

Mid-Life Crisis Syndrome

For my parents,
for making sure I grew up normal
so I could write about all kinds of awful things
happening to other people.
Thanks! (And, sorry I don't visit more often...)

Mid-Life Crisis Syndrome is copyright © 2011 Julie Miyamoto.
All rights reserved.

No portion of this work may be used, reproduced,
or transmitted in any form or by any means
without the express written permission from
the copyright holder except for purposes of review
according to United States copyright law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
places, and events used in this book are the products
of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual non-public domain
events, locales, or persons (living or dead), without
satiric intent is purely coincidental.

Published on demand through Lulu Enterprises, Inc. (Lulu.com)
First Edition print release 11 January 2011.

Free preview PDF edition available through <http://www.sgppresents.com>.
For more information, contact sgppresents@yahoo.com.

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction to Application 5

2. Specific Aims 9

3. Background and Significance 19

4. Preliminary Studies 29

5. Research Design and Methods 42

6. Milestones 54

7. Timelines 71

8. Literature Cited 87

9. Human Subjects 102

10. Inclusion of Women 113

11. Inclusion of Children 125

12. Select Agent Research 140

13. Biohazards 151

14. Consortium/Contractual Arrangements 164

15. Multiple PI Leadership Plan 180

16. Data Sharing Plans 191

17. Resource Sharing Plans 202

18. Letters of Support 214

1. Introduction to Revised Application/Response to Critiques 226

Author's Note 228

Pronunciation Key 231

1. Introduction to Application

"Is this really necessary?" Dr. Knight asked. "The effects have been thoroughly documented over the years, with countless studies supporting the theoretical cause of the virus. It's more inconceivable to think that someone has *not* heard of it than has."

Dr. Falchion raised his hand to interrupt. "This meeting is a special hearing for the expedition of a highly dubious procedure your consortium is proposing. Considering the delicate state of the test subject in question, we are obligated to ensure the greatest care is taken to minimise damage done to it. A complete summary of the significance of your proposed project as well as detailed documentation of your research plan should not be too much to ask and, if proven accurate, should corroborate the findings of other studies."

Dr. Knight sighed. "If I must—my good fellows, members of the Board... In the late twenties, a controversial study conducted by the NCI to develop a new strain of virus as a cure for cancer instead created a substrain now known, perhaps mistakenly, as *Virus securus*. While initially seeming to have no side effects of significant consequence, the *Virus securus* strain has since been documented worldwide in direct connection with the exact downturn of one's lifetime: what we will henceforth refer to as 'post-median lifespan' in this and subsequent studies.

"The infection of *Virus securus* in an individual is most evident at the instant post-median lifespan begins and has been regularly observed as the formation of a dark indelible circle in the middle of a person's forehead for those with fair skin, or a pale circle with dark skin—both appear on all infected, in fact, but the higher-contrast circle is the more visible of the two.

"The connection between the appearance of a mark and that person's time of death has been noted most convincingly in premature newborns and other young children with terminal illnesses. In each documented instance, the time of post-median marking has been retroactively recognised as such following death. In studies observing post-median lifespan identification marking, time of death has been predicted to the day, if not the hour. The only known exception to this theory has been the infection of a previously uninfected person whose post-median lifespan had begun prior to infection. In these cases, marking occurs after the same fashion but only serves to identify that the person has already lived for more than half of his or her life.

"The infection of *Virus securus* in pre-median life is commonly detected by testing a blood, skin, or saliva sample. For the most part, this is unnecessary, as *Virus securus* is transmittable by the slightest of living skin contact. Due to this, quarantine efforts have been difficult if not impossible:

only a few remote reserves barred from the populace remain a temporary haven from the societal impact of precognitive 'deathdate' forecasts. As a side note emphasising the significance of eradicating Virus securus, legions of what have been called 'psycho-terrorists' have been threatening to infect the remaining quarantined peoples and thwart what little headway science has over the virus.

"Currently, no known cure or vaccine has been discovered, and it is hypothesised from observations in prior T301 studies that creating a vaccine for Virus securus may be as plausible as creating a vaccine for getting wet. Nevertheless, one—and only one—sample has been acquired that, despite the sample's age and repeated exposure, may be immune to Virus securus, showing no signs of post-median lifespan marking or even infection: sample T301-SO7270215.

"What our consortium has observed in preliminary studies of T301-SO7270215 is an anomalous DNA sequence that could prove to be vital to discovering the true nature of the Virus securus strain, as well as a means of possibly countering its effects. For this reason, we are proposing to—"

Dr. Falchion raised his hand to interrupt again. "What is the reason for seeking to cure the virus?"

Dr. Knight faltered at the question. "Ah—begging your pardon, sir, but – are you serious?"

Dr. Falchion responded, "Science cannot afford to assume *anything*. To cover all our bases—for the record—please explain the specific aims of your consortium's effort to eradicate the virus. You stated that there are no side effects of significance other than a permanent mark on one's forehead. How is this a detriment to society worth spending millions, if not billions, in government funds to counteract?"

Dr. Knight seemed flustered but continued. "Besides the potential for yet-undiscovered side effects to exist, advance knowledge of one's time of death is not a boon to society. The parents of the aforementioned children who died in infancy are caused undue stress at learning their children have only months, sometimes *days* to live. This in turn creates stresses that affect the overall quality of life of all of society, perpetuating the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' that inevitably shortens the average individual's lifespan."

Dr. Falchion did not seem convinced. "How can this be, when each such documented onset of 'post-median lifespan' corresponds to a predicted 'deathdate' with accuracy? Does such predestination not preclude any such attempt at modification of time of death, regardless of what an individual or individuals might do to try to change it, consciously or unconsciously?"

Here, Dr. Burton stepped in for Dr. Knight. "Several other T301 studies have researched instances of known sabotage. A jealous wife knows her husband will live for ten more years but wants to hurry the process and attempts to murder him, only to put him into a ten-year coma. Alternately, a paranoid father puts his child under house arrest, only for the girl to die from an unforeseen carbon monoxide poisoning. More attempts may have been

made, but of the verifiable cases, all efforts to change the date have failed. The key in each instance is the deathdate was *known*. The only 'cure' for such a mishandling of this knowledge is not to know it, or to hide it once known. It isn't beneficial—or fair—for the greater part of humanity to live in denial and fear in this way."

Dr. Knight resumed the project narrative. "It is for this reason we are proposing to study what it is that makes the sample T301-SO7270215 resistant to the Virus securus strain, and why there is no evidence of post-median lifespan spotting or other symptoms of infection. The Biomedical Engineering Core of Vanderbilt has developed a new technology that will study the sample record and—"

Dr. Frehley interrupted without raising his hand. "Record? I was led to believe this study would require human subjects research protocols, not database management."

Dr. Knight appeared impatient but was quick to respond. "Genetic record, on the molecular level, may hold the key—"

Dr. Frehley was incredulous. "Genetic memory? Impossible."

Dr. Knight, if livid, did her best to remain calm. "With all due respect—sir—science is not an unyielding set of rules. We do not know everything that is possible, nor do we know whether anything is impossible. What is instinct, but a kind of genetic memory? Why is all life predisposed to behave in the same way even without being told to do it?"

"Even if I have not convinced you that our research is important to post-median lifespan and other studies of Virus securus, the information that can be gleaned from the molecular-level genetic mapping of sample T301-SO7270215 will prove invaluable in even more routine genetic studies. The mitochondrial record alone would advance analysis of the Human Genome Project by leaps and bounds."

Dr. Scott raised another question. "Is it not possible to conduct this test with a sample extraction?"

Dr. Burton replied, "No more than a blind extraction could be done from an archaeological dig. The location within the complete sample may prove as important as the map itself."

Dr. Falchion glanced at the other board members but did not speak. As if having read their minds, he gave a hesitant frown of disapproval. "At this time, I am not wholly convinced that the project should be approved at all, much less expedited. We will convene on the matter and get back to you by the end of the week with our response. Sample T301-SO7270215 is far too costly to release to mere genetic mapping. Your consortium is still free to pursue research on other test samples you have been granted, however. If you have any significant findings that will affect this application, please let us know again."

Dr. Knight and Dr. Burton seemed put off, but they conceded they could not change the Board's decision. That is why we must seek alternate funding, Vic. I will be counting on you and Iggy to get in contact with Dr.

Metalion on the EAB to find out what it is we still need to do to convince the IAB to green light our proposal.

In addition, we may be able to appease their expense concerns by recruiting Hunter on a temporary basis, as he is seeking early retirement and will not have exorbitant salary requirements, besides being able to tap into his vast well of knowledge in decrypting the data. At the very least, it would be most convenient if you could attend the next such hearing, as difficult as it must be to allocate travel expenses in the budget.

Incidentally, the initial test on our secondary sample provided some interesting results. It will take some time to make sense of it all and tie it into our hypothesis, but I have strong hopes for the project. If you get a chance, can you go over the records and try to organise them in the archive?

Thanks,
LB

P.S. I know it's the height of unscientific, but would using 'mid-life crisis syndrome' have a better effect? All of the volunteers call it MLCS—thank you, mainstream media—and give me funny looks whenever I call it 'post-median lifespan' and its indicators.

Attachment: 1 T301 JK01212009

2. Specific Aims

It felt like one of those days, which was happening with greater frequency these days—one of those days when it paid to call in sick and bribe the doctor to make up some infectious disease that would get me out of a week of work. Everyone else was doing it, so why not? The problem was, unlike the millions of other bosses in the world I could have had instead, Rush wouldn't have any of it.

Rush, my mentor and fountain of strength, believed staunchly in the new invincibility of humanity in having preset, unalterable deathdates. The pre-MLCS days when people lived in fear of looming death from something inane like the flu or anthrax were over—we only had crippling, debilitating injury to fear. Yeah, that comforts me a lot, sir. Basically, it meant I would have to find a pretty damn good doctor to lie through his teeth for a day off of work for me, and even then my boss's skepticism radar was fine-tuned for that to where, if I didn't want to work, I'd just have to find a new job.

I didn't hate my job, of course. It just wasn't easy to find a lot of satisfaction in it when, fundamentally, all I did was watch over the outback from afar. My job function in this regard wasn't as evident as, say, working in customs would be. Consequently, sometimes I found myself almost-but-not-quite-able to comprehend the impact of my work on the protection of the quarantine zone. If I hadn't been infected, I could've been on border patrol, but that was denied to me long ago. I suppose they had their own problems in being a colony of prisoners yet again—oh, irony of ironies—but I still would have loved to visit the outback at least once in my lifetime. Instead, like 99.98% of the population, I had free reign of the rest of the world at the expense of getting to know the exact time I would die.

Perhaps it was just disgust at MLCS that made me long to see the outback, to be among those with the freedom from having their lives etched in stone, or perhaps it was being an expatriated orphaned Brit instead of an Aussie. All I knew was the outback called to me for help, begged me to do my job, kept me dragging myself out of bed in the morning with the hope beyond hopes that someday there would be a cure—that even in another lifetime I might one day visit that mystical land of folklore. The district was nice and had its own draws, but speeding down the interstate on my chopper and breathing in fresh smog couldn't compare to what I'd only read about of that wild, unreachable continent.

My intuition was humming again. Something was in the air, and it wasn't good—something besides the smog and chain-smokers huffing away in their convertibles with the tops down. I hoped that the whiff of evil I

scented wasn't something to do with who I was afraid it would be, yet that was who always ended up at the heart of it whenever I got this feeling... I got a call at the 495 branch southbound and pulled over to answer. Rush, of course. It's always Rush—Crystal's been swamped for the last who knows how long, oddly enough, and sometimes it's actually difficult to remember that the last time I saw her was seven months ago, quite a feat for someone with my knack for memory.

His voice was nigh inaudible over the sounds of traffic. Over the grinding of a car's failing brakes, I relayed to Rush where I was and that he'd have to shout. "I SAID THEY NEED YOU AT KENSINGTON," his gruff, throaty voice resonated over the tinny speaker, something that never failed to impress me. It was part of why I put up with those outlandish beliefs of his I would find exasperating coming from anyone else, that he otherwise was the very model of a role model and I found myself regularly unable to deny his wishes.

Still, it took me a moment to register what he had said. "I'm going home?" I asked, excited at the idea of getting out of the country and back to my motherland.

There was a pause spattered with static. "UM—HIGH SCHOOL."

My heart sank. Why did I let my hopes get up like that? Of *course* it was the high school. I hadn't had to go often, which was why it wasn't the first place to come to mind. Still, I suppose I should have known... In fact, it was embarrassing once I realised the significance. "Okay," I replied, "I'll go talk to her. Did they say what it was about?"

"—SHE'S SPOTTING."

Great. Just what I needed to top off a lousy week. I imagined Rush talking to her, convinced he could guilt the gods themselves into shaping up, but she was my charge, not his. Too bad—if there was anyone who needed a stable, authoritative father figure right now...

I groaned, but he must have heard me anyway. "I KNOW, SORRY. THERE'S NOTHING THAT NEEDS YOUR ATTENTION HERE AS MUCH AS SHE DOES. TAKE A HALF DAY—I DON'T MIND."

It would have been nice if that had meant taking a half-day instead of spending the time at the high school instead. "I promise to wrap this up as soon as I can," I assured him, perhaps more to assure myself. "Let me know if anything new develops."

"OF COURSE."

"10-4."

Even so, hearing Rush's voice comforted me and snapped me to my senses, my version of coffee in the morning. He was all I had ever known of a real guardian figure, and for that I felt indebted to him. As much as I felt I might deserve it now and again, playing hookey would make me feel bad even on the rare occasion when he said he didn't mind and meant it. It wasn't as though I couldn't buckle down and get the whole day's work done in half the time, either—I just needed the motivation.

I took the ramp for Democracy and circled to get on eastbound for Kensington. It was already nearing midday when I arrived, and first lunch was starting when I entered the school, students hustling in and out of class, to and from the cafeteria. The occasional glance shot my way—they must not see my type around there often—but otherwise I headed straight to the administration desk without particular incident.

"Hello again, Jeanne," I greeted.

"Oh!" she replied, an astonished look on her face though she should have been expecting me. "It's been a while since I last saw you, Anna!"

"Well, to be honest, I would have liked it to have been longer."

Jeanne laughed. I hoped she hadn't forced it. "It does seem that you come back here whenever there's a problem, doesn't it? It'd be nice if you'd come by sometime to—I don't know—visit me?"

I shrugged noncommittally. "Maybe when the world's safe I'll have the chance. It's just one thing after another, lately." She looked upset by my answer, so I tried my best to smile, but it felt so – fake, with the way I'd been feeling that day. "So, uh... What did she do this time? I heard something about spotting?"

Her pleasant demeanor gave way to disappointment. "Not exactly. No one's sure what this is about specifically. We have Saga in the nurse's office with Miss Rodin, but she won't discuss what happened with anyone."

I had a sinking feeling that I knew what it was all about, but it was hard to say whether anyone else needed to know. "Well, I'll see if I can talk some sense into her."

Jeanne nodded, and I hurried to the nurse's office. I didn't know what had happened in there before I arrived, but the nurse seemed to be at her wit's end, her voice as though shrieking as quietly as she could manage.

"Oh!" the woman gasped when she saw me enter. "You must be Mrs. O'Malley?"

I blanched in shock, biting back my disappointment. "No, I'm – her big sister Anna."

"I'm sorry! I didn't..." She shook her head as though fighting back a protest. "I guess I was expecting one of her parents to see her."

"...it's kind of complicated," I said, quickly changing the subject. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I don't know..." She seemed despondent. "I'm just an intern! I can do bruises and scrapes, not psychotherapy. This is so far out of my league that I just don't know what to do."

"Well, thank you for trying," I offered, glancing at Saga. The girl sitting on the examination bench was sullen, with straight blue hair draped over her face that parted just enough to reveal an unconvincing dark smudge in the center of her forehead. "Do you mind if I speak with her alone?"

"By all means." Miss Rodin gave a weak grin. "I just started here this quarter and am already failing at my job."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," I muttered, trying to be supportive

but not eager to stand there talking all day. "You know how young adults are at their age."

"Mmn. Well, good luck." With that, she stepped out of the office, closing the door to give us some privacy.

"Saga Anne *Rockford*," I snapped as I turned to face her, hoping the authoritative approach would work this time. "What do you mean by this?" I strode over to where she was seated, wiping my finger over the smudge on her forehead. "Are you trying to scare everyone with your dramatics?"

"You wouldn't understand," she mumbled under her breath.

"Try me."

It wasn't clear if she hesitated out of defiance or embarrassment. I had been a live-in babysitter for her family for nine years, to the point where we could have been mistaken as sisters by blood, but in none of that time would I have realised Saga would develop into a problem child. Her mother had more often been away than at home, but at least she had had a mother, and one who had loved her dearly. And her father...

Ugh. Nine years of memories flooded my mind, and I couldn't keep up the tough act. The Rockfords had had it harder than most, even ignoring that I'd had it even harder and still made it this far. I would simultaneously want to join their family and be grateful I wasn't obligated.

"How's Epic?" I ventured.

"That's exactly the problem!" she hissed, gnashing her teeth at me as she struck the examination table in frustration. "How do I have a *life* with him around? I might as well be resigned to *death*! I single-handedly keep our family afloat, and what does it get me? Nothing but being home-bound and a miserable old maid!" Her hands gesticulated with wild abandon as she unleashed her pent-up anger.

Though I sympathised with her, I was also furious at her outburst. "It's not his fault—"

"Do I know that? Do I know he's not just doing all of this to get attention, or that he chose to be born?"

In disgust, I grabbed her shoulders, mustering all my willpower to keep from shaking her. "You do *not* speak about your brother that way! If you expect to be treated as an adult, you must *act* like one."

Defiant—must have been defiant. "Maybe I chose to be this way and grow to be emotionally-stunted forever," she retorted.

"People do *not* choose to have a hard life!"

"*Didn't* you?"

I had to fight myself to abolish the urge to turn this into a contest of wills—that wasn't the reason I was there. Saga was suffering from caretaker burnout, that was clear, but I had figured she knew how well I understood her circumstances. Was I the only one who considered myself an honorary member of the family after all this time? I had comforted them and given what help I could through her brother's diagnosis, her grandparents' deaths, her mother's—

What was going through her mind then was unfathomable. I stopped showing emotion at that point, figuring maybe I stood a better chance if I accepted her rejection of me as a guardian figure, letting go of her arms as I turned away in disappointment at my lack of authority. "I suppose I would be offended if I thought you meant that," I droned, putting the ball in her court to reveal her intentions.

If she felt bad about her behaviour, I couldn't tell. If anything, she most likely would feel too proud—maybe embarrassed—to admit she was in the wrong. Par for the course for adolescents.

"I just figured – with all that I've done for your family over the years, I thought I was more than just someone who watched you whenever your parents needed a sanity check. I wanted to be more than that—less a guardian and more a friend. Doesn't matter *now*, does it? I'm just another clueless adult who has no idea how difficult it is to play second fiddle to someone else's needs."

"Hmph."

The lecture didn't seem to be working. Fine, I could play hardball. "I just want to understand. You say I don't understand, after all, but I *want* to understand. How does spotting help you? Explain to me what the idea of entering half-life does to help you cope with your brother's difficulties. Even if you spotted this instant, for real, it's not like you'd die tomorrow."

"It'd be just like dying," she moped.

"What, being an old maid?" I felt offended again, as though her remark was a thinly-veiled insult directed at me for living the way I did, but I reminded myself that she couldn't know my lifestyle choices just from the limited contact we'd had in recent years.

She looked up at me this time, tears welling in her eyes. "You don't know what it's like having any boy who might take the slightest interest in me be turned off once he sees the life I have to live! School is the only time that I'm free, but I can't have a life when I'm in class, and it's only going to get worse when he gets older and we can't afford assistance! I can't devote my life to raising a big baby, and *Pop* can't get a better paycheck for—"

I cupped a hand over her mouth, still fighting back my irritation. "Well, your defeatism won't do anything for you, will it? Hey, why not dye your hair black, wear chains and too much eyeliner, and compose poetry about death, gloom, and emptiness while you're at it?"

She pushed my hand away. "I like my hair blue, thank you."

"Listen—you're *fifteen*. Life isn't lived all at once. Don't worry about dating even half as much as you should be worrying about grades. Too many people who get married straight out of high school—"

"*Married!*" Saga cried in indignation. "Who wants to be married at fifteen? I just want to have some fun while I can, which feels like *never!* It's not fair!"

I didn't know how to counter this, given how much she did between school and home life. "What about going out with your family? You think

that's not fun?"

"...you're kidding, aren't you?"

"We went out all the time when you were littler, and you said it was like vacation."

Saga scoffed in indignation. "Well, since then, we haven't gone out or done anything of the sort."

I stared at her in shock. "Not even to a movie?"

"Epic hates it outside. Maybe you haven't noticed."

That was new behaviour. "So – what, he's homebound?"

"And worse—neither of us can leave him alone for long periods of time, or he suffers from feelings of abandonment. Forget the 'family night out' thing."

"You can't get anyone to watch him for a bit?"

"How?" she protested. "And who? He can't stand strangers, even my friends, and what few assistants he likes we can't afford to hire anymore! If Pop can't afford the upkeep of the *house* as is, how is everything going to get better without me around to help?"

Though I had obvious reservations about returning for good, I could still do in a pinch. "I'll help, of course."

The look in her eye was puzzling. "Not for long, you won't."

My blood ran cold. "W-what's that supposed to mean?"

"You mean you really *aren't* kidding?" She gave me a patronising frown. "Epic doesn't want to be around you, either."

Another slap in the face. I stared at her, unable to process the idea. He *had* seemed more distant as he got older, but I had figured it was just a phase... "—at all?"

"Nope. I mean, I'm just the messenger here, but – nope."

Besides having a broken heart at the bald-faced rejection, I was now completely at odds for how to help them. I'd been there for Mr. Rockford's parents' deaths, and Mrs. Rockford's parents had passed before the children were born, but certainly they had to have other family, even ones that maybe I didn't know about...? *Anyone* they could ask? "What about your nan?"

Saga shrugged in defeat, furrowing her brow. "Nan's getting old, and she's still disabled. We've had her in assisted living since a little after you moved out. How can we ask her when she's already on a fixed budget?"

"What about just for advice? When was the last time you just talked with her?" I crossed my arms. "A lot of people are more than willing to help, but we don't know when you need it unless you ask."

Her face crumpled into a familiar expression, one of wanting help but not wanting to admit she needed it. There had to be a way to give their family a hand without hurting their pride too much...

I snapped my fingers. "I have an idea. What if I took you out to do anything you wanted for a night—just the two of us? Nothing too expensive or anything illegal, of course – but what would you want to do if you had a night free of caretaking?"

It was just like watching a transformation: the despair in her eyes changed to excitement in the wink of an eye. She grinned at me like a child producing a long list of birthday presents she had spent her every waking moment picking out. "Next month is this concert. Can you get tickets?"

A concert seemed safe enough, and well within what I was willing to pay for the mental well-being of a blossoming young woman. I grinned back with pleasure. I'd never attended a concert myself before, so it would be an enjoyable experience for both of us. "Who's playing?"

"Vice."

I nearly blacked out from the shock, grabbing my chest in reflex. The time it took for me to remember how to breathe was agonising.

"What's wrong?" Saga looked surprised, then concerned, then upset as she read between the lines. "Don't tell me that *you* hate him, too!" She stomped her foot in frustration. "Every adult I know complains about what a bad influence he is! I thought you'd be different!"

I choked back the impulse to expel the contents of my stomach and struggled to regain my composure. My eyes teared up, and my hands tingled with ghost pains, which didn't subside until after I took a deep breath to calm myself. How did a simple talk turn into a heart attack in the making? "If – you already know that he's a bad influence," I started, in as neutral a tone as I could manage, "then I'm not sure what else I could tell you."

"You know him, don't you?" Saga guessed. "I saw you on the telly at his hearing last year—"

"For *drug possession!* Saga, this is—" My head ached trying to envision anything that was a worse idea, but no amount of explaining was going to get through to someone whose heart was set on this kind of idolatry. "Okay," I tried, repressing my desire to scream, "forget for now that I was trying to put him in gaol then. Why do you want to see him?"

She blinked at me. "What?"

"I want to know what the appeal is. If we're going to a concert, it's my treat, so I want to know exactly what I'm paying for."

"Well..." she hinted, "you know..."

The sharp blush on her face revealed her embarrassment. "Oh," I muttered in aggravation. "Fun."

"What?"

I threw my hands in the air in exasperation. "If you liked, say, his *music*, why would you be embarrassed over that? You want to go see him in concert just because he's *attractive?*"

"Why not?" Saga hissed. "I can't like who I like?"

"I just..." No. There was no point in telling her how bad he was for her—even if they were at all likely to meet, much less become an item—but there was nowhere else for the conversation to go except downhill. "You know, I figured you had better taste. What's wrong with – oh..." I waved my hand trying to imagine my best matchmaking effort. "Phillip Ellerton?"

"*Phillip?*" she snorted in derision. "*Who* gets to laugh about bad

taste, then?"

"What's wrong with him? 1. He's your age. 2. He's also on the Honour Roll. 3. He's a sweetheart and a gentleman."

"4. He's *dull*."

I rolled my eyes at her shallowness. "Maybe I should ask him out, then, if you don't want him."

"Sounds good to me."

I sighed, still not sure what to do. At least I knew what would make her feel better, and it was a month away yet... "Well, I can't just take you to the concert in good conscience, feeling as I do, but let me talk with your father first. I will abide by whatever he says. How's that?"

Both Saga and I knew the answer, that her father wouldn't exactly approve of her choice. Yet the caveat was my best hope of getting out of the unexpected badness of what was otherwise, I had thought, a good idea—also something both of us knew. No one would fault me for the move; she was a minor, and I wasn't her mother. Surely she would understand the position I was in?

"I guess that's only *fair*," she mumbled, pouting. "You promised, though! If Pop says I can go..."

"Of course," I agreed, feeling that sinking feeling in my gut anyway. "Proper adults keep their promises."

The silence was thick enough to cut with a knife, which I assumed to mean we were in agreement, even if it probably wasn't a good idea to assume anything with Saga.

"So, are we settled? If you stop with this spotting drama *and* if your father gives his permission, I will take you to see – V... Vice next month." I cringed to say it, but this was my duty as a friend of the Rockfords.

Saga shrugged half-heartedly, making it clear she was let down by my stance. Why was it such a pain to deal with adolescents? Rather, why *this* one? "...aight."

"Good. I'll call him shortly to let him know what's going on. If I hear about any more of these episodes, though, the deal's off."

"...aight."

With a frown, I opened the office door and waved to Miss Rodin. "We're set in here, I think. Or, as good as we're getting."

The nurse returned, with a look of worry on her face. "I'm so sorry to make you do my job."

"No, it's okay. I'm an old family friend and—"

"Friend?" she asked, shocked. "I'm only supposed to let family see the kids!"

I waved my hands in panic.. "No, it's okay! I'm her adopted sister! But..." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "...she doesn't really treat me like a sister. I *said* it was kind of complicated."

She raised a hand to her mouth at the realisation, although she still seemed like she wasn't sure what to make of it. "I – see."

"Anyway, I guess I was losing touch more than I'd thought I had. I'll call her father and try to get him more involved."

"So—what should we do in the future?"

I looked away, still keeping my voice down. "Saga's brother is... They have to have a full-time caretaker for him, and that's her father until school's out, then it's Saga. It's so much harder on them without her mother in the picture, but they're too proud to ask for any kind of assistance, even as much as it hurts them."

"Oh." Miss Rodin clasped her hands to her chest. "I didn't know..."

"Of course not. Saga wouldn't tell anyone."

"Well, I'm sure there are programs for needy families."

"Would you check them out for her?" I gave the nurse a hopeful look. "I know she tries, but maybe there are resources that she wouldn't find on her own. Get in contact with her father as well, since we can't expect her to volunteer the information they need."

"I will."

"Thank you so much." I glanced back inside at Saga. "I'm going now. Behave yourself, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," she pouted.

I bowed politely to Miss Rodin before returning to the front desk and waving goodbye to Jeanne. After that I left in a huff, however careful not to let it show within view of the school. When I got back to my chopper, it was all I could do not to break something that wasn't my forehead applied rapidly to a hard surface. Handlebars didn't have quite the same effect as a desk, though—it took special aim to strike with any kind of precision, and I could only handle three strikes before collapsing in a limp mess, draped over my bike like an oversized rag doll.

I lay there in pain for some time, tears rolling down my face, until my mobile buzzed again. It was Rush checking in on my progress. "sup," I answered through a headache-induced daze, not in a particular mindset for formalities and deference to superiors and such.

"How'd it go?" His voice was back to a normal level, and even more assuring. I cooled down somewhat just hearing his calm and focus.

"Well, I managed to bribe her with a night out sometime. Thing is, she wants to see this concert happening next month. Starring – *Vice*."

There was a tense pause as I could only imagine his reaction. Then, he gave a quiet chuckle that filled me with a sudden dread, sending shivers down my spine. "That's a hell of a coincidence, I have to say."

"What – coincidence?"

"Intel suspects he's just using the DJ persona as a front—a diversion from his group's real intent. I was going to ask you to attend the concert and see what you could find out about what it is they plan to do. Possibly a drop, with the show diverting police resources in the meantime."

I almost didn't hear the last part, having near-blacked out again.

"...Versa?"

"—I'm here," I called, picking myself off the ground and fumbling with my mobile as my voice hit something resembling a high-pitched wail. "It's just... Did the two of you orchestrate a candid video moment for me? I find it really hard to believe that Fate has it out for me *that* much."

"I'm sorry, Versa, I know what he means to you. Still, you know him better than anyone else here and have—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm so privileged. Thanks so much." One more dash of forehead, enough to leave blemishes on the handlebars. "Ugh... Now I'll have to convince Rockford—I said I'd abide by what he says, and Saga will hate me forever if that's a no but she finds out I went without her anyway."

"Well, don't tell him you're going as part of a stakeout."

"Durp."

"Anyway, some papers came in for you to go over. When you get in, I'll brief you on the next assignment after that."

"Cheerio." I hung up, falling over my chopper and wishing I never had to get up from that spot ever again.

When I finally got up, I glanced in the rear-vision mirror out of force of habit. That familiar circle peeked out at me from behind a smear of foundation that matched the smudge on my chopper. Out of force of habit, I took out my make-up stick and smoothed over the colour on my face again before donning my helmet. "Yes, Saga," I whispered. "Life is so unfair."

3. Background and Significance

I changed my mind and decided to visit the next day instead, calling in advance with my plans. Saga would be upset that she wouldn't have an answer straight away, but I had a month to plan everything as it was, and she could stand to learn to have a bit more patience. I also needed to coordinate all the details, and for that I would need more than a call on a buggy mobile would allow.

The house looked pretty much the same as I had remembered from four years ago, if perhaps with fewer toys outside, a chip on the front door stair, and signs of neglected yard work around the place. It felt as though I had never left, but at the same time it was unfamiliar. The neighbours and their decor were new, due to the recent housing bust, yet the Rockfords had been lucky to have had the house paid in full from the start, bypassing the risk of foreclosure but putting them in a financial bind over time trying to maintain it. I was jealous all the same—I had hoped to have a house of my own one day, but it felt a lifetime away with the deadline I had been given.

Mr. Rockford answered the door almost before I could knock, as though he had been expecting me—not that my bike couldn't be heard two cities away, I supposed. Unlike the man I remembered, he had large patches of grey in his dark hair, trimmed shorter to reflect his age—if not maturity. I remembered when the children were rambunctious toddlers and I was just starting secondary school that he had long, wild hair, lots of energy, and a perpetual smile on his face, the excitable big brother I'd never had trying his damndest to be a good foster father as well. The smile was still there, but buried under a mountain of hardship, making him a wholly different person from the one I'd first met all those years ago.

"Good morning, Pop."

"I'm so glad you could stop by, Anna," he greeted, beckoning me inside with a flourish that was once extravagant but now seemed eccentric. It was nice that my terms of endearment were still accepted, although that didn't make the task any easier on me.

"Saga tells me it's been a lot tougher on y'all since Mrs. Rockford..." I started, figuring I'd cut to the chase.

He nodded with some sadness. "True, though I didn't imagine Saga would have told you as such."

"—in so many words."

"Heh. Yeah, it's funny in a twisted way just how much we think we know when we're younger and can't do much with that knowledge, only to realise how much we don't know when we're older and need to use it badly."

He paused in thought, then walked to the kitchen. "Would you like to have a spot of tea?"

"Don't mind if I do."

Mr. Rockford took down three cups and poured the same amount of water into each with a trained hand. Many years of practice and stringent requirements must have honed his precision to an art form. I noticed then that the water wasn't steaming. "We've taken to white tea," he explained, as though in anticipation of my question. "Boiling spoils the flavour. It must seem a little strange without the kettle."

I took a sip. "Mmm, not at all. It's delicious."

He placed the second cup on a tray with several biscuits arranged on a plate. This he took upstairs to Epic's room, careful to knock first while managing not to spill a drop. "Hey, champ, tea is on. Can you let me in?" There was a low muttering from the other side of the door that I could barely hear. After a moment the door opened, and they spoke briefly, but from the stairs I could only pick out a few words. "...Anna's here... want to say hi... know, I miss her, too... can bring the dishes when you're done..."

"You know, I remember them being quite a handful when they were little," I commented as Mr. Rockford returned for his tea, trying my best to suppress my disappointment about being snubbed by Epic. "It must've been difficult after they hit their teens. You're serving as his primary caretaker?"

He simply nodded, taking in the relaxing quiet of the morning air. A breeze started to come in through the open kitchen window, rustling the wind chimes outside. "Money's tight, but I have everything all worked out."

"Must be harder with one income."

"Somewhat." He stared at the birds chirping in the yard. A cardinal hopped up and down and every which way to get at the ripened seeds that had grown from a rather tall patch of grass that had never gotten around to being cut. Despite the deteriorated state of the yard, the sight was amusing to watch—and Mr. Rockford must have agreed—but I couldn't get my mind off how sad he seemed at the same time.

"Why don't you find someone new?" I insisted, my frustration at the situation simmering. "Yeah, 'wicked stepmothers' and all, but surely all of you can use extra help?" Even if he didn't want the personal companionship, I couldn't imagine he wouldn't want another pair of hands around the house.

He shook his head. "Maybe I was a ladies' man back in the day, but now I'm tied down, and I believe in until death do us part."

Eh? "But..." I didn't want to just blurt it out, but he wasn't exactly being clear, and I couldn't understand otherwise. "Mrs. Rockford *is* dead."

He shook his head again. "She was infected, like everyone else."

"And?"

He rubbed at his forehead as was the new custom. "Mine came in this year. I'll be sixty-eight, three months, and eight days if I did the math correctly. She hadn't shown at all."

I frowned in disbelief, trying to remember the spot that she *must*

have shown at some point. "Maybe she hid it?"

"We were the closest of friends since we met in high school, and we became even closer after I married the poor girl. For a while, we only had each other to watch our backs. Hide something like that from *me*? No, she's got at least as long left."

Processing his words was like trying to determine the validity of a religious artefact that defied all logic. Either Mr. Rockford was correct, and she was going to spend the next thirty-plus years floating helplessly through the universe, or – she was immune? If the latter, Mrs. Rockford would have been the most valuable person in the world! It was just a shame—

"Fine," I blurted, surrendering in lieu of getting into an argument. "Maybe it's true. She's still alive. *How?*"

It was strange seeing him so serious. Perhaps the extended period of loneliness in addition to being a full-time caretaker was taking its toll on him. "That's what I don't know. All NASA will tell me is she was testing an experimental craft, not equipped with anything in the way of long-term life support and no way to catch up to the remains even with our fastest and most advanced technology—nothing the media didn't leak. However, I do know she's a fighter. If there's a way, she found it."

I hated playing the naysayer, but it was difficult not to do it. "But – *SPACE!*" Her ship's engine failure and drift towards the outer reaches of the galaxy was anticlimactic compared to the Challenger, yet it still meant she would never be coming home again.

He nodded in calm acceptance of this impossibility. "Yes, I know. All of us are so proud of her, regardless, and – miss her so very much. It's been so much harder getting along without her here."

Despite my bewilderment, I felt a deluge of guilt wash over me. "I never should have left you all."

"No, Anna—you deserve to have a life of your own, independent of us. Getting through the academy and holding a prestigious government post is a fine accomplishment. I only wish I could say the same of myself."

"Hey, I wish *I* beta-tested video games for a living!" I consoled him. "You were the quite envy of the schoolyard when Saga was in elementary!"

Rather than look proud, he seemed to be embarrassed by his career. "...not much of one, I assure you. I can only do it because I can work from home in Epic's more stable hours."

I glanced toward his room. "How is he?"

"No signs of improvement, and he's gotten worse since his mother vanished. Saga told you he hates strangers and going outside, did she?"

I nodded.

"In the end, we had to adjust his schedule to an earlier bedtime so Saga could do her homework and I could run errands."

"Does he sleep for long?"

"Quite a bit. I think it helps him cope, and it's a little easier on us if he does. Maybe he knows that, to a degree."

"But he can't really just sleep for the rest of his life? At some point, he'll need to become more socialised and learn to take care of himself more. It's not like you'll be around forever, and even if Saga outlives him, she's not going to enjoy being his life support."

"No, I think Saga deserves her own life, too. It's not her duty to be her brother's keeper. That's why I have her college fund set up, so she can go off to whichever uni she wants and not have to worry about money—"

My ears perked up at the news. "You have a college fund set up for her? Does she know that—" I almost suggested that they could be using it for assistance with Epic, so Mr. Rockford could try to get a better job, to help their lives overall. It seemed like the obvious answer, but – it would be Saga's sacrifice again.

"I wanted it to be a surprise, a high school graduation present. It's all her inheritance from both sides, pretty much."

"But what about..." I trailed off, conscious of how rude I was to ask about their finances, not to mention feeling as though I was condescending to him about missing the obvious solution. "I mean, who's going to help you when Saga goes off to uni, especially if she goes out of state?"

He seemed resigned. "I admit I'll be lonelier without her here, but I'll manage somehow." For a moment, he was quiet, and it made me wonder if he really had a plan for the rest of his life, much less Epic's. I started to commit the rudeness of asking when he interrupted my thoughts. "Please don't pursue the question of Mrs. Rockford, by the way."

"That wasn't..." My clarification didn't mean anything. It seemed he did have something in mind but just didn't want to say what it was. I felt hurt that he couldn't tell me but, at the same time, that he told me even as much as he had meant that I still meant something to them. I smiled as best as I could manage, all things considered. "Actually," I continued, changing the subject, "the reason I came by was to ask if I could take Saga to a concert next month, to help her cope with her schoolwork, caretaking, and the lack of social life that comes with them."

He raised his eyebrows with notable interest. "A concert? That sounds like a lovely idea. Of course you can take her there."

"Well, the thing is..." I hid my conflicting emotions as much as possible, but I had a moral obligation to be transparent about the negatives of going. "See, the one she wants to attend stars a person named – Vice."

If his mood changed, it may only have been my perception of it. "Is this the same Vice who was arrested for several DUIs, drug trafficking, and assaulting an officer?"

"And a few things other I shouldn't name," I added, scowling. My blood ran cold again at the mental tally running through my head.

He looked downcast. "Even I wasn't so wild as that."

I had to smirk at his comment all the same. "Well, that's who she wants to see."

"Then I've changed my mind. That's not an appropriate avenue for

her amusement."

No! "I understand, Pop, but she doesn't ask for much—just this one night out."

"Then you and she can go to a movie, or a different performer."

I felt dirty arguing for Vice's case, but my assignment demanded it. "It's not the same. You remember what that was like, don't you?"

He raised an eyebrow at me, as though seeing through my act. "Do *you* want to go?"

"Not exactly," I admitted, "but – if I'm going to treat her, I want her night out to be something she will really enjoy. She's otherwise a good kid, if overwhelmed by social cabin fever, and if she doesn't get to live once in a while, I don't know what she might do—even if I wouldn't approve of these people she wants to see. I told her it was up to you if I take her, of course, but full disclosure and all."

Whether he could tell from my body language that I needed to take her, he seemed to reconsider. "This concert is next month?"

I nodded.

"What is the absolute last day you can get tickets?"

"Whenever they sell out of them, I suppose. They may have sold out already since he's quite popular, despite my best efforts to rein him in under the law."

"First, I'll speak with her about this incident at school yesterday. Go ahead and get the tickets, if you can, and I will reimburse you for them if I change my mind."

I shook my head firmly. "Oh, you don't have to do that."

"No, I couldn't make you pay for something like this."

"Pop." I put down my tea and took his hands in mine. "This is my treat—honest. If it helps get back some of her sanity, I don't mind paying for it. I'm no longer the impoverished waif I used to be, and I wouldn't have offered if I couldn't afford it."

Nevertheless, there was a look in his eyes that betrayed an intense feeling of sadness. He wanted to help others, even when it cost him dearly. Yet I couldn't let him pay for my stakeout, especially when Rush was going to do that anyway.

He stared out the window again. "Let me tell you a story."

I gave him a look of curiosity. "What's this?"

"It's something that's been on my mind for years now. I wanted to hear your take on it, nothing related to anything."

...okay. "Go on."

His narrative was well composed, as though having learned it from a book, but it wasn't from any book that I had ever read – and I had read a *lot* of them. The relative isolation in which their family lived must have given Mr. Rockford a lot of idle time to think. Not that watching Epic was really being idle but, in my experience, it was physically and emotionally taxing while leaving the mind with not a lot to do.

"Many years ago, there was a young boy. He was an orphan, much like you—impoverished, homeless, getting by on scraps. One day, a man came along and claimed him as his own, but the man was no guardian—no father figure to idolise, no role model to put on a pedestal. The man worked the boy tirelessly, often punishing him for no reason, and the boy often went days without rest.

"Little by little, however, the boy would find a coin here and there, hoarding them away in a secret place. Little by little, the boy would learn tricks and skills, hiding knowledge of them away from the man's eyes. Little by little, the boy worked toward his life's dream of being an upstanding, productive member of society, with his own house, a family, all the comforts of freedom. One day, the boy was ready to set off on his own, to fight back against his tyrannical master and cast off his life of servitude.

"Then something happened. Before he could make his escape, he met a girl. The girl was beautiful, smart, strong—everything he could have wanted, she was. Yet the girl was also an orphan, surviving on the pity of others because she would not believe that she was beautiful, smart, or strong.

"The boy had a dilemma—he could save himself, or he could save the girl. There was no way he could find to save them both. The world was too harsh for either of them to strike off alone, even if they were together, even if she accepted him. So he waited for an opportunity. He kept toiling away, and it was tougher for the boy, knowing that his freedom was waiting for him and he wasn't taking it by the horns, wasn't leaving that horrible life of having everything taken from him for an honest life of making everything for himself. Yet he valued the girl and believed he would regret leaving her behind, so he put his everything into doing what he could to save her without also destroying everything he had worked so long to accomplish.

"Then his opportunity came—the man was overthrown and was no longer a threat to the boy, the girl, or to anyone else. The boy and girl could be together. Everyone could have a happy ending.

"Except that the boy died—a sacrifice to bring peace to the world—and the girl was left alone."

I waited expectantly for Mr. Rockford to finish. I waited longer than I probably should have. "That's it?"

"That's all of it, yes."

I thought about the narrative again, substituting in people I knew or knew about in every possible combination I could find for each of the key players, but none of it made sense at all. "This isn't a metaphor about *you*, is it?" I asked with due skepticism, hoping to confirm at least that much.

He shook his head.

"Then what is the moral?"

"That's what I have yet to figure out."

It seemed surreal. I put my hands on my hips. "Well, you've told me this story for a reason. I find it tough to believe that you just made it up. Were you going to explain its significance to me?"

"You made a point of visiting me in person to ask about taking Saga to this concert for a reason, despite your obvious reservations about going. I find it tough to believe you just don't like Vice. Were you going to explain his significance to me?"

I blanched, stammering that my ruse was so transparent and feeling my argument collapse into nigh-gibberish. "...h-he's a despicable character! I was at his last hearing to have him thrown in *gaol*. Pronounced differently, his alias is *vice*. I know I promised Saga I'd ask, but I can't exactly abide by the notion of supporting someone like that!"

"Then you say no and pick something else. Why go to something you don't support?"

"To support *Saga!*"

"But you can support her without supporting someone you hate with such vitriol."

How did I get myself into these messes? "I realise this, Pop, but—"

"Does he have something to do with your scars?"

As though on cue, I felt the ghost pains in my hands again, shooting along each vicious mark. *Yes*, I thought, but I didn't have the courage to tell him. It was irrational, I knew, but how could I shatter the illusions he had of me, of being just a normal kid who happened not to have parents anymore?

Mr. Rockford looked discouraged by my silence. "If he has that powerful a hold over you, I don't want you to subject yourself to that just at the whim of a young girl. I would sooner take her to the concert myself."

"No, really," I insisted, still not sure how to impress upon him the delicateness of the situation. "He doesn't have that power over me. I won't let him. Confronting my fear is part of that." It felt embarrassing, not being able to tell him the whole story. *Say it*, I thought. *Say it, say it—get out the awkwardness already and get past this*. Yet I...

