her voice. "Are you allowed to keep on staring at my chest?"

"I'm not!" Although his gaze *had* wandered a little, he realised. "Sorry. It isn't deliberate."

Beth peered at him critically from behind her glasses. "Do you have trouble maintaining eye contact, then? Only that isn't in any of your medical notes, and it ought to be, if you do have difficulty. Would you like me to mention it to Dr Knock?"

"No, forget it." He shook his head hurriedly and gulped back the pills. "There – satisfied?"

"I'm just doing my job, Mr Campbell. There's no call for you to be so antagonistic towards me." She crossed the room and updated his chart. "They said that you were a difficult patient."

"Perhaps you should have listened."

"I did, but it's all part of the job. Anyhow, is there anything else that you need just now?"

"No thank you. Wait – actually, could you ring Spence for me and ask how things are?"

"That's not really appropriate, Mr Campbell. I can set up your communications console to let you video chat with friends and family though."

"Thank you. That would help a lot."

Drake gazed up at her bedroom ceiling and wondered privately whether anyone else at last night's party had noticed her colleague pining over Spence. Caulfield hid it well, but the augmetric could smell his fascination. Pheromones didn't lie. Poor Byron knew that too, given his advanced olfactory system. Doubtless, his baser instincts mortified him. Lusting after someone who was already in a relationship was bad enough. A new mother to boot – *that* really was sinking far too low. *He'll never so much as dream of acting on it.*

She yawned and rolled over in bed; dragging the sheet along with her as she stood up. "It's the very early afternoon after, Byron. Get up and go time."

He groaned and buried his face in the pillows. "Five more minutes, Miss Drake...!"

"No. Shower – now."

"It's moments like these that make me wonder why it is that I ever stay over at your place at all, you know." The other NIT operative clambered slowly to his feet. "I'm positive that you only let me shower first in order to check your bathroom for axe

murderers!"

"Spiders, actually, Byron." Drake had already begun her daily calisthenics. "There's a huge one lurking around the towel rack. And you want to fuck Spence."

The resultant clatter from the adjacent room confirmed that she had timed her accusation perfectly. Caulfield muttered something quietly enough that it had to have been explicit. "Now really, that was very poor form, Lottie!"

"Hmm, still utterly true though."

"You've run out of conditioner."

"It's in the cabinet."

"Ah, so it is." The shower hissed into life. "Good grief, you weren't joking – this spider's practically elephantine!"

"It's far from the only pachyderm on the premises, Byron."

"Are we in Mandalay already then?"

"Well, I can think of one chap who's certainly dragging his feet, but I suspect he'll do far stupider than merely delay things."

"You know what people say about opinions."

"Yes, and I *also* know what they say about missed opportunities."

“People do like to talk.” For a time, the only sound was of the water. Finally, the shower cut out. Caulfield padded back into the bedroom wearing his host's favourite dressing gown, still towelling off his hair. “I'm oddly certain that this robe used to belong to me.”

“It did.”

“Good to know that I'm not going mad. What's for brunch?”

“Whatever you decide to make for us.”

He was fully dressed and in the middle of plating up when she joined him in the kitchen. “Full English complete with fresh spinach – the perfect hangover cure!”

“Hmm, fabulous, Byron – sheer Heaven on a plate! I've changed my mind: Spence can't have you after all.”

Caulfield chuckled. “Probably just as well.”

“I never did like to share.”

“Neither does Craig Campbell.”

“He can't expect to have them both, Byron.”

“Well, no, of course not, but it's hardly *my* place to point that out, Lottie.”

“No. That would be shabby.” Drake speared another forkful of food. “A gentleman doesn't do

such things."

"Indeed not. Pass the brown sauce, please."

She handed him the bottle. "But you *still* want to fuck Spence."

"You are *extremely* to the point at times."

"And you're painfully nice."

He brightened. "I *knew* I was the nice one!"

Bryce was alone in the kitchen. It made a welcome change. With only two spare bedrooms available between five adult houseguests, the past couple of weeks had been crowded. She understood why Greg felt the need to protect what remained of his team from GETEC, but sometimes she wondered if he was right to do it. Take David, for one example. Yesterday had emphasised just how dangerous he could be. Bryce knew she would be relieved to see him heading out for his morning run.

At least the SCO was loyal though, unlike Dr Kenlow. Russell was just biding his time until someone made him a better offer. The medic had never particularly liked his job. He'd admitted that to her three nights after the fall of GETEC. Bryce had sympathised at first – until he started making

insinuations about Greg. That had pissed her off. *What kind of asshole blames someone for things they did whilst they were conditioned?*

Aaron was a sweetheart by comparison. Bryce smiled as she recalled how the young administrator had fussed around her during her immediate release from the hospital. Nothing was too much trouble for Greg's family! She was sure that there was a huge man crush behind all of it. Her fiancé seemed oblivious though. He shrugged it off – it was just Mellor's way, apparently. He liked being helpful.

The latter was definitely an area where Kassie could take a few pointers. Bryce sighed as she opened the refrigerator. The girl had left yet another empty carton! She never bothered to put them in the recycling unit. Her side of the spare bedroom was a pigsty too, so much so that poor Kellie had opted to sleep on the daybed in Fisher's room instead. Nagging didn't help, and Greg lecturing her only seemed to make the girl happy. She'd make someone a truly bratty little sub one of these days. *It isn't going to be Greg, though!*

Whatever Kassie assumed to the contrary, she simply wasn't right for them as a couple. Maybe if Greg were single, sure. Bryce could well imagine

him ending up suckered in by that whole 'spoilt princess' routine. He'd think that he could *improve* the girl; help her become a more rounded individual. Really, it was lucky that he had someone to watch out for him. He had a soft spot for damaged souls: an almost innate need to try to fix them. *Just look how much he did for me – Ashley too, for that matter.*

She hummed quietly to herself as she switched on the blender. Kellie had bought up what looked like most of the fruit available in the nearest local grocery store. The Englishwoman loved her smoothies almost as much as Fisher did now. It was good to see her finally relaxing and enjoying life a little more. *I'll take her one up too. She always appreciates breakfast in bed. I hope Weaver trying to drag her back to the UK hasn't upset her too much.*

British Intelligence had a lot of nerve. Kellie still suffered terrible anxiety over what had happened to her at that facility in England. They had sat up for hours talking about it again last night. Anyone who wondered why the young technician had decided to stay here in Miami ought to have to listen to those nightmarish recollections. The worst part was

that her own great-aunt had handed her over! *How can anyone do that to family?*

It was just shy of seven thirty as she opened the door to Fisher's room. Bryce smiled as the automated lighting gradually began to brighten. "Good morning, sleepy heads: time to rise and shine! Strawberry and banana smoothie...!"

The contents of the non-spill beaker sloshed a little as it rolled across the thick carpeting along with the trio of matching plastic tumblers. The sound didn't register. Nothing registered. Bryce's brain wasn't coping with the scene in front of her. The unoccupied daybed beneath the shelf filled with stuffed animals. The absent pane of all but indestructible glass that somehow wasn't in the window. The blackout blind twisting and flapping in the resultant breeze. The toddler-sized bed – her baby's bed – with its brightly patterned bedding tossed aside.

Empty.

The beds were both empty.

Fisher and Kellie weren't there.

Her screams woke everyone else in the house, but Greg reached her first. "Bryce – honey, what's wrong?"

She couldn't speak. "Ah...ah...!"

He turned then and paled: realisation dawning.
"Where's our son?"

Bryce sank to her knees and howled.

Dobos sprawled back in his seat and scrolled through his e-mails, which had piled up during their latest operation. The fuckers who had taken them prisoner had smashed his phone. Luckily, he had all of his passwords memorised, so switching to a replacement handset hadn't been too difficult. Unlike poor Darren – the blonde operative was still trying to remember his security questions. "You should just ring Tanya, mate. She'll help you sort it."

"Nah, I don't want her worrying about me, Ollie. She doesn't even know we were jumped yet. I think I'll give Whitby a bell instead."

<suggestion – favourite food in childhood>

"Eh? Ah yeah, nice one – cheers, Quincy!"

The little robot beeped happily from his spot beneath Moxton's seat. Their handler glanced back from where he was running the pre-flight diagnostics. "Take off is in twenty minutes, lads. Don't forget to fasten your seatbelts and switch everything off."

Dobos paused in mid retort as he spotted an unexpected name amidst his most recently received e-mails. The subject line read simply. *We need to talk*. The main body was just an address, and a selection of phone numbers titled as home, work, and cell. Evidently, his old girlfriend believed that she really needed to get in contact. *I haven't seen her in years! What the fuck's so urgent now?*

He sighed and switched off his phone. Whatever it was could wait until he got home. Laine was a tough enough sort of bird. Doubtless, she'd manage without him for a few more hours.

Chapter Six – Grab A Spoon

“Hey.” Jenkins nodded shyly to Spence from where she was perched at the breakfast bar, enjoying an impromptu lunch of leftover party food. “Cob's in the shower. Thanks for convincing him to give us another chance as a couple.”

“Don't thank me: it was entirely selfish.” Spence paused beside the travel cot to stroke their infants' downy heads. “I need all the help I can get with the multitude of children that I seem to have gathered up. It's that or ship them *all* off to the wilds of Scotland.”

“You don't mean that.” The young biochemist proffered the oversized bowl from which she was eating. “Miss Hedturner made *far* too much food! There's still at least half of this trifle left. Grab a spoon?”

“I think I just might at that.” Spence sighed and

hopped up onto another of the tall stools. "So you and Leister are back together?"

"Yes."

"Good. You work. Additionally, the trifle was shop bought. Miss Darnell brought it. She was hoping Jolley might have gotten back early from that thing in Algeria – it's his favourite food."

"Oh. I never really imagined trifle as an especially Welsh sort of dish."

"It isn't, but his parents enrolled him at Eton at an impressionable age. I think that I might do the same with Barnabas."

"What – send him away from his sister?"

"That's certainly one of the fringe benefits."

"Surely you shan't separate them? They're so close to one another."

"The official term is traumatic sibling bond, something which is very bad indeed, to judge by what I've read so far. Splitting them up could very well be the making of them."

Jenkins scooped up another lump of soggy sponge. "What about Kathryn? Where will you send her to school?"

"Honestly? I can't think of anywhere that would accept her. Barnabas is by far the easier of the two

to manage."

"She always behaves well enough for Cob."

Spence nodded wryly. "You see it too, don't you? The way she is around men compared to women. It's not normal."

"Oh, I don't think either of us is qualified to say *that*, not really." Jenkins glanced almost nervously towards the kitchen doorway. "Where are they?"

"Upstairs; they're eating breakfast muffins and watching yet another of those perplexingly grim animated films."

"They do like those. Do you suppose that they understand about what happened – with me and that bodyjacker...Brooke...?"

"Don't worry. I was very careful to explain that you weren't the one who wanted to get rid of them. They're furious on your behalf."

The mousy haired young woman smiled sadly. "How bad is it that I find that to be a relief?"

"As I said: not normal. Don't blame your instincts for finding it disturbing." The non-gender leaned closer. "More to the point – don't ever bloody hesitate to run from them."

"They're not *that* bad!" She frowned. "I mean, well, they're not really...are they?"

"It rather depends on how stabby you are."

Cully handed Hull an extra-large coffee as soon as the ANI team arrived at the scene. "Here – drink this, let forensics do their job, and keep breathing, okay?"

"Does any of this look even remotely okay to you right now, Mike?" His colleague's face was haggard. "Someone took our little boy; took Dr Rosa too, probably while I was wasting my time over at Volker's place! God damn it, I should have been here, at home, taking care of my own family!"

"Hey, we still don't know how they got in. There's no reason to think that your being home would have changed anything, Greg." Cully hesitated and then put a reassuring arm across the other agent's shoulders. "Don't blame yourself. We'll find them."

"What if you don't?" Bryce was curled up on the couch in the den; hugging a framed photograph of Fisher. "What if we never see our baby again? What if he's already dead?"

"Bryce, sweetie, don't think like that." Hull ducked clear of Cully and moved to kneel beside his fiancée. "We've got to try and stay positive."

"There they are now, ma'am; right on schedule." Whitby nodded to the blonde SCO as she emerged from the lift outside the debriefing area. "Welcome home, Doris. Were the micronic security jammers of use?"

Weaver beamed. "Oh yes: bloody brilliant little piece of kit, thank you, Nathaniel! I just pushed the spray button and they all but installed themselves. Getting out of the house was a doddle." In her arms, the primary asset was finally stirring. "The sedative is wearing off, ma'am. I brought his things. Shall I take him down to medical for a quick check over and change of nappy?"

"That shan't be necessary." Pembleton reached forwards and took the toddler; cradling him against her left side whilst she looped her right arm through the strap of the changing bag. "I shall manage him personally from here onwards. Make certain to file your post-op report before you leave."

The spymistress stalked away with her prize. Weaver sniffed. "Ah well, that's classic Pembleton, not even a thank you! How is Dr Rosa doing, by the way?"

"She's overwhelmed, but ecstatic to be home.

Medical is keeping her in today.” The senior technician grinned up at the field operative. “I must say – that was damned clever of you! Swapping places with her at ANI’s field office, I mean. It was a fine use of our holographic emitters!”

“We got lucky if I’m honest. It could have been a horribly different outcome if anyone else had wandered into the ladies’ loos whilst we were getting organised.”

“Still, you ventured and gained accordingly, so kudos where it’s due.”

“It’s Rosa who deserves the praise, if you ask me, Nathaniel. She’s been playing a dangerous game with both Hull and his fiancée. It seems that they wanted her as – well, as their bed mate. She managed to keep him at bay by pretending to let Ms Lenard win her over a little.”

“She hadn’t mentioned that.”

“I expect the poor girl’s too bloody embarrassed.” Weaver yawned. “Christ, I’m tired! I was up until two in the bloody morning feeding that bitch utter nonsense about how everyone had abandoned me to my fate.”

“You always were good at improvising.” He patted her arm. “I tell you what – you go and report

in, and I'll drive you home afterwards. We can pick up a takeaway on the way there."