He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry about it too much. I don't even know if it will be necessary yet. I know I'm asking a lot of Saga to help with her brother's care, but it's only a little while longer. However, I can't comfortably reward bad behaviour like that."

I knew the feeling. "Why don't you tell her about her present, then? I'm sure it'll be a weight off her shoulders."

"We'll discuss it when the time comes."

"I think it's cruel keeping her in the dark for much longer."

"She only has half a quarter left. I was hoping she would find her own motivation, rather than have to rely on outside help for support."

"Isn't that asking a lot of her, too?"

"It worked for you."

His words were both flattering and unnerving. Now I felt terrible for lacking confidence in Saga. "...thanks?"

The conversation hit a snag, and both of us were silent again. I sipped at my tea while it was still warm, mildly annoyed that it didn't make me feel any more relaxed. At lengths, Mr. Rockford continued his lecture,

as though not yet convinced of his own words. "Everyone's flawed, Anna. There's no shame in having dark secrets if you weren't the cause. My secrets are my own handiwork, and I'll own them—I will accept the consequences when the time comes. Yours are not yours, I sense. Own your decisions, but do not blame yourself when someone else cause you hurt, because that lets him get away with it for something you could not have changed. Yes, maybe some small change you could have done would have kept him from being able to hurt you, but you couldn't have known that until it had already happened—it was *not* your fault."

"So..." I was trying to determine whether he wanted to confess or was scolding me. "I can't figure out where you're going with this. Is this about me or you?"

"Both, I guess."

"And I should own up to playing the victim."

"That wouldn't hurt."

"But you're doing the same thing, kind of."

He frowned.

"I mean, really—what are you trying to prove by letting your family suffer in silence? Why not get help?"

"We're fine," he insisted, furrowing his brow. "Everything's under control." I could tell he was lying, because he had a hint of that look, of a child having been caught peeking at his birthday presents.

"On a limited income?" I asked, incredulous. "I'm having a difficult time believing everything's okay."

He remained quiet for some time. A-ha! Perhaps I broke through. "...fine," he admitted, looking away, "there are things I'm not proud of doing, Anna. Nothing anywhere near like that Vice character, but I certainly wish I had never been in that position."

"That's why it's so important for you to have help. You shouldn't be compromising who you are just for—" We *were* still talking about his being a single parent, weren't we? "—what did you do them for?"

"Money, of course. Even I wouldn't do them for jollies or endanger myself for any old reason."

"Why are you telling this to me instead of Saga?" I scolded. "I get why you haven't told Epic—"

"Oh, I've told him. Every detail of every skeleton in my closet."

I didn't have words. At least, not ones that made any sense. "Buh?" I blurted, nearly falling over from the unexpected revelation.

"Epic's a smart boy. He gets lots of things I don't. For being home-schooled, he knows maybe as much as Saga does or more. The difference is he has a difficult time processing experiences instead of numbers, words, and pictures. Yes, though, Epic is fully aware of every single illicit nuance of my life, but he lacks the social stigma that would make it traumatic for him like it would for Saga. He doesn't care about his mother giving him a weird 'hippie' name or that he and Saga look nothing like me or that we've

never gone on vacation to big theme parks like everyone else has or lots of things that would bother other kids. I've even asked him his thoughts on everything, and he describes it as, 'Pop does what Pop does. Life made Pop into Pop. Bad is not bad when bad makes good.' He insists that 'Pop is Pop, Mum is Mum, Nan is Nan, Saga is Saga.' That's what he values."

"And what does Saga think?"

"I have to admit, I have no idea what Saga values. This Vice thing is a surprise to me. The Saga I used to know withdrew after her mother vanished into the far reaches of the galaxy. Oh, she still tries to be outgoing and such, but the specifics elude me: what she wants to do with her life, who she likes, who she's been with—things like that. She used to share with her mother more, and I think she liked the 'girls' thing, but Pop is different. Anna is different, too, I suppose, but maybe you knew that."

"Oh, did I." Like I needed the reminder. Still, I got the feeling that I wouldn't be changing his mind about their family isolation any time soon—I needed a different strategy. Even though I hated to end the conversation as we were, it was getting late. "Whoops, I lost track of time! I have to get back to work. It was good seeing you again, Pop."

"Hmm." He gave me a hug before seeing me to the door. "I hope you can come visit when Saga isn't in trouble."

I forced a laugh. "I'll try. I'll let you know if I get the tickets, so let me know if you make any headway with her."

"Of course."

As I stepped outside, I felt certain that Mr. Rockford was accurate in his unspoken assessment of his wife's spotting and NASA's unlikeliness to share nearly as much about the case with me as he had. However, there was the matter of Mr. Rockford himself... Against better judgement, I returned home, donned my nightgown, and snuck back to the house well after hours, when I was supposed to be doing a follow-up on the Riordan case. Own my choices, Pop? Okay, I'll pay the price for ignoring my job for today if it gets me some answers. Not to disrespect you or anything, just a little tired of being tiptoed around as though I couldn't handle the truth.

I watched with envy as the three ate their supper together. These days, with an unpredictable work schedule and the few friends I had made over the years moving away, the only way I didn't eat alone was as part of an annual company dinner, which was hardly the same thing. I had to strain my eyes to tell, but it looked like Saga was mouthing something about how nice it must be to stay home all the time and never have to hear everyone make fun of you, to which Epic seemed to say that fun is fun, not fun is chore...

Not interested in further subjecting myself to the torture of watching them directly, I imagined the rest of their conversation. Epic was smart—was he and Saga worlds apart or closer to being on the same level? Did he help Saga with her homework now and again? Those were mysteries I didn't mind not knowing for now, the ones that were a delightful discovery to a parent but weren't vital to rectifying the state of their dysfunction.

At lengths, they finished their meal. Epic seemed not only to be competent but *pleased* to do the cleanup. Saga went to her room, and Mr. Rockford closed the drapes. Shoot, that made my spying problematic.

I waited a little while longer to see if anything changed... Just as I was about to fall asleep where I was standing, the door opened with a creak. Mr. Rockford was leaving – on his errands?

The family didn't have a car, so he walked into town. With a late realisation, I hoped he didn't pass the lot where I parked my chopper. Surely he would recognise it, which made me silently curse getting a custom model at police auction rather than a factory stock.

I was in luck! He headed downtown—I slipped behind him, trailing him from a stone's throw away. He strolled as though just taking a casual walk at night, but after several blocks he turned and looked back, as though sensing my presence. Sorry, Pop, but I've had a lot more practice at this than you. I had darted behind a tree by that point, peeking at him from between the fork in its trunk. If he or anyone else had seen me, it would have taken eagle eyes to distinguish me from the shadows.

Still, I shouldn't get careless even with a friend—perhaps *especially* with a friend. I waited with bated breath for him to decide I wasn't there. It felt longer than it was, but I may have discounted his eyesight, or perhaps he was waiting for me to slip up and reveal myself, but – I had gotten a *lot* of practice hiding.

Mr. Rockford checked his mobile. Did he get a message? No, just checking the time. He didn't wait any longer, hurrying as I followed him down the road, around a corner to—

I slapped my forehead as I saw him approach the high school. Of course—he wanted to get his GED after all this time! No wonder he didn't want to tell Saga. I figured I'd be embarrassed, too, but at the same time, I felt he ought to bite the bullet and tell her anyway. Better that than what she must think he's doing.

Speaking of, I had to hurry if I was going to backpedal and catch up on my assignment. I sighed, wondering if this had been worth the price. Didn't matter—I'd still have to pay, wouldn't I?

4. Preliminary Studies

"Backstage passes?"

He waved the laminated badges on plastic lanyards in front of me. The logo was unmistakably Vice and seemed to radiate offence, which made it almost—*almost*—comical that Rush was the one holding them. "They'll be a treat for the kid, eh? And you'll be able to get closer—"

I felt like tearing my hair out. "That's exactly my point!" I yelled, interrupting him with an unrelenting blind fury that would have mortified me under any other circumstances. "How am I going to do *both* of my jobs at the same time? There's no way I'm letting him anywhere near her! I thought you understood—" I broke off to try to contain my anger before I physically lashed out at the wrong person. "I'm – sorry, sir, but this is about as big of a conflict of interest as it can get."

Almost before the words escaped my mouth, Rush looked ashamed, as though repentant for his transgression. "I know. I'm deeply sorry beyond words to put you in this situation, but I had thought you'd want your chance to make up for losing the case last year..." He looked away with bitterness. "Another OD last night, in a hotel where he was seen checking in—victim was a young girl, couldn't have been much more than Saga's age, and can't pin anything on him because surveillance shows he never even went in the room. She must have waited for him there, but he never returned, and she was perfectly healthy up until then. For all we know, she was always meant to commit suicide, but if he had somehow talked her into shooting up, that's still third-degree murder."

I hated hearing every new detail of the jerk's life. It sickened me as a decent, law-abiding individual—hell, as a *person*. "But I just can't let that happen to Saga. Not any girl, but *especially* not her."

"What if we sent someone else along to chaperone? So you could sneak off for a bit and the kid's none the wiser *or* in danger?"

I – hesitated. Despite a considerable number of bad ideas in the past, Rush tended to make me think twice about my judgement as it was, but this was a solid nudge. Aagh—I had to hold out for a shove. "...better, but it was supposed to be just the two of us going."

"Ah, kids don't really care about that. I guarantee you, as indiscreet as Vice is, Saga's just as eager to assert her own independence. She will be trying to sneak off on her own when you're not looking, either way. Why not have someone watching your back in both senses?"

"Who?"

"I was thinking of Crystal."

The notion surprised me. "For field work?"

"The latest influenza outbreak has had most of our free agents either incapacitated or not in a state to do undercover work. Did you hear Gaudie got hospitalised for a complication from the vaccine? Crystal's all we've got. I'd go with you myself, but I have unavoidable scheduling conflicts until the middle of the show."

That was a concern as well. As unlikely as it was, what if one of us ended up under fire? "Is she packing?"

"What do you think she does in her spare time? The firing range is practically her second home after the stresses of work."

Rush really managed to surprise me sometimes. "You're not giving me a lot of options, are you."

"To do your job? If you put it that way, no." He placed the badges around my neck and stuffed his hands back in his pockets. "I'm just trying to make it as easy for you as I feasibly can. It's only up to you whether you can handle Vice."

"I can," I insisted, steeling myself. "Like hell I'm letting him win!"

"That's the spirit," he praised, which gave me butterflies. I smirked weakly at him and straightened my collar. It was all on me, then? Even Mr. Rockford, as much as he hated the idea of his little girl being exposed to the worst of humanity's offences, conceded that Saga had a life and mind of her own and gave his, ah – 'blessing' to attend. Why did it have to hinge on me?

I felt my heart sink into my stomach. Even my therapists had been conflicted on whether confronting him again was a good idea, given our history. "Well, there will be hundreds of people between him and Saga," I rationalised with some trepidation, "and two of them will be prepared. I guess it should be okay – for just one night."

Rush smiled. "Really, I do appreciate the sacrifice you're making for the assignment. There'll be a nice bonus in your holiday pay this year if you come up with something."

"Sure." Unless it was a shuttle off-world for the new year or full coverage for all the therapy I would need following the show, I had a hard time believing anything he could give me would make up for this. Why was I the only one who valued preserving my sanity? I sighed inwardly, silently bemoaning all the things I did for him. If it was anyone else who asked, *anyone* at all...

He handed me a file containing the general layout of the arena and some details on a JAM project that NSA uncovered. I skimmed through the pages and handed them back—I wasn't about to lose important files that I could commit to memory in an instant. Though I procrastinated all I could to avoid forgetting something vital, and to avoid going in the first place, it seemed there wasn't much else to do but go.

On my way out, I met with Crystal to synchronise our plans, then I dropped by the electronics store to pick up a new mobile. Finally—and it took all my nerve to go through with it—I dropped by the Rockfords' house

to pick up my date.

"Saga!" I called, knocking at the door. "Are you ready to go?"

I heard footsteps charging down the stairs almost as Saga appeared at the door, grinning from ear to ear in anticipation of the event as she leaped towards my bike. "Let's roll!"

"Hold up," I barked, catching up and holding out the spare helmet from my bag. "First, put this on. Also, keep this on you at all times—I've already programmed in my number." I handed her the mobile as well.

She beamed like a child with a new toy. "Thank you so much for doing this! I know I must seem like an awful brat at times, but I really do appreciate everything."

"It's my pleasure," I mustered through gritted teeth. "I know all too well what it's like to go without, and you deserve a break now and again. Speaking of—" I took out one of the passes and held it up, though it felt like it seared my fingers as I did. "I, er – also managed to get these..."

Saga was gobsmacked, nearly dropping the helmet and mobile as she stared at the pass. I had to put it around her neck myself and lead her by the hand back to the chopper before she finally snapped out of it. "*THANK YOU!!*" she cried, giving me a big, teary-eyed hug.

I had a difficult time breathing through her stranglehold until she let go of me, but – I suppose it was worth it. "Happy birthday."

Driving to Vienna was a pain at this hour, but it was going to have to be early if I was going to complete my assignment. Staying late wouldn't be a problem—for Saga—but I wanted to case the area when there were the fewest obstacles. At least she seemed to be enjoying the ride. I would have to remember that and give her rides more often, perhaps to get her back on regular speaking terms with me.

The arena was packed even as early as we arrived, and I was chillier than anticipated without my gloves on since the weather was supposed to be warm tonight. I hoped it wasn't an omen of things to come... "Remember, don't lose those," I instructed as I put my bike into park.

"Eh, what's with the wig?" Saga asked as I pulled off my helmet.

"Oh." I took a moment to straighten it out. "Trying a new look, why not." Mostly, I didn't want the possibility of Vice recognising me.

She giggled at me. "I don't think I would have ever pictured you as a brunette."

"Blondes have all the fun, no?"

Saga rolled her eyes in a 'yeah, whatever' look.

We entered the arena, where the attendants motioned for us to get in line to be searched. I handed over Rush's paperwork, and they let us through unhindered. From there, we got wristbands at the box office, and I expected to take our seats and relax for a bit, but when we arrived at the arena proper, I finally noticed that all the seating was gone. "Oh," I muttered, absorbing the shock of both the destruction of the arena and the pounding bass.

"What is it?"

"I've never been to a concert with a mosh pit before," I shouted over the noise, signing the same in case she couldn't hear me.

"What? You expected to *sit* the whole time?" Even in her signing, Saga laughed at me as though I had asked her when the sky had started being blue. "Dancing is half the fun!"

I sighed at the unexpected turn of events. Hopefully I wouldn't lose her too easily. Speaking of, where was Crystal? I tapped on the night vision in my glasses, taking a quick glance at the sonic-light beacon tucked in my sleeve to make sure it was working. Yup. No sign of hers, though—perhaps she was stuck in traffic? At least the one I hid in Saga's mobile was active, what times the signal pierced through her jacket pocket.

Time to get to work.

We entered the front orchestra section, where the crowd was getting fired up waiting for the main act. I was antsy, wondering how I would pull this off. Rush seemed to have a lot of faith in me, and I wished I had even half as much faith in me as he did. I wasn't an old fogey by far, but I felt out of place among the hordes of kids still in or straight out of high school, like I was the sole chaperone at a rather large, extravagant promenade.

No, maybe I was an old fogey after all—I still expected a dance to be fancy dress time, and some of the kids were barely what I could consider dressed at *all*. It was also a partial open-air amphitheatre, while the dances I had attended were all in an indoor ballroom that didn't have speakers, each one larger than an SUV, in every corner with projection screens covering the stage walls and ceiling and bombarding the eyes with offensive video after offensive video. That was intimidating enough as it was without adding the guest of honour.

As though on cue, a blast of noise burst from the stage, to which the audience responded in kind. "Aight, Wolf Trap!" shouted an all-too-familiar voice over the PA. "Thank you for having me back, you beautiful people! You know, I do so love playing the East Coast. The girls are on fire – if you know what I mean, and I think you do, ladies!"

A wild cheer echoed through the pit, which only made me want to retch in pain. Unfortunately, my years of therapy weren't helping me cope in the slightest. All that was getting me through the night was getting to the bottom of this JAM project thing that had Rush so worried and hopefully putting the main attraction permanently out of commission.

I glared at the stage. Vice was tall as it was, but the screens made him look even larger than life. He dwarfed other DJs further with his gear, yet he still commanded a major presence despite the equipment taking up the bulk of the stage, the effect amplified by his singing and rapping along with the tracks: "Non-stop fast life, different city every night" bleeding neatly into beatboxing kicks melting into "I love it when you do that stuff to me"...

His attitude and setlist were abrasive, yet the kids ate it up and cried for more. I periodically looked over at Saga so I didn't lose her, and every gleeful sparkle in her eyes was a shot through the heart for me. *It's just one*

night, and you're a speck in the crowd, I reminded myself. Just do your job and get the hell out of Dodge.

When I thought I couldn't take it any more, I got a buzz. Crystal! [10-20, Box 13.] I whirled around and clicked on my night vision—there she was in the box seats with her beacon waving from her wrist. I slipped mine out and waved back to her with my right hand as I sent her a message with my left. [Mosh, f&c.]

A prod. "I want to check out backstage!" Saga signed. I nodded, signing that I would follow. This was the part that worried me most—I sent another buzz Crystal's way as a heads-up. [BS, 10-41.]

The greasy roadies looked pleased to see us when we flashed our passes. It was difficult pretending to be excited when the foulest of Vice's escorts would be eyeing Saga up and down. Maybe if I didn't know what really went on behind the scenes, how many young women like her too often ended up in the least enviable of positions after flirting with this particular brand of danger, this wouldn't be so difficult for me. *Do my job*, I screamed at myself. *Crystal has your back, DO YOUR JOB.*

Bracing myself, I took a gamble on leaving the retinue, waving at Crystal while I did. While Saga was being given the grand tour, I feigned disinterest, walking toward the restrooms. When no one was watching me, I slipped into the back, hugging the shadows as I canvassed the grounds, both inside and outside the centre proper.

I discovered a large trailer that had been parked closer to the arena than seemed legal, something that didn't seem would go over well with the managers. It had to be Vice's, no doubt about it. I crept over and tried the door—either he was getting careless or overconfident, possibly both, but it was unlocked. Inside, I figured out why. The smell alone would set off any intruders, I realised as I entered, recoiling. It reeked of stale food, incense, dirty laundry, illicit – activities, among other things. It made me sick, but it also amazed me that others would choose to be in here of their own volition.

Keeping my assignment at the forefront of my mind, I searched for anything even remotely resembling incriminating evidence, careful not to touch any of it—slob though he was, Vice was like me and would be able to tell if anything was more than a hair out of place. Unfortunately, most of it was trash, and difficult to navigate without literally leaving a footprint. Yet each moment I stayed in that hell was an eternity of self-inflicted anguish about potentially abandoning my charge to a fate even worse than I had ever endured – in favour of rummaging through Vice's trash.

I kept one eye on the door as I opened a drawer or cabinet here, then another there. Some contained utensils and road maps. Others were empty. One contained a box of snaps and a mysterious note with one word scribbled on it, in familiar handwriting: "Gotcha."

I had an eerie feeling in my gut. There was no way he could know I was here—could he? But how would this particular arrangement of items occur except on purpose? Either way, I had no idea what I was looking for.

This stakeout was a bust. I didn't see any indication of the evidence NSA was after. Better get out while the getting was good, before I fell deeper into whatever trap I might have gotten myself into.

I snuck out and back into the crowd without being detected. So far, so good. I didn't like the sense that I was leaving Saga to fend for herself, as much as I was sure she would've liked that—I had to find her and keep her out of trouble, to at least do *that* much. Hopefully we would both survive the night more or less unscathed, and I wouldn't get any more assignments like these after this, but I was feeling less hopeful with each passing moment she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Since the entire arena was dimly lit save some floor lights, it was nigh impossible to make out specific individuals in the darkness punctuated by strobes and spotlights. Unconsciously, I looked up at the stage just as Vice was winding down for the next track, the live vocals he added giving way to commentary. "This next one is a brand new mix, just for you! It's a little number that I call – 'Versus.'" Despite his opaque glasses, he seemed to stare straight into my eyes even from the stage, sneering as he did.

I felt the beatbox bass pulse through my entire body as I made my way through the crowd. It was a slower BPM than I had expected for Vice, and it seemed jarring in his setlist. Furthermore, it sounded – familiar.

I finally paid attention to the melody, gritting my teeth in unbridled rage. No wonder I recognised it—this was *my* song! He'd butchered it and changed all the lyrics to his twisted version, but there was no doubt about it. I shouldn't have been surprised that he would stoop so low as to plagiarise me. No doubt he realised its significance and was laughing at me yet again in his own—

Wait... This was a brand new track just for this show, he said? That seemed eerily coincidental to my attendance. I whirled around, the hairs on the back of my neck tingling even as I grew uncomfortably hot from the sweat of a thousand adolescents and the blood rushing to my head. "*Saga!*"

She was nowhere in sight, nor was Crystal. I buzzed one then the other on my mobile, but I got no response even after a quadrillion redials over a span of what felt like an eternity of eternities. I pushed through the crowd to the stairs, making my way to the nosebleed section. Even there the rabble was too packed to navigate comfortably. I found the highest point I could in the box seating and lope and stared down at the audience through my night vision glasses, hoping to spot Saga's or Crystal's beacons.

Nothing.

They weren't backstage that I'd seen—not that I figured Saga would stay there while the set was still going, but maybe if she thought she could get closer... I scrambled back downstairs and toward the stage, waving my pass to the bouncer as he smirked at me, as though knowingly. "Have you seen my friend?" I asked. "Young girl with blue hair?"

"Her?" he replied, smiling a malevolent smile. "Cute thing! Ah, I think she went back to the pit. Not really a lot going on back here just *yet*."

It made me nauseated thinking about what he really meant by that. "May I have a look anyway?"

"Of course, m'lady." He bowed as he stepped aside to let me pass. I whisked by, darting glances into the arena trying to spot their beacons—either of them.

Another hour of nothing but "All the ladies love the brown man in the hottest of things" and vocalised cymbals passed, as I combed every nook and cranny of the arena while wading through an almost literal wall of noise. It felt as though I was physically being beaten from all sides by sound, even ignoring the blatant sexist messages strewn through the lyrics in between spoken hi-hats and snares. No luck, even though the stage crew gladly let me enter whatever dressing room and closet I might come across. I buzzed both of them again and again, but—if I didn't know better—it seemed like I was getting the cold shoulder. Every tick of the clock, every thump of the bass put me at greater risk of having a breakdown from the mental torture.

At the end of the third hour, a set of amplified bells tolled through the arena, simultaneously echoing the time and ending the program. I had to admit it was a well-executed and spooky touch, perfectly complementing my dismay and reiterating my feelings that something was very wrong. "And now – it's that time, everyone," Vice murmured in a soothing voice, to which the crowd responded with a low moan of disappointment. "Oh! Yes, I hate to do this to all you beautiful people—especially the ladies—but the night is young and crying out to be used to its fullest! And I do mean used – to – the..." He paused for effect, whispering the last. "...fullest..." Cries of glee smattered the air, some declarations of love from various women that made me cringe in agony.

"And with so many of you gorgeous people here, I can't fathom *anyone* leaving alone tonight! Why don't you say hello to the person next to you and, if you so fancy, get to really, ah – *know* each other, shall we say? ...yes, I love you, too, ladies, but tonight I have a date with an angel. Yes, I know... I'm sorry, but tonight is very special for me. The good news is I'll be auditioning for future dates starting tomorrow!"

I tried to tune out his voice as I routed through the audience for signs of either of Saga's and Crystal's beacons. I was so preoccupied that it wasn't even a relief when he stepped back into the shadows from whence he came, to cheers of "Encore!"—I knew him too well to believe he was truly gone, and I still couldn't find my companions even as the crowd started to thin at last. Though Vice had signed off for the show, I was already on edge when someone tapped me on the shoulder, making me start. It took some effort not to draw my gun on the roadie who was trying to get my attention.

"Whoa! I didn't mean to scare you there!" he shouted, raising his hands in surrender. "I've just, ah, been asked to bring you to the manager's office, if you don't mind."

For an instant I had let myself believe I was finally getting some help. What a fool believes... What other choice did I have, though? "Lead

the way." It had to be Vice—all the clues he was leaving behind like a trail of breadcrumbs leading to a door that wouldn't be opened until he wanted it opened, plus it was the one place I hadn't been granted access before...

As we arrived at the manager's office, the roadie opened the door and showed me inside where, to my dismay, Saga was sitting on the modular seats along the wall, cozying up to Vice as though they were a couple. I nearly shrieked in abject terror at the sight but caught myself—my showing weakness was one of his greatest turn-ons. Why did my worst nightmares have to keep coming true? Furthermore, why did that then mean they kept getting worse?

The two of them looked up at me as I entered, but only just. "Oh, hi, Anna," Saga murmured, barely audible.

"Ah, is this your friend?" Vice asked in the fakest innocent tone I'd ever heard, holding out a hand to me in between undressing Saga with his eyes. "It's so good to meet you! I'm Vice – but I suppose you already knew that if you're at my show..."

"You know damn well who I am," I snapped, striding forward.

He glanced at me again and pretended to recognise me at last under my wig. "Oh, *yes!* I do remember you now." He put a hand to his mouth in mock astonishment. "You were that sweet little number at my trial. Didn't imagine I would see *you* here, much less in the V.I.P. lounge!"

I gnashed my teeth in rage, wondering how I should kill him, first for laying a hand on Saga and twenty more times for each year he'd laid a hand on *me*. The only thing that kept me from acting was the idea of killing him in front of Saga.

"That's a hot look for you," he added in his most sarcastic seductive tone. "Is it a bob or a flip? I never quite got those straight. Love the colour, too! Gives me some ideas... Can't say I'm fond of the holster, though—"

"Wait, you brought a *gun*?" Saga bawled at me, astonished that she had missed it in all of the excitement. "How did you get that past security?"

This just wasn't going to get any better. "I know your feelings about weapons, Saga, but I do have clearance and a license to carry. Besides, I'm always on call."

She still frowned. "At a concert."

"Of all places, yes." I had to give it to him, Vice was a master at his craft of making my life as miserable as possible.

"If you've cleared it with the management, then I suppose I can't ask you to leave for carrying a concealed weapon," he said with an even more excessive air of melodrama than I had believed was possible. "Not that I mind your gracing us with your vo~luptuous presence, but such mechanisms of violence tend to cramp my style—so destructive."

"And illegal narcotics aren't?"

Even behind his specs, I could tell he was rolling his eyes at me. "Why, I really have *no* idea what you're talking about."

Though it would be a simple feat, it wouldn't do me a lick of good

to recite chapter and verse, a detailed list of each and every name, place, and time of death for his hundreds of victims, direct or no.

"Anna," Saga pouted, "it's been such a lovely evening. Please don't spoil it."

"Spoil? Oh, tsk, tsk." Vice shook his head. "Don't worry, we'll all have a wonderful time! Tell me what you want—anything!"

I started to rush him, but Saga immediately shot me a glare that was like she threw herself between us. It infuriated me just how far the tables had turned.

"C'mon, I know you've *got* to want something. What is it? You can tell me..." He worked his magic, not quite pressuring her to do anything, just being obliging enough to get in under her radar. She practically melted, giggling and whispering something in his ear, which made his eyes light up with mischief. "Oh, really? Is that all?"

The look in Saga's face was painful to witness. She was absolutely enamoured with him! I wanted to empty a clip into him on the spot, but I couldn't traumatise her like that—not even after what I'd been through. As bad as I'd had it, that would be so much worse.

...maybe he wouldn't do anything to her. It seemed like a long shot, but maybe he knew he could use her as leverage. It sickened me thinking that, but as long as she wasn't hurt in any way, I would be in check. I didn't know his exact M.O., however, other than that he behaved differently around others—I didn't expect even his charisma would help the girls bang down his door if he treated them the same way he treated me.

So did he promise to do something for Saga, or was she just caught up in being around someone famous? Even after this sordid affair was over, I would live in fear for her, with the ease that Vice seemed to find the exact things that would hurt me the most. Just the worry alone would put me in therapy until long after my dying breath.

With a deft motion, he pulled a small digital camera out of one of his pockets. He held it out at arm's length and pulled her close, giving her a quick peck on the cheek as he took the picture. "It's all yours," he cheered, handing her the camera. "Think that's enough proof for your friends?"

Saga snatched up the camera with an unabashed greed I had never seen in her before. All she could do for what felt like a century was squeal in delight at the shot. "Really? I can have this?"

"For a fan? It's nothing."

Thank you, she mouthed, unable to speak.

"How 'bout your friend – Anna, was it?" he suggested, sneering at me when Saga wasn't looking. "You want a shot with me?"

Whatever her secret motive, Saga seemed to realise it wasn't a good idea. "No way," she snapped, giggling. "You belong to *me*."

"Ooo, you're a feisty one!" He started to move his hand somewhere it didn't belong.

"Hey, now," I barked, "she's sixteen."

"Really?" Vice feigned surprise, unconvincingly. "Sweet sixteen... They grow up so fast." He stroked Saga's hair, twirling it around his finger. "I suppose I'll have to behave tonight, then, but will I see you again – soon?"

Saga blushed nearly the same shade of red I was turning, but for very different reasons. If her mother had been there... Then again, if her mother had still been around, this situation wouldn't have happened, would it? I apologised quietly to Mrs. Rockford for my indiscretions and promised to get her daughter home safely.

Yet nothing he did, as egregious as he was, was enough to warrant the kind of behaviour I was envisioning. I was correct—as long as he acted like a perfect gentleman, Saga would be on his side. Maybe that meant she would be safe – but for how long?

She fiddled with the camera, taking several more pictures of Vice to go with the first. He obliged with pride, striking several seductive poses.

"You know, that's a nice track of yours," I interrupted, to get him talking. I still had a job to do, after all, and maybe he would slip up. "Your new one? 'Versus'?"

He lit up with glee. "Oh, do you like it?"

"I wrote that, you thief," I growled. "That was my lullaby for the kids, from when they were little. How did you get it, and why did you turn it into your depraved ode to sin?"

"Thief...?" He pouted in a way that might have been endearing if I didn't know what he was really like. "That's so harsh. We creative types have to deal with so many infringements of our own work as it is without people coming in and claiming I stole your *lullaby*? I mean, that would be a hell of a coincidence, wouldn't it?"

A hell of a coincidence indeed. I closed my eyes and remembered the twins in their childhood.

"Little children,
Time for bed, to rest your head and dream a dream.
Don't you worry,
Nighttime comes, but scary things aren't what they seem.
Crawly bedbugs
Are twinkling stars up in the sky, just watch them creep.
Count them slowly,
Say goodbye to yesterday, and sleep..."

"Oh, that's a brilliant improv," he jeered, knowingly. "Have you ever thought about going into music? The indie scene is *huge* now—I bet you'd have a shot at instant stardom!"

If Saga realised the implications of our argument, she didn't let on, not taking either side, despite the evidence. Was she seriously defending him? She had as vivid a memory as I did—I couldn't believe she wouldn't remember after all this time! It was absolutely *not* a coincidence his track

was identical, down to the metre! I clenched my fists at the realisation that this was yet another ploy to get my hackles up.

"Oh, Saga," I coaxed, sensing the row was getting all of us nowhere fast, "it's getting late. Your father must be worried sick about you by now, and I'm sure these *nice* people want to pack up for tonight." I felt as though I was extracting a duckling from the talons of a hawk.

"Aww." Saga looked put out but seemed to agree. "This has been *the* coolest night of my entire life, Vice. I'd love it if it lasted forever—but yes, I have to get back to my family."

He seemed to mope at her lack of rebelliousness, but I knew she was still a good kid at heart, always mindful of her grades and family's well-being despite the trouble it caused her. Hopefully, she was also mindful of the thin line she was already walking between indulging herself and hurting me any further. When Vice started to protest, I wagged a finger at him and shook my head. *Sixteen*, I mouthed.

What could he do? "Aight," he groaned, shrugging. "Buzzkill, but I know when to call it a night." Oh, the lies he told! Standing, he bowed and offered Saga a hand up. "I do hope you enjoyed the show?"

"Oh, I did," she said with a smirk, still giddy. She walked toward the door, with a hint of hesitation as she approached it. "It really has been a lovely night."

"My pleasure—a very happy birthday to you."

He even knew...! Saga flushed with joy while I exploded in fury.

"And I'm sure you would agree," he crooned, "it couldn't fit more perfectly than to have a world party on the day you came to be..."

"Such a Wonder-ful tune," I snapped, but my disdain was lost on the both of them. It was as though he could have done anything—even kicked a puppy—and she would still be kowtowing his very existence. I hated that such a vile person had such talent and charm to manipulate others so.

Between squeals, Saga smiled in embarrassment, throwing glances his way as she reluctantly forced herself to leave. "No one will ever believe this!" she murmured in excitement. I waited for her to pass and put myself between them as Vice followed her to the door, threatening to draw my gun.

"Before you go, let me give you my number," he cooed as Saga was out the door. Before I could protest, he slipped something down my—

I couldn't stop my reflex to slap him, but he grabbed my wrist with a trained hand before I could connect, and I couldn't twist free no matter how I struggled. I didn't know how Saga would react to the sight, but her voice from farther down the hall suggested she hadn't seen us. "...Anna?"

"I'll see you again you-know-when," he murmured, laughing evilly as he did so. It took all of my effort to resist recoiling, if not shooting him then and there. "Oh, last thing," he added, crinkling his nose, "you stick out like a sore thumb with your special little glow sticks. Just a tip."

What! He couldn't possibly know the frequency to make the beacon signals visible! Yet – if he saw us...

Saga peeked back into the room. "Anna..."

I shook my head. "Unbelievable," I muttered, trying to pretend he hadn't caught me completely off-guard. "Just—we're leaving now, Saga."

Vice grinned at her again, waving as he did. "I do hope to see you at my next show, up close and – personal."

That seemed to satisfy her, and she grinned back. I snatched her by the arm and led her back outside to the chopper before anything worse could happen. Once there, Saga turned on me. "Is that why you're mad at him? Just because he stole your song?"

"You don't care?" I stared at her in disbelief. I almost didn't have words for her—at least, nothing that wasn't colourful. "I thought it meant... No, it's not just that! He gets his jollies by hurting – people."

"He didn't hurt me."

"Maybe he didn't hurt you *yet*. A child who sets bugs on fire isn't a good kid just because he doesn't also hit his mother. There's something off about what happened tonight. Like, why didn't you answer when I buzzed you earlier?"

"Did you?" Her tone was dismissive, as if suggesting I was foisting all the blame on her. "I tried to call *you*, but I wasn't getting a signal."

Ooh, that clinched it—he was up to something! But – what? Why the elaborate tricks? I hated that I couldn't dislodge the note poking my skin without Saga noticing and asking what was up, and that I couldn't check on Crystal without breaking cover.

What *had* happened to Crystal? This was disastrous. I had to report back to Rush as soon as possible. Was it safe to use my mobile anymore? Did Vice have a monitoring program on my number? ...no. Though smart, he was lazy—he wouldn't do something unless he absolutely had to do it to get what he wanted – and monitoring was a time-consuming chore. It didn't seem to matter at this point, anyway, if I was intercepted.

I pretended to check for messages. "Oh, I have a signal now. My boss wants me in early tomorrow—let me reply, then we'll go." Hopefully, that shouldn't raise suspicions about my being anything more than a District Court bailiff. I sent a buzz to Rush's desk—NSA would check all incoming calls for traces, if Vice was watching what I was sent. [C, Marco. 10-42.]

After I finished, Saga was staring back towards the arena. "Okay, ready?" I asked, grabbing my helmet and handing her the spare.

"I thought I heard fireworks over there, but I didn't see anything."

Her words gave me chills. "Where?"

"From the stage, maybe a bit behind."

Let it not be her, I thought, my imagination going crazy. It was just a car or motor backfiring, but we can't tell due to post-concert noise-induced hearing loss. Crystal is fine—just get out with Saga. "What do you think..." I asked, prompting her for my next course of action.

"I dunno," she muttered, as though lost in a daydream. "I've never heard of fireworks after a show, and I thought this place was too high-class

and policed for any pyromaniacs to get in. Security's pretty tight, though—it's probably nothing."

"Hope that's it." Understatement of the millennium! "Ready?"

If she was having second thoughts, they weren't pressing enough. "Aight. Let's roll."

Still, the downer of an end note to the concert didn't keep her from having a little smile on her face as she clasped the camera in her pocket. At least I had *that* much going for me, even if it meant more trouble for me later that I had failed to prove her crush to be the threat he was. To my relief, the ride back home was uneventful though, with the roar of the chopper's engine drowning out any ability to carry a conversation, I couldn't do anything to get my mind off of Crystal. Until I heard back from her or Rush, it was just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

As we arrived back at the house and I brought the chopper to a stop, Saga climbed off and handed me her helmet just I received a buzz. "Thanks for – everything," she said with a huge grin, a skip in her step as she walked to the door.

"Hold on, I need to get this." I had meant to take a quick peek, but just a glance was enough to make me start. [C, Polo. 10-71.]

"What is it?" Saga asked, noting my concern, but I barely heard her voice. No, Crystal was *not* gunned down! No! No, no, no no nonono—

My legs had a mind of their own. Even as my brain was still trying to process the message, I had already started the engine again and lifted the kickstand, not even securing Saga's helmet before it clattered to the ground. I didn't even know what exactly I meant to do—all I knew was there was a deceptively sweet middle-aged lady who would be happily blasting paper targets full of lead if it hadn't been for me.

5. Research Design and Methods

"I-I don't know what happened," I stammered, unable to contain my rage over the incident. "I left Saga for a little while to investigate, and the next thing I knew, both of them were gone with nothing to show for it."

Despite his normally level head, Rush seemed just as distraught as I was, but it didn't change my feelings about him an iota. Even when sitting on a chair outside the ER, he was nearly taller than me standing, and it gave him an imposing mien that I couldn't help respecting, feeling awestruck to see him even in this time of crisis. "How did they find them?"

"I put a beacon in Saga's mobile, and Crystal had hers on, but..." I growled in frustration, clenching my fists as I remembered Vice's taunt. "I don't know how, but they cracked the frequency."

"I see." He closed his eyes, thoughtful. "This is a serious problem."

Understatement of the *forever!* "I'm afraid the entire production was nothing more than an elaborate farce, a device by which to provoke me. There was no evidence I could find with even a hint of his involvement with the JAM project—only thinly-veiled attacks on me as though laughing at my being there in the first place, with Crystal as a coup de grâce."

Whether Rush was thinking or quietly steaming, I couldn't tell, but his silence was a knife through my heart. It tore me in two to have been the inadvertent cause of the mess. If only Saga hadn't... No, that wasn't fair—the night out was good for her, all things considered. Ultimately, Vice was at the heart of everything bad that was happening at my expense. It wasn't my fault he was such a pompous jerk to take advantage of our weaknesses!

Speaking of, that note of his kept scratching me under my clothes, but I didn't have any choice except to leave it there for now. Yeah, let me expose myself to my boss by fishing an inappropriately-placed card out of my undergarments in front of him—*that* would make everything all better.

"If that's all," Rush declared after musing over my report, "you are free to leave. The surgery will take some time, and there's no point in losing sleep waiting around."

"I'm going to lose sleep anyway."

"Then do it in your bed, not here. That's an order."

I hated to just leave after rushing to get here in the first place, but I was running out of options at every turn. I couldn't stay, I couldn't (and wouldn't) go back and confront Vice, I couldn't go back to the house and—I assumed by now—wake up the Rockfords to apologise for my abrupt drop-off... I was in check, possibly checkmate, and it made me feel even more helpless than ever.

"Then goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight, Versa."

"I'll have my mobile on me at all times. Please let me know the instant she's out of surgery."

"I will."

I turned, gnashing my teeth for the trillionth time just that night as I headed to the nearest WC. In the privacy of a stall, I yanked out the note and crumpled it in my hand, unleashing my limited ability to strike back upon it. I would have set fire to the damnable thing if there was any way to do it without disrupting the entire hospital—instead, I started to tear it into the tiniest pieces I could manage, stopping only when I happened to see the elaborate handwriting on it:

01212009. ♥

Huh? What country code was that? ...no, it didn't have enough digits for even a local call, especially not if it started with zero. Despite my confusion, it made my flesh curl just to be touching anything of his. All I had gotten from the whole mess was this scrap of paper—as though I would call him even if it was a real number! It made me unbelievably furious to be in this position, to fail at my job so thoroughly. It made me so angry that...

It made me wonder. He never did anything—*anything*—that didn't further his own agenda in some way. Slipping his hand into my shirt and not quite getting to cop a feel didn't seem to be worth even that small amount of effort, especially writing a note with a string of seemingly random numbers on it. There was something to it that wasn't evident at first glance. I stared at the number for a long time but couldn't make any sense of it. Maybe NSA could find something with their resources.

"Wait," I said, hurrying back down the corridor to find Rush again and solicit his input. To my surprise, Giga was there, and both had a look like they had been caught unawares at my approach. Of all— "...I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

Giga gave me an intense look of disdain. He had never approved of my working for the government, much less our department—even though he was the head of a different division entirely. More than likely, he was trying to convince Rush to have me thrown out on some illegal immigration charge or other technicality.

"Versa," my mentor acknowledged with a frown. "I thought I sent you home."

I knew I had to do something about the note, but if Giga knew what I was going to tell Rush, he might decide that I was either wasting time and resources or walking into another trap—which I might well be, but why give him more ammunition to have me removed? "I wanted to know what to do about the Riordan follow-up."

Rush grunted. "Worry about it tomorrow."

"Worrying is like counting sheep for me."

"Eh... Fine, contact Rothe or Fender. One of them should be able to brief you on the next course of action."

Giga remained silent the whole time, motionless except to glare at me—not even blinking. I nodded in deferral to him all the same, yet I just couldn't get past the feeling I was encroaching on his territory somehow. It probably bugged me more that he kept me from speaking with Rush again than anything else, that there was no justifiable reason I shouldn't have just done what I had returned to do, but I felt far too uncomfortable to pretend he wasn't there. "Good night," I called to no one in particular, turning and hurrying back to my bike.

Idiot, I thought. This is so – high school! Just go back in there and show him the note. It was no use—my legs carried me back to the chopper, my hands picked up the helmet, my fingers buckled the strap, my backside planted itself on the saddle, and my keys started the ignition. I felt pulled unavoidably toward the tech building on Taylor, as though compelled by my very soul to get away from Giga. What did it mean? It was silly to avoid a possible source of information like this...

No matter. Fender shouldn't have any problems helping me out. I just hoped I wouldn't pay for not telling Rush immediately.

It was a chilly evening to drive, and I felt even less at ease without my gloves—not that Vice or Giga helped matters. A light drizzle started to pick up, as if to add insult to injury, but I didn't want to spare the extra time to run home. The security guard gave me a funny look when I walked in and shook myself off, but I flashed my badge and continued up to Fender's office on the seventh floor. She seemed startled to see me barge in, even after I knocked. "Versa! What brings you here at this hour?"

"I came to ask what to do about the Riordan follow-up—" I glanced around surreptitiously, noting whether anyone would be looking in from the corridor. We wouldn't be visible from the security cams, at least. "—and to ask you about this."

She furrowed her brow when I handed over the note. "What is it?"

"A number, but I can't discern its significance. V—" I still shivered at his name. "—Vice gave it to me and seemed to suggest that I should call him, but this can't possibly be a legitimate phone number."

"This is all of it?"

"Yeah..."

"Just a number – and a heart."

I made a face. "Don't get me started."

Fender stared at it for at least as long as I had. "This could be quite literally anything," she deduced unhelpfully, "except, as you already knew, a phone number."

"What possible reason would he have for giving me this?"

"Well, I can cross-reference it with all of the known data on JAM, but it will take a bit of time."

"How long?"

"Maybe half an hour or so. There aren't many files on JAM itself, but there are a few hundred possible ties to other organisations. I can also scan it for embedded fibres or invisible inks, but that could take another hour since the machine hasn't warmed up."

It wasn't worth risking coming down again later, if Giga was really working against me. "Sure thing. I'll wait, if you don't mind."

"Be my guest. You can flop on the couch over there if you like—I'm sure it's been a long day for you."

"You don't know the half of it." I sprawled out on the cushions and gave in to the simple pleasure of relaxing. I would have liked to lay there indefinitely, given my emotional and physical exhaustion, but my train of thought kept wandering back to places I didn't want it to go, no matter what I tried. "Tell me about Giga."

"Eh?" Fender looked up from her station again. "What about him?"

"I'm – worried about his motives."

"How so?"

"I dunno... I get this feeling like I'm under higher scrutiny around him than with other people, like he has some kind of vendetta against me."

Here, she scrunched her face. "I don't think I like the implications of that, but I can see what he's been up to lately. Not that I expect to find anything—if something malicious is going on, he isn't likely to broadcast it."

"Well, even the department hierarchy would be informative. If I'm stepping on his chances for a promotion, that would be useful to know."

"Makes sense."

That was enough. Searching for too much in such a short span of time would look suspicious. "Thanks for doing this."

She gave me a nervous laugh. "Hey, it's my job."