At a little before eight thirty in the morning, the reluctant darling of the Martian Marine Corps finally placed a call to Deimos Base. The problem was that when Woods appeared on the screen, Kennedy didn't know how to start. Ellie had survived for eighteen hours and four minutes so far. Her mother's memory of that life was of a tiny pink form engulfed by surgical tape, tubes, and brightly coloured wires. *How in the actual Hell do I talk about that?*

The ageing gunnery sergeant frowned. "Ma'am, is something wrong? Corporal Davies said you're calling from the hospital."

"Gunny...!" She choked back the sharp edge of exhaustion in her throat and stumbled on. "My baby – Ellie – she uh, she deployed early."

His weathered face tightened. "SNAFU as opposed to FUBAR, Marine?"

Kennedy sniffled. "Aye Hell yeah, Woods. She's on life support, but she's stable."

"Well thank fuck for that, Ma'am. Congratulations on your future new recruit."

"Thanks, Gunny. Can you pass on the news for me? I don't want our people hearing it fourth hand from the press or anything."

"I'll get right on that, Ma'am. You do realise that we're going to need pictures and assorted vital statistics? Only I sure as Hell ain't about to be the one who fails to provide all the pertinent details."

Ensnorced in her office, Pembleton shuddered as the last of the intruding consciousness fled her mind. The world finally came back into proper focus around her. "Ugh...! Thank goodness, *that's* over! Still, it's a tad worrisome that none of my operatives appear to have noticed anything wrong with my recent decisions."

Fisher cooed quietly and patted her lined cheek with one chubby hand. "Angry lady gone away now...!"

"Yes, she is, child. The question is as to how."

"I not like angry lady!"

"Evidently you have impeccable taste." The spymistress wondered how in the world she could hope to resolve this horrid mess. "I expect that your parents are frantic by now. We shall have to get you safely home."

He hiccupped. "I want breakfast...!"

"Gracious, what a well-spoken toddler! Very well, let me see what I have in my desk." Pembleton sank onto her chair and set the boy on her lap whilst she rifled through her emergency rations. "Hmm. There isn't much here that's likely to suit a young child's tastes. Do you like dried fruit, Fisher?"

"Fruit yummy...!"

"What a pleasant surprise! Here you are then: these are partially dehydrated apricots. Although I sincerely doubt that you can pronounce *that*."

Fisher was too busy chewing to try. Pembleton was glad that he didn't seem to be distressed by his situation. Clearly, he was remarkably resilient. She reached for the call button on the communications panel: intending to have Miss Robinson arrange food and a few age-appropriate toys for the child. Then a terrible possibility occurred to her. *What if someone else is now possessed, instead of me?*

There might be an assassin headed to her office even now. It could be anyone – even Robinson. She wouldn't know until it was too late. "Computer – enact maximum security parameters for this room immediately. Command code: Pembleton Alpha 35679675-FBGF-8778."

The building's main AI hummed into action: sealing them both up in the office. Fisher squealed and pointed anxiously as the internal shutters glided into place over the windows and door. "Where sun going?"

"The sun is precisely where it ought to be, and so are we, for now at least. Don't worry, child. We're safe in here. It's all just a great big adventure." She cuddled him a little closer and smoothed his blonde curls away from his eyes. "I must say, you are in sorry need of a trim!"

"No! Like hair long!"

"Well, that must be an American fashion. Little boys here in England keep their hair short...!" A wave of all-too familiar pain assailed her. The bodyjacker – *Brooke, yes, that's what she calls herself* – was back: trying to claw their way into her mind again. "Not...this...time...!"

"Bad!" Fisher scowled and waved his arms. "Let alone! Angry lady go away!"

The presence retreated again, albeit grudgingly. Pembleton blinked and stared more closely at the toddler. "Why, it was *you* that drove her off! What a very brave child you are!" *Powerful too – that was probably why Brooke wanted you snatched.*

"You're a stronger psionic than she is. She's *afraid* of you!"

That was less good news than it sounded. The bodyjacker's own thoughts had verged on the sociopathic. She wouldn't tolerate having a rival psionic get in the way of her deranged scheming. No, this would mean *war*. There would be a metaphorical target on the poor child's head now, and a literal one too, if Brooke ever managed to possess a sniper.

"Angry lady mean!" Fisher snivelled a little and rubbed at his eyes. "I not like mean people! Want angry lady stay gone!"

He was afraid on some instinctive level, even if he were still too young to comprehend that fear fully. "Aunt Edith shall have to find some way to keep you safe, won't she, child? Well, don't worry. I still have a few cards up my sleeve that our opponent shan't anticipate. First things first: let's get you changed into a nice fresh nappy."

"Aunty Edie is silly! I big boy now – I wear pull ups!"

Chapter Seven – No Difficulty

Bryce huddled closer to Hull on the couch. "Greg, do you suppose that maybe whoever it is was really after Kellie and just took Fisher along so that she'd cooperate with them?"

"It's possible." It was one of the better scenarios by far. Hull just couldn't bring himself to say that. "With her talents she'd be a valuable asset to a lot of people. It'd make sense."

"They took his changing bag too, that's got to count for something, right? I mean, they must be going to take care of him...?"

"I hope so, baby." He sighed and hugged her. "Forensics haven't found any sign of a struggle. So far it all points to having been professionals."

"Hold on." Mellor had straightened up in his seat at their discussion. "The bag – is it the new one that I bought, Sir?"

"Yeah: the one with all the cartoon owls on it. What about it, Aaron?"

The young administrator whipped out his phone. "It's got monomolecular imbedded GPS to help avoid misplacing it whilst travelling, Sir! We can use it to find Fisher. I just need to contact Customer Support."

"Sorry it took us so bloody long to rescue you, Kellie." Campbell proffered the box of assorted synthetic vegan chocolates that Tresweld had left on his bedside cabinet. "I'm afraid these are all I have to entertain visitors at the moment. Eat at your own risk."

"Better late than never, isn't that still a saying?" Rosa popped a violet crème in her mouth, and grimaced. "Oh gracious, these really are dreadful! Who hates you enough to give you synthetic chocolate as a get well soon present?"

"My ex-wife: Sarah Marie Tresweld."

"You were married to a journalist?"

"Technically, I still am." He sighed. "It's complicated. We're working on arranging our divorce. At least I am. She's not fully on board."

"Oh." The technician nodded slowly. "So that's

why you used to keep on giving me the brush off. Sorry."

"What? No – no, Kellie, it wasn't *that!*" The field operative blushed. "Look, there's something that you need to know. You and I are second cousins. Pembleton is my maternal aunt. She ordered me not to let on about being related to her, so please don't tell her that I blabbed...!"

"Our familial secrets shall have to wait for now." The ageing head of British International Intelligence crawled out of the ventilation duct on the opposing wall and dropped carefully to the floor. There was a blond-haired toddler tucked into a makeshift sling around her midriff. "Craig, I'm declaring you fit for active duty, effective immediately. Your mission is to protect this child from the bodyjacker known only as Brooke. He's a threat to her: he has the ability to disrupt her possessions. As the most dangerous field operative on our books, you should have no difficulty in dispatching any puppets that she may send after him."

Rosa blanched. "But that's Fisher! What's he doing here in London?"

The boy waved happily at her. "I have adventure, sparkle doctor!"

"Good, he recognises you." Pembleton handed her charge to the younger woman. "That shall help to keep him calm. All his travel things appear to be in this bag. Luckily Weaver had enough foresight to bring it too."

"Weaver kidnapped Hull's son, ma'am?" Campbell peered incredulously at the toddler. "I trust you didn't order her to do so!"

"Of course not – well, not precisely; I was possessed at the time."

"Well we definitely can't let word spread about that!" Her nephew edged carefully out from beneath the blanket and began disconnecting the monitoring wires. "So this bodyjacker used you to take him?"

"Yes. I'm sure you've already heard what happened to Dr Jenkins? Well, it's the same culprit: Brooke. When she was in my mind, I could feel that she was incredibly angry. Quite what she'll try next remains to be seen."

Brett was too much his father's son. The potentially catastrophic powers that flowed through all three of them as a familial unit held no fear for him. In truth, Volker was troubled less by that

realisation than might have been anticipated. She thought again of the fire as it swallowed her, and of the lurching shift through time. The way that Ms Lenard's scream had cut through the sound of metal scraping across asphalt. *Agent Hull still may not know how he survived Gophy's efforts, but I do.*

She would never divulge the matter. It was irrelevant anyhow. Paradoxes usually were. Time's way of repairing itself: the scar appearing before the wound occurred. To Brett, it would have seemed meaningful. Volker saw no need to provide such encouragement. Her son took far too many risks as it was already. *Perhaps such behaviour has a genetic component behind it.*

They had argued for well over an hour when she had gotten home. Doubtless, the debate would continue once Brett emerged from his room. At least their hostilities paused for sleep. She knew of some psionic families who were not so fortunate. Those few were the same people whose lives, and invariably violent deaths, shaped the common prejudice for all of them. *It is unsurprising that they fear us.*

Volker had not slept. She rarely did: an hour's meditation was sufficient for her needs. Given the

urgency in her agent's voice when he rang to report his son's abduction, this was just as well. After last night, issuing the order to follow standard ANI procedure seemed insufficient. She agreed to use her psionics to help before Hull had time to demand it. *Brett shall undoubtedly accuse me of hypocrisy when he finds out.*

The latter discovery was inevitable, given that she would have to report to her team with whatever she discovered. That would mean an official record, and awkward questions. Those in charge might even order her suspended, pending a full evaluation. At the very least, they would send in an assessor, charged with scrutinising every aspect of her life. Children's Services would be informed; her son's behaviour examined. *They shall blame me for my parenting of him. His father must be informed, whilst there is still time.*

Until now, Volker had remained determined never to impede his career. Now though, that selflessness was failing. She was cold through and through – the weight of her choice dragging down every part of her life plan. The e-mail to London was rational. Brett deserved a chance to remain with family, and his father was the best hope of that.

Oliver shall understand once he knows.

She closed her eyes once more and gradually opened her mind in preparation for her search. Fisher's consciousness would be bright but unfocused, as was typical of such a young child. It was not merely a matter of finding him. She must be careful too not to harm the younger psionic. One stray thought could be enough to unravel him. *It is fortunate that his parents do not grasp that danger.*

Her phone shrilled into life on the coffee table beside her. Volker grimaced as she roused to answer it: *Agent Cully*. "Yes?"

"Ma'am, we caught a break! The abductor took a changing bag that was fitted with monomolecular GPS. The company's lost luggage department tracked it to London: specifically, to the Headquarters for British International Intelligence." Cully lowered his voice. "Hull's being disturbingly calm about that last part."

I was moments away from sacrificing not only my career, but possibly Oliver's too. Volker bit back her fury. "Inform Agent Hull that I shall handle all aspects of his son's retrieval personally. Under no circumstances is he to act; am I clear on that, Agent Cully?"

"I'll keep a real close eye on him, ma'am."

"Dad, it's me, Craig. Sorry to hack into your radio uninvited but it's an emergency. We can't risk the usual channels so I'm calling from Kellie's wireless interface."

"You're doing *what?*" Thomas stared at the main speaker on his car's entertainment centre in utter befuddlement.

"It's complicated – suffice to say that my degree in advanced engineering wasn't a complete waste of your money. Anyhow, Aunt Edith needs us to eliminate a bodyjacker. It's a woman, calls herself Brooke. She possessed Ashley; split her and Cob up. Then she moved onto Aunt Edith, and used her to arrange the abduction of a young psionic with the ability to disrupt possessions. He drove her off before she could do anything worse, but it's only a matter of time until she tries something."

His father nodded slowly. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need somewhere safe to hide the boy. Somewhere that isn't on the official books, and where he won't be spotted by anyone that Brooke is likely to target."

"Meet me at the cottage."

"Cheers, Dad. Can you get word to Spence and Sarah for me too, please? Let them know that I haven't bogged off for the sake of it. Tell them to come up to Kenmore with the children; we can have a proper family Christmas."

Thomas glanced across the car park towards the front window of the fish and chip shop, where Tresweld and Heidi were queuing with his grandson. "Well, at least *part* of that request shouldn't be a problem."

"Home again, home a-fucking-gain!" Dobos peeled off his jacket and tossed his holdall into its usual corner in the front hall of his flat. Unpacking his dirty clothing could wait for a bit: all the bloodstains were set anyhow. "In time for Christmas no less! Suppose I'll have to buy in a bit of turkey or something for the day."

He could always go over to Leister's, of course, or drive back to Somerset and spend the holiday with his parents at the hotel. It might be nice to catch up in person for a change. *Although then Mum and Dad will want to know why I'm still not dating anyone.*

So would the rest of his family. They worried about him ending up old and alone. According to Auntie Noreen, the latter always resulted in owning dozens of cats. Dobos sometimes wondered why that was such a bad thing. He quite liked cats. They didn't seem to need much in the way of looking after. Yes, they were fickle little bastards, but you could say that about a fair fucking number of humans too.

It got wearing, having this ability. Knowing what people really thought, as opposed to what they said. He had a better handle on it nowadays, thank fuck. Drinking helped a lot with that. Enough vodka and he didn't have to know who they were getting back at through screwing him. Thinking about it, that was rapidly becoming his normality. *I should do something to sort that.*

He knew he'd hit a low point after Whitby's pathetic attempt at bribing him to go off-book back in April. The senior technician still didn't grasp how fucking much that had hurt him. For a genius, he could be bloody dense at times. *Ah, fuck it. He can't help thinking that I'm that sort of bloke, not given how I present! Fuck, I probably should have just gone along with it.*

On balance, cats were looking better and fucking better by the minute. Dobos helped himself to a pot of out-of-date raspberry yoghurt from the ailing refrigerator and slumped down in front of his home computer. Laine's e-mail made no more sense on the second reading. *I suppose I'd better ring you and see what the matter is.*

It would be lunchtime in Miami. His fellow ginger was probably nibbling on one of her weird vegan concoctions. He couldn't picture her ever ditching that lifestyle choice. The one time that he'd persuaded her to try meat, she'd gone – well, not green, but pretty fucking close. They'd never repeated the experiment. He'd gotten used to sharing her rabbit food instead.

The call connected after the second ring. "This is Senior Agent Volker; who is calling?"

"Hey, Laine – it's me, Oliver."