Despite my inclination to the contrary, I had to follow Rush's orders and get some rest, as my head was starting to feel floaty by this point. My rebellious side was glad to at least be doing it at the office than in the lumpy bed I hadn't gotten around to replacing, which my infection told me would outlive me by years as it was. I'd always felt somewhat more comfortable in furniture not designed for sleeping, anyway.

Time passed like clockwork, with nothing to make me lose track of the planet's natural biorhythms but Fender's typing and pen-clicking. I found reflecting on the day's events unavoidable, and my brain finally shut down from being overwhelmed—

"—Versa?"

Fender shook me awake, a concerned look on her face as I sat up with a jolt. "Wh—what is it?"

"I, ah... You were – making some strange noises just now."

"Was I?" I realised then that I'd never slept in the same room with anyone who mentioned me doing that before. Did I normally cry out in my sleep, or...? "What kind of noises?"

"Like, you were thrashing about, as though you were suffocating."

"Was I." Then my terrors took on a life of their own, after a sense. "I'm sorry about that." That didn't seem to be the answer she was looking for, but I wasn't prepared to give *that* one.

"Well, er... I only found one link to the JAM project containing that number. It's an ID for a blood test sample relating to a study. However, it's an extremely tenuous link—we *never* would have thought to look for it if you hadn't given us the code."

"Who's the subject?"

"Don't have the clearance to say yet. Gimme a day or two, and I can get back to you on that—maybe. No other hidden secrets in the note I could find, though."

"Better than nothing, I suppose. Thanks, and let me know." There was nothing else for me to do here. While I had the respite, it was best if I made amends for last night's rude departure and, hopefully, not destroy any more of the bridges I spent so much time trying to build these days. "Guess I should be heading out—is the sun up yet?"

"About a half-hour ago."

"Mm," I muttered, doing the math. "I should be okay for time."

"You're going out again?" Fender asked, incredulous about my lack of proper shut-eye. "Weren't you up all of yesterday?"

"I'll be fine, Mum," I whined, feeling snarkier than usual. "I'll finish my homework and brush my teeth, too."

She rolled her eyes, returning to her station. "Good luck out there."

I smirked all the same, feeling a little better with someone watching my back. I raced back to my chopper and booked it to the house. Even on a holiday, traffic was heavy, though, and the sun was starting to beat down on me by the time I approached the house. Mr. Rockford must have heard me coming, as he met me at the front door.

"Good morning, Anna," he greeted, a hint of bags under his eyes. "I have to admit, I'm surprised to see you again so soon."

I bowed in apology. "I have some unfinished business."

"What exactly happened last night?" He glanced inside with a look of concern. "Saga won't tell me anything about what went on and why you weren't with her."

Of course she wouldn't. "...it's complicated."

"Did anything – bad happen?"

What could I do? I frowned in disgust. "The short of it is Vice and I crossed paths and spoiled the mood."

"Oh."

"It was unavoidable, though! I had to leave as soon as I dropped off Saga, due to an unfortunate work-related incident that..." I didn't know if I want to tell him about Crystal as well. "I was just trying to keep it light, and *he* went and ruined everything."

Despite the oversimplification, he looked completely lost already, something I'd always found a little exasperating that reinforced the sense he was more of a flighty older brother than a proper foster father. "Perhaps you'd better just come in and talk with her, then. I can't get anywhere."

I sighed in resignation. "Hopefully she'll understand."

Saga was sitting at the kitchen table alone, with the spare helmet I'd dropped resting on the seat next to her. I assumed Epic was in his room – still asleep? I didn't know his current sleep patterns. "Hey," I offered.

She wouldn't even look up from her breakfast.

"I'm *really* sorry about last night, Saga. I know how much it meant to you, and I really *did* give my best shot at keeping it nice—"

"You left without saying goodbye," she pouted, glaring at me.

"There was an emergency," I confessed. "My boss buzzed me that one of my co-workers was in an accident, and I had to see her."

"So? Co-workers are just the people you see at work! Why do they supercede me, when the point was spending time together—*your* idea?"

She wasn't going to make this easy, was she. "Fine, I admit I was a little preoccupied the whole time, but you can't tell me your mind was on our 'quality time' either."

"It was! I was just being mindful of the fact that we didn't see eye to eye on – him."

Were you now, I thought. I supposed there wasn't a 'best' approach to the matter. "I was concerned, okay? You'd be, too, if the reason your co-worker was suddenly disabled for *life* was indirectly your fault. I can't say, 'Whoops, sorry,' and we go back to being all hunky-dory."

Saga went wide-eyed at my words. "...sorry," she muttered.

Being vindicated didn't feel quite as good as I'd hoped. At least she understood now. "Yeah. Believe me, I didn't enjoy the ordeal at all. There was absolutely no good way out of it."

"You could have said something then."

"My work's sensitive, you know? I'm never sure what I can say that won't come back to haunt me later." I hoped that gave her a little insight into my life, but I could never tell.

Saga was quiet for quite some time. "...how is she, then?"

"Still in surgery, most likely paralysed from the waist down. She's looking at thirty-one more years of it, too."

That just made her quiet again. "...are you in trouble...?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly. I mean... How can I put it—the people who crippled her are bad people, and they aren't looking out for our best interests."

"Are they after you?"

"...kind of."

"So, yes."

Couldn't fault her for seeing through my clumsy attempts to tell her everything by not telling her anything, huh. I sat down at the table, and Mr. Rockford joined us, offering me juice and a plate of toast. "Thank you." I took a piece of toast and spread some marmalade on it. "So – did anything happen since I dropped you off?"

Saga glanced at her father, who gave her a stern look. "I called up some of my friends to hang out after you ditched, before Pop caught me."

I opened my mouth to lecture her, but it was evident that they had been through this dance, and on less sleep than I'd had. "Ah – well, I meant anything out of the ordinary, like suspicious people walking past the house."

"No."

"Haven't seen any strange vehicles parked down the road or gotten calls from unfamiliar numbers?"

Saga raised an eyebrow at me. "Why?"

"Yes or no?"

"Not that I've seen—why? Is something going on?"

I cringed again. "I told you that – Vice is *not* a good person..." The look in her eyes was still scathing as I added, "...but I don't know if it's just that he's not a nice person to *me*."

"Why you?"

Her tone was accusatory, and her silence waiting for me to answer was almost deafening, but Mr. Rockford seemed lost on how to change the subject. I wasn't going to get out of this, was I. "It's kind of... You know how people get crushes? Like, on a cute guy at work or school or that?"

"Of course."

"Well, for some people—people who aren't all there, exactly—it's a crush – but it's not love."

She glowered at me. "How do you mean...?"

I hesitated trying to think of an answer, rubbing my hands nervously as I did, the pains shooting again. Mr. Rockford noticed and, well-meaning as he must have been, pointed it out. "Do they hurt?"

Gah! It felt like too much, too soon, and I unconsciously withdrew my hands into my lap. "Do what hurt?" I hated to throw away his opening like that, but... Would I ever be ready to tell them everything?

Their reactions were unexpected. Mr. Rockford was disappointed, while Saga looked curious. Neither said anything more, however.

"How about this—" I volunteered. "It's part of my job to check for suspicious activities. For instance, Vice gave you that camera, but it could have a tracer in it, or some kind of bug. I'd have to check it out."

"Funny you should mention..." She trailed off as though she knew she had to tell me something but wouldn't unless I asked her.

"What? Something wrong with the camera?"

Her expression turned violent. "Glory broke it! She got so jealous of me when I showed it to everyone that she smashed it before I could get the pictures off of it!"

I couldn't deny I was secretly pleased, but – a camera like that was still an expensive device, and an irreplaceable souvenir. Yet recent models were sturdier than that, surely? "Just like that? It doesn't work anymore?"

She snatched up her purse and whipped out the camera, holding it face forward. "Not when the lens is broken!"

"Then the card should still be okay, at least."

"That's what I need, something to read the data. I don't care about the camera as much as that, but I know we don't have a compatible reader at school, and I don't trust my friends with my stuff anymore—not after *this*."

I stared at the make. "I should give you my old laptop. It looks like the same manufacturer, so there shouldn't be a compatibility issue."

Instead of being elated at the prospect, Saga seemed to have mixed feelings. "There's also... There were a few other pictures on the card from before, I found."

Her tone didn't sound good. "Well, they must have been left on there on accident," I figured, putting on a wry grin. "Anything – juicy?"

She wasn't playing that game, instead biting her tongue. That meant there was more to them than what might be expected and, for what reason, she wasn't letting on what in specific. Something so bad that her father couldn't know what they were?

"Well, if you like, I can get the pictures off the card and send you copies of them? You know what was on there, so you can trust I'm sending all of th—"

"That's okay," she insisted, waving her hand to interrupt me. "Just the ones of last night are fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, don't worry about the others."

I took the camera from her, hesitantly putting it in my jacket pocket. Why did I have the feeling I wasn't going to like what I found? Well, might as well see what they were before they set ablaze from the pure evil that was contained on them...

"So prints are okay? Or, as I said, my laptop's just lying around."

"Prints are good. I don't know what I'd do with a laptop – besides have Glory break it." She glowered at the last part.

"You sure? Not even for school?"

"Eh..." Her response made me wonder if it was somehow worse to have an obsolete computer than not to have one at all.

"It's up to you, then. I'll give you back the stick after deleting the bad pictures, then if you ever need duplicates, you can take it to one of the local photo shops."

"Thanks."

I wasn't sure what else to say, but I hated to just bolt almost as soon

as I barged in. "Well, if that's it, I have to get back to work—"

"You aren't on holiday?" Mr. Rockford asked, astonished.

I shook my head, picking up my spare helmet as I stood. "The job I'm working on is too important to let sit even for one day, especially after what happened to my co-worker last night. I don't mind pulling overtime—it keeps me busy."

"Well, don't work *too* hard," he warned, stifling a yawn. "We're almost getting used to seeing you around again."

I grinned, wishing I could afford the luxury of a simple home life. "I'm just glad we got everything straightened out. I'll have the pictures back to you in a jiffy, and thanks for keeping my helmet for me."

Mr. Rockford walked me out, then I jumped on my bike for what felt like the duodecillionth time in the last two days, heading to Executive. The booth attendant waved to me as I drove past while flashing my keycard over the sensor to raise the gate. It was happily empty today, which meant I got my choice of the garage. As I disembarked, I remembered my wig at the bottom of my bag and took it out, straightening out the fibres before tucking it under my arm. No point in taking it back to the apartment, I guessed, and it would just make a mess if I left it where it was.

My shoebox of an office was a haven now, a temporary escape from the drama of Vice and Saga as well as Rush and Giga. It had never seemed so inviting before, not when my job was at its most stressful, but – at least for the moment, no one was bothering me. I hung the wig on the coatrack, wondering how many heads it would turn if I left it there.

I pulled the camera from my pocket and turned it over in my hands. *It's Saga's now, not – his*, I told myself to keep from flinching. The damage seemed limited to the lens and battery casing in any event, something that probably wouldn't take much to repair—but it might also cost less to replace it, as quickly as technology was improving.

As I thought, the stick was intact and ejected from the chamber with no problem. I plugged it into my station's multireader, and the autodetect immediately opened the containing file system. There were twenty photos, the last seven of which were the ones I remembered being taken. I started with the most recent ones—as expected, his smug mug filled my screen. I couldn't advance past them quickly enough.

The first picture following Vice giving Saga a peck on the cheek was... I had a bit of a time discerning what exactly I was seeing. It appeared to be – skin? But whose? If so, I couldn't tell if it was from someone alive or from a cadaver—given what I knew of Vice, I had no idea which would be better in this case.

The remaining twelve weren't much better, portraying – things, for lack of a better word, that may have been harmless but nevertheless conjured disturbing mental images. No wonder Saga didn't know what to tell me at the house. Did it mean maybe she would start to see what I saw in him, a psychopath instead of a crooner? Perhaps a coroner... I snorted at the idea,

though that sounded less funny the more I thought about it. It was suddenly colder in the office than I expected, even though I had the air off.

The last image... Presumably, it was the first one taken, unless Vice altered the specs for some unfathomable reason. When I studied the detail, it appeared to be cloth—specifically, clothing, possibly still being worn. The colours suggested a female, the lace suggested a gothic-style dress or frilly undergarments. When I set the image to view at 100% detail, I noticed a very small number written on the skin near the hem:

03658163

Similar to the note: eight digits including leading zero. What did it mean? I skipped through the thirteen images a second time, searching each for a number and marking every instance I found with a digital tag. All save one contained a series of seven seemingly random digits following a leading zero. It didn't make sense—why eight digits total? Why not just the seven, if all of them started with zero?

I looked at the file specs. The ones of Vice were numbered starting with IMG0001, ascending sequentially, and were a standard 4:3. The others were out of order with no evident rhyme or reason, a nonsensical assortment of letters and digits. They weren't even a standard size, which meant they had not necessarily been taken with this camera. Did he mean for me to find these? ...of course, he did—but why?

I buzzed Fender, overcome with worry about what all of it meant. "Hey, D. Got anything new for me?"

"Hey, Versa, you're still awake? No, nothing new's turned up."

"Well, why doncha process these, then—I found some suspicious pictures on a memory stick that was in Vice's possession." I threw her an interoffice link.

"...what *are* these?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I'm not yet familiar enough with the medical side of things to tell if my suspicions are correct. Note the numbers I found, too."

"Great... I'll be here."

"Thanks."

The waiting bugged me, but I didn't want to go back to Rush about this without a lead. I had to figure out my next course of action alone and get his approval. Sighing, I flipped through the stack of interoffice post on my desk, then I picked at the Riordan files and pondered leaning back for a good long nap.

I got an intercom buzz. "Hey, V...?"

Somehow I didn't expect such a quick answer. "Something wrong?"

"Wow, these numbers are also IDs for samples from the same study. I may be able to find out more with time. At a glance, though, I noticed one thing in common between all of these IDs: the age of each of the subjects at

the time of the study sample was over fifty."

"Fifty?" The conclusion that jumped at me was startling. "Could it have something to do with MLCS?"

"—possibly. Crikey, if the subjects are all more than fifty years old and haven't spotted already..."

"Exactly." Maybe that mystery leading zero in all the IDs meant no spotting? "I wonder if these people may be part of a vaccination effort?"

"This may explain the seemingly random disappearances, if they're the missing persons. What we don't know is if, in fact, they haven't spotted."

"I can't think of any other worthwhile reason for kidnapping older people, especially ones who aren't particularly well off."

"The picture that's missing a number perplexes me, though—I've scoured it, but I don't think I see anything you didn't. It's tough to say if that picture corresponds to the number on the note or what's the significance of not having a number. On top of that, it's going to be difficult to impossible finding out if the photos are of the study participants, since there's strict protocol regarding patient confidentiality. Even the folks running the study may not know who they subjects are."

Well, poop. "What about the file numbering? Any significance?"

"It's just how they were taken, as far as I know. The dimensions and file names correspond to different camera specs—a few were taken with the default settings for one brand, some with another brand, but the images all ended up on the same stick. I mean, I can tell you just from the image headers that the unnumbered one was taken with a proprietary Mac program and converted to the same OS, so it has to be just a file share."

"He probably bought several cameras with the intent of using them only once," I mused. "Maybe they weren't even taken by the same person."

"Definitely different people—the timestamps are too close together to be only one person taking them all with seven different camera models."

"That's something, at least. What can you tell me about the study?"

"Not a lot. I can give you the clinical trial number, 40-C-N425, and the study title—'MAJ-Related Liver Disease.' Otherwise, all I have is an enrollment table, patient numbers, and the data corresponding to each patient plus results summary table, though none of the data ties directly to any of the subjects for privacy reasons. Similar studies to this were basically taking blood samples and analysing the contents, but I couldn't tell you for certain that this one uses the same or even similar procedures."

Wait... "MAJ?"

"Yeah—like, macrophage-attributed jaundice, I think? I forget all these weird obscure diseases."

It seemed comically bizarre that the JAM project had the reverse acronym, as though they were seeking to metaphorically reverse MAJ. It wouldn't be nearly that simple of a deduction, though—why would a group focused on wiping out a rare disease be so pursued by the government?

"Thanks, Fender. I guess it's better than nothing."

"Don't mention it."

"Ha."

"No, really—don't. I was supposed to be doing a build for Rothe instead of doing your homework for you."

I smirked. "Okay, it'll be our secret—between you, me, and Rush."

"Aww," she whined, "how do you call *that* a secret?"

"Hey, I have a job to do, too. I've gotten nowhere fast with the stakeout last night. I need something to show for it."

"Yeah, yeah... Good luck with that, I mean it."

I ejected the stick and printed out the photos, taking a highlighter to the numbers on each for emphasis before shoving them all in an interoffice envelope. Saga would have to wait until I could find a studio—even feeling as I did, I didn't want to use laser printer paper for her pictures, and they wouldn't be in colour or last as long as photo paper, anyway.

As I was heading out the door, I got a buzz from Rush on the cable and whirled around to take it. Despite my escalating fatigue, I couldn't help feeling elated with things turning around, until I heard the concern in his voice. "Versa, you're awake? Didn't you get my message?"

"Uh." I glanced at my mobile—one missed call. Oops... Was he worried when he couldn't reach me? "Sorry, I guess I was asleep then."

"I called your apartment, then Margle told me you'd checked in at your office."

"Yeah!" I cheered, excited for once. "I got a possible lead—"

"Versa!" he interrupted, distress evident in his tone. "Your foster father's been taken to the hospital."

6. Milestones

I nearly dropped the handset to hear the words, scrambling to regain my grasp. "But – I just left them this morning, and he was fine!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know what to tell you." Rush sounded apologetic yet cool. "They've stabilised him, but clearly something's wrong that no one else knew about. I'm not family, so they won't give me any specifics, and though you're the emergency contact, I think it will take drastic events to get much more information out of them than I did. In either case, they need you now. Saga's at Shady Grove in hysterics about her father, and her brother has no one looking after him."

What – the – hell. Where was all of this going? I didn't think even *Vice* and his group could conspire against me to have so much go wrong all at the same time! "I'm – on my way," I choked, my emotions starting to take over. I knew he still had time left—thirty-three years and some months—but how would he be spending that time? How would it affect the kids? I couldn't stand the idea of Crystal's fate repeating itself in Mr. Rockford.

I shoved the envelope into my bag and darted to the bike, feeling my adrenaline pumping from yet another state of crisis. It wasn't that I felt Epic was in any serious danger, but I knew he upset easily from being alone, despite his incapacity to deal with strangers—and me. The Rockfords were still my family, even if not by blood, and I couldn't let them down. Oh, that so much of their stability had hinged on Mrs. Rockford...

It was futile to believe even for a moment that I didn't measure up to my foster mother, but I couldn't help it. She had had her eccentricities—she was the only person I knew offhand who was *ecstatic* to have her hair start greying at a young age—but it was undeniable she was the glue that held us all together. Poor Mr. Rockford was always overwhelmed, in retrospect, and I wagered everything that his failure to graduate from high school was at the cornerstone of this. Everyone we knew were so proud when Mrs. Rockford got to test pilot a brand new spacecraft that it must've dealt a huge blow to his pride.

I had to see him again, to let him know what I knew and that I didn't judge him for it. I just didn't know when I would get that chance without knowing why he had been rushed to the hospital like that. Why didn't Saga call me herself on her mobile? Surely *that* wasn't broken as well?

When I pulled up to the house for what felt like the septillionth time today, I had my answer: she must have dropped it when the ambulance came. At least it was still intact, with only minor scratches from hitting the pavement. I sighed in aggravation at everything that was happening. Well,

at least I had my chance to take out the beacon—why give Vice an easy way to find her again?

I tried the front door, but it was locked. At least they had that sense, since Epic wasn't going to be much resistance against intruders. I walked to the garage, heaved open the side door, took the spare key from its spot in a niche behind the freezer, then entered the alarm code, 5349, on the touchpad. The system beeped to indicate it was disabled, and I unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The kitchen looked identical to when I had left it this morning save a broken glass on the floor with spilled juice in a puddle, which I rushed to clean up. Their breakfast plates were still on the table, left for Epic to do for dishwashing duty – or, were they there because Mr. Rockford didn't make it much longer after breakfast? I tried to figure the timetable in my head, but it made me feel guilty thinking about it. It wasn't my fault, I tried to convince myself, but my imagination ran wild with the most outlandish possibilities, like Vice getting his bully on and sending his minions to make mischief on the people closest to me—

Well, no point worrying *now*. I walked upstairs to Epic's room and knocked on the door. "Epic?" I asked, not certain what he cared to be called these days. "It's me, Anna. Hey. I don't know if you know, but Pop's in the hospital and Saga's with him. I came by to make sure you're okay."

Nothing.

"Are you okay? Let me know. If I don't hear anything, I'll have to come in and check on you, understand?"

His voice was barely audible. "...Anna..."

"Yes, Epic. It's Anna. I'm here to babysit you for now. Can I come in, or do you want to be left alone?"

"...Anna..."

"Yes or no? May I come in?"

I didn't get a clear answer. In the past, whenever I went in his room without his permission, he went into fits, so I was hesitant to disrupt his little world. It made me feel more impotent, having the responsibility but none of the authority. I respected and was grateful to the Rockfords for taking me in, but I couldn't imagine fostering a child myself, particularly if it meant one like Epic. Adults I could deal with fine, but kids—

Then I had a flash, a memory of Vice and I when we were younger. He was threatening even then, and I still saw much of him in many of the children I'd see around the neighbourhood—an unfortunate side effect of his abuse. That was a long time ago, I told myself, and kids can't hurt me...

Nevertheless, I felt lightheaded, hanging onto the doorframe to keep myself from collapsing. I couldn't recall ever losing this much control of my functions in such a short time. True, I hadn't seen as much of Vice and his influences as I had in the last two days, but it still felt disabling.

"Epic," I called again, trying to get my mind off of things, "let me know if you need help with anything, please? Or if you want to eat? Talk?"

The silence was bothering me. I had to take a peek—

Almost as soon as I opened his door a crack, he slammed against it. "NO!" he cried. "No..."

"Okay," I surrendered, feeling tears well in my eyes for a number of reasons. "I'll leave you alone. Just call to me if you *do* need anything."

I couldn't understand his behaviour. It seemed like he was afraid of me, but I did my best just to be his friend. It was a trial not taking all of this personally, and it was frustrating being in a no-win position. There was a literal wall between us where the one between Saga and me was figurative, and I at least had an idea how to bring down Saga's, but – what could I do *now* but wait?

I sat at the top of the stairs and took out the envelope of printouts to scrutinise them again. I stared in particular at the one without a number, trying to will the digits into existence just to have that one tiny element in this whole confusing universe solved. The subject seemed to be female and either tomboyish or just happening to have worn work clothes that day, with none of the lace, sequins, or fake jewel studs in the clothing on some of the others. What clued me in was the faint hand in the background, wearing a ring with a subtle feminine touch to it. The style seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it though I sifted through years of memories.

It was a long time to remember, though, and I was exhausted...

Someone was shaking me awake. "Anna?"

"Hnn-wha?" I was leaning against the side of the staircase. It felt like I was regularly coming to in odd places. "What's wrong?"

Saga had tears in her eyes. "Pop has Hepatitis-B."

"Does he?" I recalled some of the basic symptoms: liver damage, jaundice... It seemed a bit odd that he would spontaneously break down, but I wasn't a doctor to be able to say for certain he couldn't. "How is he?"

"Stable now, but we aren't sure how he got it. Mum was definitely healthy when... Well, I don't have it, either. Anyway, they're going to keep him there for a few days for observation, after which – I don't know what's going to happen."

It was a real problem, I knew. "You can still get to school, at least."

"Yeah, I'm used to taking the bus. It's just, what, now I'm going to have to take care of Pop, too?"

I shook my head. "It's manageable, but he should be back to his old self once the major symptoms are under control. There's no cure yet other than time, but during its infection phase it's just a chronic illness rather than a full-time disability."

"And how long will that be? Here I wanted to be able to go off to Uni, maybe! How can I do that when Pop's sick?"

Though I desperately wanted to alleviate her valid fears, I couldn't break Mr. Rockford's confidence about her college fund, not when I had my own doubts about him as it was. "You're a good person to worry about your family, but ultimately it's not your duty to save them."

"But I can't—"

It was heartbreaking, but I knew all too well how she felt. I would be happy to give them all my money, but it would do – what? Help for a year or so, then they'd be back to where they were, and I'd be on the street for the rest of my life. No, the key wasn't just getting more money...

I stood, stifling a yawn. "What time is it? I couldn't get Epic to even let me see in his room. I don't know if he's hungry or needs anything."

She made a face. "It's past suppertime. I guess he's hungry by now, but I'll see." I watched as she walked over and knocked on his door. "Hey, Picky. I'm back, but Pop's in the hospital. He's sick. He needs for us to take care of ourselves until he gets out in a few days. You okay in there?"

Epic mumbled something I couldn't hear. Saga opened the door, shaking her head in disappointment before going inside. I felt like even more of an outsider now, not understanding what about their rituals made me so alien to him or if it really was that he didn't like being around those not of his blood. He was most of the reason I feared I could never truly be part of the family.

Saga emerged moments later. "Would you like to stay for supper? I can do some spinach tortellini."

"That sounds nice," I admitted, only realising then just how many meals I had skipped in the last two days.

"I don't know if Epic will come out, though. He's acting all weird."

"Is it me?"

"You?" She raised an eyebrow at my question but didn't reject the idea. "...maybe. I don't know for sure, though—he won't tell me what his deal is. I wish Mum were still here, 'cause she'd know what to say to him."

I couldn't have agreed more. "Well, we might as well make the most of it."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean look at all the quality time we get to spend together now."

She gave me a look as though I had to be kidding.

"Really, if you ever need a hand, I'll be here. Now, for instance—I'll keep you company until your pop gets better, so it's not just you going crazy with Epic."

She made a face as though she tried to laugh, but in her position I imagined it to be an insurmountable task mustering the effort. "I guess it is good to have someone who sort of gets what I'm talking about."

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?" I put my hands on my hips. "I'm not *that* much of an old fogey, am I?"

"Gah, I was teasing you, Anna!" she shouted, playfully slapping my arm. "Fine, I appreciate the *female* company."

"Oh, I get it," I teased, rolling my eyes, "you're just brown-nosing 'cause you want to get into the exclusive club of Cool Girls?"

"Pfff," she snorted, heading downstairs. I smirked and followed.

"We're not as different as you think," I added, musing. "Do you remember—oh, exactly eight years ago today—that pretty butterfly we saw land on the lilies your mother planted?"

"Yeah," she agreed, reflecting wistfully as she pulled the tortellini out of the freezer. "It was a monarch, unusual for this time of year. There were four, weren't there? Lilies, I mean."

"All white."

"They looked kind of grey to me, actually."

"Well, your folks told me you might be a bit colourblind. Most flowers aren't grey."

"I guess I wouldn't know it." She leaned down to take a pot from the cupboard. "There aren't many women with colourblindness, are there?"

"That just makes you all the more special."

"Special." The look in her eyes wasn't that of appreciation. "Why doesn't it feel that way?"

"C'mon, you have a lot of traits that make you a worthwhile person. I bet lots of people really like you, but they're too shy or quiet or whatever to just come out and say it."

She filled the pot with water to half-full and put it on the range. "...I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"I mean, okay, a few guys have asked me out, but as soon as they get to know me, they get weirded out and never talk to me again."

I had to admit I didn't have the greatest amount of experience with that, so it was hard to say what the problem would be. "Why would they get weirded out?"

"I'm not sure... Like, they learn how I have a twin who's almost my exact opposite. I'm a girl, he's a boy. I'm lean, he's more heavy, though we have the same diet. I have straight hair, his is curly. I'm lefty, he's righty. I'm *trying* to be a social climber, he wants to hole up in his room away from the world..."

I wasn't sure what would be appropriate to tell her. "It sounds like something else is going on, because liking someone shouldn't have anything to do with your relatives—by blood or otherwise."

Saga pondered this. "But it doesn't help that he's terrible."

"Who your brother is shouldn't reflect on you. I am me—my family is not who I am. Same for you. Relatives do not define a person."

"But why does he have to be *this* different?"

"Well, parents give half of their genes to each child, but it's not the same half each time, and the way the brain develops is different even when

the genes start out the same—nature versus nurture. One child can be well-behaved and kind-hearted, and the other could be malicious and cruel. It's up to chance, to a degree."

She stared at nothing for a moment before looking at me again. "Do you ever wonder about your parents?"

I frowned, not excited about opening this particular can of worms. "Sometimes, but work keeps me busy. Sometimes I'm too busy to think about *anything* but work, which is fine with me."

Saga turned on the gas, deep in thought. "You know, for all I might complain about Pop sometimes, I don't know if I could deal with not having known him. Mum, too—I'll always wish she would be able to see me get married, to see my kids grow up... That's a part of me that's gone forever. How can you stand not knowing a whole part of yourself like that?"

"I guess I've just gotten so used to having what I have that I didn't worry about what I didn't."

"You should look for them," she insisted, "even if it means taking a long vacation. I can't fathom not wanting to know."

I wasn't sure if she meant it as a prod to do something positive or to get my big nose out of their lives again. "What, now? You don't want me around or something?" I teased, crossing my arms.

"No! I mean, not like that! It just – feels like something you should do, if only so you can bring them back here to meet us."

I smirked. "Even Epic?"

She rolled her eyes, gritting her teeth. "Yes, even him—I guess."

"Aight, maybe I will." It felt satisfying to be bonding on this kind of level at last. Hopefully it would lift her spirits and help her through her father's illness, keep her from feeling like everything was on her shoulders. "Say, would you like to see another concert—my choice this time?"

"Mmm – who?"

"Guy named Status. He's a local DJ. I think you'll dig his stuff."

She looked – if I had to venture a guess, guilty. "I dunno, maybe. Got a demo of his setlist?"

I grabbed my bag and pulled out a minidisc. "Give it a listen."

"Fine, maybe later."

It felt disheartening to be shot down so quickly as that. Surely she liked someone besides...? "I'm just throwing out some suggestions here. If you have any other ideas—"

"I can't really afford to go out and play, Anna! Just look what going to Wolf Trap got me—both of us, even!"

Buh? "...how do you mean?"

"Your co-worker and Pop! Wouldn't their both getting hospitalised have been prevented if we hadn't gone?"

Oh, for— "That was *life* happening, Saga! I'm pretty sure your pop didn't catch Hep-B just from chasing after you last night!"

"And your co-worker?"

I fought back the truth. "That was bad timing. It was my fault, yes, but not *our* fault—you don't even know who she is! Stop trying to take all the blame for things you couldn't control!" ...that's *my* job.

She whined all the same. "But – it sucks that we're just going to fall apart if I don't help out!"

"Help out, yes. Be the sole support system, no. You know I'll be here for you, don't you?"

"No offence, Anna, but – you're not really part of the family. You saw how Epic doesn't want to be around you, especially not you alone." She crossed her arms and hunched over in a melodramatic pout. "I've started to see why you don't like birthdays that much—just a day to set up for all kinds of disappointment."

I felt an enormous part of myself die. So she was going to keep the wall between us because she thought it was inevitable, because she thought there was no hope of working to rehabilitate her brother when he wouldn't warm to *me*, the stranger he'd known for most of his life. I would always be the outcast.

Supper was unusually cold, despite the temperature of the pasta, and when I left it was with a gloomier outlook than I'd felt in years. I couldn't let the situation simmer anymore. Sunrise was getting a visit.

First, I dragged myself back to my apartment to clean up and get my prescribed bedrest—it wouldn't do to show up looking the way I felt. In the morning, I drove down to Rockville and hit the seniors' centre, not knowing what to expect but hoping for the best all the same. It had been as long since I'd been here, and I was worried that I was forgotten.

The receptionist greeted me with a big smile, which I returned with gratitude. "Good morning! How can I help you today?"

If only more people were as pleasant! "I'm here to see Ms. Fields."

"Oh, excellent," he said, beaming. "She's the sunshine in our lives! She's getting along well with the residents and their guests, but – it's been so long since she's had any visitors of her own."

"Really?" That made me even more cross at Mr. Rockford than I'd been over his GED. "Not even her family?"

He looked confused. "She told me she didn't have any relatives."

"Not by blood or marriage, no."

"...I'm sorry."

Was this just me opening up every can of worms I could possibly find? "It's okay, I didn't mean me – specifically. I meant her adopted family hasn't even come by?"

"Oh, dear." He looked aside in worry. "I had gotten the idea there was something that was troubling her, but I was too polite to go nosing in where it wasn't my business."

"Well, that won't stop me. I want to speak with her. About them."

He glanced about, then leaned over and lowered his voice. "Please do. I haven't been able to abide by the feeling she's been abandoned here."

In a time when we needed each other more, why did it seem like we were pushing each other away? "If I had known about this, this would never have happened."

"Bless you, dear." He checked the manifest before propping up an 'on break' sign. "I'll take you to her myself."

"Thank you."

The building was larger than I remembered it being. I examined the layout and noticed where extensions were added, walls taken down to open up space. It felt roomier at the same time it felt cooler. Something about it seemed – corporate instead of homey, which also reflected the trend towards coldness in our lives. Yet another omen?

The receptionist directed me to the lift, and we stopped on the third floor. "She's in the physical therapy room, just through here."

"Thank you again."

He bowed in courtesy, holding the door open for me. "Visitors are the heart of our community. Thank *you*."

He must have meant it as a compliment, but it made me feel like a heel. Still, I put on a happy face for now as I entered the room. "Hello?" I asked. "I'm here to see—"

"Hello, Anna!" greeted Nan, recognising me at once and waving from her spot on the rails, to her trainer's concern. "Oh, my goodness, let me see you. —I'm fine, Pell, I can make it myself! Dear me, Anna, I haven't seen you since you were still in school!"

I smiled as I crossed the room to give her a hug. It was difficult not to smile back when she smiled, and I had been getting too few of those as it was. "How have you been holding up, Nan?"

"Oh, it's been tough since I busted my leg," she explained, patting her knee. "It never really healed correctly, so I can't walk very far without help – but I'm a tough ol' bird! Only seems appropriate for my age."

"Is it?" I dared to commit the rudeness of mentioning her age, albeit in hushed tones. "It doesn't seem like you're old enough for assisted living."

"Oh, I don't mind," she assured me. "I love the company, and it's much easier for me to get around here than at the house—not to mention I find it amusing being the 'baby' around these parts. Only just spotted five years ago, can you believe it?"

"About that—" I started, feeling guilty about bringing it up, "...when was the last time you visited the twins?"

"My grandbabies?" Nan lit up with joy at just the thought of them, then looked downtrodden. "Oh, not this year..."

"Last year?" I started to feel worse for instilling the idea that she truly had been abandoned, like an unwanted pet.

"Oh, doesn't matter," she dismissed. "How are *you*? My goodness, you look so grown-up! You work for the government, if I recall correctly?"

I nodded. "District Court bailiff. Not a big job, but I get my fair share of work – and pay to match."

"I'm so proud of you, Anna! I knew you'd amount to big things!"

Nan was living evidence against blood being thicker than water. In her presence, I felt all my cares about blood relatives melt away. If she had been my birth grandmother, I would have died happy a long time ago. "You know, you've always been my favourite nan, Nan."

"Oh," she pshawed. "So, what brings you here? I guess that... Well, if my grandbabies were here, I would already see them, wouldn't I?"

My heart fell to see her disappointment. "You got me."

Nevertheless, she did her best to hide her feelings. "How are they, then? Is Saga doing well in school? Is Epic keeping his books organised?"

"Pop's in a mess," I admitted, cutting to the chase. "Yesterday, Saga had to call an ambulance to take him to the hospital. He has Hepatitis-B. He should still be able to function, but it has her pretty shaken about how they're going to get along now."

Nan was quiet. Her face lost all expression, and she stared at me for an uncomfortably long time before speaking again. "Let's go."

"What?"

She hobbled over to fetch her cane and hat, a look of determination on her face. "I'm going to see our family, Anna."

I absolutely glowed in that moment, despite my astonishment. That one word from her gave me a warm feeling I hadn't felt in what must have been forever. Our... "Wait, what about your things?"

She smiled at me. "I don't need things. I mean, I'll come back for my clothes, but everything I value is at the house."

I smiled back, delighted. At least one thing was going correctly.

It felt unusual giving Nan a ride on my chopper, but she seemed just as excited to ride as Saga had, which raised my spirits—she *was* a tough ol' bird. I imagined the look we must have been getting to see an elderly lady riding side-saddle with me, but I didn't care. Things were starting to turn around, and I'd be damned if I let the stares of random strangers get to me.

Saga must have heard us coming and met us at the front door with a look of admonishment, which changed to astonishment to see her nan. "My granddaughter!" Nan cried, giving her a big hug.

"Nan!" Saga was gobsmacked. "What are you doing here?"

"Anna told me everything. How could you leave me in a home while you three are struggling without me?"

She couldn't speak. It was as though her brain was still struggling to process everything that was going on—which was only understandable considering the amount of drama just in the last couple of days, but at least it was good drama this time. "I-I didn't want you to go," she cried, sobbing into Nan's shoulder.

"There, there. I'm here now, everything will be okay."

"I just... It's been so hard getting along!"

"Shh... I know."

I stepped back from the heartwarming scene for a moment to update

Rush on my whereabouts and activities. He seemed to be pleased with my progress on both fronts, even though Fender had been doing research for me on Rothe's time. "You have a good heart," he praised. "I admit that I was always concerned about their welfare. Don't worry about the missed work."

"If you say so, sir," I replied, still guilty about not pulling my share, "but there's still a lot of ground to cover."

"Fender will bring you up to speed on her findings when you're back in the office tomorrow. Take care of your family for now."

I sighed, feeling like there was something bad lurking around the corner all the same. "Will do, sir."

"Nan."

At last Epic had emerged from his room. I was startled to see how much he'd grown, towering at least a head over me. He looked even more like his mother than I'd remembered, down to the length and curl of hair as hers had been, but his was a fiery red that outshone her greying brown.

"Eppie!" Nan cried, hobbling over to meet him. The boy lifted her up, hugging tightly. "Oh, Eppie, you're getting stronger!"

"Miss Nan."

"Of course you did, sweetie."

"Nan don't go again."

"Oh, of course not..."

I waited expectantly for Epic to say something to me as well, but when that didn't happen... I supposed Nan had their full attention now. I knew I had a thankless job, but when it was thankless at home as well, that was discouraging. Still, I did what I needed to do, and I couldn't let my own feelings get in the way.

A week passed waiting for the hospital to clear Mr. Rockford for release, and I was at my family's side the whole time. I helped Nan empty my old room for her use and picked up a few changes of clothes from the centre, but otherwise I only left to go back to work. Despite my lingering disappointment, I felt empowered being able to contribute to our household again, and it felt like no time at all before I returned with Mr. Rockford, who was dazed from so many unexpected surprises—I knew the feeling. "Nan," he murmured, astonished to see her there despite my warning.

"Oh, kitten, just look at you." Nan gave him a warm embrace and mussed his hair for all it would muss. "Poor thing—you'd all just fall apart without me around, wouldn't you?"

I couldn't tell if what he was feeling was elation or disappointment. "What are you doing here, Nan?"

"What do you mean? You're sick! I had to come and see all of you! Who's going to take care of my grandbabies?"

"That's my job! I'm taking care of the kids just fine!"

"Parenting is not *your* job," Nan shrieked in a rare outburst of rage, "not when the children suffer for it! No one can do everything alone, and your foolish pride in being a single parent and not asking for help is hurting

them! I would have never agreed with going to Sunrise if I had known you would have yourself and Saga shoulder so much responsibility on your own!" I'd never seen her this vitriolic before, and it was enough to make me fill my pants even though I wasn't the target.

"I just—"

She put her hands on her hips and glared down at him in anger, which was impressive now that she was shorter than he was. "Give me one reason the kids don't deserve another person helping out around the house!"

Mr. Rockford stammered at this. "I... Who?"

Nan held out her arms as though expressing her disbelief that he didn't think of her sooner.

"But you said yourself that you liked the assisted care centre!"

"Yes, of course I do, kitten." She sighed like a disappointed parent catching her child with a hand in the candy jar. "The people are wonderful, and it's easier for me to get around with my disabilities. However, I'm not so incompetent that I have no other choice but to live there!"

He looked dejected, embarrassed for having pushed away the kids' grandmother figure for so long. "I thought... You seemed so much happier there, and we were getting along okay, ya know?"

"How could I be happier anywhere else when my grandbabies need me?" she pouted.

The two of them melted into tears, hugging as though having been reunited after a separation of a thousand years. It made me feel happy – yet sad, because I was still the outsider, even after all I'd done.

At lengths, they withdrew, and Nan wiped her eyes in delight. "We have to take the kids to the centre," she insisted. "I've finally succeeded!"

"Where are you going to stay?" Mr. Rockford asked in the same instant, then raising a hand in concession. "After you."

Nan had what I could only describe as a mischievous grin. "I need the kids at the centre. This is very important for them – if Epic's willing."

"Epic wants Nan happy," he declared. "Nan don't go again."

"And I won't, sweetie."

I thought of the tremendous effort it took getting Epic to leave the house and glanced at Mr. Rockford, who seemed to realise the same thing. As much as he hated the outside world, Epic would go anywhere if it meant Nan wouldn't leave again. Mr. Rockford looked even lower than before, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. It was astonishing how much trouble he'd caused by simply not being on the same page or doing what felt like the best thing to do without consulting anyone else first. At the same time, now that she was back, it felt like home again.

"So let's go, everyone! Now that we're together again, we have to get my things from the centre—and while we're there, there's someone you *have* to meet!"

Nan's smile was beaming, until she looked my way again. I wasn't sure if she could read my feelings or not, that my awkwardness at being part

of yet not part of their happy little home was evident, but she seemed attuned to the possibility that I was feeling like more of an outsider by their actions.

"I'd love it if you could join us, Anna."

"Are you sure?" I asked, not wanting to intrude. "I mean, if it's a family thing or something—"

"You're as much a part of this family as I am, Anna," she decreed as though it was law. "I won't hear of you being this involved in our lives only to be pushed out just when things are getting better!"

It still felt awkward, but at least it wasn't my doing. "Thank you."

"Hold up, Nan," Mr. Rockford interrupted. "Before we go shuttling things back and forth, where are you staying?"

"In Anna's old room," she answered, glancing at me. "We've been cleaning it out while we waited for your discharge."

I nodded. "I appreciate the sentiment of keeping a niche here for me, even if it was filled with odds and ends in the meantime, but I have a gaff of my own. Nan needs it more than I do."

"See? It's settled," Nan cheered, clapping her hands. "Now, let's—"

"Nan, I think *you* should get settled!" I interrupted. "It's getting late, and Pop needs to get reacquainted with home life."

She had a look like a young child who was told she couldn't open her presents just yet. "Oh... Fine, then. It will have to wait until after my fabulous Quiche Lorraine!"

"Nan," Saga chided, "Pop's vegetarian, too. All of us have been for the past couple of years, for budget reasons."

"Hmph!" she pouted. "See what happens when Nan's gone? How can I be sure you're getting enough protein? Now I'm going to have to buy you a big ol' turkey for tomorrow's supper!"

"Nan!"

They argued over supper for some time, much to my amusement. Pop finally coaxed Nan into letting him and Saga show off their culinary skills while I talked with her on the deck.

"Oh, this is all so exciting, isn't it?"

I had to agree. "It's been so long since we were all a family, I'd forgotten what it was like."

"Oh, you did *not*," she snapped.

She knew me well. "It felt like it sometimes," I muttered. "But what suddenly has you so excited?"

Nan looked as though she was going to burst at the seams. "Oh, Anna! I know it's been so long, but I finally accomplished what I set out to do! It spoils the surprise to just come out and say it..."

"I guess I'll have to take your word on that," I replied with a bit of skepticism. "But that's for tomorrow. I'd love to catch up in the meantime."

She cast a glance around the yard, though I had no idea what she thought of the disarray. "I picked out the house, you know," she noted from out of the blue. "My sister had several spaces to let, and I liked this one the

best. When she died, it was ours—lock, stock, and barrel. I don't know if the kids ever told you."

"Mrs. Rockford mentioned it once."

"It seems like a lack of foresight, in retrospect. A three-story house is great for young people with lots of energy, but bad for old birds like me."

"It's not terrible," I argued, out of defence of the only family house I'd known. "Lots of families have them, especially folks with lots of kids."

"...I guess. But having the master bedroom upstairs feels like bad design. Kids have the energy to climb stairs. I suppose I still do, too, but it never felt so – daunting, before now."

I shrugged, not sure what to tell her. "It's understandable. Most people expect to live forever but somehow not get old. You could live in the basement, though, if you don't mind the cold in the winter—it's practically a whole other house as it is."

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I have to be where people are."

"I guess I can't fault you there."

She hobbled over to look at the big old tree in the backyard. "...and this..." Even with all of the reminiscing of late, Nan seemed hesitant to say any more than that. Was there a special significance to the tree? If I asked, would she also clam up about the secrets she kept, like Mr. Rockford?

"Why didn't you want to let the kids have a treehouse back here?" I ventured, figuring it was an innocent-enough question. "I know they would have liked it."

She gave a smirk. "Money, for one thing—always tight, it seemed. The trouble was having to hire someone, since neither of the Mr. Rockfords were carpenters. My father might've volunteered, but he died in the civil war back in my homeland."

"I remember. I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be, Anna. It's not like you caused him to die, is it?" Her smile turned to a silly scowl that nevertheless felt threatening. "—unless you're the resurrection of his killer!"

I blanched in reflex. "Uh, not that I'm aware of, Nan."

She beamed again. "Good, then I have no quarrel with you."

I wasn't sure if I could get used to having a playful nan again. Still, money couldn't be the only reason, since they had made a number of trivial purchases over the years that could have gone toward paying a carpenter. Mostly I recalled Mrs. Rockford and how she would look sad the few times when both of the twins would play in the yard. "Something happened here, didn't it?"

Nan looked at me again with raised eyebrows. "Of course it did. Our little family grew up here."

"No, I mean..." It was clear that there was something being kept unsaid, some skeleton in the closet that I wasn't allowed to see, but I wasn't sure if I could abide by it being kept there. "You know, Nan, I've seen and heard so many bad things in my life that there isn't much left to surprise me."

These days, what would have been considered a dark family secret four or five hundred years ago isn't so tragic by our modern standards."

"A man died here."

I nearly fell over from her unexpected confession. "*What?*"

"It's okay," she said, grinning. "He got better."

I didn't have any idea whether she was telling the truth. Maybe that was the idea. "You got me," I surrendered, throwing up my hands. "I won't ask. I'll stop being nosy."

"It's not that I want to keep secrets from you, Anna," she conceded. "It's that they aren't mine to tell."

Fine. It was better than another non-answer, anyway. "That's fair, I suppose. I guess I wouldn't want others airing *my* dirty laundry for me."

I walked over to the tree, noting nothing out of the ordinary about it. Its leaves were full in the springtime air and rustled gently in the evening breeze. I had guessed it to be a variant of poplar, but that was most likely a red herring—its significance was just a memory at this point, known only to Nan and whoever she was protecting.

Presently, Pop and Saga joined us on the deck, bearing supper plates for each of us. "Tada," they announced, "vegetable lasagne!"

"Ooo," Nan cooed, scooping up her plate. "It smells wonderful!"

"Epic isn't going to join us?" I asked.

Saga shook her head, crinkling her nose in a mockery of him. "It's too germ-y outside. 'Wind is wind.' I can't believe we ever got him to come outside before, the way he acts now. I guess he'll go outside for Nan, but not for supper."

It was concerning that Epic had put himself under house arrest, but in getting Nan back from assisted living, I put myself even farther out of a position of authority. It bothered me for reasons I couldn't even fathom—I couldn't understand why my emotions kicked in at unexpected times, why I couldn't accept that I was 'just' the outsider despite my lecture to Saga about what I had vs. what I didn't have.

"Now, Saga," Nan prompted between bites, "tell me all about what you've been up to these days. I've been dying to know how you're doing, now that we have a chance to catch up as a family."

Hesitating, she gave a look of embarrassment that turned to what seemed like annoyance. "Everything's fine."

"Fine? What kind of answer is that?" Nan looked justifiably put off. "All this time, and things have just been 'fine'? How are your grades? Have you gone on any field trips? Done anything fun in class?"

"Not really..."

"I know it might *feel* as though school is a daily grind, but surely something's going on in your life that's worth talking about."

"Yes," I prompted, figuring at least there was that, even if it was personally painful, "...what about the concert?"

"Concert?" she cooed. "Who did you see?"

Saga seemed reluctant to talk about it. Yes, it *was* indirectly the catalyst for the chain of events that led to Nan coming back, but surely she didn't still blame herself for Mr. Rockford's Hep-B?

"We went to see Vice—just Saga and me," I stated as neutrally as possible. I should have won an award for my performance.

"Vice?" Nan echoed, with much less enthusiasm this time, though it was clear she was trying to reserve judgement. "...how was the show?"

"...fine," Saga droned.

"*Really* now," she scolded, nearly flinging her food in impatience, "I expect you to share things with me. It doesn't have to be every little thing that comes to mind, but you *are* going to hold a meaningful conversation with me! This is not acceptable behaviour for a young woman who expects to strike out on her own someday. Communication is an important life skill, and I won't have you shutting me out anymore!"

The entire yard was as tense as a tightrope, and I felt as though I would have a heart attack even though I wasn't the focus of Nan's ire.

"...I'm sorry," Saga peeped, voice high-pitched in fright. "I just... I had no idea how to talk to you."

"Like we are now, sweetie!" she protested, a frown of exasperation on her face. "How have I given you the impression you can't talk with me?"

She looked at Nan then slowly met my gaze, then Mr. Rockford's. Finally she sighed, slumping down in her seat. "I don't really know what to say. It's just – school, you know? Every day I go there, I learn a few more things, I get dumped by *another* guy, I come home."

"Dumped?" I interrupted, taking a gamble. "Who by?"

"It's not your business, Anna," she scolded with more dudgeon than I expected. "Doesn't exactly matter, anyway."

"I'm just curious. I mean, you seemed offended when I suggested some nice guys you could date."

"Pssh," she scoffed. After a pause, however, she let out a groan of disgust. "Last one was Zachary Simpson."

"*Him*?" I nearly dropped my plate in astonishment.

"Ugh! *This* is why I don't want to tell you things!"

"Wait, who?" Mr. Rockford asked, raising his eyebrows.

I put my plate on the deck so I wouldn't drop it. "This Simpson boy was in the Forest Glen juvy hall recently for getting into fights. Saga, why are you hanging around such bad influences?"

Nan started to say something, but Saga started fuming at my words. "I *told* you you didn't get it!"

"What's to get? What do you see in people like Simpson and Vi—"

"What do *you* know about love?" she cried, turning on me. "*You've* never dated before, have you?"

"Saga, *enough*," Nan snapped, looking as though she was about to break out a switch. "Anna is just concerned—aren't you?"

I gathered my strength to fight back my original impulse. "Saga, we

just want you to understand the risks here. Do you really know what – being involved with a guy like that entails?"

"You don't understand the pressure I'm under!"

"Maybe, maybe not. Care to explain it to us so maybe we can?"

She scrunched her face into the pout of someone who wasn't getting what everyone else had. "I'm the only one at school who isn't attached now. *The only one.* I'm absolutely not exaggerating! Name anyone at all—I'll tell you who they're going with! Even Phillip Ellerton is going out with Charla Parkin now!"

As tempted as I was to play that game, I cut to the chase. "What, exactly, does not having a boyfriend have to do with your value as a person? No one is born with the perfect companion already picked out. Besides, you are more than just someone else's other half."

"But it sucks being a virgin."

"It does not. I'm one."

These were the words I meant to say, but instead they came from Mr. Rockford—as a wall of silence slammed down on the entire city, it felt like. Saga echoed my next word.

"*WHAT?*"

"I didn't know how to tell you," he said, looking more embarrassed than I had thought would be possible—his face was like the sunburn to end all sunburns. "Your mother wanted to be the one to explain everything, but thinking about it made her so unhappy..." He looked away, towards the tree in the backyard. "I guess neither of us got around to telling you."

Saga looked betrayed, and justifiably so. It took her a considerable amount of time to ask even the obvious question. "But – you and Mum... Isn't there some kind of law about that?"

He cringed as though in pain. "I just – couldn't. Might as well ask a blind man to see. Anyway, it's not like anyone was going to doubt us, when the two of you came along soon enough as it was."

She fought to find words, as did I. It was a lot to process from out of nowhere. "So – who's our real father?" she pressed. "Where is he?"

"Doesn't matter much. Died well before you were born."

So Saga was an orphan, too. One more thing we had in common, though I wished we didn't.

"Then that's why..." She followed his eyes to the backyard. "Is he buried out there? Is that why Mum was always sad?"

He nodded. Wait a tick—that meant that Nan was telling the truth earlier? "He died *here?*"

Mr. Rockford raised an eyebrow. "I don't know about *that*. I wasn't with them. I couldn't help... That's why it would have been better had your Mum been able to answer all your questions—there's only so much I know about what happened."

"Well, I know a *few* answers," Nan offered, in a surprisingly cheery tone, "and so does a friend of mine."

All that the three of us could do was stare at her, curious about what she could possibly have in mind. We couldn't find out until the next day, when she dragged all of us—even Epic, as he promised—back to Sunrise to meet a tiny silver-haired woman with twinkling blue eyes and an astonished look on her face.

"Epic, Saga," she introduced with a flourish, "this is Miss Marian Vann—your paternal grandmother."

7. Timelines

The bombshells seemed to be dropping left and right, though Miss (not Mrs.?) Vann appeared to be just as bewildered by the revelation as the rest of us. "I have – grandkids?" she asked, squinting through her bifocals.

Nan beckoned her closer. "Marian, don't you remember me telling you about my adopted family before?"

"Yes... Oh, my." She cupped her hands to her face. "You look just like him, sweetie. Saga, was it?"

Saga hesitated, most likely trying to grasp the notion of looking like her father. "Yes, I'm Saga. Saga Anne O'Malley."

I flinched again at her rejection of her family name. Despite this, Miss Vann looked deeply into Saga's eyes. "You have such a lovely name. Adventurous yet simple, strong yet elegant..." There was a moment when she looked sad, even pained, but she seemed to dismiss it just as quickly. "I feel just awful that I've missed so much of your lives!"

"What about Epic?" I asked quietly, uncertain how he would act. As though on command, Nan pushed him forward.

"And who's this?"

Epic paused for a moment, then rushed forward and hugged the life out of the poor woman. "Gran," he cried.

"My goodness!" She struggled a bit not to fall over. "Such a big, strong young man! Oh, let me go for a moment so I can see you, honey!"

He did as commanded, bowing. "Epic. Epic Grey Rockford."

Miss Vann seemed puzzled at this, glancing back at Saga. "Did you take your mother's name, then? How progressive!"

Saga blushed, as if embarrassed at having set herself apart from her brother in such a way.

"Oh, don't be embarrassed! I wish I'd been more feminist in my heyday!" Her cheer turned to – something I couldn't place. "Then again, maybe if I had..."

"Gran is Gran," Epic declared. "Be proud to be proud."

She looked at him in curiosity, then grinned with pride. "Yes, I should! Thank you, dear. I am proud I am proud."

I felt a tightness in my throat. It was difficult to breathe correctly, and I found myself backing away from the gathering. *I'm fine with this, I told myself, there's no reason this should hurt as much as it does.*

Nan followed me into the hall. "Are you okay, Anna?"

No, I thought, I can't get over my jealousy. Over the years, I had tried so hard to get Epic to accept me as his adopted sister to no avail, yet he

welcomed his long-lost grandmother with open arms. "I'm okay," I lied, fighting to hide my true feelings behind a smirk.

"Must be odd, looking in from the outside. I know how that feels."

"But you knew your family, even if this one isn't yours by blood."

"True..." she admitted. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I bit my tongue to keep from tearing up. "Maybe – I was just meant to be a loner forever."

"Loner? Don't say that. You have friends, don't you?"

I ran a hand through my hair, clenching my fist. "Certainly, friends, but I meant no parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins – children..."

Nan raised her eyebrow at the last part. "What are you saying?"

For a moment, I couldn't speak at all, then it was like the floodgates opened. "It's like everyone has a certain fate in store, and mine fell on the side of eternal singlehood this time around. I didn't have the luck to get a life like yours. That's good, because it makes me who I am – but it feels like time's just ticking down."

"Oh, don't say that. You have plenty of time to do everything you want to do."

I shook my head. "No, not by a long shot." Nan pouted her lips as I touched my forehead. "I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone else before, but I'll be checking out early. I won't get to see any of the things your family will see, not even if I start now."

She frowned with sympathy, grasping my hand in hers. "I truly am sorry, my dear. But – even if you only have a day left, why should that stop you from making the most of it?"

"It hasn't yet."

That much was true, anyway. My own dreams seemed permanently out of reach, but if I could help others where I could, then at least my time wasn't a total loss. It was just a slap in the face when others were getting what I wanted in the meantime.

Feeling embarrassed, I returned to the group rather than look rude in front of everyone. "I apologise, my boss gave me a buzz and I had to take it," I fibbed.

"Marian, this is Ms. Anna Reyes," Nan introduced as we returned, "my foster granddaughter. She works for the government now."

"Is that so?" Miss Vann looked me up and down, perhaps uncertain what to make of me. "It's good to meet you, dear! It's so nice having such strong women serving our country!"

"Thank you, mum," I replied, bowing my head. "I'm glad to serve."

"Marian," called a familiar voice. It was the receptionist from the week before. "You have another visitor!"

She turned, squinting at the door. "Oh, my goodness—everyone, let me introduce you to my son," she insisted, waving to a man across the room who looked to be my age, maybe younger. "Oh, Marius!"

He gave us a quizzical look, shoved his hands in his pockets, and

walked over. I realised as he approached that his hair was the exact shade of blue of Saga's. It was a startling coincidence—I couldn't imagine dye being so precise between batches.

"Mom," he greeted, more than a hint of snark in his voice. "What did I tell you? ...so who're these people?"

Miss Vann made introductions, trying her best to remember us all. "This is Ms. Sunni Fields and Mr. Kotaro Rockford, his children Epic and Saga, and his foster daughter Ms. Anna Reyes. Epic and Saga are your nephew and niece."

If he was surprised to meet his extended relatives out of the blue, as it were, he didn't show it. "How ya doin', kids," he said, holding out a hand to the twins. "I'm your uncle Sky."

Saga seemed unusually shy, but Epic took his hand in an instant, shaking stiffly but with the usual courtesy. "Epic is Epic."

"That's – evident." He seemed at odds as to how to address Epic. Furrowing his brow slightly, he turned to Saga. "And good day to you, too."

Saga bowed, biting her tongue. "H-hello." I felt worried by her reaction, though more so by Epic's. Again, he treated blood as thicker...

"Sky, is it?" I asked as he turned to me. "Or—"

"I prefer Sky," he explained, sneering as he rolled his eyes. "I don't think Mom here will ever let me live down having a name like Marius."

I smirked. I knew the feeling.

"Anyway, it's good to meet you, Versa."

It took me a moment to register what he had said. "What?"

"I said, hello."

"No, what did you call me?"

"...Anna. Er, sorry—do you prefer Ms. Reyes?"

"That's not what you said."

He shrugged, looking perplexed. "Maybe you misheard me. Anna's your name, isn't it?"

It seemed pointless to press the issue any further, but I knew what I heard. It was unsettling that a complete stranger would know my codename. I even expected to hear someone call me by my birth name instead, but my codename? Even *Vice* didn't know that—did he?

A chill ran down my spine, my skin breaking into gooseflesh. Epic trusted Miss Vann and her son implicitly, I assumed because he knew they were his blood relatives. Yet Sky acted suspicious, and I just couldn't help wondering if he was an agent for Vice. It was terribly convenient if he was, and now I had to wonder if they weren't in grave danger – or a medium for my impending doom?

As awfully as the reunion started out for me, it ended even worse, and I had to excuse myself early to catch up on work to get over the fear that was brewing inside me. Extended vacation though I may have needed, I needed Rush more, to have that security of someone watching my back, to be away from anything that could tie me to one location. Even more than

that, I needed a little reprieve from the torrent of conflicting emotions I was feeling. Not even the rush of wind against my face and body as I rode into the district could overpower the sense of dread looming over me.

"What do you have for me, boss?" I asked as I entered Rush's office. Nowhere felt more like home than here at the moment, sanctuary within the fortress of his regal, commanding presence.

He glanced up from the interoffice link I had sent earlier. "Fender's managed to break the DSMP and get detailed information for the patients, on the condition that all we need are their identities and not their corresponding data. All but two have disappeared since the study began, some matching the kidnappings and some unreported. We have one on monitor, but I'm not sure what we can do about the other."

"Why not? Don't we know who it is?"

He frowned, not sure of the significance. "The unnumbered patient, the one whose ID you got from the note, is in Australia."

Oh. That *would* make it difficult for us. Then again, it seemed to rule out the MLCS-vaccine theory: Who in Australia would be infected and still be allowed to stay? Wait a tick— "How did they get a sample from inside the quarantine?"

"Suspicious, isn't it?" Rush agreed. "It's a blood sample, though. That can be exported without trouble."

Okay, but there was still something odd about the whole thing.

"Anyway, all we can do about the Aussie for now is alert ANZAC and trust that the quarantine keeps doing its job. If Vice or JAM makes a move, we'll have 'em. Until then, we're just waiting."

"So, what's my assignment?"

"If you want to get on monitor duty, talk to Keplinger. Otherwise, send what you have on the Riordan case to Amburgey and get a start on the Pearson case."

Despite its despicable origins, I felt a little closer to the outcome of the JAM project monitoring. "Fine, I'll get with Keplinger straight away."

Rush seemed mildly surprised, raising an eyebrow, but shrugged and shook his head without further comment.

As I left the office, I pulled out my mobile to give Keplinger a buzz. No sooner did I take a step outside the building than a glint of light caught my eye, and I looked up to see someone wearing a large-brimmed hat, trench coat, gloves, and a full-face mask. That seemed comically suspicious in the middle of spring, on a balmy day like today.

"Hey, what's up?" Keplinger answered.

"Hey. I was going to ask to get in on monitor duty, but I'm outside HQ – and I see a 917 here who looks like he's trying excessively hard to get my attention."

"How so?"

"Every part of his body is completely covered: gloves, hat, coat—even a carnival mask. Total raw shark from what I can tell." Some days I

felt silly using our codes, but if we actually ran across enough people who obscured themselves from head to toe to merit a code for it, far be it for me to dismiss a perfectly good shorthand.

"...and you're outside HQ?"

"Affirmative."

There was a brief pause. "...that's near where Strait is."

"Strait?"

"The guy we've been monitoring. I'll send you a link so you can watch both of them. Keep an eye on raw shark and get back to me."

He didn't have to tell me twice. I tailed the suspect for a couple of streets, careful not to be seen. I reached 7th when he suddenly made a break for it. There was Strait, and there was a car waiting with the door open. *No!*

I bolted toward them, but I was too far behind. Raw shark nabbed Strait and pushed him into the car as he walked past, slamming the door as the driver took off. I barely had time to reach into my pocket and make a grab for the car before it sped away. I didn't know if my beacon took hold in the instant I made contact, but it was my best hope for tracking them.

I buzzed Keplinger again as I made a dash after raw shark. "They got Strait! I put beacon code 45R3V on the getaway vehicle, tag 3MC41JV, currently in pursuit of raw shark!"

"Got it!" he acknowledged. "Lester and Netherly are the next street down, also in pursuit. Go get 'im!"

I barreled down 7th to the last spot I saw the suspect run, darting between bystanders and scanning the area for any sign of his whereabouts. Just when I thought I'd been eluded, I happened to catch a glimpse of a door slamming shut on the rooftop of an old building.

Abandoned buildings, really...? With all the renovation projects, I hadn't realised there were any left in the district. I almost didn't keep up the chase, as it felt *way* too much like walking into a trap now—a trap bordering on ridiculous levels of movie glitz and way too much free time – which was exactly *his* style.

"Keplinger," I buzzed, "I need a 10-20 on Lester and Netherly."

"I sent Netherly after the getaway car, in case they broke the code again. Lester should be on Indy or D—"

Just then I heard shots fired and screaming bystanders. Panicked, I darted toward the source, running the opposite direction from the onlookers. "Please don't be, please don't be," I chanted, but I didn't get my wish—as I reached him, he was hunched over in a heap on the ground. "10-00!" I screamed into my mobile. "11-41! Damn it!"

As I tended to Lester with tears forming in my eyes, I could have sworn I heard a faint snickering in my ear, laughing at how everyone around me was falling like so many dominoes. I glared up at the sniper from his position on the rooftop, standing there in his gaudy costume and laughing as hard as he could—just standing there as though he was immune to any kind of retribution.

But, at the moment, he was. We were still severely short-handed, and I couldn't bring myself to leave Lester bleeding from the stomach at the side of the road, no matter how many others depended on my giving chase. Perhaps that was something the sniper knew. Perhaps he was waiting for me to take the bait.

Raw shark bait.

I kept pressure on Lester's wound until the ambulance arrived. I kept watch until the paramedics had him loaded safely inside. Only then, as they pulled away, did I clench my blood-soaked fists and resume the pursuit.

He seemed to beckon me to the fire escape as I approached, not as criminal and pursuer but more as a friend who wanted to show his bosom buddy something cool he'd just discovered. That it was unsettling to say the least was a gross understatement.

As I reached the top, the masked man slipped into the building. I sent a quick buzz to Keplinger letting him know my 10-20, drawing my gun as I followed the sniper inside, tracing every bit of the interior for traps with each step I took.

"Come in, my dear," he coaxed, trying to lure me farther inside, but I wasn't going to budge.

"What did you do with Strait?" I shouted when I was just inside the door, not eager to rush into the unknown.

Raw shark did a good job of disguising his height—I couldn't tell at a glance whether it was Vice or not. Similarly, his voice was garbled, and I couldn't distinguish his accent. Not that it would have made a difference, as Vice was a master vocalist in more than the musical sense, and he could alter his voice naturally to cover a wide range of pitches and sounds. Would he have gone through this much effort, though?

"The elder is in good hands."

"WHERE IS HE?"

"You don't have to concern yourself with him or any of the others. They will be treated like royalty."

"Marie Antoinette was royalty!" I retorted, keeping a bead on the suspect at all times.

"Ye~es..." he agreed. "I suppose you're correct."

"If you've harmed any of them—"

He tsked. "You aren't in any position to make threats, milady. We know who you are and who it is you work for. We know every little thing about you, and you know nothing about us."

His taunts weren't helping me feel any better about the events of this morning. "What do you want with them?"

"Just – for them to stay with us awhile."

"That's not your decision to make!"

"But it is, because we make it so. It is where the mighty have the upper hand, where the weak do not take action to protect themselves."

"Because civilised society is founded on the Golden Rule, that we

don't harm those who don't harm us because we would want to receive the same treatment!" Where was he? I wished there was even a window I could break, or some small bit of light to aid my night vision, but it seemed to be a completely enclosed chamber, against all fire safety protocols. "What would it take to get you to let them go?"

He slipped in and out of the shadows, taunting me in that respect as well. "For now, we will keep them for safekeeping, and should they outlive their usefulness..."

"What are you doing with them?"

"What else? We are researching Virus securus."

"There are thousands of scientists researching MLCS, but legally! Why is your study any different?"

"We're not afraid to do – questionable things to achieve the desired end results."

I pulled back the hammer on my gun, if only for the illusion of gaining control of the situation. "You'd better not touch even a hair on their heads, or..."

"Don't you worry your precious little head about it. We know the old fable of the goose and its golden eggs. The elders may get a little lonely at times, but we wouldn't harm any of them unless it was necessary."

My eyes were starting to adjust to the darkness, but I still couldn't make out the man or anything else distinctive in the room.

"We discovered an interesting trick to Virus securus, you know," he called, more than a hint of pompous self-confidence in his modulated voice-scramble. "See, my – henchmen could have easily disposed of your little sidekick, the trigger-happy desk worker back at the Filene, and there would have been no way for her predicted deathdate in thirty-one years to happen *if* we had been determined to make it happen that night—no convoluted nick-of-time escape from being gutted with a knife or having her brains blown out at point-blank range."

There, he paused to let that sink in. "However, we rationalised that it would only cause trouble for us in the long run. Murder of a federal agent, even a low-level one, would put a lot greater heat on us than if one was just debilitated. That's heat we don't need, not this early in the game, so we let you off with a warning, as it were. Whether it was our own conclusion or – something *else* telling us this, it's not really clear, but the end result is your lady friend still has her thirty-one years to go, as far as we are concerned.

"Funny how it works out that way. It's as though our entire lives have already been written out, and we're just puppets being manipulated for an amusingly elaborate story."

This guy was really starting to get me riled up. "I refuse to be a bit player in your little charade!"

"Oh, if *only* we were writing the story! No, if it's not the virus, then it's another higher power, but the virus is definitely evidence in support of predestination and a more complex universe than what we currently know.

"As it is, we are on the brink of a new level of understanding! The majority of the world still believes there are only three dimensions when, in fact, there are no fewer than *four*! Virus securus is living proof of the fourth dimension and is travelling through it with ease!"

"I don't quite follow you."

"How? It's simple. *Time itself* is the fourth dimension – a direction in which things can travel much like the way we can walk from Point A to Point B. Most people fail to grasp this because we can also walk backwards from Point B to Point A, but we haven't figured out how to travel back in time. This is a fallacy, because many things, such as gravity, can only travel in one direction even in our familiar three dimensions without some kind of intervention from an outside source.

"Thing is, we humans live our lives as vectors—growing up and growing old. We can only travel forward, never backward, as our minds as they are wouldn't be able to process living our lives in reverse. Yet that's all the virus does: from the point when we first become infected, it stretches itself out to the length of our lifespans and forms a spot on our foreheads that travels the second half of its length forward. It exists backward, but as far as we can detect, it is invisible."

Despite my mission, I couldn't focus on the task at hand, as though the questions flew from my mouth fully-formed, demanding answers. "Why would it do that?"

"Why? Why do birds sing? Why do insects buzz? It does what it knows how to do—no more, no less. There's no malice or evil in the virus except how you choose to interpret it as it affects you."

"But then, what about free will? How can it possibly determine the midway of a life in flux with any accuracy?"

"Ah, this seems to be the trick! Perhaps we are all fated after all. Perhaps the midway determination is a variable that is self-affected. Maybe, maybe it even finds all possible branches our paths can take—in the *fifth* dimension!—and eliminates the contradictions to arrive at a single, common midway, where all of a person's remaining futures inevitably draw to one conclusion. It doesn't matter which, if any theory, is true. For what reason, we die when it is predicted, no exceptions."

His theory sounded strange, but I couldn't immediately pick it apart, especially since I needed him to keep talking to get a bearing on his location. "What does this mean for humanity, then? Why is it so important to kidnap people for your research? They've already donated samples, haven't they? Why don't you let them go?"

"Ut," he tsked. "Please don't get ahead of me. We have plans, but if you don't understand the basics, how can you appreciate the payoff?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"To make things interesting... Why not. Perhaps it would get you off our backs if you understood our reasoning. Perhaps you might even – come to join us."

"In your dreams."

"To be honest, yes."

"What is it you're trying to accomplish?" I shouted, but despite the droning length of the conversation, I just couldn't figure out where he was.

"It should be obvious, I would think. You're a smart bird, I'd have figured you would have already cracked our strategy by now."

"What do you want with me, then? If I did come to see your way, then what? What am I supposed to do?"

"Understand."

Without another word, he vanished silently into the darkness—no! I fumbled about, trying to find even the tiniest light while trying not to walk into any pitfalls. Damn it all! They were toying with me! I couldn't believe how this rollercoaster was turning out, and I growled in aggravation at my immense helplessness.

"10-20, Versa," Keplinger buzzed.

"I lost him," I grumbled, slamming my back against a wall in defeat. "Uh – the old warehouse or other on Indy."

"Lost him? Where?"

"It's this big unlit building with no windows, and I don't have my torch," I snapped, close to losing it. "These guys are jerking us around. I..." My throat was starting to tighten trying to hold back my rage. "Did you get a trace on the getaway car?"

"They stopped where 2nd empties out and abandoned it, probably escaping on a boat or copter. We're trying a satellite track now, but without knowing which to follow, it's hit or miss."

Disaster, disaster. I felt manipulated like one of the hapless puppets raw shark was suggesting we all were, and just as powerless as one. It was a too-familiar feeling that would never get any easier to bear as the years went on. "Do we have anything on the getaway car itself? License, registration?"

"Stolen. Plates are faked."

"What should I do now, then?"

"Hmm—I guess Rothe could use a hand with data farming. Other than that, you'll have to contact HQ. Sorry, I don't know."

Dead end. I had wanted a quick resolution, but the prognosis didn't look good. Disheartened and discomfited, I buzzed Rush with the bad news. "Go home," he ordered.

"Huh?"

"It's too late in the day to do anything, unless you really want to file papers or do data entry after hours. Call it a night already. Go sleep in your bed, or stop being such a prude and sleep in someone else's."

Even as low as I was feeling, I had to snort at his remark. I was starting to wonder, though, with the frequency at which Rush was sending me home, if something wasn't up. There was always some important work to do—even if it wasn't exciting. All the same, I figured I should take the chance to wrap things up with the Rockfords.

It was nearing suppertime when I arrived. "I'm back," I called to no one in particular. I noticed Saga going over her studies in the sitting room. "Hey," I greeted her, eager to get my mind off my miserable failure.

"Hey," she echoed, listless. At least she wasn't likely to ask how *my* day went.

"Where is everyone?" It seemed unusual that they weren't gathered around talking about what happened that morning, as I expected they might be doing when I returned.

"Pop..." She seemed to be at odds about calling him that now. "...is making supper. Epic is – Epic. Nan's upstairs, still organising your room. You didn't have anything you wanted in there, did you?"

"No—all the rest belongs to you guys, as far as I'm concerned."

"Okay. She's been packing up the stuff we sorted, rearranging the bookshelves, and taking notes and measurements of everything. I guess the black curtains aren't to her taste?"

I had to smirk. "Not a closet Goth, is she?"

"Were you?"

"I just wanted curtains that actually blocked out light." I grinned at the idea of getting my face pierced and wearing black lipstick all the same. "So how did it go after I left? Sorry I had to cut out, but there was a work-related emergency."

"It was fine, I guess. I don't think you missed much."

"Did you learn anything about your biological father?"

Saga slumped in her seat, clutching a throw pillow. "Gran doesn't know that much about him. Both of Gran's sons had been – forced on her, and she had to put them up for adoption when they were babies because she was barely out of school and not yet self-sufficient. She knows some about Uncle Sky because they were reunited when he was eight, but my father..."

I could feel the tension building inside of her. Her confession the other day of how lost she would feel to be in my position was ironic now that she was. This unknown stranger who had given her the gift of life and made her part of the young woman she was today would remain forever a mystery. Further, she was worse off in that respect, as I still had a shred of hope of finding out about mine, where this was denied to her.

"Pop's your father," I insisted. "Sure, you get certain genetic traits from Gran's son, but Pop's the one who raised you, who tucked you in at night and read you stories, who took you to the doctor when you were sick, who's here for you now and will be here for you as long as he can. He took up the mantle of fatherhood when your mum was alone and with child, even at his own expense, even though it meant he suffered for it by being denied other opportunities that come from staying single. He demonstrates what it really means to be a father."

It sounded like a lovely sentiment, but I had no idea if Saga agreed. She fought back tears, clutching her pillow tightly.

"It's okay to grieve," I added, putting my arm around her. "A part of

you that you never knew was even there before is gone. You'll always miss it. It's natural to feel sad. Just – don't push people away for wanting to help, because there will be a time when they're gone, too."

Slowly, she put her arm around me in return, trembling as she did. I held her for as long as she would let me, hoping deep down that, despite her loss, it would bring us closer together.

"How are you feeling?"

She rubbed her eyes, making a noise like she hadn't decided.

"Do you want to talk, or would you rather be left alone?"

"Talk about what?"

"I dunno. Anything. Boys, whatever."

She made a face when I mentioned boys. "Don't get me started."

"That good, huh? Enough to make you want to give up men forever and only do girl things?"

"Trying to make me like you?"

I squeezed her gently. "Hey, don't knock it 'til you try it."

She exhaled in that 'what am I going to do with you' way.

Belatedly, I decided to take her up on her game. "So, then—what happened to Albert Holbrook?"

"Huh?" Saga raised an eyebrow at me. "What about him?"

"Didn't you like him?"

"Eh..." She shrugged in a way that could have meant either.

"How about Thomas Arsenaault?"

"Are you serious?"

"Weren't *you*? Don't think I didn't notice his name scrawled in your third-year math binder!"

She closed her eyes in thought. "You must've, huh. I didn't think anyone could read my old made-up script."

"It took some fiddling to decipher, but it was easy once I realised it was based on cursive. Pretty nice encryption, otherwise."

She let out a sigh of exasperation, groaning as though in misery. "That means you can read my diary, then."

I was genuinely surprised. "You have one?"

As she looked at me again, her face broke into a mischievous grin. "Gotcha. I don't need one!"

Though Saga had spoken it, the word caused me to recall to Vice's note and snaps tucked in his trailer's cabinet. I felt my face unconsciously contort into a grimace as the memory flashed to the forefront, my breathing slowing as it did. "Oh, snaps."

"Hmm?"

"What? What's hmm?"

"You were just staring for a moment there."

"...I remembered something," I admitted, not sure whether it was a good idea but not seeing the harm in it.

"Did you?" She pouted in disgust. "Sounds like a problem I have."

"What kind of problem?"

She scrunched up her face as though trying to put the concept into words. "It's like – I can't control when I remember things. For no reason, I'll think of the time when, say, Luka bumped me in the hall and knocked me over but didn't help me up or apologise, and it will keep bothering me well after the fact because I can't forget it. It will be constantly on my mind, and at inopportune times, like when I have to work with him on a group project or lab experiment or whatever. I can't just see Luka for Luka, I'll always see the guy who bumped me in the hall that one time and was a jerk about it.

"The irritating thing is I know someone else at school with so-called 'photographic memory', but it doesn't bother him at all. He just remembers. For me, it's as though I'm living two different lives at once—the past and the present—and I can't separate the two. I don't know how anyone could live the way I do and not have a tough time of it."

I stared at her. She had nearly described me, except my mind ended up always homing in on – Vice. No wonder she was having such a tough time getting along. Did Epic experience a more drastic version of what Saga was going through? I didn't know how severe his autism was or how it affected him—he had almost never talked to me when he was little as it was, and the most I'd even seen of him in the last four years before I brought Nan back was when I spied on them over a month ago.

"Is this why you're struggling?"

"I didn't know how to talk with anyone about what I experience. No one understands."

"I wouldn't say that, not by a long shot."

She raised her eyebrows at me—first one, then the other. "Really. So what's it like for you?"

I shrugged, not sure what to say to her. "I go about my business, doing my thing, but I can't stop seeing..." Oh, mistake. I trailed off again at the appropriate point, but that just made an opening.

Saga latched on like a lamprey. "What did he do to you, then? ...if you don't mind my asking."

Damn! Figures she would take it. I felt myself drift away even by skirting the issue. "...it hurt."

"I know, but – wouldn't talking about it make it hurt less?"

"I – don't know," I murmured as I felt my heart slow. "I just worry that, since you remember everything, you'd never be able to get those things out of your mind."

"Maybe, but bad things happen whether I know about them or not. Didn't you just tell me not to push people away just for wanting to help? I'm not going to be able to understand what's going on if you don't tell me. For all I know, he just stole your lunch money. Oh, and your lullaby."

"Saga," I sighed, cringing, "it's more complicated than that..."

"Well, how can I believe you if you don't tell me?"

I couldn't answer her. It felt suffocating to think about him with the

intent of telling all, as though he was attacking me psychically at the very notion of tattling on him. I had a difficult time breathing—

"Anna!"

Saga was staring down at me from where I collapsed. I could still feel the effects of fainting, tears rolling down my face and pins and needles running through my body. "I'm okay," I insisted, sitting up with some effort.

"No, you're not! Who faints without warning like that?"

"It's..." I put a hand over my face to get my bearings. "It's so vivid, even now. I can't help it."

"How can you function this way?"

"Normally, I don't think about him, and I'm fine."

"That's not going to work! What if you're on your bike and see him drive past you? Are you going to just get in an accident?"

"I'm fine," I snapped, but I couldn't deny the possibility of wrecking and hurting others in the process. "I don't faint when I'm active. Then my mind's too busy trying not to screw up."

"You should still see someone about it."

"I've been in therapy for years now. I'm getting help."

Her expression was skeptical. "Have you had a medical doctor take a look at you?"

"Not in the last year or so, but yes—I'm prone to having a vasovagal syncope whenever I'm overwhelmed by strong feelings. Like fear."

"You're – afraid of him?"

I kept my head between my legs to try to keep myself calm. "I'm not afraid..." Yet I wasn't acting that way, and I knew it. I had to tell her at least something, or the wall between us would grow even larger. If only I could detach, tell the whole story as though it hadn't been done to me, but I empathised with others too much for that to work.

"Saga, Anna," Mr. Rockford called, oblivious to my collapse just moments earlier. "I have supper on the table when you want to join us."

To my surprise, she didn't say anything to him about my spell, only looking at me with sadness, disappointment, or annoyance—maybe all three. It was surprisingly hurtful, and I knew I deserved it. What was I so afraid was going to happen?

Then I knew *exactly* what I was afraid would happen. Saga liked Vice, even if only in a superficial way, so she was inclined not to believe me over him despite knowing me for years. She would call me a liar, regardless of how she said she wanted to hear my side. She might think what he had done to me was acceptable if not warranted – or even *cool*.

Then I had my answer, which five different therapists couldn't help me find: I had entirely the wrong audience. I needed someone who would believe me, who would reassure me that I wasn't making it up or being a baby about it. Possibly, I needed someone who wouldn't try to 'fix' me in the way Saga was, in her suggesting that I wasn't getting help. I only knew one person like that.

Supper was an exercise in restraint. After years of being unable to tell even a therapist, I was suddenly eager to spill everything. To get my point across, however, it had to be done with a delicate touch: I couldn't just blurt everything out over the meal, for instance, and I couldn't tell Saga—*not* directly, anyway.

When we were finished, Epic took to the dishes like a vulture taking to carrion, seeming happiest when he was straightening up, and Saga retired upstairs to finish her homework. I took the chance to pull Nan aside to the sitting room as conspicuously as I could manage.

"I have to tell you something, Nan," I told her in a low voice, but hopefully loud enough to overhear anyway. "Something's been on my mind lately, but – I don't know who else would listen to me."

"Tell me anything," she insisted, patting the seat next to her on the sofa. "I may not be able to help, but I will always listen."

"Thank you, Nan." As I sat down, I hoped my gambit paid off, that Saga would be listening from the stairwell overlook. "I hadn't told any of you before, but I've been in therapy for the last six years, ever since I graduated from the academy."

"Therapy?" Nan echoed. "Whatever for?"

"Remember how Saga and I went to see a concert starring Vice—"

"Oh, him!" she exclaimed, frowning and putting her hands on her hips. "He's such a terrible man."

"Yes, I know. Have you ever seen these?" Here, I held out my hands so she could see the thin V-shaped scars on the backs.

"I—yes," she murmured. "I'd seen these marks before on several occasions, but I never wanted to trouble you about them. It always seemed like you made a great effort to hide your hands where you could, and I didn't think it was a big deal."

"Vice gave them to me."

"Did he?" She looked more closely. "My word, they *are* scars! I thought they were just marks in your skin."

"No. Every year, always on my birthday, Vice manages to hunt me down—wherever I am—and cuts them again to make sure they never fade. Then he does – other things, but always the cuts. I've done everything short of blasting into outer space to get away from him, yet he still finds me no matter what I do."

"You poor dear." She grasped my hands in hers. "Why is he so interested in hurting you all the time like this?"

I scowled in frustration as my throat constricted just thinking about

it. "Because we're a 'set' that can never be broken up." Even then, despite my newfound determination, I couldn't bring myself to spell it out, to make it all the more real by declaring it so. "...I don't know, because – he hates me just for living. Too many days, the only thing that keeps me going is the idea of finally throwing him in gaol and destroying the key."

Nan pondered for a moment, scrunching her face. "Doesn't he have the same marks on his hands?"

"Yes – but his are tattoos." The image of his powerful hands filled my consciousness, of their grabbing me and keeping hold of me so I couldn't struggle free. Though I tried to dismiss the visions, the blood drained from my face again, and I could barely speak. "It's something about yin and yang. That we complete each other... That..."

"—Anna."

This time I caught myself before I completely blacked out, though I could feel tears running down my face. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I get faint when I think about him too much."

"Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

"I've been to one. I'm fine, just as long as I keep active—it's mostly times like now, when I let myself become overwhelmed, that I feel weak."

She nodded in understanding. "I used to have fainting spells when I was young. Turned out they thought I had low cholesterol, can you believe it? Sometimes it was the heat, but mostly I just had unusually low blood pressure—hypotension, I think."

I mulled over the idea. I had adopted the Rockfords' diet partly out of a sense of solidarity, but also for health reasons. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to eat a few more eggs, as much of a distaste for yolk I had acquired.

"Anyway," Nan continued, "this Vice person—why do you bring him up? Are you afraid he'll hurt you again?"

"I think he's dead set on it – and on doing even worse than he'd ever done to me before. Everything I may fear in my nightmares, he does *and* surpasses. I've gone to the authorities on many occasions, but there's never any solid proof—he always manages to find a way out of trouble."

"Goodness... Is there any way we can help? Anything you need?"

I smiled at her, however weakly. "Listening was a start. I'd never been able to say this much before. Thank you."

"Oh, Anna," she pouted in sympathy, "I don't know why you didn't think you couldn't tell any of us before. Please don't ever feel that you need to keep such secrets just because they're ugly. Now I can see why you've become such a strong, independent woman, but this kind of thing is a heavy weight to bear. You don't have to do it alone."

"And I'm not! But it's tough bringing my world into yours... Like, the most you've ever had to endure were deaths in the family."

"I wouldn't say that."

My smirk turned to a frown. "Really."

Nan raised her hands in defeat. "I told you they weren't my secrets to tell, and I still mean that. All of us have experienced things you wouldn't believe if I told you—even Kotaro—but I can't break that confidence."

I sighed, filled with mixed feelings over the path the discussion was taking. "Fine, Nan. You win—I am not the omega, the low end of the totem pole to whom and only whom all bad things have happened. It doesn't stop me from feeling hurt, though."

"Of course not. Everybody hurts, sometimes."

I smiled weakly at her, summoning all the courage I could muster. "Will you be here for me when I'm ready to tell you the rest?"

"Of course."

That was all I needed. I gave her a hug, grateful for her presence in our lives. "Thank you."

The subtle creak from upstairs hinted that Saga had eavesdropped on us after all. Things hadn't changed from when she was little. I smiled—however dispiritedly—that hopefully the one boundary between us was no longer there. The final challenge would be Vice himself.

If only... I wanted one year to be safe from him. Just one birthday, and I could die happy. This was my last chance.

8. Literature Cited

What else could I do but wait? With the exception of the hearing, I had only seen Vice once a year since being fostered. With time running out, it was as though he was trying to get in several more years' worth of torment while he could—not that I thought he knew when my deathdate would be, but the timing was suspicious. Intended or not, I found myself looking over my shoulder at every turn, wondering when his next act would be. It made me jumpier than ever, and I couldn't focus on my work because I always felt the other shoe was going to drop, probably on my head.

Unfortunately, there was little to do to try to get the jump on *him* and turn the tables. Our JAM project leads dried up, and Vice was touring in other parts of the country—not that I couldn't follow him, but I didn't want to travel with the drama of home life currently going on, and I didn't *want* to follow him.

I picked at the Pearson case like it was a cold bowl of noodles. Half of my assignments could be finished in no time if I was pressed to do them, but it was trivial because any temp could do desk work, with minimal risk. The tough part was getting in new agents, since many of the willing were in half-life—itsself a problem for liability reasons but also because disclosure protocol dictated a necessary discrimination that only encouraged lying in order to get the job.

Like I had done.

While I procrastinated, my postbox blipped. I glanced up to see an undisclosed sender address, which caught my eye because the network was supposed to be secure, with no external access. Though I knew a little about programming and hacking, I was hesitant to open it without support.

"Rothe," I buzzed.

"What's up?" she replied, yawning.

"You sound like you're falling asleep over there. Want something big to do?"

"Big?" She sounded skeptical. "You're on Pearson, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am, but I just received a restricted internal post. What can you tell me about that?"

It sounded as though she had fallen out of her chair. "Restricted?"

I frowned. "Is that bad?"

"There's no protocol that allows unsigned senders in the network. Let me see it before you do anything, and I mean let me get over there."

What felt like moments later, I heard squeaking in the hall from Rothe's sneakers. Unbelievable— "How did you get here from Chesapeake

so quickly?" I asked after picking my jaw up off the floor.

"I took 355. Where's this post of yours?"

I pointed to the header. Rothe stared at it for an uncomfortably long time, as though engaging it in a staring contest. Finally, she took my tablet from me. "Huh. No touchpad?"

"I got tired of it, not very precise. Settings are lefty, by the way."

"Hey, I'm ambidextrous. I'm *awesome* like that." She clicked on the post and brought up its signature headers. "This... I don't know where it originated, but it's not a normal internal post. Something's wrong."

"What should I do?"

"Nothing. Leave it. If I can borrow your station—"

I shrugged. "Have at it. All I'm doing is twiddling my thumbs until active duty comes up again."

"You prefer active duty?"

"I prefer doing all the things that no one else can or wants to do. It makes me feel useful."

She smirked. "I guess I know the feeling." She opened the transfer logs for my station and checked them against the transfer logs for the last several hours. I wasn't quite sure what she was looking for, but I didn't want to interrupt. "Here," she declared, pointing.

I followed her finger to a blanked line.