There was a pause. "Hello, Oliver."

"I got your cryptic e-mail. What's going on?"

"The situation which prompted my communication with you has been resolved. There is no need for you to enquire further."

Dobos rolled his eyes at her too perfectly level tone of voice. "Ne beszélj ostobaságot, szerelem!"

"Technically, I am being entirely factual."

"What if we weren't being technical?"

She sighed. "There was a personal matter that I felt you ought to know about."

"Well, what is it?" He leaned back: balancing the chair on two legs. "You're not sick, are you?"

"No. Our son is showing signs of developing an unstable personality, however."

The remains of the yoghurt splattered across his computer keyboard as he lurched forwards at her words. "Sorry, did you say our son? Since when do we have a kid? Fuck, did you hook up with me again in the future or something, Laine?"

"I was pregnant when we ended our relationship. It seemed unfair to burden you with that information at the time; given that your career had started to progress in the direction that you were hoping for."

"So, what; you just never let on? For fuck's sake, Laine, I would've fucking helped!"

"I have never doubted that fact. You are a responsible and – on balance – good man."

He could imagine every detail of her face right now. The way that her left brow would tighten ever so slightly as the debate continued. How her pale

gaze was staring across the Atlantic and past Ireland into his heart. "So I'm a dad, then?"

"Yes. I have named him Brett."

"Fuck. Okay. Right, I'm coming to meet him. I'll be on the next available flight to Miami. We can talk the rest of it through in person."

"I am already on my way to London for a work-related matter. Brett is with me. Weather conditions permitting, our flight is scheduled to arrive at New Heathrow in precisely ninety-seven minutes."

"Do you usually bring him along to work?"

"His babysitter has proven unreliable."

"Oh." Dobos scraped his wits together. "Well, I'll see you here in London then. Whereabouts are you thinking of staying?"

"I still have free use of my father's apartment. He pays to have it maintained in his absence."

"I'll meet you there."

Chapter Eight – Sans Use

Walking through the open-air Christmas market, arm in arm with a tall, long-legged man, Jenkins looked happy. That was the first thing that Hull observed that evening. ANI's database identified her companion as Maurice Jacob Leister. Apparently, he was one of British Intelligence's oldest and best operatives. *The man who saved Dubai, if I'm reading this correctly. That's an interesting choice of boyfriend you have there, Ashley.*

Hull was sure that he'd seen Leister's picture before. Either that or he had a twin brother working in GETEC's Long Distance Transit department. There had been multiple complaints back in March regarding a missing cargo vehicle. The other supposed delivery driver for that run had also vanished. In the end, LDT wrote it off as one of those

things. Given that missing driver number two was currently making small talk with Leister and Jenkins, maybe it was just as well that they'd quit searching when they did. *Paul Benedict – also British Intelligence. Ashley's birth father, too. Thank you, ANI.*

Yes, having access to ANI's resources was proving extremely helpful to this plan, as was his old GETEC issue stealth suit. The latter had gotten him out past Cully and the rest of Volker's minions. Admittedly, he was stuck working alone: it was a one-person suit. *At least Howard's private stealth jet resolved that whole transport to London sans use of my passport or bank account dilemma.*

The breathtakingly gorgeous black woman accompanying Benedict was a wild card. Hull couldn't find any trace of her in either database. Presumably, this meant that she was the sort who didn't leave any witnesses to report back. Either that or someone buried so deep within witness protection that all traces of her former life were long gone. It hardly mattered. He wasn't there for her, or for the solemn faced little boy conversing with Benedict. *Third option: that kid and his mom have no idea what Daddy does for a living. Yeah,*

I'll bet that's it!

He didn't blame Benedict for keeping his family out of the game. That was the dream for most sane operatives. Leave the job at the door; eliminate anybody who tries to drag it into your house. Christ knew that he hadn't wanted Bryce and Fisher to be affected by *his* career! Too bad that British Intelligence had seen fit to steamroll their way over what he wanted. Taking Kellie back was one thing, but snatching Fisher was a step too far. *They'll pay dearly for that.*

There was no sign of Nightingale, but the two pale haired children bore an uncanny resemblance to them. Clearly, the non-gender had family not mentioned anywhere on their official file. Hull frowned as the girl paused yet again to study one of the stalls. It looked as if the others in the group hadn't noticed her trailing behind yet. *Hurry up, kid; you're making it kind of tricky to follow your – uncle, grandfather, maybe? Is British Intelligence running an in-house group childcare scheme?*

The girl had bought herself a hot chocolate in one of those garishly patterned paper cups. It looked to be a typical example of festive market crap: more whipped cream and marshmallow

topping than there was drink. Another man browsing the market stared at her as she sipped it. Hull's instincts pinged. Something about that guy's expression was extremely wrong. *Grown men shouldn't look at little girls that way!*

By now, Jenkins and the rest of the group were three stalls ahead. Hull moved towards the pale haired girl; his stealth suit still mimicking his surroundings perfectly. Remaining one with the landscape inside of such a crowded market was no mean feat. He sidestepped an elderly woman and her hover trolley just in time. *Okay – that one was too close! Maybe I should hang back a little further to be safe.*

The asshole with the unwarranted stare had sidled closer. "Hello there, miss. You know Zima Bogomolov, don't you?"

"Yes, but I don't know you." She backed away from him warily. "What do you want?"

"Ah, don't be scared; I'm a mate of his. He asked me to come and find you for him."

"Why?"

"He's got a present for you for Christmas, but he ain't got time to drop it off himself. It's in the boot of my car, just over there." The man pointed towards a

dull grey vehicle parked on the edge of the pedestrian only zone where the market had been set up. "I've to get you to sign for it though – can't be too careful these days, eh?"

The girl frowned. "I suppose not."

"Come on then: you follow me and I'll get it out for you."

Hull glanced at the information scrolling across the inbuilt HUD feature on the faceplate of his stealth suit. No doubt about it: the girl was at serious risk. *Didn't anyone ever talk to you about stranger danger, honey?*

It appeared not. She was following the guy to his car without so much as a backwards glance. "Do I need to sign my full name? Cob always says that we shouldn't really tell anyone about that, but I expect it's allowed with friends."

"This creep *isn't* your friend, sweetheart." Hull's stealth field deactivated as he slammed the would-be child abductor's face into the nearest streetlight. The guy crumpled to the pavement, barely conscious and quite probably choking on his own blood. "According to ANI's database, he's a wanted criminal in at least three countries." *With a known penchant for little girls, but no fucking way*

am I breaking that news to you.

She blinked. "Are you a policeman?"

"Not exactly, no, but I do work in law enforcement. I'm Agent Greg Hull, of American National Intelligence. What's your name?"

"Kathryn!" The pale haired boy had caught up. "You know that we're not supposed to wander off!"

"I *wasn't* wandering, Barnabas; I was...well, I mean...oh, just shut up, can't you?" She glared at him. "You *always* have to be right!"

"Okay, that's enough." Hull held up his ANI lanyard; marvelling at how the crowd instantly lost interest in the fracas. "The main thing is that you're safe now, Kathryn."

Barnabas prodded the man on the ground with his foot. "Is he going to die?"

"He could do." Neither child seemed remotely concerned by that possibility. Hull filed their behaviour away for later consideration. "I'll take care of him. You two had best run along back to your group before they start a search party."

"What about my present?" Kathryn pointed at the car. "He said Zima sent me a present! It's in the boot. I want it."

Her twin – that much was obvious even without a

genetic analysis – sidled closer. “Did he send one for me as well?”

“Why would he? Zima's *my* friend: mine and Aunty Val's; not yours!”

“Well, Aunty Val likes *me* better than you...!”

“Enough!” Hull interceded in their nascent shoving match: his left arm forming a barrier between them. Some of the hot chocolate mixture sloshed onto his glove. “Try and be a little more careful with your drink, sweetheart. Now look, I sincerely doubt that there are any presents in the trunk. This guy probably doesn't even know your friend.”

Kathryn pouted. “I want to see for myself!”

“Ah, there you are, darlings! Thank goodness, I found you. We've been looking...!” Leister stopped. His blue eyes hardened. “Children, come away from that man immediately.”

“Don't worry; unlike your people, *I* don't target kids!” Hull didn't bother to feign politeness. “Where's my son, Mr Leister?”

“I haven't the faintest idea what you mean.”

“If that's true, then maybe you should talk to your boss. Because Fisher was abducted from his bed last night, and when we checked, the GPS for

his changing bag put him right in the damn middle of your organisation's headquarters."

"I can assure you that the only person living in your household whom we're interested in acquiring is Kellie Rosa, and I'm certain that you understand why *that* is, Gregory."

"Funnily enough she's missing too. It's pretty weird really, considering that she refused to go back with Weaver. Should I be worried about her, or can you prove that she changed her mind?"

Leister stepped in close enough to whisper his response in Hull's ear. "You have some bloody nerve to play at caring, Mr Hull. If we weren't surrounded by innocent bystanders, I'd...!"

"There's nothing in here but a roll of duct tape!" Behind them, Kathryn had helped herself to her would-be abductor's car keys. "That's not much of a present!"

Barnabas shrugged. "You could use it to restrain someone, I suppose."

"Aunty Val already said not to do that again."

Hull stared at the twins for a moment, and then looked back at Leister. "Okay. I have to ask. What's the deal with those two? Moreover, why weren't any of you keeping a better eye on them?" He

lowered his voice. "This asshole was about six seconds away from taking Kathryn when I intervened. He's a registered sex offender, for Christ's sake!"

"Cob...!" Jenkins hurried into view then: almost falling over herself when she recognised her former supervisor. "What's he doing here?"

"He claims that British International Intelligence has taken his son, darling. I'm still fairly certain that it's just another unpleasant scheme on his part."

"It really *isn't* you know, but I guess I can see where you're coming from. I'll try not to take too much offence."

The young biochemist huddled closer to Leister. "Cerise needs us; there's something odd going on with Dad."

"Aw, don't be so dumb, Ashley!" Benedict strolled up to his daughter and her companions. His features twisted into a cruel smirk as he continued. "Your old man's fine – I'm just *borrowing* him for a little while, that's all. Hey there, Greg: long time no see! Did you miss me?"

"Well that kind of depends on who you are, doesn't it?" Hull edged to the side a little: putting himself in front of the twins. "Do I need to guess, or

are you going to introduce yourself?"

The voice was Benedict's, but nothing else of the reply matched up. "It's me, silly – don't you remember? We met at last year's Christmas party, in Boston. You didn't want to fuck me. Why didn't you want to fuck me, Greg?"

"Yeah, you're not narrowing it down particularly well, I'm afraid." Hull hoped that his own smile looked convincing. "I didn't have time to date anyone last December. Can we have another clue?"

"Yes, darling, I must agree with Greg: that would be very helpful. In age-appropriate terms too this time, please?" Leister nodded towards Kathryn and Barnabas. "We do have children present. I'm sure that you understand."

Not Benedict growled and whipped out his gun in response, seeming oblivious to the resultant panic amongst the nearby shoppers. "Oh no, you ain't going to fool me this time, Maurice! You just stay right there where I can see you. I want Ashley to watch when I put a bullet through your lying face...!"

The latter threatened projectile remained safely in its chamber, as Benedict crumpled to the

ground. Cerise rubbed at her hand. "Damn, Paul! I do *not* need you going bat crap crazy right before Christmas!"

"That definitely wasn't Paul, darling. I suspect it may well have been the same person who possessed Ashley."

"You mean Brooke?" Jenkins whimpered and touched the discreet metal disc nestling at the nape of her neck. "I thought this psionic diversion unit was supposed to keep her away?"

"I'm afraid that it only protects the person wearing it, darling."

Cerise snorted. "Maybe we ought to see about having it made standard issue!" She turned her attention to her son. "Don't worry, little man. Me and Paul ain't having a fight; he was just possessed, that's all."

"Okay, Momma."

"Wait a minute – Ashley, did you say *Brooke*?" Hull groaned. "Damn it, I do know her! Brooke Rawlings, she worked as a computer programmer at GETEC's Boston facility; always went a little bit too wild at social events. I recommended that she get some compassionate leave after she had a breakdown at work. But since when was she a

bodyjacker, and why the Hell is she targeting any of you? How does she even know who you are?"

Leister's phone rang before he could reply. The older spy sighed and answered it. "Sorry, Nightingale; we've had a little bit of bother at the market. It's all sorted now. I promise to have the twins home in time for bed, darling."

"That might not be too clever an idea, old swan." At the far end of the line, Spence paused to put another bullet in the final intruder's head. "We've had unwelcome visitors. There were three to be precise: all of them male, Caucasian, and heavily armed. I have it in hand now, but from the sounds of things in the hallway, all the neighbours are very much aware of what's happened, and the building attendant is either dead or seriously wounded."

"Never mind that, darling – are you and the littlest chicks safe?"

"We're fine, Cob. Look, I'm going to pack up and get out of here with the babies until NIT has a chance to clean up. I'll ring Mr Moxton and beg a lift over to Miss Darnell's flat. I'm afraid your place is going to need a new front door."

Chapter Nine – Never Let On

Ambassador Hendrik Volker's London home was exactly as Dobos remembered it. The red-haired field operative paused as Laine let him into the front hall of the apartment: halfway expecting that the elderly German diplomat would appear from his study to interrogate him. "I'm surprised that your dad didn't have me dropped headfirst into the Thames when he found out."

She blinked at him. "I have not told him. It is not his concern."

"I got you pregnant – I'm fairly sure that he'll have some bloody opinion on that!"

"That is precisely why I chose not to tell him."

Dobos frowned. "But he knows that he has a grandson, right?"

"No. The United Nations assigned him to Mars for three years shortly after you and I parted ways. By

the time that he returned to Earth, Brett was attending kindergarten, and ANI had employed me as a forensic psychologist. My father found the latter disappointing enough. He would have had nothing positive to say about my being a single parent."

"So, what, you just never let on? Laine, that's fucking horrible!" He shook his head slowly. "I can't believe that you went through the past twelve years with no support!"

"Speaking very technically, it has only been eleven years, eight months, and five days."

"You should have told me. I would have done right by you and Brett."

"As we discussed earlier, that could have damaged your career. Besides, we are not here to debate alternative histories." With that, Volker turned and led the way into the front sitting room. "Brett, it is time. Your father is here."

Television forgotten, the boy scrambled up from where he was sprawled on the sofa. Already tall for his age, he was pale and red haired like both of his parents, but he had his father's poppy petal blue eyes. Right now, there were unshed tears brightening them. "Why haven't I ever met you

before? Didn't you care about us?"

"I didn't even know that you existed, kid!" Dobos hesitated: unsure if he should offer a handshake or a hug. "You're – you look a lot like your mum. You've got my eyes though."

"Yeah, Mom always says that too." Brett dropped his gaze and kicked shyly at the edge of one of the immeasurably expensive rugs. "That's all she ever told me about you."

"Well, it's still more than I got from her!"

Behind him, Volker was answering her phone. "Agent Hull, if you are calling to enquire about Fisher, I have no further news to impart."

Dobos turned to stare at his former girlfriend. "Sorry, but did I hear that right? You're working with Greg Hull?"

"I am his immediate superior, why?"

She works for ANI now. The situation with GETEC had remained the centre of attention since it broke. It was an open secret within the Intelligence community that Greg Hull had been claimed as one of their deep cover operatives, but he hadn't guessed that Laine would know him. "Well I guess it's a small fucking world."

"What do you mean?" She stared at him: giving

no external hint of her disappointment over his choice of words. "No, Agent Hull; I was replying to someone else. What did you say? You are *where* in London?"

Dobos scowled. "Right, that does it. I don't care who that fucker's supposed to be working for! If I see him, I'll put a fucking bullet in him."

Volker gestured for Brett to leave the room. The boy ignored her and edged closer. "What's going on, Mom?"

"Good fucking question, son."

"Both of you please: be quiet." She turned her back to them and returned to the call. "Agent Hull, you are not authorised to help search for your son. Why are you not in Miami?"

"Wait, is his kid bloody missing *again*?"

"Yes, and we have reason to suspect the involvement of British International Intelligence. Now please, stop interrupting when I am on the phone. Agent Hull, I told Agent Cully to inform that you that I would handle the retrieval personally...! Wait, what was that? Which bodyjacker are you referring to?"

"NIT's going to have their hands full cleaning that up." Moxton pulled out carefully from the

building's car park: his injured ribs aching with every movement. The traffic on Chelsea Bridge was heavy tonight, even by London standards. "How are you finding mothering so far?"

"I'm taking it a day at a time." Spence glanced back at the two infants dozing in their matching travel pods in the rear seat of the vehicle. Kathryn's beloved oversized bear stared back blankly from the middle seat. "Thanks for the lift, by the way. I did try to sort a taxi but you know what this time of year is like."

"Don't mention it. I hadn't anything planned for tonight anyhow. Have you and Craig settled on names for them yet?"

"No. He's been far too busy saving hapless tourists from renegade Irish hotel staff."

"It almost sounds as if you think he needs to sort out his priorities."

"I suppose you think that's unfair?" The non-gender sighed. "Maybe it is. Maybe I'm just being selfish...!"

"Stop that." Moxton shot his passenger a stern glare. "You're not being selfish, Housekeeping. A bit hormonal, yeah, probably, but not selfish. Craig's being an arse – hope that helps."

"He's what his life has made of him."

"Well, I know what my operatives would say about that platitude, but there are small ears present. They're what, sixteen days old now?"

"Yes. How was Algeria?"

"Classified, need to know, we nearly died. You know: the usual stuff."

"Ah, that. I almost miss it sometimes."

"That'll be the sleep deprivation talking."

"I prefer to think of it as my inner career obsessed something or other."

"Tell you what; you can think of it as whatever you want, just as long as it doesn't start dancing."

Spence chuckled. "I hadn't ever imagined you reading those sorts of books!"

"Well, I don't know what *your* excuse is, but Miss Darnell convinced me to try them, after my operatives bet her that she'd never manage it. She's a very persuasive young lady when she sets her mind to it."

"Is she better than me? At the job, I mean. I gather that she's on the same career path."

"Did you leave anything else behind you on that island, or was it just your self-confidence?"

"Now that you mention it, I had a rather

impressive spark gap transmission system, and a decent supply of sun dried lizard jerky." They glanced again at their infants. "I suppose I might have to bribe someone to go and collect it all for me. Have you a few days free?"

"I could scrape the time up, assuming that there's something more than what you're using as the excuse for it?" Moxton slowed the car to a near crawl in deference to the looming traffic lights ahead. The vivid blue and white of a nearby boutique's Christmas display chequered the interior of the vehicle: rendering Spence's thin features into a skull. "What exactly will I be looking for?"

"My medical notes, and whatever else Hull may have kept on record of the events during my captivity. I need to check a few details."

"Do I sense grimness, Housekeeping?"

"If you keep on asking, you risk being told, Mr Moxton. I can't promise that you'll like hearing."

"It needs hearing though, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Spence nodded slowly. "But that doesn't mean that you have to be the one to fill the role of listener."

"By which I infer that Craig definitely shouldn't be."

"Not if my concerns are proven correct."

"Grimness ahoy, got it." He shifted gears again. "You don't fully trust that he's their father, do you?"

"He *can't* be. None of the maths aligns. Based on when I gave birth, conception must have occurred whilst I was still on that space station."

"That deserves stronger language!"

"Don't worry, it's had plenty already."

"Who was it then?"

"I don't know. I wasn't *with* anyone, or at least not anyone that I remember. By any rights, I ought to be incapable of even getting pregnant. Yet here we are."

"You reckon the answers are on the island?"

"I bloody well hope so."

His father's cottage was less than three miles from the outskirts of Kenmore, and the midwinter weather was bitter, especially at night. Campbell was careful to keep Fisher tucked inside his coat on the way from the car to the front door. "When I was a boy, Dad always expected me to walk to and from the village. He used to say that it built character. In hindsight, I think he just wanted to preserve his axle."

"The road back there has certainly seen better days." Rosa took Pembleton's arm to help her across a patch of thick frost. "I suppose we were lucky that the car hire centre had a proper jeep available!"

The spymistress eyed her nephew. He was limping, and his shoulders sagged in a way that she recognised all too well. "You did well, Craig. Once we're indoors you should rest."

There was no question: she had chosen the right man for this job. Brooke had harried them all the way from London to the Scottish border. A dozen possessed and now incapacitated field operatives still hadn't been enough to better Campbell. Eventually the bodyjacker had either given up or run out of hosts with access to ranged weaponry. *Perhaps Scotland is simply too far away from wherever she's lurking.*

Thomas welcomed them in, handing Pembleton a battered looking satellite phone as soon as she removed her coat. "It's secure, and there's no one at Headquarters nowadays who knows how to trace that sort of signal. I expect that you have matters to arrange, Edith."

"Thank you, Thomas."

Fisher, having drowsed for most of the journey north, was now wide-awake. "Where this new place now?"

"So, this is the asset?" Thomas leaned forwards to peer at the toddler. "Has he got a name, or is he a vat grown one?"

"He's Greg Hull's boy. You know – the one that Dobos and Jolley accidentally snatched back in April." Campbell sank onto the nearest available armchair, and deposited Fisher on the rug at his feet. "Don't hold him to blame for his dad's misdeeds."

"I thought he looked familiar!" Thomas resisted his urge to smirk. "Never mind, lad. You're in better company now, at least."

"Want to see Rudolf!" The boy beamed happily at his grey bearded host. "Want to see Rudolf and elf please, Santa!"

"Craig, you're here!" Tresweld appeared from the kitchen with Seamus. "Ah, love, sure you look half wrecked! Did the doctors really say that you were okay to make the journey?"

He winced as she deposited their son in his arms for a cuddle. "They made no objection...!"

"Well, I suppose they know best. You mind

Seamus. I'll go and help Heidi with the tea."

Seamus yawned and gummed at his father's coat sleeve. "Da-da-da...!"

"I didn't realise that they'd be here." Campbell kissed the top of his son's head fondly and then set him down next to Fisher. "Play nicely, boys."

"He really should see a doctor as soon as possible. Is there a chemists' shop in Kenmore?" Rosa handed Thomas the list of medications that Dr Knock had provided. "He's still recuperating from those gunshot wounds. Our senior medic is concerned about infection."

"Nonsense, he'll be fine!" The retiree tossed the prescription aside. "He just needs to rest up after the drive."

"I should really get this coat off...!" Campbell made an attempt at standing, but slumped back instead. "Are Spence and our little ones here too then, Dad?"

"As far as I know, they're still in London. I've tried ringing Leister's home number to read them in but no one ever picks up the damned phone."

Weaver spat out a half-chewed morsel of pan-fried squid in black bean sauce at Pembleton's

words. "Possessed by a bloody psionic, ma'am? Well, yes, I suppose that it was a little out of character. No. Yes, I fully understand. I'll attend to it immediately, ma'am!"

"What's going on?" Whitby stared at her from across the remains of their takeaway as she hung up. "I thought you were finally off the clock for a bit."

"You'd best grab your stuff, Nathaniel. We have a ruddy bodyjacker to track down and eliminate! Pembleton wants us to regroup with Leister and the rest – she's briefed them already. They're at Miss Darnell's flat."

The senior technician went in search of his laptop. "Is it her again? Brooke?"

"That's the name. Apparently, her surname is Rawlings. You'll never guess who provided us with *that* information."

Tanya had matured somewhat in the intervening months. Hull felt sure that the naive teenager whom he remembered would have objected to her guests cuffing someone to a radiator. "Lovely little place you have here, by the way. How are you able to afford it?"

She ignored his attempt at small talk and closed the door of the bathroom: shutting the ANI operative behind it. "Seriously, why did you guys have to bring him here?"

"On balance, it seemed the easiest way to keep him from causing trouble, darling. That stealth suit is disturbingly effective. At least now we know where he is."

"Yeah, but he also knows where Darren and I live! Not a good situation, Cob."

"Don't worry, love; we can always move once this is over." Jolley wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "That's assuming that Mr Hull isn't in prison or dead by then."

"Damn asshole would have been at the bottom of the Thames already if he hadn't managed to call his boss before we could get hold of his phone!" Cerise shook her head. "You just know that ANI won't turn a blind eye to us if we take him out now."

"Bloody interagency politics...!" Benedict clasped the cooling pack to the bruise on his head. "Cerise is right. We'll probably never get another chance to finish the bastard."

"It's an unavoidable risk, I'm afraid." Leister

glanced back into the living room, at where Jenkins was helping the children to select a film. "Right now, our priority *has* to be dealing with Brooke."

Chapter Ten – Technical Term

Half a world apart from London, Brooke Rawlings scrambled up from her meditation couch in tears. The world was conspiring against them: against what they ought to have together. “It ain’t fair, Greg! Why’d they all have to keep getting in my way?”

Ashley was by far the worst culprit. Even death hadn’t been enough to get rid of *that* mousy haired little bitch! She was always so damn difficult to possess, especially when she was sober, and she wasn’t even all that pretty. “At least Bryce is *pretty*! Ah can understand why you love her best, Greg.”

No, Bryce wasn’t the problem: it was all of the rest of them. Those others, oh yeah, they’d pay for wasting so damn much of Greg’s time. Kellie, Tanya, Nightingale – fuck, now that last one was a fucking stupid name! “Ah made them take your

son, Greg! You ought to at least hate them for doing that!"

He probably *did* hate them. He couldn't show it too much though, in case they hurt Fisher. Yeah – that explained why he'd tried to reason with Leister instead of killing him. That stupid little brat; slowing his daddy down as good as a damn rock tied to his feet! "Ah wish he wasn't around, but you'd miss him, wouldn't you, Greg? Maybe ah shouldn't try to kill him after all."

She had made that mistake once already. Killing wasn't *always* the answer. Greg had been awful sad when he found out what had happened to Ashley in the Caribbean. Brooke didn't want him to be unhappy. That hadn't been the plan at all. She'd just figured that killing the other technician would make things better for him. "All the trouble ah went to fooling Saunders, and rigging up that fancy little transmitter to disrupt the circuitry in her ID chip! That sure was a waste of time."

Greg still didn't hate Ashley, even though the little bitch kept rejecting him, but that was okay. Greg knew best. That was part of what attracted Brooke to him. He'd take care of her properly – not like those other guys. She'd be safe if she was his.

Bryce obviously understood that, even if Ashley didn't. Bryce was good. "Ah'm good too, Greg. You'll see that eventually."

"You know what I think, Nightingale?" Hull looked directly at the pale haired figure standing over him. "I think you're pissed off because Senior Agent Volker got here first, and now she won't let you kill me."

"That's as may be, but I don't see her stopping me from interrogating you either. Let's start with how you abducted me and kept me on your secret island for seven months."

"Okay, let me level with you. My former boss – Carson Howard – had put out a retrieval order for you and your babies. He figured that with Craig Campbell being the father, GETEC could use their genetic material to improve our SCOs. I hid you on the island to keep you safe."

"How very altruistic you make it sound. What's your excuse for the space station? Did someone adopt an orphaned panda cub every time you pushed my boundaries?"

He sighed. "Look, I know that I said a lot of stuff to you when we were out there. I fully intended to

scare you, but it was just *business*. My job was to break you down and then rebuild you to suit GETEC's needs. You knew that when Pembleton sent you in, and so did she. Don't blame me for having met your expectations...!"

The slap echoed against the tiled walls of the bathroom as Spence lowered their hand. "I've already added up the dates, Mr Hull. Does conception around March 3rd sound about right to you? Because that's what lines up with their delivery – more than three weeks before Craig and I got together. The babies *aren't* his! Moreover, from what you let slip whilst I was tied up in that bloody van, you already knew that they weren't."

Their prisoner licked the blood from his lip and smiled quietly. "So, you figured it out. I guess a part of me hoped that you would."

"Why did you do it?"

"It seemed the best way to confirm whether we'd really managed to reverse the genetic tampering that our scans found during your initial medical. Who sterilised you anyhow – do you know?"

Spence nodded. "I know. You don't. That's how it's going to remain, Mr Hull."

"As power plays go, that's pretty weak."

"I play the cards that I'm dealt. By the way, you'll be hearing from my solicitors regarding how much child support you owe. Consider it compensation."