"Someone managed to crack the RAID and erase every instance of who sent this from where. No, this could've been done internally—in fact, someone with clearance would be able to do this more easily than an outside attacker." Rothe clenched her fists lip in aggravation. "Without this data, we don't know even that much. It's speculation until we can run an undelete on the whole thing."

"For one post?"

"Well, this is a potentially serious threat here. If this is an external attack, who knows what could happen if it's left unchecked. However, all of our people would be on this like white on rice. On the other hand, if this is an internal job..." She scratched her head in bewilderment. "Internal, that means we could have double agents letting people in whenever they want."

"What should I tell Rush?"

"Rush needs to know that security has been compromised, but now I need Gourley, Fender, Rasnake, and Kwasigroch on this immediately!"

I started to buzz Rush, but Rothe stopped me.

"Let Evans know first—he's the head of IS. That'll be much faster than calling all of them individually."

I nodded, dialing IS, but... "That's odd."

"What is?"

"The cable's not responding."

Rothe frowned but didn't panic – yet. "How about your mobile?"

I did as she ordered. "...now my mobile's not responding."

She held out hers without a thought. I took it and tried again, but no

response. What was going on?

"No carrier. It's like we're in a dead zone now, or a faraday cage."

"What?" She grabbed her mobile and picked at it, then took mine and did the same before putting them both down and picking up the cable. "Ridiculous," she said with ire. "The federal satellite network is absolute top of the line. I don't know about the cable, but there's no reason we shouldn't be getting service from the airwaves."

I pictured a series of IABMs taking out all our satellites, but there was no way—*no way*—a single group working alone could afford to invent interatmospheric weaponry without detection, much less any with a vendetta against me in specific.

"What about the network?" I asked, racking my brain for ideas. "Can you get a direct link to anyone?"

"I don't know if I want to take the risk. With malicious code, the best thing to do is not to do anything that might access it or anything it might compromise until the code is quarantined from the rest of the system."

Fantastic! I was rendered helpless yet again. What a terrific way to push me into early retirement. "Great."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry you can't do your work."

"What if... What would happen if you logged out of my account?"

"And into an administrator's? No way. Not until I get backup on this, I don't want to open up a Trojan on my own."

"Or a test account, I dunno. Something so the code's not open and running anymore."

"I don't think it works that way, but I'll try." She closed my account and logged in as a junk user. When the system booted, the postbox blipped. "What..." She read the header. "Undisclosed sender? Really?"

"You're kidding."

"And it's still addressed to you? On the test account?"

"Let me see."

Sure enough, the post listed my assumed name as the alias for the test account's address. "How—" I stared at the monitor in abject disbelief. "What if... Is this tied to my station, do you think?"

"You mean, if you were to log in elsewhere, would this still show up? I would think so, since your account isn't tied to one machine."

"Yet both accounts got this post."

"Ugh," Rothe groaned. "This is what I'm afraid of. What if I log in as me and I get your mystery post as well—then what? I don't want to do anything that compromises the system, which could be anything until I can isolate and examine the code – which I can't do as a limited access user."

"I'll get somebody, then."

"Fine, I'll make sure this doesn't do anything."

I stepped out of my office and had barely taken ten steps when I ran into Giga. Oh, just what I needed. Well—he *was* a higher-ranking officer, and we couldn't reach anyone else...

"Ah, excuse me, sir?" I asked with trepidation but trying my best to hide it. "Might I ask your opinion on something?"

He gave me an intense glare that unsettled me even more than usual. "About what?" he snarled in disdain, looking physically imposing though he was barely taller than I was and less fit.

Nerves of steel, Versa. My mantra didn't work—all I could think of was his jaws of steel chewing me to pieces. "I received a suspicious-looking post that Rothe says is potentially malicious, and it may indicate that the system has been compromised. We cannot reach anyone else on the cable or via mobile to request assistance, and time may be of the essence."

"So what do you want me to do about it?"

Uh... Huh. I guessed higher-ranking officers didn't need to take information security training. "Well, sir, if I were to open the post, there's no telling what it might do to the system."

"So don't open it."

"But this means I can't use my station. The post doesn't have signed headers, which means that someone has cracked the network or otherwise violated protocol. I can't trust anything I do on my station to be secure."

He nevertheless didn't seem to grasp the sense of urgency Rothe and I did. "So, what? How is this normally fixed?"

"Rothe or another administrator would log in to try to disassemble the code to see if it's harmful. She can't because the post appears on a test account as well as mine, though in both accounts the post is addressed to me specifically by name."

Giga gave me a glare that was even more intense than before, which was an astonishing feat. "Let me see." He followed me back to my office.

Rothe was clicking away at a game. "I beat your record in Hearts," she cheered with a laugh.

Eh? "How did you do that? There's no record."

"Ha, kidding." She turned around to see Giga standing there and immediately straightened up, flushing a brilliant red. "Oh, er – sir."

He gave her a look that might have killed her, as piercing as it was. "What's this about a malicious post? How would you fix it?"

"Erm." She rubbed the back of her neck in embarrassment. At least it wasn't just me who felt that way about Giga. "As I explained to Versa, I would normally log in as an administrator, but—"

"Then do it."

"But this bit of code seems parasitic—"

"I will accept responsibility for the results of any fallout that may occur to the system as the result of your efforts. Being unable to do work over a stupid piece of post is ludicrous."

I agreed, but he seemed to be treating it too lightly. Nevertheless, Rothe did as she was told, logging out of the test account and back in under her own. As soon as the system booted, her postbox blipped, popping up the same undisclosed sender post addressed to me.

"Is that it?" he asked, giving a sneer.

"Yes. There's no benign reason why it should give an anonymous name as the sender. All our accounts have hardcoded sender identity fields automatically assigned. These cannot—or *should* not—be erased, but this one has been."

"What's inside it?"

Rothe ran a full debug on the post, scouring each line for malicious intent. "I don't..." Then she went into the main postbox program and did a debug on it as well, scanning for changes in the code.

"What's taking so long?" Giga barked.

"I can't rush security!" she complained. "I wouldn't rush surgery—this is the same kind of thing!"

He seemed unusually impatient for what I expected. Did he feel we were holding him up? It wasn't as though he couldn't have ordered us to find someone else to help—

"I see..." Rothe muttered, scratching her chin, "...nothing out of the ordinary. I can double-check with Evans if we can get him down here, but I'm pretty sure this doesn't do anything. The only thing significant about this post is the implication of someone erasing the sender's identity. However, I have *not* located the cause of how all three accounts that logged into this station has received the same post but to the account's ID in Versa's name, nor who erased the sender's ID and whether the sender was from inside or outside the network."

"Why does that matter?"

Rothe and I both stared at Giga for a tense moment.

"If someone's jerking you around," he snapped in disgust, "what's the difference between inside and outside the network?"

"Begging your pardon, sir," she offered, "but one suggests we have an insecure network, the other suggests we have a double agent."

"Then secure the network and send our activity logs to NSA to let *them* do the dirty work of finding a double agent in our midst. This is far too much time to be wasting on a junk post!"

If I had had even a smidgen of a doubt about Giga being a crotchety old miser before, it was long extinguished.

"...okay, sir," Rothe agreed. "I – ah – just need your access code to clear the security override."

He glared at each of us in turn. "AZP9ZZ," he snapped, doing an about-face and marching out of the office.

Rothe shrugged and logged in as Giga to tie him to the action and remove any possible question of his involvement. "I can erase the post," she explained, "but the code is hard-wired to replace itself infinitely until it has been read. Highly unusual function, but it's interesting – and informative."

"So – I have to read it at some point, then it will go away?"

"Looks like it."

"What about connectivity? I'll need to use my mobile—"

She threw her hands in the air. "I know... I don't know... Just read the damned post, I guess."

I gave her one last look of uncertainty as she handed me my tablet and I opened the post. The body was a simple message, a little too familiar:

Pretty young thing,
With cheeks so silky-smooth, platinum hair, and flowing hips,
Lay beside me.
There is no place I would rather be than inside your lips.
Be my lady,
Let me take you to a higher place with my magic touch.
For this moment,
Just relax, I promise it won't hurt...
Very much...

It *had* to be Vice! Who else would post me his foul corruption of my lullaby? "How is he doing this?" I growled, furious that he seemed to reach me wherever and whenever he wanted.

"Who? You know who's behind this?"

"This is – Vice's work." I still had trouble just saying his name, fighting not to black out at the mere idea of him, but—given the escalating situation—I needed strength now more than ever.

Rothe opened her mouth as if to say something, but she seemed to forget what to say as soon as she did. "So," was all she could muster.

It was clear there was some meaning behind the modified lyrics, but I couldn't see what it could possibly be from what little I knew about his plans. "Obviously, I need to know this for something—why else would he go through all this trouble?" *Naïve underage girls weren't going to ravage themselves, after all*, I thought. "It's like he's just taunting me."

"That *is* a lot of effort just for a taunt," she noted unhelpfully. Yet there was a look in her eye, one I knew too well.

"What? You suspect something."

"I just... Criminy, I thought maybe you were kidding about Giga. What the hell? Even the least suspicious attack shouldn't be brushed off just like that!"

Giga had a hand in this? That sounded like a serious accusation—one that I couldn't shake, either. "I think I might have a new lead," I hinted, trailing off.

Neither of us had to say another word. Absentmindedly, I reached for the cable and heard a normal tone. I narrowed my eyes, my suspicion deepening as I dialed Rush's line.

"It works now?" Rothe asked, incredulous.

I scowled. "Go," came Rush's voice, but I wasn't comforted by it as I normally would be.

"I may have something," was all I could say. "Can I see you?"

"Of course."

"Somewhere – secure."

When he paused, he was silent for such a long time that I wondered if he'd gotten disconnected. "Come to the house," he answered at last.

I was going to his place again—the idea gave me butterflies in my stomach. His sons were in uni, but his wife probably... I fought to push away those feelings and reminded myself that this was business. "I will," I acknowledged, my mind a world away. I ended the call and, despite every inclination to the contrary, printed out the offending post and its headers as evidence. "Thanks for the help, Rothe."

"Sure thing," she chirped, giving me a wave before she left. As she stepped out the door, she glanced in the direction Giga had gone, stared for a moment, then shook her head and—I assumed—headed back to Chesapeake. I followed her lead, returning to the garage to start a commute I hadn't made in so many years.

When I arrived, Rush's vehicle was in the driveway, which probably meant she was in as well, with her truck in the garage. At least I wouldn't have to wait for him—I had no idea what I would have done if I had to face her alone. Even so, I couldn't enter at first, as memories pushed aside for so long filled my mind again. The last time I was here was when his boys were tots, well before I'd dreamed of being a government agent. I was surprised they'd never moved—I'd seen photos of his whole family in the meantime, and all of them trended towards large and husky, but even in my petite frame I had felt cramped in that townhouse.

I had my answer in moments. "Welcome back," Rush greeted after I knocked. "We've had a custom house built just in the next quad, but that's Sal's domain, and I didn't want to bring business into our home."

"I had no idea," I replied truthfully. Neither of us had the time or taste for idle chat, so it wasn't too surprising such a big purchase got past my radar. It was just as well, given how coldly his wife acted towards me... "I guess you stay here during the week?"

"For now, I am—I'll have to commute on the Metro once the place finally sells. Double mortgages aren't fun, I'll tell you that."

"If you're the only one here, why aren't you parked in the garage?"

He shrugged. "Isn't clean. I've been migrating our things in there for Sal to pick up when she feels like it. Not as far to go for the boxes."

"I'd like to see your new place sometime," I admitted, failing to suppress my feelings. Why did all my old memories haunt me so?

Any warmth in his voice vanished. "What did you find out?"

Business. Sure. I snapped out of it and pulled the printout from my pocket. "I received this post over the network from an undisclosed sender address. It's the lyrics to – Vice's song. Rothe and I found that whoever sent it erased all traces of where and who it came from and coded the message to propagate infinitely until it was read."

"Undisclosed..." he echoed, catching on.

"Correct, that shouldn't be possible – or, not innocently so. And, uh..." I felt it detracted from my report to mention him, but I didn't know how not to say anything. "The first person we could find to consult about the issue was Giga, who seemed to brush off the sensitivity of the situation."

"How do you mean?"

It felt childish tattling on him like this, but I had to follow my gut. "When I described the nature of the attack, Giga seemed more annoyed that we would let a piece of post stop me from doing my job, that there was no cause for concern."

Rush was silent, lost in thought—which was fine with me. I could have stood there all day, taking in his majestic, authoritative presence, but I knew better than to hope that my fantasies would overtake cruel reality. "I will see what I can do, but what you're insinuating—"

"I do not mean to insinuate anything other than concern for Giga's lack of it." No way did I want it on record that I suspected a higher-up to be a double agent! ...not without more substantial evidence. "It made me feel uncomfortable that he failed to grasp the gravity of the situation, especially since security is as strong as its most insecure point of entry."

He nodded without any particular emotion. "I will speak with Giga about the matter, from a purely factual standpoint. If there is a nonmalicious reason for his actions, I will find it."

"Thank you, sir."

He crumpled up the printout. "Don't let this garbage bother you. I know he's taunting you, but that's all it is—a taunt."

I wanted to believe that more than anything in the world. "He can't hurt me anymore."

"Good girl," he cheered, which made me blush at the impropriety. "I'll need Pearson wrapped up shortly, then I have another lead on Riordan. It's difficult asking you to do this, but you're the best agent for the case."

I couldn't help feeling skeptical. "Is that so, sir?"

He stepped inside, just past the entryway, then returned with a folder. "You know the main contact: Ms. Sunni Fields."

While not the worst shock I'd received in recent days, I was still floored by the news. "Nan? What—"

"It's taken a preposterous amount of time to research, but we finally discovered that she went by the name Hatake Nikkou when she was working under Denham Riordan. I can only assume that she's still undercover for the same reason she went underground in the first place—or perhaps because you knew her as Sunni Fields for so long there was no compelling reason for her to go back to her old alias. Either way, she is the last remaining known connection to the weapons of destruction that Riordan was believed to have been engineering."

The name stood out in my mind like a sore thumb. I had picked up some of her language over the years, but since Nan didn't teach it to us and I was too – preoccupied to learn on my own, I didn't know enough to speak

fluently. Furthermore, Nan must've been careful not to speak her own name even in the safety of our home, refining her comprehension of the lingua franca to the point where most days I could hardly tell she was an immigrant at all. What had her past life been like? She had mentioned her homeland's civil war on many occasions – but what was her role in it?

"I – have no idea if she'll talk," I stated bluntly as I took the folder, mindful of her comment that the secrets she kept were not hers to share. It also explained why she was hesitant to teach us her native tongue, to prevent any of us accidentally learning something we shouldn't. Still, I didn't know if I could do this to her. "It can potentially destroy the delicate balance of our little family to press too hard."

"If there's anyone I trust to act with discretion, it's you."

"Well, I appreciate the reassurance," I lied.

He furrowed his brow as though reading my thoughts, upset at my lack of conviction. "I know it's been so long since Riordan's assassination that any evidence of these supposed weapons should have been uncovered by now or would already be in the wrong hands, but it's vital we exhaust all our options first. If his plans still exist anywhere, it's a ticking bomb waiting to go off."

"I'm familiar with the ramifications." As improbable as it sounded, the proposed design—if built—would affect the entire planet. "I'm trying to wrap my brain around our Nan being linked to the thing is all."

"I know, Versa, but people have secrets you wouldn't believe."

Sadly, I would believe. "I'll get on it."

He slapped a hand on my shoulder. "Trust me, I understand what I'm asking of you. Godspeed."

I fought my inclination to act as I wanted, as unprofessional and undignified as such a reaction would be. "Thank you, sir."

I returned to my bike with the folder, flipping through it carefully. It contained a paper trail of tenuous but undeniable links between Hatake Nikkou and Sunni Fields, including a foreign newspaper article with a years-old photo of her, Riordan, and a mysterious dark woman, noted as Hatake Arashi. The evidence was difficult to sort through—what I could read of the newspaper caption described the two as sisters. What happened to Arashi?

Then I recalled her talk with me from the other night, about how her sister had owned several places to rent. For a foreigner to own so much property was astonishing, and suspect. What would the most obvious course of action be from here? Was there a route that didn't necessitate asking Nan straight out to leak her involvement in political warfare and espionage?

...yes. First, I would translate the article properly—something I assumed hadn't been done only because time was of the essence getting this to me. I returned to my office, not certain whether a quick resolution was the best outcome. If I couldn't find even a trivial reason to avoid confronting Nan over something that might drive a wedge between us—

As I pulled to a stop in the garage, my blood ran cold. Out of the

corner of my eye, I spotted a familiar tint of blue hair from the opposite end of the platform. *There has to be a perfectly reasonable explanation for his being here*, I thought, but I couldn't discern what. I knew everyone in the entire district who had clearance for this area, and Sky wasn't among them.

...maybe he was temping for someone, or just started today. Yes. I wanted to believe he wasn't another threat, but it felt difficult hiding the nervousness in my demeanour. I tried to pretend I didn't notice him, but when I kept catching glances of that shock of blue in the rear-vision in my glasses, it gave me more cause for concern. I took the stairs as usual, but especially because I didn't want to risk getting caught in the lift alone with him. After three flights I heard the footfalls of someone approximately his mass following me up, and it was all I could do not to make a mad dash for my office, bolt the door behind me, and barricade myself in.

I did close and lock my door, at least, leaving the lights turned off and blinds down to prevent anyone from bothering me. If he knocked... well, I would have to come up with some kind of an excuse.

Nothing. After the expected amount of time it would have taken to catch up, the only sounds I heard in the entire building were the hum from my workstation and the HVAC. It was strange for there to be this degree of silence at this time of day...

I was letting my paranoia get to me again—whatever reason he had for hanging around was irrelevant. I had to do my job, free of distractions, and try to figure out how to glean the info I needed without destroying my home life in the process.

Unfortunately, the subtle and various nuances of language were difficult to convey through a device as clunky as a dictionary, even one as comprehensive as our database, and though I pieced together the general idea from the characters, idiomatic expression meant I might still lose a lot in the translation. Did Rush know a translator who could—

...no, he probably expected me to know already, since I was close to Nan for so long and remembered, literally, everything since I was three. My pride and my curse... I checked the directory for a translation service, noting one on 17th. Worth a shot.

That creepy feeling lingered, and I peeked out the blinds without touching them—no one was in the hall that I could see, but it was possible someone might be just outside my line of sight. Well, I still had that wig from the night of the concert. Doffing my riding jacket and stuffing it into my bag along with the files, I carefully pulled on the wig, parting it in the opposite direction from before. I glanced in my mirror, pouting that I didn't look much different despite my efforts. Maybe I needed a whole disguise closet for just such occasions...

As I stepped back into the hall, I was astonished at how quiet it was—I couldn't even hear the HVAC going. No one seemed to be tailing me that I could tell, but I tried to act nonchalant for the security cameras all the same. It worried me that maybe *that* was how I was being watched, but I

couldn't do anything about it now.

Using my chopper was risky, all the same. Instead, I walked down Executive to the White Flint Metro stop, buying a day-pass and catching the next shuttle to Dupont Circle. I didn't notice anyone following, but I gulped in reflex to realise I wasn't the only one who could go in disguise.

The shop was hidden, but I located it after some footwork. "Hello?" I asked when I entered, uncertain if they were even open at this hour—even their sign was written in Han characters.

"Irrasshaimase!" the clerk greeted me. "How may I assist you?"

I glanced around the shop, which seemed to be filled with travel posters. "I'm – sorry, I was looking for a translation service."

"We can translate for a fee, yes," he said with a smile.

"Oh! Thank you." I hadn't expected a travel agency, but it made sense, in a way. "I have an old newspaper article that I was trying to read. I can make out some, but not all of it."

"Certainly! I can translate it now for you, if you like."

I took out the article, feeling a sense of *déjà vu* as I met the clerk's eyes again. He was pale, but he didn't seem to be foreign—that alone was probably not a concern, since learning a language wasn't tied to race, but it seemed unusual.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, reading my body language.

I stared maybe a little longer than I should have. "You – seem a bit familiar," I admitted, plumbing my memories for why.

"Do I?" he asked with a hint of nervousness.

"Have you lived here for a long time?"

"I'm – not really comfortable talking about myself with strangers."

I forced a smile, feeling bad for pressing the issue. "Nevermind, then." I held out the article for him to see. "Just this for now."

He looked it over and furrowed his brow. "This is very old," he noted unhelpfully.

"I know that. I need to know more about the people in the article."

Still frowning, he translated with some deliberation:

"Okazaki—A controversial new technology that has been proposed by Dr. Denham Riordan of the University of Human Environments has come under fire from MEXT for reasons undisclosed to the public. Opponents to Riordan's proposal cite concerns regarding its impact on the Route—"

He stopped there. "What is your interest in the people involved?"

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion, wondering why he would be so reluctant to read an old newspaper article. "I believe I know this woman—" Here I indicated Nan. "—but if she is not who I think she is, then that will be a weight off my chest."

"Oh." He skimmed the rest of the article, though I couldn't dismiss

the air of secrecy his inquiries suggested.

"—Riordan claims to have been working closely with the Deputy Minister of MEXT, Dr. Hatake Arashi, prior to her disappearance—"

"*Disappearance?*" I cried, though in retrospect I wasn't sure why I was so surprised. "What happened to her, do you know?"

The clerk had a look in his eyes as though he knew, but— "I can translate this paper for you. I am not prepared to do research."

"Is it not common knowledge?"

"I'm just part-time help, miss. I don't know *everything* that happens over on the other side of the world."

I felt patronising, expecting him to have all the answers I needed, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that he was withholding something from me. "What's your name?"

"I said I'm not comf—"

"Just your first name. Aren't you required to wear a name badge to work, anyway?"

He glanced down. "...I must have forgotten it today." Even then, he waited as long as was polite before answering. "I'm Si—"

"Amy's twin!" I realised, making the connection.

"...I prefer Simon."

"Amy used to play with Saga when they were younger, before..." I trailed off. No wonder he was so discreet about who he was! "Is she still in gaol, do you know?"

Simon cringed at the mention of his sister. "I'm not really at liberty to speak about her to strangers."

"But—" I started to protest. Was I really a stranger to him? "You mean you don't remember me at all?"

He stared at me for a bit. "...not really."

"Anna Reyes? Oh, for—" I remembered my wig and pulled it off, shaking out my hair. "I'm sorry, it slipped my mind that I had that on."

"Sorry, Ms. Reyes," he insisted coldly. "It must have been a long time ago, if at all."

I was getting discouraged by this. In school, Simon was at the top of his class. Amy – would have been as well, had she not kept getting in trouble, but that he couldn't—or wouldn't—remember me was yet another thing on the pile of let downs.

"Oh," I conceded, pulling my wig back on as my irrelevance took a greater role than it had. "I guess I just expected..."

Simon didn't seem eager to continue our conversation, remaining silent even though I still wanted the rest of the translation.

"...so what does the rest say?" I prompted, growing impatient now that we were back to a strictly business relationship.

He pushed it back to me. "You know her. You should just ask her."
I shook my head in disbelief. "What are you talking about? You just said—"

"This woman is Sunni Fields. If that is who you wanted to know about, then that is who it is."

"That's not what I wanted to—"

"We're closed for today, miss. Please come back another time for all your travel needs." He forced a smile, but his stare was icy.

Fine, I could take a hint, delivered with all the panache of a punch in the face. Feeling miffed at getting the cold shoulder, I snatched the article and shoved it back in my bag, not looking back as I made the trek back to Executive. Another dead end—all I had left was to bite the bullet and...

I doffed the wig in a bathroom and pulled my riding jacket back on. It felt like a lot of hassle, this whole disguise thing, and I didn't even know if it was working. My mind latched onto the night of the concert and how easily I was tracked while in disguise, even in the darkness of the arena. Here I was walking around in broad daylight with the most minimal-effort disguise imaginable. "Why don't you try hard?" I scolded myself, but even then I couldn't envision buying a false nose and other stage make-up effects, pouring that much time into looking like someone else when I was running out of time as it was.

No. That was another trap, denying who I was purely out of fear of one person. As much as I hated Vice, I wasn't ready to lose Rush, and my family, to escape the threat of torture. I couldn't abandon the few things that brought light to my world spending my time running from the dark.

Even if it meant asking the worst of Nan.

I returned to the house again, not prepared to call it quits on my daily check-ins with or without my assignment. It was now or never.

"I'm back," I announced, hoping to catch Nan alone.

"We're in here, Anna!"

It was Saga's voice, from in the sitting room. I walked over to say hello to—

"Hello," greeted Sky.

The bag dropped from my hand as I lost my grip. "I – ah, where can I put my bag?" I improvised, trying to hide my shock.

Saga gave me a strange look. "In the den, if you want."

"Good. Ah, let me get cleaned up before I sit with you." I kicked my bag into the den and went to the WC, turning on the faucet and splashing cold water on my face. *He's part of the family now*, I reminded myself, even though I hadn't expected him to become integrated so – quickly. I needed to get used to seeing him now and again.

"How was your day?" Nan asked when I returned. "Sky came by to visit, since his mother asked about everyone."

Well – it was worth a shot. "I ran into Simon at a travel agency on 17th," I mentioned, wondering if she remembered him.

"Simon?" she cried, excited at the news. "How is he doing these days? How's Amy?"

Success! "He seems fine, but – he wouldn't tell me anything about Amy. I'm not sure why, but it's like he doesn't want to talk about it."

She smiled anyway. "I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. Still a troublemaker, even after..."

That was my chance! "After what?"

"Oh," she tsked, "you know how she was always causing problems, one way or another. Such a bad influence."

"Amy from my school?" Saga asked, curious. "The same one who knocked over the convenience store on Kensington Parkway?"

"Yeah," I replied, wondering how I would pull this off.

"What happened to her? I heard they threw her in prison for like twenty years!"

No doubt I could abuse my work access to find out, but it wasn't relevant to my needs. "I don't know. Simon wouldn't say."

"And Simon?"

I shrugged. "He wouldn't tell me much about himself, either."

"Why not?" Nan asked, incredulous. "He was always so well-behaved, and he would tell me everything that went on in his life."

I pouted, doing my best to making my disappointment known. "He didn't remember me."

Nan seemed to share my disappointment. "Well, I would love very much to catch up with him sometime!"

"As I said, he was at the travel agency on 17th. I can take you, if you like."

"That would be lovely! I haven't seen him in ages—I've always worried about him, you know."

Sky remained silent the whole time. If he was planning something malicious, he wasn't going to let on. I couldn't drop my guard, but I didn't know how to proceed—it was going to be the balancing act from hell trying to get the information I needed while making certain he didn't get something from me he shouldn't have.

"So, how are you, Sky?" I asked, not certain I could make progress with company present. "How is your mum doing?"

"Mom's been struggling," he stated, mincing his words.

"How so?"

The conversation seemed to cause him discomfort. "She's not *old* old, but her osteoporosis has been difficult to manage. I didn't want to have to put her in a home, but it was much less for me to worry about if, say, she fell when I wasn't around."

"Of course," Nan agreed. "Nothing wrong with assisted living."

"...by the way, what do you do?" I ventured, figuring I may as well learn more about the one I viewed with such deep suspicion. "Do you work in the area?"

He stared at me for a bit, as though annoyed that I asked. "I'm between jobs for now, which makes the decision harder."

"It's a tough economy. Everyone's struggling." Suddenly, I had a brainstorm. "I mean, Nan inherited this house from her sister, otherwise who knows what cardboard box we'd be living in now."

"Heh." Sky ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, that's pretty much what I'm living in, myself."

"Oh, what's your sister's name, Nan?" I asked, genuinely curious regardless of my assignment but still bracing myself for fallout. "I don't think you've ever mentioned her before the other day."

She looked downcast, but in that proud way. "Stormy. She was a teacher at the school where Mr. and Mrs. Rockford graduated."

"Really." I was astonished that this had never been mentioned in my nine years with them, though at least now I had my lead. "Did they know this?"

"You can ask Mr. Rockford, when he's feeling up to a chat. I think she was too busy with work to meet up with us, though."

"She never came to see you? How busy can a schoolteacher be?"

Nan shook her head. "We all have our own agendas. I wasn't going to question it if she didn't want to see—"

"—her own sister?"

"Not everyone is close to family, Anna."

Her words were a slap in the face, especially coming from Nan. I thought— "Okay," I conceded, feeling stupid for projecting my feelings like that, "it's just – strange thinking anyone wouldn't want to see you."

She grinned. "Try as I might, I still haven't befriended *everyone*."

"Nan?" I teased, "not friends with *everyone*?"

She started to say something but hesitated, her smile disappearing.

"What?" I prodded, not liking the change in her expression.

"I was going to say, 'You of all people should understand just how difficult it is.'"

Another slap in the face. The conversation was indeed driving us apart, but not in the way I'd expected. It felt much colder in the room than I realised, and I had to leave earlier than I had planned, staying long enough to see off Sky before bidding my own farewells.

As I returned to my gaff, I mulled over the day's events. I hadn't learned much that I could use, and I possibly made enemies of people who weren't a threat prior to this. Par for the course.

I parked my chopper with a sigh, hoping I could make up for this tremendous flop somehow. I'd gotten as far as taking off my helmet and securing it to the pillion bars when I felt a gruff pair of hands grab me from behind, one clapping over my mouth.

"What do you think you're doing, Versa?" Sky demanded.

9. Human Subjects

I felt panic set in as Sky overpowered me, like a stronger, stouter version of Vice. He easily carried me into the apartment entryway against my struggles, taking the keys out of my pocket, opening the door to my gaff, and pushing me inside. "Keep quiet," he barked, closing the door behind us as he dropped my keys on the floor.

I reached for my mobile, but he knocked it away before I could dial out. "What do you want?" I shrieked before he clapped his hand over my mouth again, knocking me to the floor.

"I said keep it down! I just want to warn you."

Warn— I tried to vocalise my protest, but he didn't budge.

"Listen," he ordered, "Simon was keeping quiet for a reason. I don't know why you went to him, but keep away."

I stopped struggling. He knew Simon? They both *were* about my age, but...

He let me go and turned to leave. "You said it again," I shouted at him, despite his threats. "Why are you calling me Versa? And how do you know where I live?"

"Just keep away," he barked, opening the door again and closing it behind him. I stumbled to my feet and gave chase, but he was gone in the blink of an eye. I dashed through the entryway and back into the parking lot, listening carefully for his footfalls, but he was like a shadow, vanishing into nothingness – like that. Sky was a much more versatile individual than I'd first wagered, if he could lose me so effortlessly!

I cursed myself a nonillion times for letting my guard down, even if it wasn't a genuine threat. ...was it a threat at all? I didn't know what evil schemes Simon *or* Sky were up to, but there still wasn't any good reason Sky would know my codename!

That meant... I had no idea what it meant. Where Simon and Sky involved with the same thing? The JAM project, maybe? More questions without any obvious answers.

It was frustrating how far my attention was getting divided, between my work and worrying about my family and my own well-being, to then add these other puzzles to the mix... What took priority? I thought about giving Rush a buzz to get his take, but I didn't want to trouble him for no reason when I didn't have much to report in the first place. Stormy – Fields? I went back to my apartment and pulled out my laptop to do a quick search. The first result yielded a surprisingly brief obituary:

Stormy Fields, 57, world history and geography teacher at Kensington High School, was found dead yesterday along the Paint Branch Anacostia Tributary Trail. The time and specifics of her death have yet to be determined, and an autopsy is pending the council of her family.

Stormy is survived by her loving sisters Callisto Black and Sunni Fields.

I fell over to read the last line. *Callisto?* Who was *this*, now? I felt as though my brain would explode from the infodump I had to endure over the past week or so. It was like a nested doll, with each mystery uncovering another, more convoluted one.

I dug deeper into Stormy's search results, but an hour of research yielded tired eyes and not much in the way of useful information—she had started teaching at the school about three years or so before Nan and Mrs. Rockford had moved to the area, but before that was completely unknown. It wouldn't have been difficult to pull off a 'disappearance' in her homeland, to resurface here as a nondescript teacher, I realised, but I couldn't work out a direct link proving that she had, even with Nan's files.

After shaking the cobwebs out of my head, I started a search on this Callisto and came up with – a whole lot of *nothing*. Maybe it was a typo? I tried searching for Callisto Fields, Callista Black, Callie Fields-Black, Caylis Black-Fields. Not a single hit under any permutation I could imagine. I dug into the INS database, the voter registration database, the DMV database, but I couldn't find a connection to this mysterious Callisto in any of them, and I finally retired to bed in defeat after hitting the wall, literally, with applied forehead action.

...did I dare ask Nan about her? I didn't know if my heart could take a serious confrontation, if I was so hurt by her unintentional strikes earlier. I couldn't just run back to Rush with my tail between my legs, either—he had high expectations of me, and I had to exhaust all my options first.

I needed guidance, but I couldn't ask the two people who were most able to help. I felt like an idiot, paralysed by fear of disappointing my boss and alienating my family—avoidable only by quitting my job, which wasn't acceptable. If only I had someone to tell me what to do.

It looked like I needed another round with the therapy monster.

Though I had told Nan I had been in therapy for six years, I'd hadn't been in seven months, due to a falling out with my last therapist, general frustration with the process, and schedule conflicts with the next one in the queue. The labyrinthine mess of information and emotion that was piling up in my head made it seem like a good a time as any to try again, however. I called first thing in the morning, choosing a psychiatrist by closing my eyes and pointing, not even looking at the name as I dialed. I was in luck—they had an opening in an hour! At least that was something. Furthermore, the

office was a block from my gaff... Maybe this would be my lucky break.

There was no wait when I entered, not even to sign in, which was both refreshing and unsettling. I figured any reputable therapist would have at least *some* business at this hour. "Hello?" I called, wondering where the receptionist was.

"Come in," called a voice from the next room, past an open door. "I've been expecting you."

I stepped into the office with hesitation. "Good morning, Dr.—"

"You may simply call me Johnathan," he insisted, standing to greet me. "I know I've earned my title, but it feels off-putting to be so formal. I'd rather let's consider this a friendly chat between equals."

I shook his hand. "Okay. I'm Anna."

"It's good to meet you, Anna." He motioned for me to take a seat, which I obliged as he followed suit. "Comfortable?"

I nodded. "Very." It wasn't a lie. The couch was so comfortable that I was tempted to ask him the name of the designer so I could get one of my own.

"Now, then, let me lead with this question: What do you want out of our sessions?"

I was uncertain what he was asking. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, what do you expect of therapy? Why are you paying me money to lie on a couch and talk? How you answer is how I would expect to earn your custom."

Huh. "Well, I figured I would tell you my problems, and you would advise me on how to solve them."

"Oh, no," he protested. "I'm not an advisor at all. I would have no idea how to help you if your co-workers kept stealing your lunch or your car was getting old and you didn't know whether you should get a new one or buy used. I have limited expertise in practical advice for everyday affairs. That's not what psychology is about, that's not what I earned my degree learning to do."

"Then – what?"

"You get out of therapy what you put into it. I will listen to your problems, yes, but—to a degree—you have to find the answers yourself. I can't tell you what to do, only nudge you if I feel you may be heading in the wrong direction – and even then, it is still your choice to keep heading in the wrong direction. My ultimate goal is to help you try to make sense of the things you're going through, to help you find an answer you can live with."

I furrowed my brow at him, out of a lack of comprehension more than anger. "Well, when you phrase it *that* way, it sounds like you have the cushiest job ever."

"If it was, I wouldn't imagine people would keep paying for therapy, except that eventually your friends would get fed up if you tried to unload on *them* in the same way. Perhaps it would be better if you considered it to be hiring an objective viewpoint who is legally obligated not to turn around and

blab your troubles to everyone else."

Hmm. "That does sound a little better. My prior therapists weren't nearly as eager to spell out their services."

"Is that why you stopped seeing them?"

"Of course. I got fed up with the process, that I was paying them all this money and getting nowhere."

"What did you discuss with them? What kinds of things, if you don't want to get into the specifics?"

"Oh..." My mind wandered over the various topics. Or, the *topic*. "The most progress was I got as far as starting to tell them about Vice—"

"The DJ?"

I nodded, my heart sinking in expectation of this session turning out the same as the others. "That one. I think a couple of them were skeptical, as though he's some god of music who wouldn't deign to sully himself with a nonentity like me—those were the ones I dropped immediately. The others, I don't know. Maybe they thought I was delusional or lying or had some kind of complex. If only it was actually like that, *then* it would mean he would leave me alone."

"Why doesn't he leave you alone?"

I balked, but in astonishment. From his tone, I got the feeling that Dr. – Johnathan was unconditionally accepting, which made it feel okay to tell, but... I choked, not certain what to say all the same.

"I apologise. Is that too difficult? How about this, instead—why do you feel that you couldn't make progress with your prior therapists?"

I mused over it. "It felt too much like I was being judged, like they were being condescending to me instead of trying to help. It's not my fault I have the history I do."

"Of course it isn't."

"Like – I just..." The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't spit them out. "I just want someone to believe me, you know?"

He nodded. "Everyone wants to be believed. It's only natural. No one likes to be thought of as a liar, particularly over bad things."

"Exactly!" Wow—he had gotten through to me in five words where five others had hit the wall. "I hate feeling completely helpless and, worse than that, being thought of as a liar when I mention feeling helpless."

"Is that what he does, makes you feel helpless?"

My heart ached being this close to a breakthrough, yet... "It's much more than that, but... Even thinking about it is enough to make me relapse."

His gentle concern turned to dismay. "Relapse? Are you—"

"I have blackouts. The memories are so vivid that I have to think of them as vague nightmares to keep my fear from taking over."

"That's not healthy. You can't let fear consume your life this way."

I knew that, but... "How can I get over my fear?"

"The best way is to confront that fear. This is touchy, however – a germaphobe can be shown that it's okay to get dirty, that some dust is not

going to cause death and destruction. When it comes to a malicious person who is genuinely out to get you... I don't know what to recommend, because there's no blanket answer. Blacking out is definitely not healthy, though."

"I know *that* much."

"Are you seeing anyone about this? Have you seen a neurologist?"

"Once. Said I was prone to fainting, as a reaction."

Johnathan looked let down. "This is what I was trying to illustrate. I cannot solve your blackouts from talking with you. I might recommend a second opinion with a neurologist I know, but otherwise that is the extent of my ability to help. I do genuinely wish to solve all your problems, but I cannot, nor should I."

At least he was honest. "So, what does that mean for me?"

"It means you will have to find a way to deal with your fear, not to block out your memories, necessarily, but – dull their edge in some fashion. For instance, I mentioned being a germaphobe: In that case, you might try taking a pottery class or going mountain-climbing—something that might force you out of your element and acclimate you to dirt being something tolerable instead of something to fear.

"However—and this is where it gets problematic—if you were a victim of assault, I can't in good conscience tell you to put yourself into a situation where you would get assaulted, in the hopes that repeated exposure would make it easier to bear over time. That's insanity. Instead, you would have to figure out what specifically about the assault hurt you so much and what you could do to make it less frightening to live with."

I got where he was coming from, but there wasn't an easy answer that I could see. "What about – feeling powerless?"

"What specifically makes you feel powerless?"

"Like – my hands are tied."

"Literally or figuratively?"

"...can I say both?"

He gave me a disappointed look, scrunching his face. "He's really that bad, is he..." Sighing, I nodded. "Well – figuratively, I would refer you to one of the local trauma support groups. No one has gone through *exactly* the same thing you have, but you'll be among those who've survived similar experiences, and nothing's quite as validating as being with others who've been there, too. I also suggest seeking guidance from a mentor or someone else you respect. Try to find ways to empower yourself, to feel confident in your abilities as a person, while not allowing others to bring you down.

"Literally – you may want to keep a rope-cutter on your person?"

I forced a laugh, but it seemed obvious now that I thought about it. A small rope-cutting device wouldn't hurt—a razor jammed in my boot sole, maybe? Still... "Well, I don't know about the mentor part—they're the ones I can't tell."

"Why is that, may I ask? Why can't you tell them?"

"You know... I can't let my boss down."

"Why not? Even bosses understand that people aren't perfect."

"Yeah, but – I don't *want* to let him down."

Johnathan looked – sad, if I had to venture a guess. "It's one thing to empower yourself, but it's another to hold yourself to such unrealistic standards. That's the surest way to fail. This is just your boss—why does he govern so much of your life, or why do you let him?"

You don't understand, I began to protest, but then I realised – maybe he *does*. Rush was more to me than a boss, but why was that? I knew better than to let myself get to where I was, but I did it anyway. "I – don't know," I conceded. "I just want..."

"Have you ever let your boss down before?"

Another shock. "No. Not really, anyway."

"So you must have conditioned yourself over time to believe that you *cannot* let him down, at any cost, but it's unfair to put such a heavy burden on yourself. People fail every day. There's no shame in failing, but you must own your failures and learn from them—not only how to succeed next time, but how not to fear failure. What are you afraid will happen if you disappoint him?"

"I..." The very idea made me shiver, the fearful thing I envisioned, and—despite his advice—I didn't dare name it and breathe life into what I dreaded most. "I just can't do it..."

"Really?" Johnathan's brown eyes pierced into my soul. "What is your history with him?"

The question sent chills down my spine, and I couldn't answer.

"Put it this way, then—why is he worthy of respect greater than your own self-respect?"

For a moment, I wanted nothing but to sing his praises, to breathe life instead to the joy I felt even being associated with Rush, as counter to my fears. "He feels – safe."

"Safe, how?"

I flushed in embarrassment to admit it, even in private. "When I'm around him or even just hear his voice, I feel as though he's protecting me."

"Does he know this? ...if that's not intrusive."

I shook my head violently. "Or, I don't think he does."

Whatever Johnathan thought of this, he didn't say. "Are you afraid that if you let him down, he will stop protecting you?"

I cringed in reflex. "No...!" I whimpered, hoping he didn't jinx me.

"Anna," he prompted, putting a hand on my shoulder in consolation, "this ideal you are projecting onto your boss isn't healthy for either of you. Your boss has a legal obligation to treat you as his employee—no more, no less—and he can't possibly live up to your expectations of him, especially when he doesn't even know you have them."

"I know," I whined, but I didn't want to shatter the illusion.

"This might be the key—you don't want to let him down, because you don't want *him* to let *you* down. Has he ever let you down before?"

It hurt to remember. "...yes."

"Then you know it's survivable. Did you forgive him for it?"

I looked away in discomfort. "Sort of."

"Then if he is a reasonable boss, he will forgive you for not being perfect. It is not your fault if you have failings. In fact, many bosses find it flattering to be asked for their assistance, to be shown that their knowledge is valuable. Why don't you try it, let him know that you need help?"

"But – I'm at odds with the assignment he gave me, and I don't see how I could ask for his help on it."

"How so? ...not the specifics so much as the gist."

I bit my tongue in nervousness. "He wants me to..." What would be a safe way to phrase it? "...turn in my nan."

"Your – grandmother?"

"Yes. It's a huge conflict of interest."

Johnathan grimaced. "I'd say. Why didn't you tell him no, you can't do it?"

"Should I?"

"Does your nan deserve to be turned in?"

I started to say of course not, but how much of that was from the amount of trouble I'd had getting her back from the assisted living centre in the first place? "I'm not sure. She knows something we need to know."

"Is it possible to ask her without turning her in?"

"That's what I can't work out. It may destroy our already unstable home life if I even let on that I know she's hiding something."

"If I had to venture a guess, you're – police?"

"Sort of."

"Close enough, then. Have you tried asking her what she would do in your position, if she had to choose between her job or her family?"

"No, she would..." What *would* she do? I was starting to feel I didn't know my own family as well as I thought, and it made me feel worse.

"It might make it easier to find an amicable solution if you let her understand that you're in a difficult spot as it is and, given the choice, you wouldn't want to choose."

"Maybe..."

"The alternative is, again, telling your boss you just can't do it."

"But then I'd have to..."

I trailed off in horror to recognise the choice before me: destroy my family, or destroy my sanity. If I didn't do this for the Riordan case, I would be put back on deskwork or JAM—truly a case of trying to choose the lesser of two evils, with the JAM case's diminishing returns for what it had cost.

Johnathan waited expectantly for my answer, making good on his claim that he would not tell me what to do.

"Why does this have to be so *difficult*?" I pouted, grabbing fistfuls of my hair.

He chuckled. "I sympathise. If life were easy, though, how would

we tell when we accomplished anything? Difficult times are what make us stronger, what separates the achievers from the layabouts."

"Heh," I snorted. "You'd *think* that..."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Well, yes. Do you think otherwise?"

Try as I might, I couldn't dismiss memories of Vice once the JAM project had crossed my mind again. "I guess it feels like there's so much evidence to the contrary."

"Such as...?"

Did I dare to open that can of worms? *...it's what I'm paying for, stupid*, I thought, cringing. "Such as how easily I succumb to the slightest whim of my abuser, regardless of what I actively do to avoid him entirely. It's like he's laughing at my efforts, dancing in circles around me without breaking a sweat."

Johnathan was silent for a moment. "Is this Vice again?"

"...yes."

"From your tone, I get the impression this is going to take multiple sessions, and by which I mean *many* sessions."

I smirked. "You've done okay so far."

"I try," he said with a blush. "Anyway, do you want to tackle this much today? It's a lot for a single meeting, especially our first."