"Oh, they aren't mine either, Nightingale! Jesus, no – that would have been highly inappropriate on my part. Forcibly impregnating an underling using my own sperm?" He shook his head. "Seriously, there's a line."

"Then whose sperm was it?"

"It wasn't. The medics cooked up a batch of synthetic sperm using some of your bone marrow. They're *your* babies, Nightingale – no one else's."

"Artificially induced parthenogenesis?"

"That's the technical term."

Spence turned on their heel and strode out of the bathroom. "You may release your operative now, Senior Agent Volker. I'm done with him."

Volker tilted her head in acknowledgement. There was a clink as the handcuffs dropped to the floor of the bathroom. "I trust that until the situation with Ms Rawlings has been satisfactorily resolved, there shall be no further repercussions for the actions which Agent Hull is believed to have carried

out whilst he was conditioned?"

"Gee boss, when you put it that way, I can't help but feel kind of doubted." Hull emerged, rubbing his bruised wrists. "Do I at least get to ask what's happened to my son now?"

Having observed Volker's body language as she arrived with Dobos and Brett, Leister suspected that Hull's future career with ANI was likely to be considerably less promising than he hoped. "Fisher is perfectly safe, Gregory. We've had word: Pembleton is running things remotely until someone eliminates Brooke. Nathaniel here has rigged up a temporary anti-possession grid to cover London. Outside of that, we shall need to utilise individual devices. Tanya, darling, is there any word from Dr Knock about how those are coming along?"

"Medical's got enough extra strong tinfoil hats for everyone, Cob. Dr Knock's on his way here with them now." The young handler glared at Hull from where she was sitting between Jolley and Moxton. "Not that *he* deserves to get one!"

"Okay, I'm sensing some resentment towards me on Miss Darnell's part. Does anyone else want to take a pop at me, or are we going to pretend to be professionals?"

"Don't tempt us, Mr Hull." Spence answered before things could get any worse. "We seem to have acquired a common enemy, so let's act like it. Who is Brooke Rawlings, and what precisely does she want?"

Their nemesis shrugged. "There isn't much to say. She came on board via GETEC's postgraduate internship scheme the same year that Ashley did, but with a focus on computer programming and micro engineering as opposed to biochemistry. Her first assignment was in Prague, but she experienced some difficulties adjusting to the workload. GETEC shelved the research that she was conducting into drones and transferred her back to Boston, which is where I first met her. She seemed...well...normal: just a typical computer geek, desperate to bag the next big promotion. There wasn't any mention on file about her psionic capabilities. I'd be genuinely surprised if anyone at GETEC knew about that side of her."

Whitby and Jenkins exchanged glances. The senior technician cleared his throat. "Ah – I think that may resolve another mystery too! By any chance were Brooke's drones *microscopic*?"

“Evidently true love is spending one’s Saturday night cleaning up the remains of three men whilst making all of the potential witnesses agree that they died elsewhere.” Drake patted her colleague on the shoulder. “Never mind, Byron – I understand that unrequited adoration is considered to be rather fashionable this season.”

“I’m sure that I haven’t the faintest notion of what you’re insinuating, Lottie.” Caulfield peered carefully at the replacement carpeting samples. “I’m simply a man, standing in front of an oversized book of carpet samples, trying to decide between turquoise and teal.”

“Hmm, and referencing old films to boot – all the while thinking of a certain pair of eyes just a shade or five paler?”

“All right, that’s very droll. Now please, let’s not keep on at it any further. As you’ve oh so broadly hinted, there’s quite enough that’s blue in my life already.”

“Gracious. You really are smitten.” The augmetic shook her head. “Fine – business it is then! According to our database, the inhabitants of those body bags were infamous middle of the range guns for hire. They had prior convictions for all

forms of assault, abduction, and arson."

"Masters of the three terrible As, eh? I wonder who they were working for this time."

"We aren't likely to have access to their banking details until after Christmas, so following the money shall have to wait." Drake handed him a small white card, with four capital letters embossed on it in black ink. "I did find one of these odd-looking business cards tucked away in each of their respective wallets. Does it ring any bells?"

Caulfield scratched his chin. "Hmm, C.A.K.E – do you suppose it's some sort of a super-secret dieting society for villainous types?"

"Possibly, but none of these three were fat."

"So, it's a mystery for Christmas? What luck! Come along then, Lottie. Let's see where this particular trail of crumbs leads us."

"We ought to get these half-baked not so goods out of Leister's penthouse for a start! Incidentally, what *shall* we tell the neighbours?"

"I rather thought that we could go with it having been a bizarre designer drug induced crime spree. We haven't used that excuse in ages."

"There's no doubt whatsoever, Mr Benedict –

you've been the victim of the same psionic who targeted Ashley." Knock pointed to the pair of images that currently filled the screen of his portable scanner. "Note how, despite your unique neural patterns, the two intruding signals line up perfectly with one another? That's due to the way that psionic intrusion works. Think of it as someone pressing down with an inflexible ink stamp. The overlaying image would be the same every time, but there could be variations in its coverage of the affected surface. Essentially, some people's minds are more readily accessible than others."

"At least it's definitely the work of just one rogue bodyjacker as opposed to an army." Spence dragged one of the dining table chairs over to beside their infants' travel cot and sat down. "Do you suppose that you can track her, Senior Agent Volker?"

"Federal constraints aside, it is doable, but not without risk. We would need to allow Ms Rawlings to strike again, and lock on to her neural pattern before she discerned our intentions from her host's memory. Due to the latter concern, the volunteer shall require exceptional mental fortitude."

<proposal – flashclonedlobsterpot>

"Ah, you mean trap her consciousness in an artificial host, of course!" Whitby beamed at the little robot. "That's excellent reasoning, Quincy! We can use an RCS from Headquarters to lure her in, and then reverse the field on one of Dr Knock's portable devices to contain her!"

<query – which unit are you expounding to>

"Eh? Oh – no, just thinking aloud, sorry."

Hull cleared his throat. "Well, my priority is Fisher, so if it's all the same with you, Senior Agent Volker, I'd prefer to leave this little anti-psionic safari to our friends from BIINT. Just tell me where my son is, and I'll go collect him."

In the end, they compromised and met at the Lancashire safe house. Those in London crammed into Hull's questionably acquired stealth jet. Sunday morning began with a brief and mostly civil discussion over who should pilot. By popular demand, the task fell to Moxton. The other adults spent the flight explaining the situation directly to the children and to those in Scotland via satellite phone. By the time that the jet touched down on the snow outside the farmhouse, all involved grasped the necessity behind their tenuous alliance.

Thomas greeted them with his trusty revolver at the front door. He glared at Hull. "Go ahead: give me a reason to do your lad a favour!"

"Put that away, Mr Campbell." Spence staggered past him into the gloomy hall with an infant squirming sleepily in the crook of either arm. "Senior Agent Volker has assured us that Hull shall cooperate fully. We told you that already."

"Is that Stockholm syndrome, or are you just being sharp tongued for the bloody sake of it?" The retiree lowered his weapon grudgingly. "Fine, just go on in! By the way, Craig's upstairs, resting. The drive down from Scotland tired him."

Chapter Eleven – Very Bad People

Zima peered balefully at the two NIT agents. Sundays were his preferred quiet time: a part of the week when the Russian dedicated his entire day to accomplishing very little. Awkward questions about very bad people that he may or may not even know had no place in such days. “I told you; I did not know any of those men! All that I did was to walk a lost child home. Why must you attempt to criminalise me for this?”

“We’re merely trying to determine why Kathryn was targeted for abduction.” Caulfield smiled at the nightclub vendor. “Surely you have concerns about being named as a friend by the fellow responsible?”

“He lied to her: it is that simple. No friend of mine would kidnap little children.”

“Then how did he know that she trusted you?”

Drake glanced warily across the office at the flimsy looking wire crate where Grisha lay gnawing contentedly at a ham hock. "Where could he have gotten that information?"

"I have no idea."

"Miss Drake raises a fair point. We've shown you his picture, Mr Bogomolov. Think hard, was he hanging around in Battersea Park yesterday morning? Might he have followed you and Kathryn back to New Chelsea Towers?"

"If he was there, I did not notice. Besides which, I suspect that Grisha would have alerted to anyone following me."

"Mx Spence informed us that you were carrying a shovel." Caulfield's smile tightened. "Interpol has some very interesting notes regarding you and gardening. I expect that you keep an allotment here in London too. Suppose that someone were to arrange a soil analysis of it – what would the blood and bone ratio be?"

"It would record as perfect for growing an assortment of vegetables; as anyone with eyes can tell by looking." Zima leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Solovei and their loved ones have *nothing* to fear from me, Agent Caulfield."

Drake scowled. "Well, that's very reassuring, especially given how the other three men that you insist you don't know attacked New Chelsea Towers and kicked down Leister's front door to gain access."

"Kathryn's would-be abductor definitely does know them, by the way." Caulfield held up his tablet again to show the file. "Or at least he did. They're very dead, and he's not far behind."

"Bad seeds deserve no good weather." Zima shrugged. "Should I pretend to care about the demise of criminals that I do not even know?"

"No." The older NIT operative shook his head. "That wouldn't make any sense. What's C.A.K.E?"

The Russian's bright hazel eyes went flat. "That last is a term that I have knowledge of. They sent a man here yesterday morning to wave a gun in my face and demand money. I refused."

"So they targeted someone that you knew for leverage!" The augmetric folded her arms. "I shan't bother asking what became of the man who was here yesterday, but we're going to need all of the information that you have on C.A.K.E."

"I've got half a mind to drag you straight to

Lancashire Century for treatment!" Spence tucked yet another large pillow underneath Campbell's shoulders, propping him up against the headboard. "Pembleton never ought to have picked you as bodyguard to begin with. Are you actively trying to lose the use of this leg?"

He sighed. "Really, I'm *fine*, canary."

"That raging temperature suggests otherwise, Craig." The non-gender bent to check the dressing on Campbell's upper right thigh. Pain flared across the line of their own recent surgery. "Fuck...!"

"Spence, what's wrong?" The field operative reached anxiously for their hand. "Here, you need to sit down for a bit. You're doing too much too."

"I'm *doing* my bloody job." They sank down beside him on the bed. "But I expect that five minutes shan't see the world burn down."

"To be fair, there's a small amount of risk where France is concerned. It's the downside of being so popular with holidaying spies."

Spence snorted. "I prefer Tuscany anyhow."

"Hmm, well how about we compromise and settle down together as a family in Monaco?"

"Could we even afford to live there? We've got dependents now, after all."

"I know." Campbell kissed the top of their head.
"I'll sell my yacht."

"That's not what I meant. You love that boat."

"She's worth a decent amount, Spence. Unless we plan on living aboard, I simply can't justify the marina fees – not whilst we have five children to support."

"Five...? Oh yes, I almost forgot about Seamus. Seamus Aiden Malachi Tresweld-Campbell – Christ, that's a stupidly long name to pin on a child!"

"That's why I just generally just call him Sam."

"His mother doesn't like you doing that." Spence shifted closer to him, careful not to nudge his injured shoulder.

"It's just one of the many things that we disagree about, I'm afraid."

"Still no further along with the divorce?"

"Sorry."

"It's alright." *At least she gave you a child who's biologically yours!* "How did you even manage to get Seamus from Dublin to London without his mother's written consent anyhow?"

He looked slightly guilty. "I may have travelled using less than standard channels."

"Gosh, Miss Hedturner really does just agree to

whatever anyone suggests, doesn't she?"

"I may have lied to her about Sarah knowing."

"You're bloody lucky that you didn't get stopped!" Spence tried not to suspect that Tresweld had intended for Seamus to anchor Campbell to Dublin in her absence. "From now on, no more undocumented international travel arrangements, agreed?"

"I give you my word, canary."

"We ought to get rid of him, Barnabas." The snow crunched as Kathryn squeezed it into a ball.

"Who do you mean?"

"Mr Hull, of course – weren't you listening? He's the one who took Aunty Val away and made Craig think she'd died."

"I know *that*, but Cob said that he works for Brett's mummy, and that she'll be cross if anything happens to him." Barnabas winced as the icy missile thudded against the front of his coat. "Hey, mind my stitches, can't you? Go easy!"

"You never went easy on me at slices!"

"That was different!"

"No it wasn't!" Kathryn hurled another snowball, catching her brother square in the face. She

stalked closer as he staggered backwards. The teddy bear clasped under her arm did little to detract from the predatory slant to her eyebrows. "You *always* had to win, but now that you're weak you want to change the rules!"

A long-suffering sort of sigh echoed from across the farmyard, where Jamal-Kristof was attempting to sculpt a penguin. "Quit fighting you guys, or we're gonna get in trouble!"

Brett, perched on an upturned bucket next to the jet, glanced up sharply at that. "He's got a point. I'll pay you ten bucks each to keep quiet."

Kathryn frowned. "What's that in pounds?"

Her twin picked himself up and ambled over to see what the older American child was doing. "Wow, that's a super nice phone, Brett! Did your mummy buy it for you? Was it for Christmas?"

"I uh, well I just *borrowed* it. And she's my mom, not something from out of a fucking museum exhibit!"

"Oh. We say mummy here in Britain." Barnabas peered over Brett's shoulder at the phone. "What's that you're watching, anyhow?"

"It's an encrypted video log – something to do with GETEC, I think." Brett pointed to the logo

amidst the scrolling lines of code. "But why's Agent Hull still got so much GETEC stuff on his phone, I hear you ask?"

"Eh? What are you on about?" Barnabas tapped the screen. "It's just a screensaver, silly! See, you tap and then swipe. There's the main menu now."

"Don't you know how to work a phone?" Kathryn giggled. "That's pathetic! Even Jamal-Kristof can do that, and he's only seven."

"Seven and two thirds but leave me out of it! I ain't getting the blame for stealing some creepy guy's phone." The younger boy scooped up another handful of snow and smoothed it onto his creation. "Paul says if I study and keep out of trouble then when I'm older I can maybe go to school at Harrow, like he did."

Brett was too engrossed in Barnabas' demonstration to pay any attention to the others. "Have you got one like this?"

The pale haired boy shook his head. "No, but Uncle Oliver does. He says it's the best sort of phone on the market; all the proper spies use them. I'm getting one for my next birthday."

"Hang on; so my dad's your uncle? Are we all

like cousins or something then?"

"We call him Uncle Oliver, but he's not really blood." Kathryn snatched for the phone, pouting when her twin swatted her hand away. "Aunty Val's the only proper relative that we have left who isn't in prison. Well, her and those two stupid *babies*...!"

The rear compartment of the jet cycled open abruptly: the edge of the ramp sinking into the snow. Brett grinned. "Cool – Agent Hull must've set up his phone to be able to control the jet! What the fuck did you press, Barnabas?"

"Um, that green icon there. Look, it's brought up another menu. What does *actoflective* mean?"

"There's only one way to find out!" Brett tapped the screen before the other children had time to debate further. "Oh, wow – it must be some kind of stealth feature!"

They all stared as the rest of the jet rippled out of sight, only a few indentations in the snow revealing its location. Kathryn lobbed an experimental snowball: shrieking happily, as it splattered against what appeared to be thin air. "I can see right through it! How does it work?"

"What are you lot up to out here?" Dobos emerged from the conservatory. "Oh, for fu...!"

Okay, who's bright idea was this then, eh?"

"Sorry, Dad; I just wanted to see what actoflective meant." Brett scrambled to his feet and held out the phone.

His father glanced briefly at the name on the main screen and then closed up the jet. He pocketed the phone. "Actoflective: useful outside of snow and other such hazards. Don't let me catch you stealing again. Now come on in, all of you. Heidi's made soup for lunch and your Uncle Darren's threatening to eat it all."

Chapter Twelve – Something More

“The usual boosters ain't enough this time, Benny!” Brooke gulped another of the lilac coated capsules back and continued. “Ah need something more; something better! You know you *promised* C.A.K.E would make me the strongest psionic ever.”

Benny shrugged. “Okay, I'll talk to the guys in the lab and see what they can cook up. It probably won't be ready for a while though. Have a merry fucking Christmas in the meantime, Brooke. Try to keep out of trouble.”

“Yeah sure: you too, Benny.” The bodyjacker held it together long enough for the front door of her apartment to slam shut, before breaking into near hysterical laughter. Her handler still had no idea what her psionic talents let her do. C.A.K.E didn't seem to care much about those sorts of details, which was pretty dumb, but very

convenient. "GETEC would've wanted to know every last detail, wouldn't they Greg?"

Keeping her bodyjacking a secret from the mega corporation had been tricky. Life was simpler now. Except that it wasn't, because first the stupid boosters didn't help her against Fisher and now BIINT had started blocking her using technology! With all of GETEC's facilities under lockdown, her micro drones weren't going to be an option either. "Good thing there's nothing left on file to connect me to those."

She'd learned a *lot* since Prague. Nowadays, Foncette wouldn't have stood any chance of blackmailing her. Not that he'd understood what her drones could do. They'd just been a means for him to poison his rival: such a pathetically basic plan. "Too bad you never checked whether ah'd used the dosage that you wanted me to!"

"I'm so sorry that I don't have better news for you, Captain Kennedy." Major Berkeley studied her patient's face as the Martian read through the results of Ellie's tests. "She's not in any pain at the moment, and we can put her under before that situation changes."

"But she's still...?"

"She has a limited lifespan, yes: inherited from her father. The paternal half of her genetic matrix is coded to shut down at six months. That's why labour began prematurely. It wasn't anything that you did, Marine."

"Yeah right, you mean aside from having got together with a guy carrying a built-in death sentence!" Kennedy set the tablet aside and hunched back against her pillows. "Look, there must be something that you can do. Can't the hospital fix her genes?"

"Well, in theory, yes." Berkeley sighed. "We'd need access to appropriate donor material. It's already flagged on the system and we're looking, but I have to advise you that the chances of our securing a match in time are very poor. Ordinarily, we'd look at family, but with Yuudai's unique circumstances...!"

"He was a *clone*!" Kennedy grabbed for her phone. "We need a donor who matches him, but who doesn't have the same problem built in, right? Well, that's easy – we use Greg Hull!"

"Good evening, Feathers." Caulfield smiled at

the non-gender as they opened the door of the safe house. "Lottie shall be along in a minute; she's just parking the car. The snow's back on."

"I think it's only prudent to warn her that there's a cloaked stealth jet in the middle of the yard...!" Spence winced at the sound of metal scraping across metal. "Never mind; it sounds like she's already found it. So what's your news, Mr Caulfield?"

He deactivated his lazrella, shook the snow from his shoes and followed the thin figure into the front hall to wait for Drake. "We sorted out the matter at Leister's penthouse. It's tidied up and safe to use again and the neighbours are none the wiser to what really went on."

"Thank you. What *did* go on anyhow? Who were those men who broke in?"

"They were professional criminals, working for an agency named C.A.K.E. From what we've gleaned, they were after hostages to use against your friend Bogomolov. He's been refusing to bow to their racketeering."

"Is that why Kathryn was targeted too?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. It's probably sensible for you to keep an eye out for the foreseeable. They may

try again. Good job this place was available."

Spence nodded. "I reckon we'll spend at least Christmas here; probably longer given Craig's injuries. What does C.A.K.E stand for?"

"It's short for Collaborators, Assassins, Kidnappers, and Extortionists. Would you believe that the third full stop on their logo is actually a miniscule ampersand?"

"Someone's put too far much thought into that acronym. Moreover, stop calling me *Feathers*. It's bloody annoying."

"Sorry." Caulfield did his best to appear contrite. "Is there any word on your bodyjacker?"

"We have her name: Brooke Rawlings. Senior Agent Volker has sent word to her colleagues in Boston and they're chasing up what few leads are available. I doubt there's much hope of finding her. A high level psionic with an advanced degree in computer programming shan't be easy to sneak up on."

"Here's hoping that she can't hack her way past these psionic jamming discs, eh?"

"Don't tempt fate."

Drake came scurrying indoors then: shivering and grumbling despite her thick winter jacket. "The

weather gets worse every time we come here! Whose invisible plane did I just dent?"

"Greg Hull." Spence closed the front door whilst the NIT operatives hung up their coats. "I still can't wrap my head around him being one of ANI's lot all along."

The augmetric arched a finely sculpted brow. "Oh yes, we were chatting about that on the way up from London. Working for ANI doesn't utterly preclude one from falling prey to an *accident*, you know. Isn't that right, Byron?"

"Such things *do* happen; it can't be denied."

"I'll bear it in mind." The security panel lit up at the final keystroke. "Right – that's everything locked up for the evening. Come on, we can join the rest of them and pick each other's brains over supper."

"I'll have to call and let Senior Agent Volker know that our agents have finished interrogating Miss Ross. She's pretty devastated at having messed up so badly." Cully paused to let the information sink in. "Then again, she's only human. We all make mistakes, don't we, Ms Lenard? I mean especially when we're young and impressionable."

Bryce barely even glanced up from the

vegetables that she was dicing. "I know what you're getting at, Agent Cully. I'm not that person any longer. Greg saw to that."

"He's quite the knight in shining armour." The ANI agent shook his head. "I bet you'd support him no matter what, huh?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"One of our forensics drone units found something in the basement during our search of the house. I'm wondering if you know anything."

The knife stilled. "I don't understand."

"It looks like there was a body down there at some point, ma'am. Admittedly, the trace is very faint but it's there. Given that this is a new build and Agent Hull is the first occupant, well...?"

She stared at him. "You aren't seriously trying to suggest that Greg...that he *killed* someone...?"

"At the very least he may have known about it. I mean dead bodies generally don't just up and walk away."

"But that doesn't mean that Greg was involved! It could've been anyone – maybe even one of the contractors during the build?"

"We'll look into them too. The lab is still analysing the material. Someone did a heck of a job cleaning

up. Didn't Agent Hull do cleanup work for GETEC sometimes?"

The landline shrilled before Bryce could reply. She wiped off her trembling hands and went to answer it. "Hello?"

"Ms Lenard, this is Captain Kennedy. I need to speak to your fiancé immediately."

"He isn't here; he's in England with our son."

"Ma'am, this is life or death. I'm over at Miami VA. My baby was born just shy of forty-eight hours ago. She needs urgent gene therapy and Hull's the best chance of a match. I don't know whether he told you yet or not, but the father was his clone."

Fisher's little sister is here early! Bryce thought briefly of the custody application papers she and Greg had filed on Friday afternoon. The Martian woman must have already been in labour at the time. "He told me, of course. Captain Kennedy, I'm so sorry. I'll call Greg immediately. I know that he'll want to help."

"Thank you."

"So, we're just letting Mr Hull go?" Tanya turned back from the living room window to stare at the others. "Seriously, he gets to go fly away as if

nothing ever happened? Can't we press any charges? Like, none at all?"

"Apparently not, love." Jolley sighed and pantomimed firing a gun in the direction of the receding aircraft. "It's stupid bollocks, mind."

"I couldn't agree more, darling." Leister hugged Jenkins closer and glared at Pembleton. "With all due respect, Edith, there's nothing that ANI can offer that's worth sparing that bastard. We ought to have finished him here and shipped his remains back to Miami for the medics to pick over at their leisure!"

The spymistress took a small sip of her brandy before deigning to respond. "Senior Agent Volker has promised to have him fully evaluated. If any of his misdeeds are proven to have been of his own volition then ANI shall prosecute him accordingly."

"Oh, like shite they will!" Thomas hurled his own glass at the opposing wall. The remains of the whisky splattered across the wallpaper: trickling down to pool along the rim of the skirting board. "I never thought that I'd be bloody glad to be out of the business, but I am now!"

"May I quote you on that?" Tresweld looked up quizzically from her tablet. "Goes for everyone, by

the way – sure, this has all of the makings for a bloody amazing wee human-interest story!”

“Go fuck yourself with a rolled up non-disclosure form, Ms Tresweld.” Weaver dragged her fingers languorously through her blonde hair. “That’s my ruddy quote.”

<statement – samewithbellsattached>

“I make it a fucking three.” Moxton patted the little robot’s chassis. “Come on, Quincy. Let’s go check if the kids are still behaving nicely for Oliver and Miss Hedturner.”

Behind them, the Irish woman sputtered. “Lady Edith, are you going to let your operatives speak to a member of the press in such a disrespectful way?”

“When one asks ridiculous questions one must accept intolerant replies, Ms Tresweld.” Pembleton stood up. “Weaver is utterly correct regarding the non-disclosure form. I’ll have one drawn up for you presently. You may feel free to describe your opinions on that and everything else in fifty years and not before.”

Drake leaned forwards and proffered her tablet. “Here you are, Ms Tresweld: NIT uses the same form anyhow. Two birds and so forth.”

"I'm going to check how Craig's doing, excuse me." Spence slunk out of the room. The door swung closed quietly behind them.

"You should probably go up too, Cob." Jenkins nudged him. "Spence needs a chance to talk to someone about all of this. I'll be fine down here, honestly."

"Ashley's right." Benedict nodded. "Cerise and I shall stay with her."

"If you ask me, Volker's taking a big gamble risking flying with Hull." Cerise shook her head. "I wouldn't put it past that creep to try something on the way back home!"

Rosa finally spoke up. "He shan't want to draw any further negative attention. Besides, Fisher's there too. I don't believe that Mr Hull would risk anything happening to him, or to Captain Kennedy's poor little baby."

"I suppose that there's little point in you bothering to testify against him now either, Kellie." Whitby sighed. "That lucky bastard – he just keeps on scraping through!"

"Chaps like that tend to make their own luck, I'm afraid." Caulfield winked at Leister. "Still – no one's immortal!"

“Indeed not, Byron.” The older man kissed Jenkins’ cheek before rising to his feet. “I’ll go and see how Nightingale is feeling.”

Tanya wriggled up beside her boyfriend on the sofa. “Gee, well right about now I’d guess that the smart money would probably be on miserable and betrayed!”

Chapter Thirteen – Safe Spot

“Well, it's certainly not Monaco, canary.”

“It's our best option for now, Craig. My wages can't stretch to a big enough home for all of us even if I do manage to go back full time.” Spence switched off the engine and peered gloomily through the windscreen of their people carrier at the relentless late January rain that was currently hammering Bournemouth. “At least this way you shan't need to sell your yacht. The mooring fees at Poole are far more manageable, and it's only half an hour's drive from here if one takes the A road route.”

“True and we're right next to the golf course too. That might be fun. I know Dad enjoys it.” Campbell grimaced. “Damn this leg! It's cramped up again. Can you grab my cane from the boot?”

“Yes, just wait there. I'll go and open the front

door first – Lillian's solicitor mentioned that the alarm's a bit tricky."

It was hardly surprising that their late sister-in-law had had some quiet doubt regarding relocating to Lackey Hall with her arranged husband. From what NIT had dug up, the Ashby and Lackey families had been feuding discreetly for almost a decade. There had probably been cracks showing long before that. By the time of her unfortunate accident, Lillian would have been as much a hostage as a wife. *Just a well-bred broodmare, as far as the elders on both sides were concerned.*

Clearly, non-combatant Lillian had planned accordingly. She had kept on this house and willed the entirety of her estate to any subsequent children in the event of her death. The only stipulation being that their father and his parents would have no access to any of it. Jasper hadn't ever bothered to tell the children about *that*, or about his fruitless efforts to contest the will.

Old money tended not to talk: it had other people to do that. Spence was still leery of accepting their title as Lady Lackey. Nevertheless, the non-gender knew that assuming the official role of guardian and laying claim to managing the

inheritance was what had really ended their battle with Children's Services. *About time too – those bloody social workers; acting as if there are hundreds of families out there lining up to adopt eleven-year-old orphaned assassins in training!*

The aforementioned pair of traumatised youngsters wouldn't arrive until tomorrow afternoon. Leister was taking them shopping again today, whilst the movers delivered the existing three vanloads of furniture and other items. The old swan had been extremely generous with his money, perhaps to try to counterbalance Thomas' distinct lack of involvement. *At least Craig didn't leg it once I told him the truth.*

With the alarm system finally satisfied, the door to the detached seven-bedroom period property swung open quietly. Spence dragged one of the nearby bronze planters across as a makeshift doorstep and hurried back to the car. "Here's your cane – can you manage?"