It was a lot, but I also felt, since I was already here... "He *is* at the heart of my problems, I suppose."

"Well – okay. Where should we start?"

"There's so much... I'm not sure."

"How about I lead with this: Why did you drop your last therapist?"

My therapist? "I – felt he was pushing me in a direction I didn't want to go."

"What was that, if you don't mind my asking?"

I gritted my teeth in agony. "He asked me if I thought I might ever be able to – forgive Vice for what he's done to me."

"I see," he noted. "It's not a bad question, but no is a perfectly good answer. Still, forgiveness may help you to move past the pain—"

"Pain that still happens!" Despite our progress, now I was starting to feel put out by this therapist as well, already! "I know for a fact that he's determined to make my last birthday the most misera—"

"Oh, you are due soon?" Johnathan exclaimed, shocked. "To die?"

"...yes. At the new year."

"And when's your birthday?"

"New year's eve."

"So – it's a ritual, then, every year on your birthday? What about times in between?"

"Before, it was only on my birthdays. This year, he's gotten to me even on odd occasions. I think he's trying to cover as much ground as he can before it's too late, while still saving something big for the end."

"Well..." He bit the end of his pen. "Consider this: Worrying about

it this early means he's making you miserable without even doing anything. You can spend the rest of the year full of dread, always looking over your shoulder to see if he's hiding in the shadows waiting to attack, or you can make the best of the time you have. Even MLCS can't dictate the quality of your life—only its length."

"What," I protested, not understanding, "so I *don't* defend myself? Just *let* him have my way with me?"

"I'm not saying to resign yourself to the inevitable—it just doesn't seem helpful to let the future rule you in the way you have been. Certainly, take measures to protect yourself to the best you are able, but can your life be worth living if you hole up in a bunker for the rest of it?"

Frustration at my failed disguise came to mind, and I knew he had a valid point. "But – I have a much harder time coping now than I ever had before, especially since he's stepped up his game, as it were."

"In what way?"

My heart nearly stopped, the memories flooding my consciousness like a mental deluge of depravity and torture. Rather than apologise for the impertinence of his question like before, though, Johnathan pressed on.

"What do you fear will happen if you tell someone about what he's done to you in full detail?"

"...I don't know."

"If it's not too much to ask, why don't we try it? You may stop if it becomes too uncomfortable."

Logically, it sounded like a good plan. In practice...

"Just relax, and let me know if you can't continue."

Though I had reservations about it, my stubbornness demanding I keep mum about everything, it was like a part of me rebelled and flipped a switch, to have this drama over already. I was astonished to hear the words pour from my mouth as though a practised speech for a play.

"One example—my eleventh birthday was when I was turned away from dolls forever. That was when he discovered flunitrazepam and had snuck some into my lemonade when I wasn't paying attention, something I knew only because he gloated about it when I awoke hours later. This was after he had taken off most of my clothes and dolled me up in an itchy frilly dress—the kind that those porcelain dolls wear. When he saw I had come to was when he stopped and cut these V-shapes into my hands, spilling blood all over everything. When I screamed, it made him laugh harder, and he even poured lemon juice on the cuts.

"He didn't do much beyond that—that year—but it was traumatic enough for me to feel uncomfortable around dolls. I can't even go into a toy store now, and when my family gave me a doll as a gift one year, I ran away in tears and couldn't face them for the rest of the day."

"Did you ever tell this to anyone besides me?"

The memory of my helplessness made me want to cry and never stop, but I had to fight to be strong. "...who could I have told? All anyone

knew of that time was I was gone for days, and no one could prove that he had done anything to me. He always manages to find some seemingly airtight alibi, like staying with a friend who's in on it. I've never been able to prove his guilt, and it makes me feel even more helpless each time."

"There was absolutely no evidence of the 'doll' torture?"

"He has an eye for detail. Even back then it would have taken a cracking good CSI team to find the tiniest scrap of evidence. The casual glance of a guardian convinced that her child isn't a cruel torturer isn't going to cut it."

"How did you explain it to your family, your disappearance?"

I was silent. I couldn't...

"*Did* you tell them you were abducted?"

"...no."

The look in his eye was a mystery. "They didn't worry about you?"

I frowned at the feelings of hurt from that time. "It's complicated."

"Your family doesn't support you?"

"Not always—no, not really."

"...I truly am sorry. There isn't much disappointment that compares to when the ones we're supposed to be able to depend on don't come through for us. It can make you project inappropriate feelings onto people outside your family, such as your boss."

Again, I wanted to protest his claim, but I didn't see how I could possibly validate myself.

"On that note, I think this is more than enough for you to work on in the meantime," Johnathan declared, scratching out some notes. "Here's what I can determine about your situation from what you told me, in sum:

Vice gets to you.

You panic when he gets to you.

"I think we can safely assume that he will always try to get to you, so that's an unfortunate something you can't change. All you can do is try to deal it when it happens. That you don't have the support of your loved ones means it's all the more important to find your own strength, since you are the only one you can count on, no matter what.

"The trick—and I know it's asking a lot—is to find some way to keep yourself from panicking when he tries to get to you. I can't make any fool-proof suggestions without knowing how it is he gets to you, what it is he does to make you his captive audience every year like clockwork. I don't mean to sound like I want to know—maybe I don't *need* to know, and this is simply your own quest for self-betterment. The choice of how to handle it is yours, but the first step is, obviously, overcoming your debilitating fear.

"I mean, in a sense, all of our hands are tied. Each of us will die some day, and there is nothing we can do about it. Our lives remain etched in stone, if you believe in predestination, and even if you don't, the laws of

nature are still more powerful than all of us working together, much less any mere human working alone."

It all seemed so easy for him to say, not knowing the true depths to which I had been dragged down over the years. Yet, I did take his words to heart. "I understand."

"I regret having to cut you off like this, but we've actually been talking for two hours already, and I imagine time isn't on your side, from what you've told me."

"Two...?" I checked my mobile. One new message, two hours ago. "Oops," I murmured, flushing in embarrassment—normally I was better at watching the clock.

Johnathan smiled warmly and stood to see me out. "Don't worry about hogging me. I've never been busy this time of day, anyway."

When I got up, I was overcome by an unusual sensation—I didn't want to leave just yet. It was so unexpected that I had to laugh.

"Something funny?"

I looked away, chagrined. "Well, it's just..."

He gave me an expectant look as he straightened his square glasses. It made him look a bit endearing, despite the hideous style. "Yes, Anna?"

"I mean, I feel like we've progressed so much in just one session, what's left for next time?"

Johnathan grinned widely. "Then perhaps that means I've done my job well."

I couldn't help beaming at him. "I hope so." It was astonishing to realise how much better I felt. I had never imagined just *talking* would have such a drastic improvement in my outlook!

...even if it meant dealing with fallout. At least now I understood that I couldn't just run from fallout—sometimes I would have to face it.

As I shook Johnathan's hand and said goodbye, I stepped out of his office to check my mobile. I had another strange feeling then, as though I'd forgotten something, but it slipped my mind as I read the message:

Anna, can you bring your laptop? —Saga

She was going to accept it at last! Good—I didn't know how she could do well in her classes these days without a computer, so I was more than happy to hand it down.

I walked back to my apartment to get the laptop and have a quick watercress sandwich. One way or another, I was determined to resolve the matter with Nan today, even if I was never forgiven for it—I'd lived too much of my life in fear already.

My mood was at an unexpected peak as I strolled back down the block. It was such a pleasant feeling that I hardly noticed when a burlap sack came down over my head, and I didn't resist when I was carried away.

10. Inclusion of Women

That unpleasant, sickly-sweet smell lulled me to sleep and lingered in the air after I came to. I felt nauseated, between the prickling feeling in my brain and the fact I had let myself literally get carried away two days in a row. It couldn't be Sky—I had done nothing to provoke that behaviour from him again—so that left...

"Hello again, love."

He was finding me with startling regularity lately! I couldn't let him take advantage of me anymore—I forced myself to concentrate not on our past together but on preventing our future together. I couldn't let that awful, smarmy face be the last thing I saw before I died...

My instinct was to beat him to a pulp with my bare fists, but time and time again proved I didn't possess the upper body strength to overpower him, not with all the strength training in the world. Instead—for once—I lay there in silence, unmoving, to let him make the first move as I assessed my situation in the meantime. Where was I? Looked like a hotel room...

"No pretty words for me, sexy?" he teased. "No 'Your honey smell makes me sick, your lies are spreading so thick, pins in your photos I stick'?" Even as he leaned in close, nose touching mine, I did my best to stay calm. "It's the silent treatment, then?" he cooed, stroking my temple with his hand. "Sure, I'm game. Everybody wanna talk too much, but what you need is a special touch..."

As Vice reached down to put his hands where I didn't want them, I leapt to my feet, drawing my gun in reflex. —gun? Indeed, he had allowed me to remain armed, despite incapacitating me for what must've been hours. It couldn't have been an oversight—

I jabbed my gun into his neck, but he whirled around and slammed his palm into my chest over my heart, pinning me to the wall with his right shoulder as he grabbed my wrist. I couldn't aim at him, nor could I free my hand from his grip. He pushed me down, scraping my back against the wall, until I was in an even more compromising position than before. Whatever my feelings were before, he single-handedly made me despise being female and – unable to do back to him the things he apparently planned to do to me.

Not that I *wanted* to do to him everything he had done to me. Just killing him would be perfectly acceptable.

"You know," he teased, breathing heavily into my face, "every time we touch, I get this feeling, and it gets harder – and *harder* – to restrain myself. I have the best time planned for us for the new year, but some days I simply can't wait..."

I wanted to kick him, but my legs were bent in odd directions, such that if I tried I would fall flat on my backside. At the same time, though, we were at an impasse. Neither one of us could make move without the other getting the advantage. True, he was making my bowels churn just being in contact with me, but I had the gift of fear on my side, making me apt to do anything to get away.

"*Why?*" I screamed in his face, fighting to keep the contents of my stomach down as vivid memories of birthdays past flooded my brain.

"Because it promises to be simply orgas—"

"No!" Change the subject! "What are you doing with JAM?"

"Oh, don't tell me it's business before pleasure!" he whined, relaxing ever so slightly. I took the moment to wretch free, falling to the ground as I fired – nothing.

"Damn it," I cursed, patting my side for the clip I knew wouldn't be there no matter how much I wished for it.

"I told you I didn't like those weapons," he scolded, pulling a blade from behind his back. "They take all the fun out of watching you *squirm*."

He was going to do it, was he... "Why now?" I asked out of spite. Today seemed so – insignificant, by comparison, when all his prior attacks on me were like they had been scheduled. My birthday, then Saga's—

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Why *not* now?"

"This isn't your usual M.O. Why the sudden interest?"

Vice crossed his arms, standing over me and looking all the more intimidating from where I lay on the floor. "You mean a guy can't just drop in to say hello? Not even to—"

"What are you planning? What's your involvement with JAM?"

"What's *yours*?" he sneered. "You seem awfully interested in my sponsors for some reason. Trying to get their funding?"

I propped myself up on one elbow. "They claim to be a research group studying MAJ. What does that have to do with you?"

He threw up his hands in a sarcastic show of defeat. "Don't know. *Don't care*. We could do this dance all day, you know, but I have things to see and people to do—" He turned his head meaningfully towards the king-size bed at the other side of the room. "Speaking of..."

I tumbled over, jumping back to my feet. I still had a blunt object at the ready, at least, even if it wasn't an ideal deterrent. "You have all the adoring prepubescent fan girls you could ever ask to have your way with," I snapped. "What am I to you?"

The grin on his face was sickening. "All these birds chasing after me 'cause they wanna make love..." He leaned back, looking irritatingly smug with his hands behind his head. "All these birds, and not a one realises I don't make love."

That sounded unbelievably out of character. "You mean to say that you've never—"

"Oh, I've had my way, to be certain, but make *love*? Pssh. I prefer

a different four-letter word."

Hate came to mind as well.

"And *you* mean to say you *really* don't know what I see in you?" His voice was incredulous, as though I had asked what did he get when he multiplied six by nine. "You mean – after all these years—"

"No," I retorted. "Of all the people in the whole world, you decide to pick on *me*, and I'll never understand why."

"Ohhhhhhh—" he groaned in mock agony. "How can you possibly choose the brand new mega-mall over the Louvre? Brand new toys are fun for a while, but they don't compare to a well-loved favourite. It's the *history* that makes it special!"

"So," I concluded, heart stopping, "you're doing this because you've *known* me the longest?"

"Oh, believe me, I tried branching out," he taunted with a disgusting smirk, "but none of the others had quite the same reaction. I still visit them on occasion, but – you're still the best."

He was nearly in my face again, whispering his sweet disgustings to me despite my efforts to keep him at yardarm's length. I needed to keep him talking, to keep my mind off of my fears. "So what's the draw?" I inquired, edging my way away from him. "What exactly is it you do for JAM that's worth their while?"

Vice shook his head in disappointment. "So focused on your work, are you. Don't you know all work and no play makes—"

"*Answer the question.*" I knew I had no leverage to make him talk, but maybe I could coax him into gloating...

My gambit paid off, maybe. "They want my charisma," he replied with a tilt of the head. "Just couldn't – resist."

"You talked them out of their money?"

"Oh, nothing of the sort! They want me to go out—back."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Is that what you wanted to hear, love?" He leaned over the small table as he laid his knife on it, making subtle gestures that suggested—*no!* Don't think about that... "They're paying me to work my magic and break the quarantine."

"*You?*" If I didn't suspect in the back of my mind that there was a strong chance that Vice could actually pull it off where thousands of others had failed, I would have laughed and never stopped. "Why you?"

"Because I'm – the – best." He licked his chops with an air of such smug superiority that I wanted to kick his teeth in like nothing else. "Don't discount my skills just because I prefer spinning the disc and bustin' a rhyme to rocket science."

"What are you planning to do?"

"I thought you were a smart bird. Isn't it obvious?"

It *was* obvious, but I hated putting words in his mouth and telling him exactly what was on my mind. "I thought you hated being told what to

do. That means you have *some* kind of stake in the turnout. What is it about Australia that has you so interested in going?"

Just like that, his face took on a cold demeanor in an instant. Gone were the snark, the sadism, and venom. "Mum's there."

I stared at him, but he didn't show any emotion at all. He was lying, he *had* to be. What kind of answer was *that*? Yet – he looked so serious for once. "Mum?" I blurted, incredulous. "The great anarchist Vice wants his mummy? That's what this is all about?"

Nothing. How was I to tell if he meant it? Of course I was curious what he was feeling, but – was that really worth trying to break the most far-reaching and protected quarantine in history?

"You mean, for all your vast wealth and power, you can't just give her a call?"

He made a sneer as though disgusted by my ignorance. "No more than *you* can, sweetheart. It wouldn't matter even if I was prime minister, president, king, czar, emperor, sovereign, federal chancellor, generalissimo, sultan, supreme commander, and/or tyrannical dictator over the entire world, there's no way they'll let us even just *talk*. Part of keeping the quarantine protected—from temptation, as it were. Either way, I would rather see her in person, as I'm sure *you* would, too."

Of course I knew this, all too well, but surely for all of his alleged charm he would have found a way around that? Or maybe he had already tried... "I still can't believe you would risk destroying the one thing in all of history that represents the work of every nation coming together—"

"Don't you wonder about *your* mum?"

Now he was talking crazy. "What? *My* mum now?"

"Of course. You think I'm lying? She's in Australia – and waiting. Know her name? I do. I could even tell you, if you want. You could check out her files beforehand and see for yourself."

My mind started racing. I'd never sought to locate my parents with any conviction before, because setting up my own independent life seemed more important, then work consumed my waking life after that. It was rare that I had idle time on my hands to pursue such a project, but should I have? Even Vice's casual mention provoked ideations of finally reuniting with the ones who gave me life, as though lighting a long-dormant fuse.

First things first, I had to neutralise Vice as a potential threat. The best possible method would be to bribe him out of it, to pretend I didn't care one way or the other. "So you want Mummy, is that it? What if – I found her and you just stayed here, out of trouble?"

"Ha!" he blurted. "Coming from you, that's hilarious. Why would I want to stay out of trouble – or trust *you*?"

"I can get to her with minimal risk of infection. Knowing you, you would have the entire continent crawling with the virus in an hour. No one would ever have to know, and you could stay here having wild parties with sorority girls more interested in your fame than the rest of you."

I didn't figure he would seriously consider my offer, but it had him scratching his chin all the same. "To be honest," he admitted with a shrug as he approached me again, "I rather loathe flying. I'd take a boat if I had to go, and—yes—that's extra time I could be with the honeys. If I thought I could trust you to honour the deal, I'd make it."

"You can trust me," I insisted. "She's on the list, isn't she? I'd have to get to her either way, or you wouldn't have bothered."

"What list?"

"The note, and the pictures off the camera you gave Saga with all the missing study participants. *That* list."

He seemed nonchalant as he approached. "Whatever, sure. List."

I started to flinch as he drew near but steeled myself. "I will do it. I will do what you say."

"Ooo, I like the sound of *that*. Then do that, do *exactly* what I say."

He grabbed my neck, turning and pushing me to the floor face-first. My head ached from the impact of crushing the rim of my glasses between my skull and the floor. He kept me pinned as he pulled a leather collar out of his pocket and strapped it around my neck, complete with leash. It bit at my jugular, as tightly as he had fastened it.

In futility, I imagined being just another one of his groupies, trying to push our history out of my mind. Denial may have been my best coping mechanism in the past, but it wasn't helping me now. I couldn't comprehend how anyone could find joy in this, if they did—I couldn't move, couldn't cry for help, couldn't do anything but brace myself for whatever horrors he had in store for me.

I gave him that much, he was creative—never quite the same abject horror twice.

"*Up!*" he shouted, yanking viciously on the leash. It nearly choked the life out of me, even when I tried to anticipate his moves and minimise the risk of strangulation.

"NOT THIS!" I cried, but he had the upper hand as long as he had a grip on the other end of the leash—I was confined to his reach.

"I don't know, love," he jeered, "I think I rather enjoy this. Maybe I'll just give up on Mum and play with you some more. I don't know about you, but I still have a lot of days left to live that could be a barrel of laughs if you were always around. Hell, even if you *die*, there could still be some fun to be had..."

I wanted to throw up, but he would even use that against me, I knew it. I grabbed at the D-ring, struggling to pull it loose and free myself. The best I could do was—

Hmm. I grabbed onto the leash just past my neck, spinning myself to wrap the excess around my shoulders. Before Vice could figure out what I was doing, I gathered enough slack to unfasten the leash and spin myself back around. "Take *that!*" I kicked him in the stomach with all my might, somewhat disappointed I didn't connect lower.

"You—!" he screamed, but I instinctively pointed my gun between his eyes, giving him pause as I tugged at the collar. ...pause? That meant I had a round... Yes—the weight indicated one left in the chamber, probably part of his plan from the start. Unfortunately for him, there was no way I would have thrown aside even an unloaded gun.

What to do... I had my lead. What would the benefit be in exacting my due vengeance, besides my own peace of mind? Gaol time wasn't the best way to end my days, but maybe it would be preferable to staying on the run from my abuser. I only had a moment to decide – yet I was hesitating.

In that moment, he lunged at me, apparently deciding himself free from harm, and I shot in reflex. The bullet flew past his head and lodged in the far wall as I darted to one side and made a break for the door. My left shoulder ached from the recoil after being shoved into the wall earlier, but it was better than what he might have done if I hadn't reacted the way I did.

As I reached the door to make my escape, Vice stopped, as though reassessing the situation as not in his favour. "Fine, then," he agreed. "No more playing around. I will give you all you need to know to find your way in Australia. Find Mum, bring her back if she desires, but let her know that I want to see her."

My mind was latched onto the idea of my mother being in Australia, and it was a fight to get myself to remember the task at hand. "What if she says no?" I retorted, forcing myself not to put such an obvious stake in it.

He waved a hand in dismissal. "Then I tried—we tried. Her loss, babe." As Vice ambled toward me, I kept a hand on the door, ready to bolt at the slightest provocation. "But don't you think she'd be even the littlest bit curious, a little excited about having a world-famous son like me?"

"Don't make me sick." I glowered at him, irritated that so much of my future was in his hands, one way or another. "Remember, I'm only doing this to find my mum."

"*Your* mum, eh? Don't care about my..." He shrugged. "I suppose you're eager to know after all this time, though. Fine, here." I flinched as he reached up to the D-ring on the collar still around my neck and pulled out a bit of paper that had stuck inside the fold. As I reacted, he looked defensive. "It was how I was originally going to smuggle the codes there! Didn't want to read them ahead of time and have it look premeditated if I got caught!"

Whether I could believe him or not was irrelevant, but he certainly had a way of doing things in the most offensive way possible! I snatched the scrap of paper out of his hand and skimmed it as he held out another page covered with notes.

"All the flight info is listed here. That one in your hands is the gate ident code, security specs, blah blah blah, though you'll also need a cracker since the passcodes cycle—oh." He fished another wad of paper out of his back pocket. "Here's everything on *your* mum and her whereabouts. Just don't forget me in all that."

Try as I might, I haven't yet, I thought as I accepted the papers with

reluctance. Oh, if only...

I absorbed the details of the notes as I pulled the collar off my neck. The flight was a week away. That gave me some time to prepare, at least, to find a way to explain this to Rush—

...no. I couldn't tell him I was going through with this, because he would never let me go through with it, not for all the planning and scheming and people watching my back in the world. He would take the info and make sure I could never use it to get in, not even letting me send a message, then berate me for falling for such an obvious trap and lacking the sense to see I was jeopardising my job. No, this was entirely my own doing. It was starting to sink in how much more I had bitten off than I could chew. How would I pull this off, exactly?

I was mildly astonished that he allowed me to leave without further harassment, but that emphasised how important this must be to him, despite indications to the contrary. Perhaps he realised there was everything I could do for him and little I could do against him, as well—as he claimed, there were no details that directly tied him to a plot to infiltrate Australia, much less much of anything else. Yet it was almost as though any schmuck off the street could follow the directions...

That didn't make me feel better about my mission. If just anyone could do what I was going to do, what did that say about worldwide efforts to stop people like me? I wished it didn't feel as though all my years of hard work weren't going to waste, but – I had to keep in mind that maybe what I had been handed was a way to prevent others from doing the same. More than that, though, I needed some kind of a sign—something to let me know that what I was doing wasn't just going to end in tears.

I exited the hotel and reoriented myself—I was a few streets away from my apartment. At least he hadn't been *that* cruel to me – or, not in this respect. On my way across Seven Locks, I spotted that shock of blue again. It seemed ridiculously suspicious now, and I couldn't let it go this time. I ran up to Sky to confront him directly, determined to get an answer.

"What the hell are you doing?" I barked, no longer concerned about appearances and minimising family drama.

He started at my approach. "Walking," he snapped. "I'm allowed to go on an evening constitutional, aren't I?"

"Where? To and from?"

"What business is it of *yours*?"

"I've caught you spying on me twice, now. Explain yourself."

"Where?" was the question I imagined him asking, but he surprised me. "It's not that big a town when you spend your days wandering it. Of course I'm going to cross your path now and again."

"Who just wanders around town?"

"I told you I was between jobs. Better to blow off steam than stay cooped up in one spot."

I didn't want to trust him, and from his responses I was starting to

realise how much I didn't trust him. "...what were you doing on Executive?"

"Had an interview. Fell through. Who's spying on who, then?"

I supposed that was a reasonable answer, despite his treatment of me earlier, but it was still suspicious. "Why did you warn me to stay away from Simon?"

"That's not your concern."

"It certainly *is* my concern! Nan wants to see him. How can I tell her no, Sky won't let me?"

"You won't have to tell her, because I already took her."

His words were astonishingly offensive, in that he was beating back every question I threw at him and turning them against me. "*You* took Nan to see Simon?"

"Is that okay with you, princess?"

"Don't patronise me!" I shouted, irritated at his attitude. "I've gone through a lot for this family to let some little upstart just waltz on in and lead them into trouble!"

Sky stopped abruptly, turning to glare at me with his piercing hazel eyes. "For your information, I'm keeping them *out* of trouble."

I wasn't certain what to make of his words. "What is Simon up to?"

"*I told you, stay away from him!*"

The ferocity with which he growled at me was like a wild animal's. I wasn't sure I should provoke him any further, but I also didn't want to back down. "...why are you doing this? You don't have to be part of our family."

He didn't seem to let up. "What kind of question is that? It's not my decision, you know."

I glared back at him—he wasn't easing my suspicions.

"Your gram and my mom wouldn't shut up once they were reunited after however many years. She wants to be with you guys. I can't just walk away and be done with you. We've gone through too much to—"

"—like *we* haven't?" I hated not getting the answers I needed from anyone. "I'm not sure what you think you're protecting us from. Our family has experienced so much more than a pup like you would imagine—"

"I'm older than you think," he countered with a sneer. "Don't talk to me about experiences."

Yeah, sure. "How old, thirty?"

He furrowed his brow at me, making it clear that I underestimated but not saying by how much. I did the math, but...

"Fine," he conceded at last, gritting his teeth. "If it'll get you to shut the hell up already... I didn't grow up *well*, exactly. Mom's tried to do her best by me, but I can't bury my roots in crime. Vice won't let me—"

"Vice!" I used my increasing anger to suppress the urge to swoon.

He nodded, glancing back over his shoulder. "I'm to keep an eye on you and let him know – things."

"Why?"

"He has his ways – and it's easier to just play along. Mom lost me

once. I can't do that to her again."

If that was the case... "Is he watching us now? Bugging us?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not telling you anything that's really going to change matters, either."

"Is Simon involv—"

"*What is your deal with Simon?*" Sky was about to tear his hair out. "When I say leave him alone—"

"—you fail to give me a good reason why I should! I knew him and Amy when all of us were younger—"

"Not by far. Not in any sense of the word."

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

He looked away and started walking again. "You think you want all the answers, but that path isn't one you want to go down. I won't interfere one way or the other with your business with Vice, or his with yours, but I draw the line at Simon. There's no reason you need to bother—"

"Does it have to do with Riordan?"

I couldn't tell if it was my imagination, following him from several steps behind, or if he had genuinely reacted to the accusation. Either way, Sky kept walking and wouldn't stop, remaining silent the whole time.

I realised this wasn't getting me anywhere. He admitted to being an agent for Vice under duress—what good would it do to turn him against me? "Aight," I agreed, "I will leave the matter of Simon alone, for what reason you haven't told me. What is it you do for Vice?"

"I told you," he grunted. "Watch and report."

"That's it?"

"That's the agreement. I won't do anything to hurt you."

My skepticism radar was off the charts, but that he volunteered even as much as he had meant something. In fact – it shocked me to suddenly realise I wasn't the only one who knew of my impending death.

Sky knew.

"Hey, do you remember back in school, the forehead taunt?"

He glanced at me as I caught up to him. "What's this now? Going to ask if I ever played MASH, too?"

"At my school, there was a boy with hazel eyes who did it to me—rubbed the make-up off my forehead and revealed that I'd already spotted."

He was silent again.

"Did – Vice make you do that to me?" I pressed, astonished at the revelation that, even then, he might've been siccing his goons on me. "Did he put you up to finding out if I was spotting yet?"

"I'm sorry, Anna. I had no idea who you were, and I had even less idea that you actually would have shown."

"So he knows?"

"Are you kidding?" He laughed as though forced. "I was mortified at the idea of someone at school in half-life. I couldn't tell anyone."

I hoped he was telling the truth. Nothing would destroy my efforts

like Vice knowing when my final days were. "Then why did you do it?"

He shrugged in dismissal. "Trying to fit in. All the cool kids were doing it. That crap. I said it was a hard time. Mom still doesn't know I was involved with criminals, either, and I'd like it to stay that way, that the most trouble she'd ever known me to be in was a little school prank."

That sounded familiar. "I guess I know the feeling." ...wait a tick. "When you were *eight*?"

"*I said it was a hard time*," he growled. Then he noticed the look on my face. "I also said I was sorry."

"It's just..." This conversation wasn't getting any easier on either of us. "If you've *really* been watching me, as you said, you'd understand that my job requires me to know things. I'm sorry if that makes me abrasive at times, but I don't know how else to get answers."

He merely grunted in response.

"So I apologise if I've been too suspicious of you, but by your own confession, my suspicion was justified. At the same time, if your mum is determined to be part of our family, and you as well, then we might as well get to know each other as family."

"Sorry. Even family will have secrets."

"I understand." A little *too* well. May as well get the other question out, in any event. "So, what do you know about your – half-brother?"

Sky gave me a confused glance. "Oh. No, brother—Mom is pretty sure it was the same bastard both times."

Really. "Very well. And?"

"I can't tell you much at all. Neither of us knew the other existed until he discovered my files and tracked me down when he fought to stop the syndicate from—"

The syndicate! "You were both involved with crime lords?"

"I'm only extrapolating here. He knew an awful lot about me even before we first met, things I can only assume were classified information – which meant he had managed to break into the syndicate's databases. They toppled shortly thereafter, so I can only figure he was behind it."

"Alone?"

"I dunno. Doesn't seem likely, but I don't know who else would've helped him."

"Well, he sounds remarkable all the same." Yet I still didn't know who he *was*. "Er, I never caught his name..."

"I didn't throw it."

"Uh."

"Also, I'd be damned if I knew, either. Almost as soon as we met, we were separated again." He looked as though he was going to say more but thought better of it. "Anyway, we met the once. He probably wouldn't have minded seeing more of me, but it was a bad time, and he died after that, I understand."

"How did you find out?"

That look again. "Mom."

"How did *she* find out?" What aren't you telling me?

"Would you like to ask her yourself?" he asked, showing impatience again. "Because I think Vice's not going to be pleased if I reveal any more." He cracked his knuckles as though to show off his strength. "Not that I'm afraid of him, personally, but I'm not going to carelessly put Mom at risk without a good reason. You being nosy isn't good enough." He hesitated as we reached my apartment. "You're home now. Why don't you call it a day."

"What about you?"

"You'll see me again," he grumbled, continuing on. "Don't worry about that."

There was no way I wouldn't worry, regardless of his position. I considered tailing him, if for no other reason than to see how he liked it, when I got a buzz. Eh? I flipped open my mobile and finally noticed just how much time had passed—I'd lost a whole day to Vice's wickedness. So much for my resolution to settle the matter with Nan! Rush must've been worried when I didn't check in...

"Sorry," I answered pre-emptively.

"Versa!" Rush's voice was frantic, at least compared to the norm. "Why haven't you answered your mobile?"

Did I dare reveal my weakness? ...I was hiding too much, and for no reason. "He got to me again."

"—how?"

"...I don't know, sir. I let down my guard, and when I came to, all I could smell was chloroform."

"Are you hurt? What did he want?"

"Just my pride." I couldn't tell him about Australia, not yet. "He wanted to taunt me again. He almost – had his way with me, but I escaped."

I expected him to send me home yet again, par for the course, but the hesitation in his voice betrayed work before pleasure. "I know what I'm asking of you, especially considering your circumstances, but the Riordan case needs to be wrapped up as soon as possible. How are you progressing with your nan?"

"Not well. I get the sense she's deflecting any opening I might get, between trying to be subtle and that I haven't been able to get her alone yet." Before he could interrupt, I added, "I'm definitely going to ask her tonight, come hell or high water, even if it breaks up our happy home."

More hesitation. "Good. Report to me first thing in the morning."

I had an eerie feeling in the pit of my stomach, one not settled by my usual medicine. His voice, normally the calm in the eye of a storm, did nothing to soothe my upset feelings. "10-4."

Despite my understanding with Sky, I was feeling more alone now than ever before. It ached to be in my position, with no desirable course of action to take. Rush was failing me now, I had to admit, and Nan would also turn her back on me when I confronted her...

Was this part of his plot, too? It seemed a terrifying coincidence, if not, to drive me to seek out my birth mother as the one guiding light left for me in the world. And stupid me, I would seek her out. Absentmindedly, I felt the folded-up notes in my pocket, frowning at my weakness, and headed back into my apartment to clean up before supper.

13. Inclusion of Children

Saga greeted me at the door as I arrived an hour before mealtime. If she suspected anything was amiss from my day's absence, she didn't let on. "Did you get my message?"

"Sure did," I replied, pulling the laptop out of my bag and handing it to her.

"Thanks for this," she said, not looking thankful at all as she led me back to the sitting room.

"Of course. Do you need it for school?"

She shook her head. "No, to watch something—Pop said he finally found this old recording of his and had it converted. He'd lost the original camera, and it took some hunting to find a way to play it again. It's about twenty years old already, you know?" She picked up the disc from its spot on the coffee table and handed it to me.

"Huh. What's on it?"

"He said it was to be a present for Mum, when she felt the most distraught and needed a pick-me-up, but after he lost the camera, he had no way to show it to her, and conversion was harder to do back then because we didn't have the proprietary hardware. He kicked himself so much over not being able to give her this one gift."

I looked at the disc. It was only labelled 'Rockford' and what I presumed was the date on the original recording.

"Want to watch?"

I had to admit I was curious, but it also seemed – nosy, if it was originally to be for Mrs. Rockford. "Sure, if you don't mind, but maybe you'd want it all to yourself?"

"I don't even know what's on it."

I handed it back to her. "Then maybe that's all the more reason not to share."

"...no, there have already been too many secrets between all of us." I felt the sentiment behind her words and appreciated it, but it still felt like a jab for not being more forthcoming with her about my own secrets.

"Okay," I agreed. "Does Epic want to join us?"

She shook her head again. "He doesn't see the need. 'Past is past.' Though, I don't really see much of what the present is for him now, and he's never given me a good explanation no matter how I ask."

It almost felt as though I was being Saga's sibling in Epic's stead, but if it comforted her more to share it than not, far be it for me to deny her the experience. She put the disc in my laptop, and we both watched with

anticipation as the autoplay booted the recording. A rambunctious voice filled the air, describing the scene in ridiculous detail as the video circled wildly about what looked like Gran and Gramp Rockford's house, though it was a lot messier, to be sure. A huge grin snapped into place as the camera settled onto a flat surface. "By the way, peeps, I'm your intrepid host Kotaro Rockford. Ladies, I'm available for parties, dances, parties, clubs – all kinds of parties. And did I mention I was available?"

It was a much younger, infinitely more boisterous Pop. The sight was amusing in this context, though I felt perplexed by the whole player act now, knowing what I did about him. It had never occurred to me until then that people had lives before becoming parents.

He picked up the camera again, turning it onto his old bedroom. "Oh – look, folks! In his unnatural habitat, the elusive Big D slumbering in his nest!"

The door swung open to reveal not only the messiest room I had ever seen—short of Vice's trailer—but also a pile of sheets and clothes that must have been a bed, with a vibrant swath of blue hair sticking out of it that revealed brilliant, if sleepy, sky blue eyes beneath. "What are you doing, 'taro..." mumbled a soft but pleasant voice.

"Oh, good, you're up! Check it—my folks bought a new camcorder today!" The video swung around as he said this—a master cameraman Pop was not.

The boy blinked repeatedly with the lighted camera shoved in his face again. "You're not recording *now*, are you?"

"Of course I am!" he cheered with comical enthusiasm. "How often does the elusive Deeg venture forth into the world? I'm going to capture as much as I can for posterity!"

Deeg? – sat up, making a lazy grab for the camera as he did. "Turn that thing off."

"No way, Big D," he protested, swinging it back out of reach. "This is going to be a priceless artefact some day, believe me!"

The boy paused for a moment, as though contemplating the idea of such a recording ever being valuable, then shook his head in bemusement. "Fine, whatever."

"So, say something! Your public awaits!"

"I'll say that everyone who watches this video later is going to get motion-sick from your camera work, 'taro. Don't you at least have a tripod for that?"

"I dunno—somewhere?"

"Look here." He stood up, motioning for young Pop to set the camera down, and adjusted the view before sitting back on the bed. "Now we can both be in the shot."

"Hey, great idea!" Young Pop slammed down on the bed beside him. "Oh," he added, making a horrified face, "but maybe I shouldn't let my dazzling good looks steal the spotlight away from you."

"Oh, that's okay, I can just do this," he said, laughing and covering young Pop's face with his hand.

"Aww!"

In that instant, the boy made the warmest smile I'd ever seen on a person—digital or in real life. It was a smile that made me feel like nothing else in the world mattered, that everything was good and always would be. It was a smile that, on occasion, I would see on Saga's face when she was younger, which pleased me then and saddened me now that I almost never saw it. There was no doubt. This boy with young Pop, though he looked to be barely nineteen, was Saga's father.

It started to feel uncomfortable that neither of us had anything to say about the video yet. "Blue hair runs in your family, then?" I commented to break the ice, but she didn't answer. I glanced over to see her wiping away the tears streaming down her face as she paused the playback. "What's the matter?"

"This is all I'll ever have of him, isn't it? One home movie?"

I frowned in sympathy. "At least you *do* have it. I don't—" I broke off before I inadvertently turned the moment into a pity contest. "—I don't think you should spend so much time thinking of what you don't have."

"But—"

"I mean it, Saga. You shouldn't be spending so much time trying to recapture a past long gone at the expense of today. You have this, so don't fret about not having more. In fact, maybe you should make something for *your* kids someday."

"Is that what you're doing for your kids?"

Aagh. Caught. "...I am now! Just as soon as I get a camera."

She smirked, but I couldn't blame her for feeling bad about it. I had no blood ties to this boy, yet I could see that behind his act, behind the playful banter, there was a poor soul who was helpless against destiny like I was. Did he know he would die shortly after this recording was made? If so, did he let it weigh him down, or did he try to live his life to its fullest in spite of it? I would almost wager that he was the first victim of MLCS, but that couldn't be true, not if the math was correct.

Still, I wanted to know more. He was a total stranger, but he felt like someone that anyone would want to know—someone warm but sad, loving but lonely.

Saga started the video again after a moment, as though uncertain at first whether she wanted to keep watching after all. "So," young Pop went on, "introduce yourself for the lovely audience! All the ladies are asking for you, especially—"

"Haha, sure," he murmured, clearing his throat and putting on the most comically somber expression imaginable. "My name is Dale Griffin Shinra Douglas Noel Adams Dyne Spyridon Venom Lambourghini—"

"What! Get serious!" Here I had to laugh at young Pop's distress, despite myself.

"Like you ever are? Fine, this is Dionysos and I am Prometheus from Cross—"

"D, you're ruining it!"

The boy frowned at him in impatience. "I could always go back to sleep, you know, like I'd rather be doing."

"You've been asleep for half the day already!" he yelled, throwing his hands in the air. "Supper's going to be on the table shortly!"

"You're really determined to do this, aren't you?"

Young Pop gave an unconvincing innocent look, touching his chin in mock astonishment. "WHA~AT?"

He sighed. "Fine. I'll make you your award-winning video, *but!* I want to do it in private, okay?" Young Pop tried to say something, but the boy slapped a hand over Pop's mouth before he could speak. "I know who you're doing this for, and that's great, but show it off *later*. Okay?"

"*How* later?"

"If you have to ask that, it's too soon."

There was a moment where the frivolity seemed to die off. It felt painful to see his amusement degrade to – annoyance? – then to sadness. He *did* know something and was hiding it! If it *was* of his impending death, why hadn't he done more to prepare?

I want to know him, I admitted. He felt like a kindred soul who could identify with my pain. I hadn't wanted my parents any more than I did at that moment, but I knew they would never be who he was, this timid vessel of strength, bravely facing the world without a complaint.

...or perhaps I was projecting my own feelings onto him. Either way, I felt empty inside—long established, but only newly realised. It was a different kind of sorrow from what Saga was experiencing, but I would be hard-pressed to say it wasn't as deep. I wished he was still alive, for many reasons, but just as many were selfish as were out of compassion.

Young Pop finally conceded. "Okay..."

"I'm serious. Things get more – valuable with time. Like a birthday present, see? If you celebrate your birthday every day, then it's not—"

"I get it, D! I'm not a *complete* idiot. It's just not fun, ya know?"

"BIRTHDAY PRESENT. It's a surprise." Boy, was it.

"I'll watch it anyway, D."

"I know you will. Just don't watch it *now*. I feel awkward enough without you constantly interrupting, so *shoo*."

After the boy chased young Pop out of the room, he returned to the camera, running a hand through his hair in exasperation, seeming to struggle with what to say as though every word mattered.

"This is difficult for me," he began, looking everywhere but into the camera. "I could make a thousand of these recordings, and it wouldn't be enough. There's so much..." He hesitated, which made me unconsciously concerned, given the short amount of time left on the playback. *So say it!* I thought. *Say it fast!*

Finally, as though reading my thoughts, he looked straight into the camera with a poignant expression, one that would melt the heart of the cruellest person on the planet. "I know this is what you want to hear, so I'll say it—yes, I love you. I may never see you after this is done, but – I care too deeply to let anything stop you from living your life to its fullest. My mission now is to protect you and your future, even if it destroys me, even if this is my last chance to tell you everything I wanted to say to you, even if I never get to look into your eyes myself and tell you how much I care."

Was this really for Mrs. Rockford? It felt like he was speaking to anyone who might watch it – even me.

No, it couldn't possibly be for me, and it was daft of me to entertain the notion. I didn't know why I felt this way over the long-distant memory of a man, why my heart ached to hear his words. I started to feel like I had all the wrong feelings for the wrong people, that I was at the pinnacle of an emotional stream with everyone I cared about flowing away, the only inlet being the thunderous acid rain cloud that was—

No, I couldn't let my emotions consume me. Even if I never knew the tender companionship of another, all that mattered to me was that I was living my life well, that what I was doing made a difference in the world, despite the torment I endured to achieve my goal. If I died to save a life, I would spend eternity in bliss.

But...

He looked downcast, as though he might cry. "...this is all I can leave behind."

My intuition shouted at me—those seven little words were a huge flag waving in my face. Was he upset that he couldn't make the thousand recordings he wanted to make? Or did he actually *value* leaving behind next to nothing over leaving behind all he could, that its very uniqueness in being the one tangible piece of evidence of his existence made this recording all the more poignant?

I started to feel that maybe I *should* be doing the same, but I had no one to care. Sure, my fosters would miss me, but everything I had was already theirs, and what else could I leave them other than my terrors? I didn't even have any good stories that weren't just relaying the secret torment I had endured over the years.

Was that the culmination of my life's efforts? A diary of pain and suffering? I was suddenly furious at myself for allowing one person to colour my experiences so negatively that I had little time for anything else. I understood then the *real* hurt Vice had caused me: the inability to enjoy all the good things that happened in my life due to allowing the bad things to overpower everything else.

Perhaps – that was his lesson. If Saga's father had known of his imminent demise and come to the same conclusions I had, it was no wonder that he felt sad. An all-too-brief life thoroughly wasted, indeed.

He had one final message before the recording ended, looking into

the camera again with those soul-piercing sky blue eyes. "...I'm sorry," he whispered. The playback ended with his turning off the camera.

"So?"

I felt something inside me that I had long ago thought I would never feel again, something that made me flush with embarrassment at her inquiry. "So – what?"

"What do you think?"

"About your father?" I shrugged, nonchalant, not certain what she would think about my true feelings. "He seems like a good person."

"Anything else?"

I was stumped for what to say. "Like..."

"...I guess I'm asking – as an anthropologist. What am I missing? What is it I'm not seeing when I watch this recording?"

"I dunno. What did you expect to take away from this?"

"*Some* kind of answer!" she complained, throwing her hands in the air. "I feel like I just have more questions."

"That's natural, though. As he said, a thousand recordings—"

"But Pop gave this to me because it was supposed to have at least *one* answer. What is that?"

"...what he's like?"

"And what's he like?"

Did I really want to tell her my thoughts? ...I guess I had no choice but to spill a little—there *were* too many secrets. "He seems like me."

"Oh?" Saga tilted her head as if skeptical of my analysis. "What makes you think that?"

"He seems embarrassed to be put on the spot like that, but in more than just an introverted way. There was something he knew that he didn't want known, that Pop was trying to get him to divulge but wouldn't."

"...like you?"

I looked away in discomfort. "I'm sorry, Saga. I couldn't have been ready to tell even Nan, much less you."

"I thought we were sisters! ...practically."

"No—not this way. You and Epic both have this wall up that I've never been able to crack, as much as I might try."

She gasped at me. "We... I do not!"

"Why couldn't you tell me about Pop's trouble before, that he was only now trying to get his GED?"

"You weren't—"

"You've had my number all this time! You could always call and talk to me. I thought I impressed this upon you!"

She frowned at me as though I was blaming her for our distance. "You left us!"

Those three words were a slap in the face. "Saga..."

"And I don't get why you acted so surprised that I decided to take Mum's name. *You're* the one still going by your first foster's—the one who

gave you up after only a year?"

Another slap in the face. "I grew up a Reyes, and it's the one on all my important papers. How do I just throw away my identity like that?"

"Easily! By declaring, 'I want to be a member of this family.' By calling yourself a Rockford because you want to be one—even if you aren't."

I wanted to tell her it was easy for her to say, but it was clear there were hurt feelings on both sides. It was probably pride in her mother that made Saga change her name, even if frustration with Pop might have been a factor, but it was still her family name. I didn't have that excuse—not with Vega a distant memory—and I couldn't deny that there were times when I still wanted an out, because I couldn't get over...