"Don't worry; I'll make it, canary. Give me the giant bag of baby stuff and I'll find a safe spot to set up the travel cot. I'm assuming that it's packed right next to the kitchen sink?"

"Ha bloody ha. Use the back sitting room; it

looked spacious enough in the photographs. I'll try to get the small people indoors without disturbing them."

Hull smiled fondly at the tiny form in the incubator. From point of transfer and initial booking in to post treatment assessment, the gene therapy had taken the specialists at Mercy Hospital's NIC unit a fortnight to complete. Three weeks on from that and his daughter was thriving. Well, as much as any extremely premature baby *could* thrive. She was only thirty-one weeks old now, so it still would be another couple of months until they could take her home from the hospital. Winning the right to be the ones who would do that had been bittersweet. *Poor Susan; I still can't get over her putting herself through that!*

For some unfathomable reason, the Martian had genuinely believed that a judge would favour a single mother from the colonies over a stable Terran couple. Worse yet, there had been civilian legal advisors all too willing to take her money after the military attorneys signed off. There had never been any possibility that she would win, but the parasites hadn't cared about that. In their view, the money,

not to mention the prestige of representing a minor celebrity, would have been worth the false hope. *Woods ought to have warned her about what would really happen.*

The old gunnery sergeant must have gotten caught up in all the marketing surrounding his CO. The guy really should have known better than that. A figurehead for young Martians and aspiring career soldiers, outside of the Red Planet and its Marine Corps, Captain Mars had no more influence than Woods. That had to have been tough for her to accept. She'd need time to come to terms with it. *Maybe we'll see about letting her have supervised contact with Rayne once everything settles down.*

Bryce had picked the new name. Hull liked it too: it was a perfect fit for their little miracle, and matched up nicely with Fisher. All the best parenting websites encouraged using similarly themed names for siblings. Those sorts of connections were important for children. Rayne deserved every advantage that her parents could give her. After all, she wasn't merely at risk of health difficulties. Being even half-Martian was a huge social stigma. Having full Earth citizenship would go

a long way to improving her prospects. *Not that Daddy's ever going to stand idly by and let anybody hurt you, precious little girl.*

"How's life as a single dad then, Ollie?"

"I told you already, Darren: I'm not a single dad! Laine and I are long distance co-parenting. Why is that so fucking hard for you to take in?"

Jolley chuckled and settled back to enjoy his coffee. "Is it that bad then, mate?"

"It has moments." The red-haired man sighed and fed a few more coins into the BIINT break room vending machine. "Good moments, fucking crap moments, moments when I just want to kick the living shit of someone."

"That doesn't sound all that different to the rest of your life, to be honest. How does Brett like his new school? Has he had detention yet?"

"Nah, he's a good kid, really. He's just a bit too bloody keen to fit in. Some of the other pupils have been ripping the piss out of him."

"Ah, kids can be right nasty little fuckers to one another sometimes. It makes you wonder how we got to the top of the food chain."

Dobos peeled open his snack. "I blame the

fucking parents. Nothing but a bunch of overly entitled judgemental twats, the lot of them."

The sniper shook his head sympathetically. "I told you not to go with that school, Ollie! Aye, sure, it's right posh, but Webparent has nothing nice to say about it. Isn't that right, Quincy?"

<affirmation – verypoorreviewsoffacility>

"Clearly Tanya has bagged herself a fucking brilliant father for any future children the two of you might spawn together." Dobos slumped down onto another of the small sofas. "Quincy, do me a favour and see what Webparent advises about helping a kid settle in at a new school."

<onitmalesiblingunit>

"The rat bastard even had the guts to invite us over to visit his new love nest!" Tresweld gulped back some more of her wine before continuing with her phone call. "He says he can't travel at the minute, so he wants us to throw a birthday party there for wee Seamus – a bloody cake smash; can you believe it, Aunty Deirdre?"

"Aye, that I can, Sarah. He sounds like a typical absent father: only ever there for the fun bits. The feckers are all the same if you ask me."

At the back of the little house, Heidi closed the kitchen door quietly. The au pair knew better than to listen in on her employer's angry ranting. Instead, she busied herself with cooking dinner. No doubt, Sarah would be fine once she'd gotten it out of her system. *It is the same every time that Craig is telephoning her. She is drinking too much alcohol all of the time though. Maybe she will get help with that soon.*

Seamus waved to her from his playpen in the corner of the kitchen. "Ah gah gah...!"

"What is it, baby boy?" Heidi smiled at her charge. He was becoming more vocal by the day. "You like the smell of the food?"

"Gaah...!" The baby wobbled for a moment and then flopped forwards at the waist where he sat. "Ab bab bab gah...!"

Some of his mother's angry words were still audible through the closed door. It couldn't be good for him to listen to! The blonde girl shook her head sadly. "Dinner will manage in its pots for a little while, I think. Come, Seamus – I will take you out to look at the cars again."

She bundled on both of their coats and carried him out through the tiny back yard to the narrow

entry that ran the length of the houses in the street. The opposing wall of the entry was lower: serving as the boundary to a thriving pay and display car park. As usual, Seamus seemed fascinated by the vehicles that came and went. A vivid orange and purple hover jeep caught his eye, and Heidi indulged him by following it along the entry to where the car park opened onto the road. The driver smiled and waved to them as she drove away. Seamus squealed happily and waved back. "Cah...!"

Fireworks echoed from somewhere along the street: around at the front of the houses. Heidi peered up at the sky, but could see nothing past the glow of the floodlights illuminating the car park. "Someone must not have finished celebrating the New Year, Seamus!"

She carried him around the corner and along past the side of the end house in search of a better view. A tide of pedestrians blocked their access to the front side of the houses. The street was always busy, and this evening was no exception. At first, it seemed like normal Dublin hustle and bustle, but then Heidi realised that the streetlights here were off and all the houses were in darkness. The people

rushing past them were fleeing in terror. One man gestured frantically at her. "Get that wee baby away out of here, love! There's lads with guns a few doors up!"

He was gone before she could respond. Heidi backed away from the main street. Home was only five minutes away, but was also the direction from where the shots had sounded. Gunfire, not fireworks – that had been the noise! She shivered and hurried into the car park via the pedestrian gate. "Everything is okay, Seamus. Don't be scared."

The baby cooed happily, oblivious to the danger. Heidi hoped that he stayed quiet. There was another entrance and exit point at the far side that would take them out a good distance away from whatever was happening. She would telephone Sarah once they were safe.

"Hey, Brooke, I'm glad you could make it!" Benny sat back from his spot at the coffee table and wiped off his nose and upper lip. "It ain't a party without you, hot stuff."

The bodyjacker tittered and accepted a glass from one of the other guests. "Ah wouldn't miss one of your parties for the world, Benny!"

“That’s my girl! Come with me – I uh, I got that new thing that you’ve been waiting on. It’s in my study.”

Brooke gulped back her drink on the way, tossing the empty glass aside as they entered the study. The new thing took her nearly an hour to earn, because fuck only knew what Benny had taken. Finally, he zipped up and dragged her by the elbow to his desk; draping her over the smooth synthetic mahogany. She moaned as the needle burrowed into the softest part of her, where nobody should spot the injection site. This drug was fast as fuck. She could feel it already: feel her power surging. “Oh, fuck yeah, Benny – that’s what ah wanted...!”

Her handler laughed as he helped her back to her feet and straightened her dress. “The lab says it takes twenty-four hours to load fully. After that, you’ll need three more shots every week to build up your levels. I’ll come over to your place with the stuff. It should only be about six weeks until you start to get the full benefit.”

“Wha’ do ah owe ya’....?” For some reason her speech centres always took the worst of it, no matter what booster C.A.K.E supplied. “How many

hours...?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head about that. Run along and enjoy the party. I'll let you know once you're paid up." Benny slapped her on the rump as he herded her out of his study. "Go and meet my new friends over there. Apparently, they're a real big deal in the Ukraine."

Her words had almost gone entirely now, but she could feel her mind strengthening. The confines of her brain already felt too small for the energy roiling within it. The temptation to seek out a host immediately flared. No – Benny wouldn't like it if she ran out on his party. She'd seen what happened to people who embarrassed him when he was entertaining.

The newcomers fed her a pill first: laughing as she gobbled it back like a piece of candy. Things were pretty much a blur from the point that it reached her stomach. Eventually, Benny scraped her up, stuffed her back into what was left of her dress, and poured her into a cab. "See you again soon, Brooke! Don't forget to tip the driver for me. He's another friend of mine."

The bodyjacker nodded, resigned. She hated it when Benny made her take people home, but the

E.V. GREIG

endgame was what mattered. He'd never give her the next shot if she refused. Without the new booster, all her planning would be for nothing: she'd never get to show Greg why he should pick her. *Ah just gotta bide my time...!*

Chapter Fourteen – Is What It Is

Kassie looked very different with her hair stripped back to its natural medium brown. Hull liked it: the almost twenty-one-year-old drew far less attention as a demurely styled brunette than she had as a bottle blonde wild child. The glasses that she wore at his instruction instead of her preferred contact lenses completed the look perfectly. The tiny camera embedded into the thick plastic frame was a handy bonus: ensuring that, if necessary, he could observe her every interaction. Not that she had tried sneaking off to any further unsanctioned social events. He had cured her of *that* annoying habit after the Valentine's Day fiasco. *A lesson that was long overdue, if you ask me.*

He rolled over in bed and kissed Bryce tenderly on the side of her neck until she woke. "You know you're my favourite, baby." The long central chain

of the handcuffs rattled quietly as he removed them from the drawer. "Kassie is just a project. Once she's thoroughly broken in, we'll find someone else to take her on, I promise."

"Oh, Greg – you know I won't fuss if you decide that you want us to keep her!" She stripped off her nightgown and rose obediently to her knees in the middle of their bed, as he positioned her arms above her head and looped the chain over the discreet hook embedded in their bedroom ceiling. "I trust you."

"That really means a lot to me, Bryce. Open up nice and wide now, that's my girl." He settled the steel bars of the gag into place between her perfect teeth and pulled the leather harness tight around the back of her skull. "Okay, I know we can stretch your jaw a little further than that."

She blinked twice when he reached the point that was comfortable for her. Hull stroked the mass of soft honey blonde hair fondly. "Come on, be brave. Just a tiny bit more, you can take it for me, can't you, baby?" Tears brimmed at the corners of her eyes as the gag widened inexorably to its maximum setting. "There now – that's perfect; such a good, obedient girl."

All that Bryce needed to do was stand up on the bed and she would immediately be able to free herself. The real control was inside her head. Mentally, emotionally, she was his and only his. The rest was merely window dressing, but fuck, what a window! On her knees, with her arms, torso, and mouth all stretched out to their absolute limits and her blue eyes bright with the pain – damn, she was hot! “I am so proud of you, Bryce. You’re the best investment that I ever made.”

They didn’t really talk about it much, but it was true. He had picked her out of a mob of twelve female inmates auctioned off by the State to whoever would pay their bail. The others were repeat offenders: junkies and petty thieves. In contrast, Bryce’s record was as pure as the rest of her. Immigration officers had picked her up when she attempted to check into a hotel without a valid travel visa. Her passport confirmed her as twenty-one years old and Canadian, but no family or friends had stepped forwards within the mandatory two-week holding period, marking her as fair game for the indentured servitude circuits. *Their loss was my gain. Besides, who needs family like that, anyhow?*

To be fair, the fines attached to entering the USA without the proper documentation were eye watering. That was without the charges for assaulting a federal employee, and then attempting to defame said man's character. The latter were what had shifted Bryce from facing only ten years in lieu of payment to life imprisonment with no possibility of parole. Little wonder that she hadn't trusted Cully. *Nice try at dividing us, Mike, but my girl knows how the system really works.*

He took a single tasteful photograph: focusing on how the lighting in the room painted a shadow of the chain along the middle of his fiancée's back. "I have never seen anyone look quite as beautiful as you do chained, baby."

At this setting, the gag rendered coherent speech virtually impossible, but she gave it her best shot nonetheless. "...'hank...oo...G'eg...!"

The distorted reply was still more than most people would have managed in her situation. Hull smiled and set the camera aside. The mattress creaked softly as he moved to stand in front of her: slowly unfastening the gag. It clinked when he dropped it on the rug. "You're welcome, Bryce. So would you like to show me properly just how much

you appreciated the compliment?"

She ducked her head to work, and he gripped the chain of the handcuffs to steady himself. This was her rodeo now: she already knew exactly what he expected from her. An exceptionally crude joke about the ultimate in hands' free entertainment came to mind, but he dismissed it. *You don't joke about something this perfect.*

The imagined gunshots woke Campbell again, just as they had every morning for the past two months. He lurched clear of sleep and the bed, dragging most of the quilt along with him as he went. Reality elbowed its way past the nightmare: six-fifteen according to the soft glow of the alarm clock. He sighed and slid his thumb across the screen to pre-empt it from sounding. *Almost time to get up anyhow.*

At the far side of the bed, Spence waited until he had begun to breathe again before speaking. "It wasn't your fault, Craig. Ireland is what it is."

"I know that." The former field operative pinched the bridge of his nose and squinted. "I do, really. It's just the nightmares that don't seem to understand."

"Evidently your subconscious is a sadistic git."

The non-gender pulled on their dressing gown and shoved their feet into the pair of oversized bunny slippers that he had bought them for Valentine's Day. "Tell him to let you alone for a bit. I'm going to wake Kathryn and Barnabas and check in on the nursery before I start breakfast."

"Okay."

Spence paused. "You could come with me and see whether any of the three smalls are awake for a cuddle yet."

"No." He shook his head. "I need to shower first: get my head fully clear. I'll get them changed and dressed after that."

"That works for me. Give me a shout once you're ready to come downstairs?"

"I can *manage* the stairs alone now, canary!"

"Not with two squirming infants and a proto-toddler in tow you shan't." Spence yawned. "At least ask the older pair to give you a hand. They should be up by then anyhow."

"All right, you win, I'll be sensible." Campbell limped towards the en-suite. "What train did Heidi say that she'd be on today?"

"The three-thirty, but it's likely to be delayed. She'll text us from the station when she arrives."

“Good, I’ll drive down and collect her.”