The tension between us was stretched to the breaking point, and I hadn't even talked to *Nan* yet. I rubbed my temple to alleviate the phantom headache that was threatening to strike.

"Saga. I love you guys so much, but I can't live with you forever. One day, you'll get to strike out on your own, and you'll understand exactly what it's like. I'm sorry you felt that I was abandoning you, but I only live in Potomac—I've been just a call away. Any time, day or night, if you needed someone, I would have been happy to drop everything to come back. I still am, in fact. The only thing that's different is I probably won't sleep over."

"But Epic—"

"Epic is *fine*. Pop knows this, and he wants *you* to live your own life, too. That's why I spoke to Nan, to bring her back and help lessen all your fears. No one wants you to be a prisoner to your family. We want to help Epic, yes, but we want to help you, too, and the best way to do that is to help you succeed on your own, so when you want to come back and help, it will be with pleasure—like it is for me—instead of a burden."

I couldn't tell how she was taking it, from her abrupt silence. I was running out of things to say, myself, but I was growing tired of this game, tired of always reassuring her and getting the cold shoulder for my trouble.

Saga's behaviour was exactly what I needed to get over. I was the only one I could count on to always have my own interests in mind. Saga didn't, Epic didn't... Not even Rush put my welfare first. Maybe Nan did, but she also knew too well the importance of self-sufficiency to cater to me.

Speaking of... "By the way, where's Nan?"

She almost didn't answer me, facing away from me and staring out the window. "Epic took her to the grocery, to try to get her physical therapy in. I'm amazed that he agreed to go, but that's Nan for you."

It sure was. "What about Pop?"

"Taking a nap. He's not really taking well to the treatment."

"At least he'll survive it," I noted. "Did you ever ask him about your father?"

"Are you kidding?" she pouted. "It took him this long to even admit we're not related! He hasn't told me a thing."

I was incredulous, and surprised that Saga wasn't angrier. "What

did he say when he gave you this recording?"

"Nothing," she spat, "as though it would answer all my questions for him, but it doesn't."

"Did you let him know how you feel when he doesn't tell you?"

"What's gotten into you, Anna?" she shouted, inexplicably hostile. "Pop's still recovering. I'm not going to pressure him while he's ill. Why are you so nosy, anyway?"

It *was* strange that I found myself wanting so many answers, but I also didn't see why Saga didn't. "You have evidence of a father. I don't."

"But you can still find yours!"

"Then what? Yours was special—died saving your mum's life, and probably yours as well. Mine hasn't even tried to seek me out, most likely doesn't even know I exist. I'm jealous." It took guts to admit that and really drive the wedge between us, for what? No, I didn't have a justifiable reason to pursue the matter, but if Saga wouldn't...

I glanced up towards the master bedroom. Saga must have read my mind, or I was more transparent than I thought. "No, just leave him alone!"

"What's the matter with asking, exactly?" I contested. "No one died from being asked a simple question. Besides, I want to see how he's doing."

It was strange seeing her so riled up about the matter. Did she think I was trying to take over her job or something? I thought it was a daughter's natural instinct to want to know her father...

Maybe that was it—maybe she was so bewildered about having her whole world uprooted like this that it was safer to go on believing Pop was still her pop by blood. And here I was trying to push her farther down the spiral by pressing on where she wouldn't, to prove just how wrong she was about her whole life.

I didn't mean it that way, honest. I just...

I shook my head. Fine, I wouldn't ask just yet, but I would see how Pop was doing. He was still *my* pop, at least. For now.

He heard me approach, though I expected our row downstairs would have risen the dead. "Where were you yesterday, Anna?"

At least *he* worried about me. "I was – held up at work," I fibbed, feeling if Sky could do it, I shouldn't feel bad about it either. "Saga says treatment isn't going well?"

Pop looked like he wanted to smile but was weighed down by too much. "They said I had the wrong genotype for what they prescribed?" He shook his head in utter incomprehension. "I'm not old enough for this."

"Anyone can get Hep—"

"I mean, for *this*. The responsibility. You were good to bring Nan back here, because I don't know how I would've managed without her. And you, Anna."

I frowned, but in sympathy. "Of course, Pop. You're still my pop, you know?"

"And you as always, Saga."

I glanced behind me, but almost as I met her gaze, she turned away. "The shepherd's pie is almost done," she stated, heading back downstairs.

"I heard all of it," Pop continued, as calmly as could be managed.

"Are you really jealous of her having a dead father?"

It was hard not to flinch. "...yes," I admitted.

"You know that just means he can't let you down."

It was a startling accusation, especially coming from Pop. "I just..."

"It's difficult, trying to live up to someone else's expectations. Do even one insignificant thing wrong, and it doesn't matter how many things you've done perfectly—only the failure counts."

I didn't have a response. Was I being lectured *again*? But the look on his face was as though he was lecturing himself, as well.

"So, who is he?" I ventured, after too much uncomfortable silence.

"A friend of mine, once."

I gave him a look of disbelief. "...that's it? A friend?"

"There's really not much else to tell about him."

"You can't tell Saga *anything* else about her father at *all*? What he liked, what he did—what his *name* was?"

"Not in particular. Sometimes I can't even be sure the name I knew him by was his real one. He was an intensely private person, and it took so much determination on my part just to get the one recording. When we were growing up, I had always suspected he was under a lot of pressure from his parents, but that was before I knew he was an orphan."

"Orphan!"

He misread the meaning of my outburst. "You know how long it took Nan to find his mother. How was I—"

"No, I mean – not even fostering?"

"Oh." Pop had a dour look on his face. "No, he had a foster—the biggest jerk either of us knew. Didn't talk about him much in that context, but I could tell they were at each other's throats. Maybe even literally."

That sounded unbearably familiar. No wonder he was so private. Letting something like that get out... I felt an even deeper connection with him than I had thought should have been possible. How could someone I'd never met and never would meet leave such a hole in my heart? I wanted to meet him so much, to have someone who knew what I was going through on a basis of equals instead of – well, this 'trust me when I say it sucks' basis. Further, that he died to protect Mrs. Rockford was the kind of noble service that was part of the reason I became an agent in the first place.

At the same time, I felt Saga was acting dismissive about the gift she had been given. If she didn't appreciate the recording, I would've been ecstatic to take it off her hands for her. Even a copy would satisfy me, and it was easy to make! But, that would be her decision, not mine, and it was too significant to diminish that for her by asking her to share what she may not want shared. Yet again I was denied something for who I was not...

How odd, this feeling. I knew this was someone special, someone I

could never call my own in any way. Why was it so out of line to care all the same? Why did it hurt to be denied on the basis of irrelevance?

Then again, my dark side blurted, I'll meet him soon enough as it is. Yet I had mixed feelings about that, as well—the afterlife was one of those things I wanted to believe was real, but it seemed too much like longing for what wasn't meant to be – or deluding myself into believing it was real long enough for it not to matter if I didn't. Too many days I thought, if there was an all-powerful deity watching over me, deliberately forcing me into the life I had, what was it all *for*?

"Still," I pressed, "what was he like? Even if he gave you a false name, you still knew what kind of person he was, didn't you?"

Pop frowned in discomfort. "He – had a fierce temper. I can't count how many firsthand experiences I've had showing just how quick he was to anger—" He glanced at my concerned expression and changed his tone. "—but mostly that was from being passionate about what he wanted. It bothered him to ask for help—he wanted to prove his independence, but it was a tough battle for him."

"Then – he was 'the boy' in your story!"

Pop didn't answer. When I recited the narrative again in my mind, I didn't have to ask why. Even then—

He stared out the window at nothing. "There was something Allie told me once, and I never forgot it."

"What?"

"Atashi wa kare o mitsukeru suru tsumori."

I knew enough to recognise the language as her native tongue, but the phrase was unfamiliar. "What does it mean?"

"Beats me."

I furrowed my brow at him. "*That's* what it means?"

"No, I just never asked. I remember it, though."

I was astonished by how little he seemed to know, even about his own wife. When I put all the pieces together, however, it made sense that he was frustrated by his position: he didn't measure up as a father, as a husband, or even as much of a person overall. I could see how he would feel as low as he did, but at the same time I didn't see why he wouldn't work harder to change that.

"What do you want out of life, Pop?"

"I didn't, for so long. Life was just a time to have lots of fun, until *this* whole mess started, and I was faced with the choice of just being Allie's friend – or helping more directly when her children would be fatherless."

"But you have to have *some* plan for the rest of your life...?"

"As I said, I'm not old enough for this."

I started to point out that Nan wouldn't be able to watch over him forever when Saga knocked on the doorframe. "I said pie's on. Come and eat while it's hot."

Once again, she vanished before I could look up. Teens! "Let's go

eat, then," I said, helping Pop up.

"It smells good," he noted. I nodded in agreement, but we didn't get to take two steps, stopping at the window before he asked, "That Vice guy, what does he do?"

I cringed at the change of subject, but I supposed it was only fair. "A lot of things. Whatever he feels like doing."

"Why did you go see him in concert?"

"Oh, that was his deejaying gig. I guess it's the most efficient way to control a huge chunk of the spotlight, which he loves."

He smiled at this. "I had wanted to deejay at Saga's wedding some day, if she isn't too ashamed of me. I still have my turntable and a bunch of hits from before my time." He laughed as though at a joke. "I deejayed for our school when I didn't want to commit to taking any specific girl to one of our dances. It was the only civil way to make a choice."

"You were a big stud back then?" I couldn't help grinning. "...but then how was it you never...?"

"I didn't wanna," he pouted, childish even now. "I wanted to stay a kid forever, because I was having too much fun enjoying life. Why ruin that with something as life-changing as having kids over a temporary feeling? I wouldn't be the kid anymore, not with *real* kids around."

He stared intently out the window at the old poplar, past the porch below. "I had hoped he could have been the one growing old with her, but he had to – do what he did. I was never clear on the details, except suddenly I didn't have my best friend anymore. If I could have died instead, Epic and Saga would have their real pop now, and I would have stayed the little kid forever, not him."

"That's honourable, Pop, but don't discount yourself just because you feel like you don't measure up. Everybody fails."

"Not like me. They were so perfect together: both smart, energetic, and totally in love. I guess I had energy, too, but I ran out of it in trying to raise twins—even with foster help. The only thing that kept me going all these years was the knowledge I would let him down if I couldn't manage. It was the only way I could think of to honour our friendship.

"But now look at us. Alex is gone—chasing him up to the heavens, I suppose. I knew her heart wasn't in our marriage, that's how strong their love was. I don't have that, and I won't for anyone, except – them. I was in love with their love. I felt that would be the greatest thing I could do for the world, to make sure they were together. Maybe they are now..."

Though I felt so much empathy for his good heart, I wanted to slap him. "Pop, I have no doubt in my mind you meant well, but didn't you once think of how all this would turn out? Epic and Saga haven't had their mother for eight years—wouldn't it have been easier to tell them before? "

"I told—"

"Epic, yes. Saga, though, is the one suffering. She's in serious flux trying to figure out who she is as it is without doubts about her parentage

added to the mix. Even telling her when she was little would have given her some time to get used to the idea of you not being her birth father."

He looked even lower than before. As irritated as I was with him that he put the family through needless heartache, I couldn't stay mad with him for long, though.

"Just – talk with her sometime, please? Don't keep so much from her, even if it means some hard feelings at first. Shutting her out further does no one any good." I clasped his hands tightly, choosing my next words with care. "Please consider telling her she doesn't have to worry about you anymore, since now you have Nan, Miss Vann, and Sky to help when she's gone off to uni."

"And you?"

I cringed but tried not to show it. Why was it so hard to lie to them? "You know this will always be my home, don't you? Do you think I'd just forget because I'm an adult? Yes, maybe my first years out were stressful on me, but I'm all settled now. I'll gladly give you all the support I can."

I hoped that was enough of a nudge. For one thing, Saga sounded more impatient about supper getting cold. For another, as much as I wanted to believe the torch had been passed, I didn't know the Vanns at all, nor how Nan would change if I followed through—

...maybe I didn't have to ask her. Maybe I would, finally, let Rush down and, by that token, let him let *me* down. It was too much weight to carry, this secret-keeping and secret-breaking business. If I were to quit, I didn't know what I would do with myself for the rest of my time, either, but my decision would be easier than Pop's.

Unfortunately.

At least supper was normal, and Saga at least pretended to be on speaking terms with me for the duration. I thought about Nan and whether she would truly react the way I expected—or feared—but the only way to know for certain was the way I didn't want to try. Would she at least help me tender my resignation papers?

"Is something the matter, Anna?" she asked, as though on cue.

I bit at my fork, wondering just how transparent I was after all. "I was just thinking," I admitted, fork still in my mouth.

"Well, you haven't said much. Everything going well at work?"

Urk! "...not really."

"That good, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm supposed to find out about—" ...*gag!* Was my tongue always this loose? "—Simon."

"Simon? Why's that?"

"It's tough to say." Might as well stretch the truth, now that this can of worms is open. Worms for everyone! "It just feels like such a conflict of interest, though, that I'm actually considering resigning."

"Resign!" Nan dropped her fork. "That's not like you at all! You can't just up and quit!"

"I'm not sure you grasp the sensitivity of the situation," I countered, trying to remain calm. "How do I just turn in my friend to my boss, just for some old information?"

I could tell Nan wanted to ask what kind of information, but she had the sense to know that was the wrong path to go down. "But there's always a protocol in place for this kind of thing! You just tell your boss you can't do this assignment, then you work on something else."

"And let someone else turn in Simon?"

"If that's what has to happen, then yes. It's not our job to tell other people how to do theirs, nor is it to keep our friends out of harm's way just because they're friends, especially if they deserve it."

"Does Simon deserve it?"

She made the face that I must have made at the idea. "That is not up to us to decide."

"What would you do?"

"I would tell my boss that it's too personal, that I couldn't be the one to bring in my friend. Just tell me you won't resign over this one thing?"

"Aight," I conceded, feeling an enormous weight off my shoulders. "I won't give up, Nan."

She smiled warmly at me again, and I felt – mixed, still. Someone would come for her if I didn't, and all I did was delay the inevitable. At least she would understand it wasn't my idea, but I couldn't stand the notion of Nan being locked up even for a day. What would that do to our family?

I felt so uncomfortable after supper that I had to retire to the sitting room for a spell, just lying in the peace and quiet of the dark. Saga snuck in after me. "What did Simon do?"

Ungh, worms. "Can't tell you." At least *that* was the truth.

"Are they going to send him to gaol? Like Amy?"

"I don't know, Saga. For years, all I did was what I was told to do, and I don't have a lot to show for it." ...screw it. "Like, Vice—I was sent to go spy on him, but it was hard trying to find out what I needed to know *and* watch you at the same—"

"You were spying on him *then*?"

"Yeah. And not well. Crystal's paralysed, and he got to you."

She looked away. "But he didn't – get to me."

"He did. Maybe not the way you think he did, but he did, and me via proxy."

"But – that's okay, isn't it? I mean, I'm still fine—"

I buried my head in a couch cushion. "He's *grooming* you, Saga. If he couldn't have his way with you for real then, he will some other day."

"No way," Saga insisted. "What would a big celebrity like him see in me? "

"I see this all the time!" It was difficult not to shriek in reaction as I sat up. "You may not understand the appeal of a young girl to a conceited rock star type, but the one thing that one person can never offer is variety."

You would be one more notch in his bedpost, used and thrown away like a tissue. After that, he'd lose interest in you completely, and your life would be changed forever, because your first time wouldn't have been special..."

If she took this to heart, I couldn't tell. Her face was contorted into a mix of confusion and denial. "Yet he's interested in *you*. Why's that?"

"I'm..." My entire body ached to even think of what his reasoning could be. "I'm being 'saved' for later."

"You—" Saga pouted in thought, then shook her head.

"What?"

"'Saved' as in, you've never slept with someone before?"

"Is that a surprise to you?"

She choked as if on a piece of food. "We're just a house of virgins, then, *including* Nan and Pop?"

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Except it's *weird!* Three grown adults living under one roof, and not a single one experienced in that way?"

"What's so special about not being a virgin?"

"Clearly you don't know!"

"And you *do*?"

Saga threw her hands up in defeat. "You really *are* a prude, huh." I couldn't comprehend what she was alleging, or why. "I just think – maybe you wouldn't be so uptight if you got a little dirty."

Every single maternal warning imaginable spouted from my mouth like the incarnation of the overbearing, overprotective mother I'd never had and never would be unleashing her fury upon Saga. I almost couldn't even make sense of it myself, as violently as I exploded with incomprehensible lecturing. "*LOOSENING UP IS THE WORST POSSIBLE REASON TO HAVE SEX!*" was the most intelligible thing I could manage.

"Sex?" she chided. "I wasn't even talking about that. Haven't you even been *kissed* before? And don't tell me I can get cooties from kissing, 'cause I already have 'em."

Why did she do this to me? I furrowed my brow and settled back on the couch, pulling my knees up to my chest as I did. "A lady doesn't kiss and tell."

"So, no one. Never been kissed." She almost laughed but tried to stop herself. "I guess that makes me feel better, then."

I started to retort, but I realised there wasn't a good answer for that. What was wrong with having a clean record, as it were? "As long as you feel good about it."

"Hey, I was just kidding."

"Saga," I scolded, "I'm serious. The world poses a lot of risks for someone inexperienced like yourself. It's difficult enough to navigate all the dangers out there without hurling yourself into it and throwing caution to the wind. Even your Zachary Simpson—the emotional baggage alone dealing with someone like him makes me worry for you. Say you and he went out

together, then he got arrested, was tried as an adult, and was thrown in gaol. Would you wait for him to get out?"

"...maybe."

"Why? What's wrong with a nice guy who would be there for you and wouldn't make you wait for the heat to blow over?"

"I dunno. What's wrong with the nice guy who was going to be there for *you*?"

I blanched. She couldn't possibly... "Who's that?"

Saga looked mischievous as she seemed hesitant to say – I assumed because she truly didn't know.

"Well?"

"Fine," she conceded. "Dr. Mardock."

I blinked at her. "Really?"

"What?" she laughed. "You mean you seriously didn't have a crush on him?"

"No," I stated truthfully.

"Then who?"

Ah! It was a trick to get me to talk. "I see what you did there," I admonished, shaking my head in disbelief. "You know, maybe some people just aren't interested in playing that game. It's a lot easier being single."

"Pfff, easy."

"Hey."

She sneered at me, incredulous. "I mean it! It's so weird that you're *this* averse to even a little affection!"

What she was insinuating was aggravating, even more because she couldn't understand my reasons. I felt too ashamed just thinking it to myself to let her know—I'd never hear the end of it if I told her the whole truth. "I just think it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Life isn't about locking away in a cage away from the world, never letting anything happen. That's *boring*."

The truth was hard to deny, but... "That doesn't justify the opposite, throwing caution to the wind and taking all sorts of risks for a cheap thrill."

"KISSING!" Saga threw her hands up at me in exasperation. "On the cheek, even! How is that taking all sorts of risks!"

She couldn't know. She couldn't... I stood in impatience. "There's so much more at stake than cooties, Saga." This talk was starting to hurt too much to bear. I didn't want to start taking my frustration out on her unfairly. "Perhaps we'll continue this later."

She gave me a confused look. "Why? Where are you going?"

"To find myself."

12. Select Agent Research

Now that I had crossed the point of no return, I had to focus on my mission. Nan was, hopefully, still the same Nan I'd always loved, but her days with me were numbered. I didn't imagine bailing on my assignment would go over well even with Rush, even under the best of situations, so if I was going to go through with this Australia scheme, I had better throw my all into it—it wouldn't be a no, it would be a *BIG NO*.

Despite the quarantine, legacy archives of Aussie records existed in illegal storage facilities, the main reason they hadn't been taken down being a lack of manpower and lower priority. If raiding the archives had been on my list, it would have been just after "minimising white space" and "dusting the typewriter." I expected at least a few rebels among the force appreciated having them up, as well.

At the moment, they were providing a valuable service. I took the red line all the way to the end, broke into the databases from a public library, and dug up all the possible records for my mother based on the information Vice had given. There were quite a few listings for G. Lee in NSW, a few more in the ACT, more still in the Northern Territory... I spent over an hour just narrowing down my selection, crossing off the dead ends and sifting through maybes, but the process was slowgoing with only half even having a photo reference included.

My mobile buzzed, and I absentmindedly checked it. Of course it was Rush, wanting an update on my progress. I felt a lump in my throat as I silenced it, going back to my work and trying to pretend I just hadn't heard it. This was turning into a year for firsts, sure enough.

What was I doing. I was snubbing my mentor and digging through illegal archives for a name and a face—and I didn't have the face—for what? Did I honestly think Vice would give me something genuinely useful, that I wouldn't just be walking into another of his traps? Yet here I was, being his little pack animal and toiling dutifully away at his homework. I bet he didn't even look her up but gave me a false name to waste my time...

That would be unlike him. Even wasting my time would have to be valuable to him to waste the time he spent setting me up for this. There was something here—there *had* to be.

Gotcha.

It was like a phantom whispering taunts in my ear. I looked around, but the library was deserted at this hour. Even the staff had gone on break, apparently trusting me not to get into mischief, or not even realising I was still there.

"Found you."

No, someone *was* there. I looked up instinctively and trained my ear on the source of the voice. Poking my head over the carrel wall, I noticed Rothe – and Giga. *Damn it!* I ducked, hoping they wouldn't notice me. As long as I kept quiet, there was no reason for them to suspect anyone else was here, especially not at the far end of the hall from where they were. If they were after something major, they would check the grounds, but hopefully it was just something minor, harmless to eavesdroppers...

"Yeah, I found the source of the breach," Rothe answered, probably indicating whatever was in her hand. "Whoever accessed the database last pulled the records from this station and left. Hasn't been logged on in over an hour."

I was quietly grateful for my paranoia and for having disconnected the modem from my laptop. If they were searching for me—

Giga practically shouted when he spoke, which was startling in the library. "Explain to me again why we haven't shut it down completely."

"...would you like me to try?" she asked, reluctance evident in her voice. "The problem is this database is only one mirror of countless others. It may actually be easier to take out every other computer in the *world* than to target only the people doing this—but not *much* easier."

"...or to just take down the quarantine."

I was aghast to hear such words come from a high-ranking official. "How's that, sir?" Rothe admonished.

"The so-called psycho-terrorists out there are growing in number all the time, with more and more fighting on the side of 'Misery loves company' than segregation. What are we doing to stop them? Not a lot, even when we give it our greatest effort."

"But you can't seriously think—"

"Maybe you're too young to remember a time when people actually did *work* instead of playing keep away. This quarantine business is a waste of time and resources, just to maintain a gated community."

"I sincerely hope you don't let anyone else hear you say that, sir."

Giga grumbled at nothing in particular. "Report back to Executive at once," he barked, his voice diminishing as though he was turning to leave, "there's another project that needs your immediate attention."

Rothe was as silent as I was for what was an uncomfortable moment for both of us, before she packed up her things and headed out. Only once it was absolutely silent again did I peek up again. I was the only one in the library, and it felt even more eerie than before.

When I looked back at my work, there was another record staring at me, a Dr. G. Lee of Adelaide. Not thinking about it, I opened the record and met a startling sight. That face... I stared at her photo for an indeterminate amount of time, filled with perfect awe. This must have been how Saga felt, seeing her father on the recording for the first time. This woman had to be my mother, no doubt!

The rest of the details listed were less pleasing—surrogate donor. *That* was how she was inside the quarantine and I was not. It seemed odd to go so far from my homeland for that kind of procedure, but I had been born before MLCS first appeared, so the question of crossing the border wouldn't have been an issue.

...even so, why had I been given up? Vega had only been my foster after I had spent five years in an orphanage. Before that, the orphanage was all I'd known. Something must have happened to my original foster parents for them to have gone through so much trouble to have me, only to lose me. Why couldn't I remember them...?

Past is past. Maybe Epic was on to something. It was easier not to do something this difficult—but I wouldn't have another chance, if I gave up now, in addition to having to answer to Rush. I'd already come so far to—

"I figured you'd be more excited to see her."

My hand flew of its own accord, my wrist meeting that too-familiar grip just a tad bit stronger than mine, my gaze meeting the one behind those creepy opaque lenses. His laziness was inherent even in his abuse—though I trained every day I could in the hope of being able to overpower him, he was always stronger than I was – but barely. Before, when he would try to keep me bound, he had always struggled, each time teetering at the edge where, if I had only had a tiny bit more muscle, I could have broken free.

Maybe it wasn't laziness. Maybe even *that* was a game to him, the thrill of the fight. If so, that made Vice even more conniving an antagonist, to be able to calculate so precisely something as abstract as my prospective strength at any given moment. It made him despicably devious that he could so deliberately be exactly one step ahead of me at every turn, as if taunting that he knew me better than I even knew myself.

"You *did* realise log activity to the archives could be easily traced from a public access point, didn't you? Or is that why you're over here away from where *they* would have found you?"

"Have you come to take me away?" I asked, forcing every iota of my being into fighting against my instincts, into treating him as any normal business contact. "I noticed that flight info you gave me didn't include, oh, a ticket or anything."

"Yeah, about that..." He made a motion as though to knock me out again, but I spun backwards out of my seat, stepping out of his reach. "I was going to say, we're ready to take you when you are. Get prepped and all."

"We?"

He shrugged casually. "Told you, this is a sponsored trip."

So I would get to see the full extent of the JAM? Maybe that made up for my bad decision... "Let's go."

"A word of warning," he added, "you're not going to like this."

"Of course I won't," I agreed, "because you're involved."

"Nonono, nothing like that at *all*, love!" His sneer was malicious, suggesting something beyond the farthest reaches of my imagination. "I

mean, you – will – *not* – like this."

I bit my tongue to keep from lashing out in a public place. "Thank you for setting me up for so much disappointment, then," I retorted. "Now I'll have such high expectations they won't possibly measure up."

Vice chuckled forebodingly. "I aim to please, family."

The journey was looking less desirable at each turn. I gulped at the idea of what he could possibly be insinuating. Nothing I imagined would be able to get me safely inside the quarantine—that much was true, or I would have discovered the way in on my own. That must've been an added bonus to being as inventive as he was with torturing me, that the unthinkable would have come to him in due time, and the timid little 'prude' Saga accused me of being would always be at a handicap for it.

At least he behaved while we were still in the public eye. Once he led me down to the garage where his car awaited—

"A pony?" I asked, keeping the snark alive in hopes the best defence was a good offence. "No limo service?"

He opened the passenger side door of the Mustang with a flourish. "I have it on good authority that this is your chariot of preference," he cooed, though I didn't imagine even Sky had spied on me long enough to know that. I *did* like the make, but I could never justify the cost to buy one myself, not for looks alone. Was this another form of taunt from him?

"No ragtop?" I added, hopping inside before he could smack me on my rear when I wasn't looking.

He slammed the door, jumping and sliding across the bonnet before getting in. "Have you ever rolled a convertible?" he chided with a chuckle. "No protection from impact whatsoever!" His words were blood-curdling as he started the ignition, shifting like a maniac as he peeled out of the garage. I could barely hang on even with my belt buckled. "Ever drive off a cliff in a Hummer? Now *that* is an experience of a lifetime!"

I couldn't scream. I couldn't. I—

My voice reached a deafening shrill that I couldn't believe he could withstand. No one with a death wish would drive the way he did, drifting around corners and speeding between cars travelling in *both* directions, as though trying his best to cause the greatest amount of incidental damage, all without getting so much as a scratch on his own car. Worse was his laughter the whole way, as though mocking the world for being his play toy.

Every rev of the engine lasted an eternity, a literal hell on wheels. I didn't know how I survived the ride intact, and now I wouldn't be able to ride in another sports car without remembering this. A new terror every day of the year, indeed.

"Missiyası nəzarət xoş gəlmisiniz," he shouted as we finally pulled to a stop, even more cryptic in his manner than usual. "I do hope you enjoy your stay. We've even rolled out the red carpet for you. Oh, sorry—that's just your face, is it."

It was all I could do to keep from hurling on the upholstery, the

blood rushing to my head as I held it between my legs. My fingers had dug into the seat, puncturing the leather, and I could barely even breathe from the surge of adrenaline. Was my heart even beating? ...almost.

Vice seemed to delight in my misery, provoking me even further by reaching toward me to grab—

I smacked him away in an instant, struggling to unfasten myself and clamber out of the car. Where were we... I cased the garage. It seemed to be a private facility, with no visible entrance that I could recognise—he must have closed the door behind us on our way in. I forced myself to remember the path we took, trying to gather a rough estimate of our location. It was difficult to tell, however, given the unusual amount of force he had put on the vehicle while in motion.

"It's about time," snapped a melodic voice from the opposite end of the garage. "I was starting to wonder if you were holding out on us."

I whirled on the speaker. "Amy?"

The woman strode up to me, her platinum hair in a bun held in place by long hairpins that gave her the appearance of a fashionista, her language giving her the appearance of an old biddy. Her heels clacked noisily against the tarmac in a way that attacked my ears like no other. "...you'd better hold up your end of the deal," she snarled, glaring at me as though *any* of this was my idea.

"—it's good to see you, too," I retorted, a bit put off by her attitude.

She turned on Vice now. "Is everything ready? Is *she* ready?"

"Of course, and of course *not*," he answered, that smarmy grin of his reflecting in the roof of the car as he leaned over it, leering at both of us. I turned away in disgust, though it wasn't any easier looking at Amy instead.

"Remember," she lectured, "we only have one shot, then they'll be on their guard."

"Of course, sweetcakes."

"So – how do I get in?" I ventured, hoping I wouldn't regret asking.

Amy glanced at Vice meaningfully, and I assumed—behind those blank lenses—Vice did the same. That meant...

She did an about-face, wordless as I followed in even greater dread of what was to come than I'd previously imagined. The pieces were falling into place in the shape of a disturbing image, one I wouldn't have described to me beforehand because, if I knew what it was, I wouldn't go through with it. They knew it. *I* knew it. And if I had any second thoughts about going, Vice was there to make sure I couldn't escape.

What did I get myself into now?

Amy led me down a corridor to a decision room, the walls covered in numerous projection screens displaying parts of the quarantine zone out as far as Carpentaria, the Bight, and even the Reef. "You're familiar with the geography, I hope?" Amy barked like an angry schoolmarm.

"I've seen maps," I replied, not certain how exact I needed to be.

"You'll be sent to a spot about a league off of Adelaide. From there,

Centennial Park is a stone's throw away—"

"How will I get past the border?"

It was stupid of me to ask, and all of us knew it. I flushed with rage to be patronised in this manner, but she continued without pause. "Once you're inside, you should be able to make your rendezvous without trouble. The gate code cracking device we've provided will give you any necessary access to the grounds—"

"And how am I getting out? Especially with—"

Amy gave me a glare like no other, as though daring me to interrupt her again and incite her wrath. I started to explain my seemingly obvious reasoning, but—

"Forget it!" she snapped, pushing aside the conference table like it was made entirely of foam. "I'm done here. *You* can tell her everything – if anything." Was this really the girl I used to have play dates with for Saga?

Vice made it more than evident he was watching as she stormed out of the room, down to the rhythm in his swagger mimicking the clack of her heels on the marble floor in the hallway. "You heard the lady," he conceded, shrugging, "though I expect most of the district did, as well."

I still wanted an answer. "And?"

"Tut, tut, love," he chided, wagging his finger as though scolding a baby, "we've got some time. Why worry your little head about it just yet?"

"Won't I have a greater chance of success if I know what I will have to navigate?"

At first he didn't answer, that leer of his still stuck on his face. Then he looked aside, scratching his chin as if in thought. "No."

The dismissive tone in his voice was unsettling. I got the feeling he was being dead serious when he said I wouldn't like what was in store for me. "So – what, then?"

"Oh, I can think of a *lot* of things – or just one." He lunged at me yet again, only a step behind me as I dodged his obvious advances. I backed into a corner despite my instincts—at least *something* would have my back.

"*Stop it!*" I shrieked, channelling all my willpower into standing my ground. "What did I ever do to deserve this kind of treatment from you!"

His face became indignant, glowering down at me with bottomless rage. "*Tell* me you don't remember, you little aynasız!"

"What? I don't—" What exactly was he insinuating? "Remember what? If you have something to say, say it!"

"How far back does your memory go?"

Now what was he going to try to turn against me... "I remember everything since I turned three," I admitted. "Nothing before that."

He scowled at me with an even more potent contempt than I could ever have imagined. "Of course you wouldn't remember. Why incriminate yourself, after all?"

My head was spinning as it was without adding more mind games. "Instead of playing around, why don't you just spit it out?"

His hand came down just past my face, slamming against the wall with a dull thud. It was difficult to say whether the pain or the threat of pain was worse, sometimes, and Vice's – *everything* made it so much worse than my memories dredged up. The stench of cigars and bad cologne lingered on him and aggravated my gag reflex, and I couldn't hold back the tears welling in my eyes.

"You started it."

...what? "Are we in primary again?" I snapped. "What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

His fist came down again for each accusation he threw. "Hitting me. Kicking me. Pushing me. Shoving me. Pulling my hair. Taking my toys. Throwing dirt in my face. Putting bugs in my food."

"I did no such—" ...did I?

"*I* behaved. I did nothing to you, and *you* did nothing but pick on me, and any time I cried, you just sat there and laughed at me. No one ever punishes a girl, either, so I had no choice but to endure your abuse until I finally fought back."

"Even if I did any of that—which I didn't—we were just *toddlers!* *No one* knows what they're doing at that age! It's no justification for how you've treated me all these years, now that you're damn well old enough to know better!"

"Oh, *I know*. I just figured – why stop when it was getting *good?*" He slid up to me with a sleazy expression on his face, grinning from ear to ear. "And *you* taught me how good it feels to be *bad*."

Oh, blame the victim, I wanted to shout... Why didn't I? What was this feeling of guilt? "No!" I couldn't fall into this trap, even if it was true – that we had switched roles. I had to remember the real me, the real him.

"You're me, and vice – *versa*."

Every molecule of strength in my body poured into my left cross, connecting with his clavicle. It knocked him back somewhat, enough for me to make a break for it, but only served to make him angrier at me. His growl was untamed, resonating from his gut as he gave chase, even as I got enough clearance to draw my gun on him again.

"Don't think this is over, love," he snarled, "not by a long shot." He stretched out his shoulder, doing arm circles to relieve the pain, then leaned back against the wall with his hands shoved in his pockets. "And at any rate, it's a long trip. Perhaps you should enjoy a last meal before that."

I hadn't felt very hungry due to feeling sick to my stomach, but he had a point, even if I didn't like his phrasing. Nevertheless, I didn't lower my weapon. "Perhaps you'll just drug my food."

"—perhaps we've been doing this dance for too long." Vice sighed and strode calmly from the room. "Hop to, if you like."

Keeping at the ready, I followed him into the corridor, up a flight of stairs after I stubbornly refused to ride on the lift with him, and into the building's canteen. Only then, in the presence of innocents, did I holster my

gun—though, if all of them were involved with JAM, I may have been too considerate. "Have a seat," he ordered.

"Isn't it self-serve?" I started toward the bar.

"*Have – a – seat.*"

I hesitated for a moment, between obedience and rebellion, but I didn't know whether the others in the room would be on my side – or his. At length, I grudgingly took a seat at a nearby table as he sidled up to the bar.

I took the opportunity to observe the others in the room. Most of the people here didn't give either of us a second look. Some of the women watched Vice with interest, which made me ill. One cast a glance my way before he realised maybe he shouldn't, returning his attention to his food.

Hmm. I considered switching tables—maybe even saying hello to the fellow whose eye I caught—when Vice returned, clattering a mysterious tray of – *something* in front of me.

"Eat up," he instructed, taking a fork to his flank steak and lifting it to his mouth without cutting it first.

I stared in horror at the thing laid out before me. It didn't seem to resemble food, much less anything I would eat willingly. It had to be a meat dish of *some* kind, from the smell of blood wafting from it. Not even cooked blood, either, but something far too raw to digest properly. If this was to be my last meal—with the appropriate ominous tone of one—it was the most unappetising thing imaginable.

"You eat your dinner like a good girl," he barked, between swallows of his own. "Something died to provide you that sustenance."

"Which is why I won't eat it," I countered, disgusted at the idea that something had not only died for this – *thing* but had been mutilated beyond all recognition as well.

"It's not going to kill you. EAT IT."

"In fact, it *might* kill me." I scowled at his flagrant ignorance – or deliberate provocation? "I haven't eaten meat in so long that I doubt I can digest it properly anymore."

Vice dropped his steak back on his plate, leaning back in disbelief. "*Ohh*," he bellowed in a loud, sarcastic voice that drew all eyes to us, much to my irritation. "You poor little *baby*. Does Poppy have to chew your food for you, too?" He started to gesture as though to regurgitate his own—

I slammed my hands on the table and stood in a fit of rage, but he grabbed my wrist before I could get very far.

"You think that you're being humane or something by not eating the flesh of an animal, but guess what. Even plants have life, and you eat those while they're still alive. They're still *feeling* when you dig your teeth in."

"That's not why—"

"Animals do nothing to deserve our pity, to deserve to be left alone while we go hungry from not eating them but instead competing with them for the same food. I guarantee you the beast that this steak came from would kill and eat you just the same if it had been given the chance. It would rend

the flesh from your bones even with teeth designed for grinding, because it needs to eat to stay alive. Even worse, it would kill you slowly, painfully, because it doesn't have a convenient *gun* like the one you're carrying now—Miss *Humane*."

The people who hadn't left at the start of our rather vocal row were now shuffling out of the room a little more quickly than they might have done before. I tried to wrest my arm from his grasp, but – still no progress. It wasn't that I really cared what the JAM project members thought of me, but I was sick of the public humiliation, tired of the drama unfolding before us like a highlighted road map leading straight into hell.

My stomach was in knots, between all of the things assaulting my senses and feeling as though I willingly volunteered myself to live my every nightmare all at once. The only thing that would have been the icing on the cake would be if—

I dared it to happen. The worst things possible already seemed to be happening, so what's one more. Make it so. *Do it*. Yet I was spared that much—either I wasn't just the hapless play toy of a sadistic, unloving deity, or – it was coming when I wasn't expecting it.

When I looked into Vice's icy stare, I felt it my heart sink. I knew – somehow – I'd probably just wished my worst fear into existence. I tsked to think that, in millennia of human history, the devil had always been depicted as some red horned hulking beast, and not a smooth-talking attractive man in his mid-twenties.

"You *are* going to need your strength," he continued, as though he had heard my inner monologue and noted it appropriately. "It's not like we can give you peanuts and an in-flight movie for the trip, you know."

"What's wrong with egg salad," I droned, more as a declaration.

"So you won't eat the flesh, but you'll eat what comes out of the—"

I grabbed my fork and stabbed into the meat thing. "*I* am trying to cooperate. *You* are trying to make this ordeal as difficult as possible. Even *you* should realise there's a limit to how far I'll go."

"And can you blame me for wanting to see how far that is?"

I kept picturing visions of my own personal heaven, where every implement of torture he'd ever used on me – or ever *would* use – was at my disposal and I would have my twenty-two years of vengeance, plus interest. I scraped the meat mass off my fork, pushing it to the side, and picked at the now blood-soaked vegetable side dish. It was still foul, but tolerable.

After chugging his beer, Vice belched loudly, relaxing for a bit as he leaned back and threw his arm around my shoulder. Fighting it didn't serve me any purpose—though I recoiled in reflex, I didn't know what was in store for me to use up all my energy doing this 'dance' again. "Let's go," he ordered, getting up and leaving his tray behind.

I glanced up at the clock to confirm my senses. "The flight's not for ten hours yet—"

"If you're going to be prepared, it has to be now. Let's go."

I didn't think it was possible to hate myself more than I did now, for being such a willing pawn in this game. I wished I had turned in Nan like a good agent, wished I was taking Rush's next order, wished I was even under Giga's fire. *Anything* would have been infinitely better than finding myself where I was in the here and now.

He led me out of the canteen like a leashed pet, the stares from the others boring holes in my back. I couldn't imagine what they thought of us, how much they knew. Even in their complacency, they seemed to be in on my torture, as audience participation. I wondered if even one of them would have stepped in under any other circumstances, if herd mentality kept them from stopping my abuser like I had seen in that one study. Would the lone man who had eyed me earlier helped if not for the fact that no one else was? It was telling that I was desperate for even a shred of assistance—even for a sympathetic look from a complete stranger—and I didn't even get that.

"Give me your gun," he demanded, as we stopped before the gate to the warehouse section of the building.

"I might need it."

"You can't have metal on you, not of that size. Too easy to detect."

Now I was willingly giving up my protection. It was tough to keep from crying at my powerlessness.

"Oh, don't be like that," he said with a sneer. "It'll see action again."

My hands trembled as I weighed the options, but there truly was no turning back, was there... Reluctantly, I removed my holster, feeling naked without it on, but it was only a burden without my gun.

Vice took my weapon from me and admired it for a moment, then held out his other hand. "Your mobile, too—don't want the chip traced."

And my way to call for help? I frowned, wondering if I should just bend over, too.

"*I'll be back*," he pronounced as he took the mobile off my hands, turning with a skip and a flounce as though to the beat of a song in his head. He disappeared into the warehouse office, where I could almost but not quite see him through the blinds putting my things away and taking out something else before returning as promised.

The object in his hands was a rather large black box. "This is that gate cracking decoder that Amy mentioned. It's not going with you, but you will be able to access it once you're inside the quarantine. It'll be shipped to a Priest Doromo, so you'll have to find where the postie sends everything."

Their gate code cracking device was strangely bulky, and I couldn't believe a large organisation like JAM wouldn't be able to manage something a bit more – portable. But I had no room to voice any complaints, especially at this stage in the game. If I voiced objections and they dumped me from the mission, I was back to square one, and the last few days of agony would be for naught. Trapped again by my weakness...

I bit the bullet. "What about me?"

That sneer crossed his face again, blossoming slowly as though in

anticipation of a glorious event. He placed the device into a shipping box and grabbed me by the arm, dragging me across the warehouse floor.

"Hey!" I shrieked, infuriated. "I'll go where you tell me to go! You don't need to force—"

"You should know by now—I do what I do because it's what I *want* to do." He stopped before an even larger box, lying open as though awaiting its contents.

My eyes widened as I saw what kind of box it was. "No..."

I felt a sharp sting in my neck as Vice injected me with – *something*. My mind went hazy as he pushed me into the box, and I felt the cold slowly overtake me. "I *told* you you wouldn't like this," were the last words I heard as the lid closed over me, filling me with the sensation of being buried alive. Was I really going to be able to survive *this*?

I couldn't believe I was trusting Vice to get me in. I supposed I was really trusting my own preset deathdate to get me in, but semantics. Amy, too—I didn't imagine *she* would turn against me so. I wondered...

In my last moments of consciousness, Sky's warning came to mind. Perhaps that was what he was trying to tell me without telling me, that Amy was now an agent of such despicable evil, working alongside an even greater evil, that Simon had no choice but to go into hiding from her, his own twin. But then, why work at a travel agency so close to home? I supposed he was in my position, that something else was tying him to one spot, that it was all he and Sky could do to keep him safe. I hoped I would be able to apologise for my impertinence, to let him know I understood his pain.

As I lost more warmth to refrigeration, Simon became the least of the least of my concerns, getting shunted immediately to the farthest reaches of my mind as I felt the onset of hypothermia, my facilities shutting down as my body's only known means of self-preservation. I started to hope this was the end of my nightmare, that I would never wake up from my hibernation...

13. Biohazards

My coffin cooler slammed to a stop on its side, the impact knocking me fully awake and causing my entire body to ache with crippling pain. If I hadn't been completely relaxed, I bet I might have broken something, but the most it felt I had might have been some nasty bruises.

To my surprise, my suffocating prison had cracked open, a stream of light nearly blinding me after hours of darkness. Was it deliberate? I was gob-smacked to think that anyone could possibly plan for this – but maybe even *they* were counting on my preset lifespan to get me through this trial by hook or crook. Pressing my luck, indeed!

I remained still, trying my best not to betray my position as I started to regain feeling in my extremities. My understanding of cryogenics wasn't what it could have been, but JAM must have been working on a way to keep me in a cryopreserved state while also allowing me to revive without outside intervention. It still hurt like hell as I struggled desperately to warm myself, but—I assumed—I was in.

After what must've been hours of silence, in slowly-abating agony from the chill, I peeked out the crack, but all I could see was the side of a crate. I listened for movement as I pushed on the lid, but it wouldn't budge. Uh-oh. The way the box had landed was beyond improbable, such that the cheaply-made refrigerated unit would break open upon impact with a hard surface, and this meant I was wedged in. It took all my strength to push the door open with a loud thunk as the unit shifted.

I let the lid fall closed again, leaving it open a crack as I listened for signs of detection. Nothing...? After a long, paranoia-filled wait, I ventured outside of the box, keeping low and stifling my sneezes while I examined the area. I seemed to be in a medical storage facility, which must have been how I was able to enter the quarantine in a fridge—the virus could only be transmitted through contact between living humans, so they wouldn't have given cryopreserved cadavers the same degree of screening. They *really* hadn't prepared for my method of infiltration? I would definitely have to report the breach as soon as I got home! As it was, I had a difficult time not thinking of Rush's unabated fury upon my return, even if all went according to plan and I made it back without harming the quarantine.