Their au pair had more than earned her holiday when she ran his son’s would-be kidnappers over with their own stolen hover van. That had been before she learned who the victim had been in the shooting: why poor Sarah wasn’t answering her phone. Most people would have quit after that. Heidi wasn’t most people, and seemed content that Bournemouth was far enough away from what had happened in Dublin to be safe. *I hope she’s right about that.*

Sarah’s extended family remained outraged at the ruling that young Seamus should live with his father, but Campbell didn’t care. His son was never going back to Ireland, not after how Sarah had died. *I can’t bring his mum back, and I might never get revenge for what those bastards did to her, but damn it I can at least keep Sam well clear of their madness!*

“Agent Hull, I require a moment of your time.” Volker led the way into her office and closed the door behind them. “It is my duty as your immediate superior to reprimand you for your recent treatment of Captain Kennedy.”

"Are you accusing me of having done something inappropriate, ma'am?"

"Such an accusation would be legally baseless. I merely wish to advise you of my evaluation of the facts as I see them."

"With all due respect, my personal life is none of your concern, Senior Agent Volker."

"Perhaps not this time, but what about your treatment of Oliver Dobos?"

Whoa, talk about a curveball! "I interrogated him as a potential asset for GETEC." *You know – the corporation that ANI abandoned me in.* "It was my job, it had absolutely nothing to do with my personal life."

"I have read the debriefing report. He and his companions took your son and Miss Shelby during their failed extraction of Dr Rosa. I believe that your subsequent treatment of them during their time in holding was in fact heavily influenced by your personal feelings."

The clock on the wall ticked quietly past ten am whilst Hull mulled over her reply. "This might be difficult for you to hear, but I think I was the first person to meet your ex-boyfriend's needs in quite a while. He's a self-loathing masochist, with a

submissive streak a mile wide, and serious trust issues. I only hope that he lucks out enough to have someone extremely responsible over him, because with the wrong partner he'll end up dead."

"In other words, you claim to have acted in his best interests."

"Don't try to pretend that you aren't concerned about him too. It can't be easy to remain objective about an ex-lover, especially not the father of your only child."

"You are attempting to elicit an emotional outburst from me. It will not work."

"Emotions aren't a crime, you know. All those big feelings that you're bottling up right now? They're *normal*."

"One might be excused for wondering just how latent your psionic potential truly is, Agent Hull."

"You ought to know better than me: you're the Level 12 here, after all, ma'am."

Something appeared to have lit in her at his taunt, and the pale eyes flashed. "Perhaps that is a topic for us to explore further."

"Well, I'm open to engaging in a little mutual exploration if you are. What do you say, Laine?"

"You are quite obviously bluffing. Nothing shall

come of this but a series of increasingly crude double entendres."

Hull smirked and stepped closer: deliberately crowding her. "Is that so, huh?"

"Yes."

"And what if I decide to take it further?"

"No more procrastinating." She pressed up against him: clenching her fists in his shirt as he claimed her mouth. "Take me now, or leave."

Hull paused for a moment and then nodded. "Red to stop, otherwise you take whatever I throw at you. Do you accept those rules?"

"Yes."

"Then kneel for me."

"No."

"Is that red no or regular no?"

"Make me if you can no."

"Well, aren't you just full of surprises?" He grabbed her by the hair and forced her down onto her knees. "What do you say to me now?"

"It would appear that ah have no choice but to obey your command, Sir."

Hull froze. "What did you just say?"

"Aw, damn. Ah slipped out of character!"

"Jesus Christ...!" He scrambled backwards,

staring in horror at the woman kneeling in front of him. "Brooke, is that you?"

She giggled and nodded shyly. "Ah guess the gig is up now, Greg! Can we keep playing for a little while longer? Ah was really getting into it!"

The ANI agent shook his head. "How long have you been controlling her?"

Brooke shrugged her puppet's shoulders. "Ah jacked her whilst she was out running yesterday morning. She sure does *love* to run! Wait, should ah have hit on you sooner? Is that what's wrong, Greg? Did ah drag it out too long?"

"You just attempted to trick me into sexually assaulting my boss! That *wasn't* okay, Brooke. How did you even manage to control her?"

"Aw shucks, that was easy, Greg! Ah'm way more powerful than she is now. C.A.K.E made sure of that. They gave me drugs to make me stronger. Those crappy little discs can't keep me out no more either!"

"And you used all that power to do *this*?"

"Ah wanted to get back in touch with you."

"Why didn't you just pick up the phone?"

She blinked. "You mean you would've talked to me if ah'd called?"

"Of course I would, Brooke." Hull wondered if Volker knew what was happening. *Can she hear us? Will she remember afterwards, like Pembleton did?* "I've been very concerned about you. Why don't you tell me where you really are so that I can come and get you?"

"You...you really mean that, Greg?"

"Absolutely, Brooke – here, give me your address. You go home, get your real body ready for me. I'll smooth things over here with Volker."

"Okay, Greg!" She snatched the tablet from him and eagerly tapped out an address. "Ah'll see you there!"

"I'm looking forwards to it, Brooke." He kept the smile pinned on his face until Volker groaned and staggered upright. "Senior Agent Volker, is that really you this time? Are you back?"

"Yes, I am." She nodded slowly. "That was both illuminating and decidedly unpleasant."

"Ma'am, I genuinely didn't know that...!"

"Stop wasting time, Agent Hull. I was fully cognizant of everything that occurred, including your bargain with Dr Rawlings."

"So, you don't blame me?"

"In some regards, you were as much a victim as I

was. In others, not so much, however now is not the time to debate it. You have succeeded in locating the bodyjacker. We must not miss this opportunity to capture her."

Chapter Fifteen – Zero Signal

“Wow, Kellie, this place is super cute!” Tanya followed Rosa through her flat to the tiny kitchenette. “So, I brought coffee cake, and Whitby sent another holographic puzzle. How are you holding up?”

“I suppose that I can’t complain.” The technician shrugged and busied herself with the kettle. “One sub dermal tracking device is much the same as any other, really.”

The younger woman frowned. “Well at least British Intelligence don’t rig their ID chips to explode if their employees piss them off!”

“Neither did Mr Hull, not that there’s anyone around here that seems to care about the truth. Whoever murdered Dr Jenkins, it wasn’t him. Although it’s moot, given that she’s been back from the dead for well over a year now anyhow.”

“Are you totally sure you don't have Stockholm syndrome? Because it kind of sounds like you're defending that creep again.”

Rosa snorted. “I'm not defending anyone: I'm just fed up with being monitored constantly by my supposed friends! Why else do you think that Nathaniel asked you to check up on me today? No one here trusts me. At the best, they think I'm mentally disturbed, and at the worst...well. You try having to go to court to prove yourself human. See how it impacts on *your* positive outlook.”

“I thought that was only a formality?”

“They want me to agree to take the bloody Turing test! If I pass, they'll consider my application to be deemed human. It could be months, maybe even years until there's a final verdict. Frankly I was better off with GETEC.”

Tanya shook her head firmly. “You don't mean that! You're just stressed out, that's all...!”

“Shut up!” Her host slammed the plate she was holding against the edge of the worktop. Shards of blue and white pottery rattled in all directions. “Stop telling me how to think – I've had enough of being told what I'm supposed to feel! I'm a person, not a machine!”

"I didn't mean to...!"

"Oh, you have no idea what you meant! You're nothing more than a silly girl caught up in what she imagines to be a great big adventure. Well, let me finally tell you what none of the rest of them has had the integrity to mention. The job that you've been playing at doing *isn't* an adventure. It's the grimmest sort of life that anyone might be unfortunate enough to fall into – nothing but lies and death and then yet more bloody lies about where the bodies are hidden. If you have even an ounce of common sense then you'll be on the next available flight home to America, praying all the while that nobody here decides to make you stay!"

For a long moment, the young handler simply gaped at her. Finally, she seemed to find her voice again. "Okay...um...so this job that you think I'm so totally naive about...? Yeah, well here's the thing, Kellie. All the while that you were over in Miami running your department and double bluffing everybody to suit your own needs, I was here training. I had some of the best teachers in the world, too, and I'm pretty sure that they would've told me if I was completely crap!"

"Oh, don't start...!"

"No, you don't start!" Tanya stumbled on with her tirade; fighting back her tears. "I *can't* go home. Mr Hull made sure of that when he had me declared legally insane and told all my relatives that I'd been institutionalised! Oh, and for the record, those are only the relatives that GETEC *didn't* already murder. My parents are dead, and that...that asshole you keep defending...? He's the one who covered up what really happened to them! Because that's what he does best: he covers stuff up and he recruits people. He forced me to join GETEC, he forced Ashley to join it, he *tried* to force Spence, and I'm pretty fucking positive that if you weren't so busy feeling sorry for yourself, then *you'd* remember that side of him too. Who knows – *maybe* it would even occur to you that he's not actually going to be any different working for ANI. He'll just be signing his reports as *Agent* Hull instead of *Supervisor*."

She turned on her heel and stomped towards the front door of the flat. Rosa slumped backwards against her refrigerator. "Tanya, please don't leave! I didn't mean to lose my temper. I'm sorry for snapping at you...!"

"Bite me!" The door slammed shut behind the

young American in exile. *Some lunch that turned out to be!* Hoisting her oversized purse up onto her shoulder, she stormed down the communal hallway to the lift and jabbed the call button. "Ugh, hurry up!"

"Hey there, sweetheart – what's with all the rush?" A tall, dark-haired man – with what *had* to count as movie star good looks – had emerged from the emergency stairwell. "Oh, I've got some bad news about the elevator, by the way."

"What's wrong with it?" There was something vaguely familiar about him, but she couldn't quite place it. *He sounds Californian. Maybe he's on TV or something.* "Is it broken down?"

"Nope, it's not that bad!" He smiled and lined up beside her as the lift doors finally opened. "I'm afraid it's just crammed full of these heavily armed guys with your picture right at the top of their things to do lists! Ain't life a bitch sometimes, Tanya?"

She ducked past him towards the stairwell, pulling out her phone. Another squad of goons blocked her flight roughly half a second before she realised that she had zero signal. "Oh crap...!" There were now twelve semi-automatic guns trained on her. "Okay, I give up! You got me; I surrender:

there's no need to shoot. Who *are* you anyhow?"

"Damn, I almost forgot about that! We never actually met before, but I've spent so long reading about you that I feel like we're already old friends!" The ringleader gestured sharply to his minions. "Secure the asset, men." His too perfect smile widened as he watched them duct tape her mouth and secure her wrists and ankles with plastic zip ties. "My name's Carson Howard. You might remember me from your internship with GETEC, but I have another kickass start up that I'm running now – goes by the acronym of C.A.K.E. Maybe you've already heard of us? More importantly, and I really *can't* stress this aspect enough, princess: *I'm* the guy who gets to decide whether you and Kellie live or die."

"So, to clarify, when you said that we were going to *capture* the bodyjacker, what you really meant was that you planned on burning out her psionic nodes with a single thought?" Hull covered the drooling wreck that had been Brooke Rawlings with an emergency blanket. "What happened to all those rules about federal employees and psionic power?"

Volker continued floating calmly at the

epicentre of her pyrotemporal bubble. "Are you not comfortable with my chosen course of action, Agent Hull?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not." He shook his head. "Whilst I'm not criticising your methods per se, that's mostly only because you fucking *terrify* me. You sent me in here to distract this woman and then you reduced her to a vegetative state. Frankly, I would have appreciated a heads up."

"Advising you of my true intentions was too great a risk. Dr Rawlings might have plucked the information from your mind."

"Oh well that's rich, given that you're the one she possessed, not me!"

"I can only presume that you have forgotten the metaphorical lobsterpot method suggested by Dr Whitby's robot."

Hull blinked. "Wait – you mean that you *deliberately* allowed her to possess you?"

"Yes. I deemed that it was the safest and most efficient way to uncover her motivations. I was correct: she is merely obsessed with you."

"Don't you mean that she was obsessed?" To his surprise, he found that he almost pitied the bodyjacker now. *Well, aside from her having*

endangered Fisher. "I'm fairly certain that you've permanently broken what remained of her already drug addled brain."

"The neural shock will pass soon enough, Agent Hull. Dr Rawlings shall recover fully, given time and appropriate medical and psychiatric treatment."

"I guess that's good news." Something nagged at Hull's gut. "But if you suspected that she was obsessed with me, and you still let her possess you, then just how far did you plan on letting things go between us? What if she hadn't slipped up?"

"She did slip up." The copper haired woman's features remained impassive as she replied. "It is illogical and emotionally unhealthy to dwell upon what might have been."

"I...I literally have no idea how I should take that statement. Oh, and another thing, just how powerful *are* you? I mean if Dr Rawlings was right about the boosters taking her beyond the scope of a Level 12 and you still took her out, then where does that leave you?"

"There is only one option." Volker's bubble finally dissipated. She landed gracefully: a hawk retaking its favourite roost. "I shall surrender myself to the Psionic Investigative Department when we turn over

Dr Rawlings. Any reassessment of my capabilities shall be up to them."

"I don't like that plan." PID was infamous for its treatment of the people it policed. "Rawlings is a dangerously unstable individual. You did what had to be done to stop her."

"It is irrelevant. I have broken the law and there is no option to disguise that fact."

He snorted. "Will you quit trying to martyr yourself already? I won't tell PID if you don't, and it's not as though there are any other reliable witnesses to what happened here. Nobody's going to care what Rawlings says. For all anyone else knows, the same people who boosted them in the first place wiped out her psionics. That's what my report's going to indicate anyhow."

"Why are you attempting to protect me?"

"No offence, ma'am but you have a kid with one of Britain's most destructive secret agents, and he already knows my home address. I'd prefer to avoid giving him any excuses to drop by for a visit."

Spence paused in helping Campbell with unloading Heidi's luggage from the boot and frowned at the screen of their phone. "Craig, can

you and Miss Hedturner manage the children alone for a bit?"

"I expect so, canary. Why, what's going on?"

"They need me back in London earlier than planned. Miss Darnell's gone dark and Jolley's reacting accordingly. I'm sure you can hazard the knock-on effect."

He nodded and snatched a kiss. "At least if you leave now, you'll miss the worst of the evening traffic. Drive safe, Housekeeping."

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