Still, I was in Australia – that forbidden land of my wildest dreams. I checked the evacuation plans for the building layout, grabbing and donning a lab coat, face mask, and latex gloves before leaving the room and heading to the nearest empty office room, throwing open the blinds. There was the Torrens on a mild winter day... I was really *here*.

Post. I had to find the package at once. There was some letterhead lying on the desk—University of Adelaide. Huh. That didn't seem to jibe at all with what Amy had told me... Had I been diverted in transit? Worried, I pulled the gate notes from my pocket. There were four gates between here and Centennial Park, requiring me to pass through at least one regardless of which path I took. It didn't help that I didn't know the codes for any of them. Regardless, dallying in any given area was dangerous, in multiple respects, so I had to get moving.

My biggest worry was other people. I covered myself as best as I could, but I couldn't guarantee that pretending to be sick would keep others away from me on their own. My best chance would be if no one else was around... I looked at the clock on the desk. Luckily, it had a date function—it was a holiday! I was in luck – and I had been under for forty hours before my slow thaw. No wonder I felt awful, even more so than usual, though the temperature didn't help. Maybe I wouldn't have to *pretend* to be sick...

The halls were empty save the occasional maintenance worker or staff member clocking in overtime. I crept out of the building and followed my map toward the closest gate two streets away. As I took in the campus sights, my worries seemed to melt away. Everything was cleaner here in the Lucky Country, more peaceful and yet more – alive. I wanted desperately to stay here, in my haven far away from Vice's wicked reach, never knowing pain again. Yet – I couldn't do that to the continent's twenty-seven million inhabitants, to sacrifice their peace of mind for my own selfish desires.

"Workin' hard this arvo, are ya?"

I looked up to see a guard standing idly at the gate. Made sense, in case someone forgot a code, I supposed. "G'day, mate," I greeted, imitating his accent as I cleared my throat.

"We don't get many folk in on holidays as is. Nice li'l sheila like ya should be takin' a sickie, not up and about."

"I got a big med project due. Can't afford to lose any time."

"I ain't seen ya before this quarter."

"I ain't come this way before. Gotta find a project member a' mine who's gone walkabout."

He shrugged at me, watching closely as I approached the gate with uncertainty. The guard being there meant I couldn't make a mistake without blowing my cover. "I remember when these stupid gates didn't used to be here," I fibbed to buy myself some time.

"Yep," he agreed, "it's a pain, fair dinkum. This much security for a uni? Waste. There's been talk about maybe takin' 'em down soon, but that's after we get a new lord mayor and all. The current admin seems to think we need it in case a' break-ins, but we've been fine so far, eh?"

I forced a grin at the irony, but at the moment I needed a hint that I wouldn't be getting. Unfortunately, I waited too long for that hint as I stared at the slotted keypad in bewilderment.

"Forget your access key?"

"...yep." I played up the blonde ditz act for effect. "I don't know Chrissie from Bourke Street some days. It's – just so much to keep track of everything, you know?"

"Well, lemme see your ident card, and I can give you a temp one."

Damn it! "Naw, hang on—I know the code. It's..." I struggled to think of what the code might be. My blood suddenly ran cold as I thought of the rogue unsigned header post I had gotten that day... "Maybe it's – my favourite song?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Is it?"

Trembling as I tried to contain my rage, I typed in the ident prefix from my cheat sheet, listening to the keypad tones in expectation that maybe they would match the tune. No luck—all the same pitch. For the rest of the code, I ventured a wild guess and typed in the first letter from each word in the lyrics:

PYTWCSSSPHA
FHLBMTINPIW
RBTIYLBMLLM
TYTAHPWMMTF
TMJR.IPIWHVM

The gate access light blipped green, swinging open at my command. I forced a cheer that it worked – as furious as I was that I had to use the crass perversion of my lullaby to make it work.

The guard whistled in appreciation. "That's good on ya that ya can remember all that."

Not really, but I didn't say as much. "Well, it conveniently worked out to my song, so it's a piece of piss."

"Ace." He waved and winked at me as I stepped through the gate. "Hooroo to ya, love."

I breathed a sigh of relief that I pulled that off, hoping I wouldn't have to trust my luck much more. At least there weren't any other physical barriers standing in my way, though I felt mildly put off by the guard's terms of endearment.

I made the ten kilometre trek to Centennial Park, passing Victoria Square with reluctance and wishing I could explore rather than stick to the confines of my mission, especially since it looked like so much had changed from what was on the maps available in the archives. In a way, it was its own kind of hell, like walking through a confectionary store while on a diet. I forced myself to focus on finding the priest's package, dodging passersby with as much subtlety as I could manage.

At the cemetery, I strolled through the gardens and approached the chapel area, thinking I might even be happy if my cremains were scattered here some day. I was so lost in thought that I nearly collided with someone at the consultation area, our arms grazing.

"Oh!" I shouted, horrified by my inattention.

"You scared me there!" the woman cried, startled.

I coughed instinctively. "Did – I touch you?"

"Huh?" She looked perplexed, checking her arms out of instinct. "I don't see... Ah, you're worried about transmitting your flu or something? It's okay, you look well-covered. I'm sure I'll be fine."

I hoped so as I stared at her forehead. "Well, can't be *too* careful."

"How can I help you?"

"You work here?" I was relieved to get some help. "I'm looking for a package that was sent here. It should be addressed to Priest Doromo."

"Oh, that...?" She looked relieved. "We were so confused, because there's no one by that name. Is it for you?"

"He sent me over here to pick it up when he found out they put the wrong address on it."

The woman gave me a warm smile. "Sure thing, sweetie. What's your name?"

Giving my assumed name was probably a bad idea. "Mary Nye."

"Nye?" She gave me an odd look. "We don't get many Nyes."

I forced a chuckle. "You sure? I bet you have lots."

"Well, it's good to meet you all the same, Mary." She led me inside to the reception desk, picking up the large parcel and a clipboard with pen, holding the latter out to me. "Just sign here that you received it."

I took the clipboard and did as instructed, careful not to touch her directly despite my gloves—being paranoid had yet to fail me. "Thanks a lot," I said with a nod, taking the package under one arm and handing back the clipboard.

"Don't mention it. Hope to see you again soon!"

I started to say goodbye when the implications of her words struck me. "I do, too," I replied, smiling behind my mask. The woman tilted her head at me, as though not quite able to tell whether I meant it as a joke.

I left the office with my prize, heading back toward the main drag, but I was stumped as I ducked behind a bus stop shelter and tore open the package, freeing the unwieldy black box. My understanding was I needed it to get through the gates, but how would I use it inconspicuously with guards at each one?

How would I use it at *all*?

There was no visible interface, only a wide glassy part on the top of one side that might have concealed an infrared sensor and, in the middle of the same panel, a small hole with the same material, but indented. I pushed in the hole, but nothing discernable happened. How exactly did this thing function? I was tempted to dismantle it to see what was taking up so much space, but I only had one shot at the mission—one I couldn't throw away on suspicion. It was aggravating that I hadn't been told a thing, that I was the only one holding any stock in my mission's success. I recalled what Amy told me, compared to what I had been through so far, and I wondered if she'd actually known what she was talking about. If it was not an accident, what

was the purpose of sending me so far away from the device? Why had I not been prepared for such an accident occurring?

I found a note stuck to the side. "Take to Lee, Keswick terminal." The Metro? ...my *mum*? Would she know how to use the device? At least I didn't have to pass through any gates to get to the Metro from here. My time running out quickly, I threw the package wrapping in a waste bin and lugged the black box back up the road to the Keswick Metro station.

The Metro was bustling with activity at this hour, which made me increasingly nervous. I kept to the sides, dodging people and ambling along until I could find a concession kiosk to ask for help. There—

"Good day, may I help you?"

The woman operating the kiosk had to be her—Mum. My lifelong search was finally over! I looked into her eyes in sheer awe, staring without thinking. "Hi..."

"Do you need some help with the ticket vending machine, or finding your destination?"

"No, I..." It was an uncanny resemblance, but something still felt off. "Are you Dr. Lee?" I asked, clutching the box in my hands with mixed feelings. I hadn't realised before that very moment that I had wanted to see her so much—

—and wouldn't. "No," she responded, confused. "Not Dr."

I frowned, wondering if the records were wrong. "Oh. Ms.?"

"My name's Ginger—"

There was a shot and a splatter of blood. No, not again—! My eyes darted around the terminal, looking for the sniper among the panicked mob. With a shock, I realised that the box had made a familiar jolt just then—

A sickening sensation consumed me when I figured out in an instant why the device was so bulky. The specs were crystal clear in retrospect: a tiny camera, a powerful wireless transmitter, a slide away door to conceal the gun barrel, a CZ 75 like mine—which explained why Vice took it—would be just about the perfect fit...

Why couldn't I just die?

"FREEZE!"

I made the mistake of turning my back to the wall—the box had a clear line of sight to others. It fired eight times more, emptying the full clip, taking out several more people even as I adjusted for my slow reaction time. I couldn't move an iota from where I stood, out of sheer mortification, the now useless black box clattering to the floor with a disgusting thud.

One of the station guards approached, keeping a gun on my head as another tackled me, forcing me to the ground.

"No, don't—" I started, to be cut off by other guards grabbing my wrists and slapping handcuffs on me.

"Nothing more out of you, sheila," the guard cuffing me growled, "unless it's a full confession of what you think you're doing!" He turned to the others. "How many casualties? We need ambos down here, pronto!"

"Don't touch me!" I shouted, coming to my senses as my mask was ripped from my face.

"You gave up that privilege when you opened fire in a public area!"

I panicked. "*DON'T TOUCH EACH OTHER!*"

One or two of them stopped, starting to grasp the seriousness of my outburst. Did Australia have an emergency protocol in the event someone infected got through the border? Surely they weren't this passive about the virus! How many years had it been known now?

It became painfully obvious. Vice was working with the heads of a major pharmaceutical company that believed itself to have or be on the road to finding the cure to MLCS. Total infection of the human race would not only ensure maximum profits but also the greatest chance of finding those with immunity, and JAM would have a monopoly on the cure if they were the only ones with access to the immune. In exchange for 100% worldwide infection, Vice got the funding to do whatever he damn well pleased for the rest of his damned life.

Why him? I couldn't count the number of people so easily suckered into bending to his will. Even the most upstanding and religious personages eventually caved to his charisma under the best circumstances. It was like a hypnosis that only I could see through – except now even *I* allowed myself to be blinded. The only reason he hadn't bothered breaking into Australia before was his otherwise total disinterest in it. If he tried, there wouldn't be a border guard alive who could resist.

Further, he had never planned to do this himself. It had *always* been designed with me in mind, and I was a damned fool for going along with it. That was why Vice said my knowing in advance wouldn't have increased my chances for success, why Amy's briefing didn't make any sense upon arrival. It must have all been an act, saying any old garbage that would get me to go along with it. They had no intention of briefing me on anything useful, no intention of getting me back out safely. They might have even sent me to the University and the package to the cemetery to increase the likelihood I would fail and be caught. The trump card was the box itself, making certain I would not get out of the country unnoticed.

"Get the divvie van around here!" the lead bobby shouted, shoving me toward the gate.

One of the guards who heard my shout called to him. "Ah, sir?"

"What is it?"

"I don't mean to suggest that... That is, could she be a carrier?"

The bobby completely froze except for his eyes, which grew wide. "*CODE ZETA!*" he cried, bringing the entire station to a halt. One guard set off a klaxon that must have been their equivalent of a hurricane warning.

It was too late, though—who knew who had accidentally brushed against whom in the close quarters of the station, which guards had taken off following contact with someone who had touched me. A series of klaxons added to the first, and no one in the entire terminal moved for what felt like

hours until a quarantine team arrived.

I could barely look at anyone, the shame of my failure hanging over my head like a thick cloud. When I did look up again, I saw the gate guard from earlier, winking at me with an evil grin before turning away as though pretending he didn't know who I was.

Now I knew how I succeeded in getting this far despite the odds. The insidiousness of the virus was that just one person could inadvertently cause a pandemic and, without physical barriers, it would take the complete cooperation of everyone in the quarantine to contain it. If even one traitor was among the quarantined, bought out by JAM—

What could I do with this knowledge, though? My throat clenched in knots, tears streamed down my face without abating, my spirit was broken thoroughly. Had every person in all of Australia queued up to punch me in the gut, I doubt I would have felt any of it, though I would certainly deserve it if they did.

I was finally dragged from the station, horror at my poor decisions complete as I noticed the odd telltale circle visible on random bystanders. A few of them took my picture as I passed, probably intent on exposing me as the world's worst terrorist. I wouldn't be able to show my face at home upon my extradition, if I wasn't gaoled for the rest of my life as it was. Anything that happened from that point was a literal blur, my vision distorted from the waterworks I couldn't stop.

I was taken to their detention facility, stripped of my belongings, and thrown in a dirty cell, still cuffed—no one wanted to touch me even with gloves unless it was absolutely necessary. Didn't matter, since I didn't want to move at all from where I huddled into a ball on the floor. Someone had to come in hours later and feed me, and I didn't even protest when the food was some mystery meat like what Vice had given me. I didn't care anymore. I wanted to die so badly that I would have done everything in my power to fight the virus, to prove it was wrong about my remaining time in this world, but all of my power dissipated into unadulterated self-loathing.

The next day, I was put into a bulky biohazard suit and brought to trial before the Supreme Court of South Australia, the first time I would see the law from the opposite side of the bench. The solicitor general was brief in his argument, describing the facts succinctly as *prima facie* evidence in the interest of getting me out post haste. Sure, why not. I didn't want to be here any more than they did. I remembered but didn't really listen to the rest of the proceedings, wishing I could wake up from this terror soon.

"Does the defendant have *anything* to say?"

I came out of my trance on cue. I shook my head, not even certain if my voice worked anymore. It was rude and potentially disastrous of me not to address His Honour, but I couldn't overcome the damage I had caused the quarantine to worry about the damage I would cause myself.

The other judges were silent up to this point, as though their only purpose was to add an extra layer of intimidation factor to the chief justice's

already domineering mien, but there really wasn't much to be said—*res ipsa loquitur*, indeed. Anything else was dragging out the inevitable and serving no one. "Superior Court of South Australia. In the matter of the People of South Australia versus Anna Reyes, we find the defendant guilty of high treason against the country of Australia." Yes, yes, get on with it—get me to the chopping block already. "On a personal note, I would have you executed on the spot," Ellis growled, gnashing his teeth at me, "but that abomination you carry dictates any of our efforts to do so would be futile. Instead, your embassy will come to collect you, and you will await trial in your country—hopefully a large, public court-martial if I have anything to say about it!"

"Affirmed," declared the other judges.

I would have been surprised at the chief justice's conduct, except I would have behaved exactly the same way in his position. Arguably, it was the most unforgivable crime possible in this day and age, so emotions were bound to run strong.

"Chief Justice Ellis and Justices Whitaker, Boomer, Francis, Gibbs, Duke, Louis, Charger, Donner, Rivera, Slater, Virgil, and Smitty concurred in the judgement and opinion."

Audience reaction to the verdict was mixed. Most threw the foulest of insults at me, with no appeals for order from the bailiffs, yet others were even less than disinterested, if that was possible—even Australia didn't have a consensus on its place in the world. Some of the next defendants seemed—relieved not to be in my position. At least *someone* was happy.

Still, the vocal ones mattered, and to be at the center of a worldwide spigot of venom was the most soul-wrenchingly humiliating experience of my entire life. The only thing that could possibly have made it worse... No, I forced any ideas out of my head, as they had the unfortunate side effect of coming true. I felt lower than low. For all I had done to make the world a better place for my presence, I undid it all in a moment of indiscretion, in a concession to weakness that blossomed into full-fledged gullibility.

I barely registered being yanked up from my seat and prodded to the awaiting shuttle, pushed along with a truncheon by an aggravated guard who seemed to have a personal vendetta against me, the way he jabbed my back when I didn't walk fast enough for him. I hardly noticed being led through the boarding gate onto a private jet home. I absorbed but couldn't respond to the rigid interrogation the diplomats gave me as they removed my biohazard suit. The most emotion I felt was mild surprise when they informed me that Giga had been mysteriously absent for days and I would instead be turned over to Rush, at his insistence. Oh, *that* made me feel better...

The twenty-hour flight felt like a timeless purgatory—both too long and too short. I couldn't eat even when the attendants forced food into my mouth and pressured me to swallow. Why? Who cared if I lived or died? It wasn't as though suicide would work, and if I suffered a slow, excruciating death over the time I had left, wasn't it my own problem?

I despised Vice for pushing me into these hopeless situations. I was

a worldwide political refugee, the only thing saving me from being attacked by every vigilante on the planet who came within arm's length of me was Rush, acting through our government. Seeing him waiting at the deck upon our landing was like seeing the grim reaper. Walking with him then was like walking to death row, except I wouldn't be granted the explicit privilege of dying at the end.

When we arrived at the office, he left me cuffed as he took his seat. "Before I can release you," he grumbled, looking unimaginably furious, "we will go through a debriefing. I need to know why you did this, and you need to know the consequences, clearly."

I couldn't respond even when I forced myself, beyond the faintest, "Yes, sir."

"So, why?"

I knew I had to speak for him, when I couldn't for the embassy, but I couldn't find my voice. "I..." It was so much more painful being here than under the cruellest of torture devices, every word I couldn't speak a tiny set of fangs tearing into my flesh and ripping me apart. When I couldn't answer, Rush pulled a report up on his station, to inform me of the extent of damage I had caused.

"The quarantine has been compromised," he droned, filling me with immeasurable guilt, "and it is not yet certain how many remain uninfected. The contained infected will be given an emigration allowance and asked to leave, and the remaining uninfected – dwindling as their numbers are – will be given the choice to stay, or leave with infected family members." Then he leaned back and crossed his arms. "The process will be unbelievably costly for Australia as well as us. It's defeatist to say, but it may be easier to give up entirely and remove them from the quarantine, allowing its citizens free association with the rest of the world. However, the legislation has already been in place so long that there are as many resisters on both sides, with no clear majority."

"That's what he said," I interjected.

"What was that?"

I temporarily found determination in relaying my report. Someone else had to know what had happened! "Giga. I overheard him telling Rothe that there were increasing numbers of psycho-terrorists determined to break quarantine, and fighting them all is a losing battle—futile, even."

"I'm sure he didn't mean—"

"In so many words, he suggested the best course of action would be to bring down the quarantine and save everyone a lot of headache."

Rush looked at me as though I was crazy. Clearly, I was, but in this case I was telling the unthinkable, ridiculous truth.

"They told me he's been AWOL for several days, so I know I can't verify or deny it, but there is absolutely no reason I would accuse him of saying it if he hadn't."

"—what does that have to do with you being in Australia?"

"It doesn't, except that I heard them talking while I was searching for records from information Vice gave me."

"What information?"

"Vice said my mother was there, in Australia. He said he was sent by JAM to go, but I bribed him out of it, convinced that I could get in and out without setting off any alarms. They shot me up with something to help me through cold storage, but I didn't realise until I was in that they had only sent me there to infect the populace. Part of JAM's plan to find as many immunities to MLCS as possible and create 100% demand for a cure."

"You should have told me—"

"—and have been denied any chance of seeing her, if she was really there! You told me yourself how strict the borders are! I had to go illicitly or not at all, because if I tried to go through official routes, I would just be blacklisted forever as having ulterior motives for breaking quarantine."

It was futile arguing, both of us knew it.

"It was the perfect set-up," I continued, lambasting myself. "He played to my weakness. Again. I was a fool for believing that swindler."

He was lost in thought for much longer than I thought he would be. I didn't know what else to say that would help me – or implicate me further – and I felt too upset at disappointing him and myself to do anything but await his sentencing. When he did speak again, his voice was cold.

"The minimum punishment will include suspension, with periodic probationary hearings to decide whether to reinstate your service. From this moment, you will be on unpaid leave, although someone will be in contact to ensure your attendance at your court-martial. While it is prescribed, I see no reason to add gaol time in addition to this." He leaned over, taking hold of my wrists even from across the desk, and unlocked my cuffs, then pulled out and emptied a large envelope containing the items confiscated from me by the Australian bobbies. "I assume you will want your wallet and keys now. Any personal effects in your desk will be sent to your home later, as your office will be reassigned in the interim. Your identity will *not* be revealed to the general public, as per our agreement with the Australian embassy. This is the best I can do."

"I understand, sir." It tore me up inside to be having this talk, that I had simultaneously allowed Vice to get the better of me and single-handedly destroyed my career. Everything I had been working toward was gone, just like that. I took my belongings gingerly, as though they would explode at my touch, like everything else.

He dropped the cuffs lazily into a banker's box next to his desk as he stood, gesturing as to walk me out, without touching me. I lowered my head in shame to be escorted from the building in this manner, but I knew I deserved it. When we reached the entrance lobby, he turned his back on me without a second look. "You're dismissed." He wouldn't even say my name, code- or otherwise.

With the heaviest of heavy hearts, I turned away, walking out of

headquarters – and perhaps his life – forever. Though I was tempted, I didn't look back either, trudging through the lobby past bewildered co-workers—well, *ex-co-workers*—who had not yet heard the news. I didn't see any of them as I passed, only Vice and that malicious sneer of his.

How did he do it. No, I knew how—it was always easier for evil to win than good. Goodness slips into evil with the slightest misstep. It was so easy to be bad, and I had just chosen the tougher of the two because...

"...because I didn't want to be like *him*. Whole lot of good *that* did."

Everything that mattered to me was crashing down before my eyes, and now I knew firsthand the awful truth to the saying about taking years to build a reputation, taking an instant to destroy it.

...so be it. I had no more reputation, no more anything, no more *I*. Anna Reyes-slash-Versa was no more, and if I couldn't kill her body, I would kill her mind.

I stormed down 18th to the nearest bar, entering one for the first time in my life, and walked straight up to the bartender. He caught my eye and greeted me with a smile. "Evening, milady. Name's Daniels. What can I get for you?"

"Whatever will kill the pain."

"Ouch. Bad day?"

"You don't know the half of it by far. Gimme."

"Well, what do you like? Scotch, bourbon, whiskey, vodka...?"

Pfff, choices. "Scotch, I dunno. That sounds good."

He narrowed his eyes at me in suspicion. "You ever drink before?"

"Does cough syrup count?"

He scratched his chin as though debating the wisdom of serving me. "How about a Chardonnay to start?"

"Whatever. Gimme."

"ID?"

I pulled my license out, handing it to him and pointing out all of the security features. "100% legal eagle. You can't buy a fake this good."

"Okay, okay, I believe you..." He poured a glass of sparkling white wine, and I downed the entire thing almost as soon as he handed it to me. It felt tingly, but that wasn't enough. "C'mon, you can do better than that."

He shrugged, handing me a beer from the tap. "Imported."

"Don't care where it's from if it works." I drank a little more slowly this time, though it tasted sickening. "Ugh—I might as well drink the cough syrup if it's going to taste *this* bad."

With some hesitation, Daniels mixed up a cocktail or other, pausing before handing it to me. "You aren't driving, are you?"

I dug my keys out of my pocket and slapped them on the counter in annoyance. "Chopper, but like I'd be able to keep me balance in my state, anyway. Jes' load me up."

"You got a way home? How about to pay?"

I was still almost able to think clearly. I needed that drink! "Here."

I took out my wallet and pushed it into his hand. "Gimme."

After a moment, he sighed and gave me the – gin and tonic, I think. Whatever. I sipped at it like it was a mug of hot cocoa, but still in one swig. It felt warm on the way down, almost enough to make me lose myself.

"This all you got?" He shook his head and pressed my now-empty wallet into my hands. "Sorry, I'm going to have to cut you off."

"Wha...?" I whined. "But I c'n still use me card—"

"Company policy. No credit after you're too blind to sign for it, and from my perspective, you look like you can't hold your liquor." He walked from behind the counter and led me toward the door. "You should be glad, though—I gave you the ladies' night discount. Otherwise you'd owe twice what you had on you and I'd have to escort you out less – politely."

"Aww." I was just starting to really feel the buzz. "I haven't blown any chunks yet."

"You need to call someone? I'm not letting you drive. I'll keep your keys here, and you can come back for them when you're a little more sober."

"Need me housh keys," I snapped. At least I had that much sense.

He held out my keys. "Which one?"

I pointed to my apartment key but missed.

"Nice try, but I can tell the difference between a house key and a vehicle's. Here—you can have all the others, they don't look like they will drive anything."

As he pulled the key to my chopper off the ring, I grabbed the rest and shoved the lot in my pants. No, not in my pocket. What was I thinking? I felt like I had no control over myself – yet I was still lucid. Maybe I just needed *more*.

Somehow I coaxed myself into mustering the effort to walk to the nearest ATM to get some more cash. It took me several tries to type in my code correctly, and I ended up pulling out the maximum daily withdrawal, but I had my drink money. *C'mon, body*, I thought, *just behave for a little bit longer, then I can properly smash you up*.

It was a small miracle that the liquor store owner didn't stop me from buying up several bottles of the highest proof spirits I could find. Not saying anything seemed to help, at least until I had already paid. As soon as I was out the door and around the corner, I couldn't drink fast enough.

Oh, yes, I thought as my physical prison seemed to disintegrate. So *this* was why people become addicts. Maybe I would have to try something even stronger, less – legal...

When I got to the last of the bottles, I felt part of myself die. I was too far gone by that point to get anything more, yet – damn me! – I was still mentally coherent. I failed to even destroy myself properly, my *self* didn't want to go.

"Pfff." I slammed my back against the rough brick wall and slid to the ground, ready to pass out there and, ideally, never wake up again. I cried like I had never cried before – not after Vice's cutting began, not after each

subsequent, terror-filled birthday when I felt the most helpless, not even last year when he went a step further and suggested he would up the ante and do things to me that—

My body was starting to come down off its high. Buzz. Whichever it was alcohol did. I craved something more, something that drinking wasn't getting me, but I had no idea what I could do in my state. Smoking? Nah, tastes and smells bad. Anything harder would take more finesse to acquire than I would have for several hours, if not days. I didn't know what to do next besides be sick, and I wasn't ready for *that* again.

"...what about Ibiza?"

"Nah, they caught me last time. I gotta lay low for a while."

"Terrific. So you want a night out, but we can't go anywhere good."

A couple of boys happened by—chatting about clubs and bars, from the sound of it. One of them stopped in his tracks as he noticed me. "Uh, hey there. Are you okay?"

I wiped the tears off my face and clutched my bag of bottles tightly, moaning. "Noo..."

"I know you—aren't you Dad's sub?" the younger of them noted. When I looked up at them and focused hard, I vaguely recalled seeing them before. Rush had mentioned them in passing, but I'd only met them once when they dropped by with their father after I had started living on my own. His brother was only a year older, so it surprised me that they were going barhopping at their age.

I nodded with some effort. "You're – Zhell? And Chet?"

"Wow, you remember us?" The boys exchanged glances, ignoring my butchering of their names.

"Yeah, I – er, *ushed* to work fer yer pop. Fired now, though they won' say as much." I felt so woozy that talking took all of my diminishing concentration. "Ugh," I groaned, trying to pull myself up off the ground.

"Do you need anything?" Zel asked. Had I been in any condition to think, I might have been more concerned by the look in his eye, but concern about myself was the last thing on my mind. I didn't care who did what to me—why, when, where, or even how. He offered me a hand up, and I took it, but my legs weren't responding.

"I need – ride home," I grogged, falling into Tet's arms like a sack of potatoes.

"Uh – sure. We'll give you a lift." He put his arm around my waist to help me walk. He was warm—much warmer than I had expected. It felt nice. They were nice boys. I wondered – how nice...

14. Consortium/Contractual Arrangements

The pounding wasn't from my head after all. Or, not *all* of it. Part of my brain was telling me that someone was at the door—someone angry—yet the rest of my brain was having a difficult time recalling what parts of me did what. I struggled to stand but found myself flailing ineffectually in the old beanbag chair my last roommate left behind and never bothered to collect. Did I even manage to stand? Hmm... Nope, still just flailing in the same spot where I fell asleep. The pounding in my head was starting to match the pounding outside, and nothing I tried could get me out of this crippling paralysis.

When I finally found my bearings to get up and open the door, I saw Rush standing there, looking as stoic as ever – for a moment, at least. His eyes widened in dismay before quickly looking aside. "Versa!" he snapped, turning to block the view into my apartment. "Where are your clothes?"

Hungover though I was, I remembered every painful detail. "I shtill have – me top's on," I slurred, not yet coherent enough to put together words and modesty into a dignified combination. It didn't even feel that drafty, for one thing.

Not waiting for an invitation, Rush pushed me back inside, closing the door behind him but keeping his eyes on it instead of me. If I had been more in touch with the world at that point, I might have been horrified at my conduct. As it was, when he shouted, all it did was make my head throb even more. "I came here to ask you to help me locate Tet and Zel when they didn't come home, and what do I find when I get here? Tet's car outside, and both boys leaving your apartment! *What* did you do last night?"

The pain made me somewhat more honest than I expected to be. "Got plastered..."

"With *minors*?"

I threw myself headfirst into a sofa cushion and covered my head with another to block out some of his screams, to no effect. "'ey din't drink nuthin'," I moaned, feeling myself getting stupider and more agonised by the moment.

"Then what *did* they do?"

"Nuthin' ill-*eagle*..." Did I have to spell it out? Even considering, I thought it was painfully obvious – or maybe just painful? I felt sore all over as the rest of me started to wake up, and I felt sticky in places I realised shouldn't be visible. Oh. I pulled the sofa cover over me, barely. "Gave me ride home..." I added with some due effort at coherence.

"And that's all?"

"Was late. Slept..."

I was starting to feel the full impact of Rush's anger, his eyes boring holes in my very soul.

"Good boys," I added, to get my mind off his wrath. "Helped me out last night. Maybe need to – talk with them 'bout bad influences."

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, backing up without looking until he could reach the sofa cover and pull it over me before facing me again. "Is this what you're going to do?" he snapped. "Live like *Vice*?"

I couldn't help myself. As I sat up with an unforeseen energy, my hand struck him across the face before the slow realisation of what I'd done had hit me. My mouth dropped open. "...now I'm in deep sh—"

"If you were any other agent," he snarled, "I might have other words for you."

"HA," I blurted. "I'm not agent anymore... You know that..."

"And neither am I, but I didn't go and destroy myself over it!"

I forced myself to look at him, though his anger was unbearable. "What's that..."

"I wasn't going to tell you immediately, because I didn't want to add to your guilt, but I was forced to resign from my position as part of the agreement not to release your identity to the public—claimed you went on my orders instead of as a maverick. I figured it would lessen the shock, but I'm not quite sure now that you felt it!"

I knew I deserved his anger, yet... Had he really never been in my position? I hurt in ways I'd never imagined before. "Headache" wasn't a sufficient term to describe what I was experiencing, and the universe itself couldn't contain the pain concentrated in my gut. It was unfathomable that people would willingly put themselves through the things I went through last night... The physical nausea was bad enough without adding the emotional. It hurt – so – *much*. I pounded my head into the arm of the sofa, hoping new pain would blunt out the old. "Nnn... Ngh!"

Whatever else had been on his mind before I had let him in, Rush was now only concerned with stopping me. Despite his rage, he grabbed me to keep me from hurting myself any further, holding my wrists tightly so I couldn't move, until I didn't have the energy to keep thrashing about. When I was a limp, sticky, sweaty, exposed mess that no longer had the capacity to struggle, he fetched my robe and covered me up properly, then he put on some tea and waited patiently while I fully sobered up.

It was the worst experience of my entire life—that being waited on by the one I most admired, as much as I otherwise might have enjoyed it. At least when *Vice* tortured me, I felt fully justified that he was in the wrong.

I hated being the wrongdoer.

"You're spotting," he growled when, I assumed, he figured I'd had enough time to sober up. "When did this start?"

Damn. I let myself get careless. Well, *durp*, I did, but I neglected to clean up in my self-destructive all-night pity session. "...a while ago."

"How long do you have?"

I shrugged. "Byeh." I didn't want him to start lecturing me on full disclosure and all that. Why did it matter when I was on probation anyway? And he was retired? For all practical intents and purposes, I was out of work, and minimising the chance of my dying on the job was irrelevant. I could lose all my money and be evicted tomorrow, spending the rest of my life either in an insane asylum or living in a cardboard box and eating out of the trash, eventually dying from food poisoning or starvation, but it wouldn't be dying for our fine government like I had wanted. Never before and with such all-consuming desperation did I wish I would die early, that I could just crawl into a hole until my time ran out. Nothing else mattered a damned bit, and I wanted off the ride already. Why was it so *far away* now?

"...what's done is done," he stated, being deliberate in his vagueness about which particular thing had been done. "There's no point in trying to change the past."

"Nope," I agreed noncommittally, clutching my robe tightly around me. I had no idea where the conversation was headed and figured I may as well just listen to whatever he had to say.

"I do still care about your well-being, Versa," he tried to assure me, but I wasn't quite convinced. Yes, a part of me always had that unwavering faith of his trust in me, but it was under a deluge of uncertainty, drowning me in a sense of impending doom. Not that yesterday did much to help that. "Even had you meant to destroy the world, I find it hard to believe the world is so fragile as to be able to be upended by one person acting alone. Society has continued this way for aeons and is still going strong, always adapting. If anything, you've guaranteed life to those whose time remaining was in doubt – whether they appreciate it or not."

Words, words, words. "Well, thank you for trying to make me feel better about screwing up royally."

"I'm not just saying that."

My heart and my head were both doing too many flip-flops to make sense of what he was trying to say. "I know you were just doing your job," I apologised. "It's all my fault—I let him get to me again when I should have said no. And you were there for so long..."

"I was there a whopping two months longer than you were there."

Was news to me. "But – you knew more than anyone else about our department's function, the ins and outs of every case—"

"I paid attention and bullied my way through tough situations. I made mistakes as well, same as everyone else."

It was hard to say whether that made me feel better or worse. My mind suddenly flooded with memories of boring hours-long meetings where I knew he had lied or otherwise skewed the facts just to get the point across, things I had ignored then but seemed flagrant in hindsight. Could I say he was in the wrong, that a white lie was worse than not getting funding for all our projects? There weren't many ways to accomplish what he had done...

Still, we were both paying the price for our flaws, and the pedestal I had put him on was tarnished and crumbling.

I felt sicker than sick. All of this tension in the air was making the situation worse, and I felt the most humiliated by having made Rush do what he did for me. If I thought I could make it work, I would have slit my throat that instant, but the obvious reason it wouldn't work was hovering over me, as though putting himself between me and the knives. Perhaps that was why he was still hanging around after finding the boys at my gaff, that he thought he was saving me from the death he didn't know was still five thousand four hundred and ninety-one hours away.

"I really did try to get you off as painlessly as I could manage. Not having your identity publicised was a major effort, and costly for everyone."

"You shouldn't have thrown away *your* career as well. It's not like I have anyone to let down..."

He frowned at me. "You act like there aren't people who still look up to you. I can name at least one young woman who does but maybe hasn't admitted it because she's embarrassed to tell you."

Saga? "No, she's on a Vice kick now, despite my efforts. I showed her—I described every gruesome detail—but she wouldn't hear any of it."

"She didn't want to admit she was wrong. Most people don't, but adolescents especially hate the idea that they didn't get something correct on the first try, even though growing up is all about trying things and learning what works and what doesn't. It takes introspection to realise that we're all works in progress and that mistakes are only the natural way we learn how to do something better. I hate to say it, but it may even take her getting hurt by him directly to show her."

"Like hell I'd let *that* happen!"

"Like hell you'd be able to stop him by moping in your apartment."

"Ouch." I drooped my head in disgrace, feeling the worst for giving up so easily. "So what's next for me. Looking for my remaining family got me nothing and upset the world's delicate balance." My voice droned with the disappointment of someone with no light at the end of the tunnel.

"I would offer somewhere for you to stay for a while—away from temptation—but it wouldn't be appropriate now."

"What?" I protested weakly. "I have my rent covered through—"

"No, you need to be where people are. Even if you got a roommate, it wouldn't be enough. You need to be with other people like you, of similar minds, and you need to provide a guiding light for those around you instead of holing up by yourself. Whether it's Saga or a foster child of your own, even, you have a lot of wisdom to offer to the next generation. It would be nice if you passed some of that along before you go."

I knew what he was saying, I knew it was the upstanding thing to do. My heart just wasn't in it, though. Perhaps he sensed that.

"You've got some time on your hands," he said as though it was a command, "so take a load off for a while. Don't do anything serious, just

relax – but not with five bottles of spirits and *not* with my sons. Go hiking or camping or something. Visit Kensington like you wanted—the real one, across the pond. Just don't think about the legacy you're leaving behind—for now—unless it's with a positive goal in mind."

"What will you do?" I asked, perhaps with the subconscious idea of following him despite better judgement.

He shook his head, looking exasperated. "First, I have to reassure Sal that we'll be okay, since she's still shaken up over it. Then we'll – talk – with Tet and Zel. When everything's settled down, I'll look into another line of work. True retirement's still a ways off for us, especially after we bought the new house."

I felt the burden of guilt more heavily than before. I was certain it wouldn't be easy for someone of Rush's experience to get a job that paid even close to what he had been earning. I tried to think of even one time in my life when my good intentions helped more than hurt, but only the bad times stood out—all seven thousand eight hundred and three of them. Each day that passed was another bad memory drowning out the good, burying my happiness so far under that it took significant effort to find it again, and now that my greatest moment of defeat was from the same source as my greatest victory...

Why couldn't I stop thinking? It was all I could do not to explode from the stressors of the entire sordid situation. All I ever wanted was for my life to have a fraction of the drama I endured on a daily basis, but it just seemed to grow like a mould.

Rush was silent for a bit. I looked up at him, but he barely seemed to acknowledge me. I tried to think of what to say next, but I couldn't—I projected onto him the same feeling of awkwardness, from his mien. "Can I count on you not to do something stupid like try to kill yourself?"

Now his look was penetrating, burning, but no longer with rage. I couldn't help myself, suicidal tendencies and all. "Of course, sir," I agreed truthfully. Even at my lowest, I couldn't disobey him.

He looked askance at my continued use of honorifics, but it seemed to satisfy him all the same. "Then I must say goodbye, and I hope some time will find you in a better place."

His meaning was indistinct. Was he telling me goodbye forever, for real this time? "...sir."

Whether he wanted to add to that, I would never know, as he bowed his head and proceeded to leave. Though I pretended not to care as Rush saw himself out, as soon as the door closed I rushed to the bedroom window and watched him walk back to his car. My heart sank thinking this would be the last time I saw the support system for my entire life, a vanishing shape in the distance.

I got a buzz just then. It was coming from the parcel that had been leaning against my door last night, which I kicked into the apartment just to have it out of the way. My mobile must've been inside – or, one like it, with

the same ring settings. I glanced at the package but couldn't muster the care to pick it up and open it. Even if it was my mobile, the call wouldn't be my mentor—not this soon, even if there had been the slightest possibility he had some forgotten tidbit to share with me. More likely, it was Vice just calling to gloat about his victory over me yet again...

When I dawdled long enough for it to go to voice, it buzzed again, which prompted me to rip into the parcel with anger and answer just to shut up whoever this impatient person was on the other end. "Yo," I answered, with about as much monotone as I could possibly manage as I slumped into the chair by my kitchen counter.

"Versa!" Fender cried. "What happened? I just heard you got put on probation—"

"Pfff," I snorted in derision, though at least her calling meant it *was* my mobile. I would have to check it for bugs later—if I cared. "They gave me the axe. I'm never going back."

"You're..." Her voice died for a moment, and I felt insanelly jealous of it. "Are you okay? Can I come see you?"

"Eh." I didn't figure it would make a difference what I said.

"You're still at Avalon, aren't you?"

"Eh."

Within moments, there was a frantic knock at my door. Did she and Rothe go to the same driving school or something? How in the world...

"It's open," I shouted, not able to find the energy to pull myself up out of my seat.

The urgency she had given off before now gave way to hesitation, my front door cracking slightly as Fender peeked inside, a large envelope in her hands. "Hello?"

"I said that you can come in," I stated in a raised voice. Maybe I shouted—I couldn't tell through the haze of my depression.

She stepped in and closed the door behind her, as though second-guessing coming to see me. "How are you doing?" she asked timidly.

"Eh."

"I brought what they cleaned out of your desk. Er, there was just the one photo." She held the envelope out to me.

"Uh-huh."

When I didn't take the envelope, she laid it on the counter. "I – only heard some gossip about your probation and Rush's resignation. They're being even more tight-lipped about it than usual, considering."

"Good, they're doing their job, unlike me."

She seemed put off. "I mean, I want to know what happened... Not to sound nosy or anything, just – if there was anything I could do, ya know? Some way I could help?"

I took a careful assessment of the contents of my apartment, a little more focused now than I had been the night before. From my spoils of war, there was about a fifth of a bottle of something I'd not quite finished at the

far end of the counter, which I emptied into a glass against all good sense.

"Since when did you start drinking?" Fender asked, less casually and more accusatively.

"Since last night." Who cared what she thought. I didn't answer to anybody anymore.

The next words out of her mouth took a long while to form. I decided to save her the trouble. "You—"

"I was the one who broke into Australia, is that okay?" I interrupted in impatience. "Rush let me go, then he resigned. Now I'm wallowing in my own pity until the sheer shock of still being alive wears off."

My confession caught her off-guard momentarily. "Versa—"

"You might as well stop calling me that," I added, a bit annoyed at the reminder of who I could no longer be. "I'm just Anna now, Denise."

I wasn't sure what the look on her face meant. "...Anna. Look, I understand that you screwed up, even if I don't really understand why you did it. What good is it going to do you to abuse yourself this way?"

"Can't do me less good than anything else."

I started to take a swig when she put a hand over my glass. "Please, hear me out for a moment."

When she wouldn't relent, I gave in, putting the glass down as I rubbed my forehead in aggravation. "Fine, what."

"I have some connections. I can try to get you a position working with one of our contractors, but you'd have to be clean to pass the drug test. I mean, they can tell even if you had cold medicine or ate poppy seeds the day before."

A job? I almost snorted in derision but caught myself. "I don't need a job. I don't care about money."

"Everyone needs a job. Are you set for life or something?"

"Perhaps."

She looked upset. "...fine, I won't argue with that. What will you do, then? Are you going to drink the rest of your life away?"

"Perhaps."

"V— Anna!" she protested, sounding more out of character than I'd ever heard her before. "This isn't any way for you to live!"

"What do you care?" I took a swig before she could react. It tasted off from sitting out uncorked, but it didn't matter to me. "It's not like your work depends on me anymore. I'm just your ex-colleague now."

"It doesn't have to be like that. You—" She broke off, clenching her fists as though angry at me but realising she had no authority over me to do anything about it. "Regardless, I can't let you destroy yourself. You're a good person with a lot of potential."

"Not really." I pulled my bangs out of my face to show her the circle I hadn't bothered to cover up again. "I'm going in the new year."

Her eyes widened in horror before she cringed in embarrassment. If I hadn't known any better, I would have thought she was hurt. "So you lied

on your entrance exam."

"Who hasn't? I wanted this job more than anything, to be an agent and help our country before I died gloriously in battle. That was my lifelong goal, to serve our government and be remembered as a hero. It won't happen *now*, thanks to Vice."

"Buh? What does *he* have to do with Australia?"

"Oh..." I did *not* want to get into this old wound again, but it didn't sound like anything but the whole story would satisfy her. "I'm an orphan, did you know that? Or, I thought I was, but he told me otherwise, that my mother was in Australia. How do I resist the temptation to go when he just shows me the way? I had to know where I came from, to know that part of me—to know why I was abandoned."

She was quiet, looking as shy and pensive as I normally thought of her being. "Of course I didn't know. You don't talk about yourself much."

"I have my reasons."

Despite her appearance, Fender acted like she was afraid of silence, not shutting up. "What did Rush have to say about it?"

"He didn't."

"Not even when you told him about going?"

"He didn't, because I didn't tell him." Criminy, shut it!

"But he resigned over it. Why?"

"Taking due responsibility for his underlings going rogue. I dunno. Whatever you want to believe is the same as the truth."

I was starting to realise why Fender never spoke much before—when she was excited, she blathered on and on like a kid about things that made no sense. It made her sound a lot more like a Denise than a Fender.

"Well, frankly—I'm surprised you stayed under him so long instead of being transferred out at the first opportunity. I know for a fact that Giga had several openings that could have gotten you a big promotion, maybe put you at the head of your own department. You know, Rush has always been the newbie in the special ops branch, and I'm astonished he even managed to last for this long without getting into some major trouble. He talks down to everyone like they're ignorant little kids, then he tries to pass it off as a joke! I think he's prejudiced, too—did you ever notice how almost everyone in our department is the same race? And he treats some of the cleaning crew worse because they're biracial? OH! And did you know he forged documents to get the Bennett case closed before the statute of limitations ran out? I hadn't realised before he tried it running scans of copies will work if they're high-enough quality. Even copies with the signature from a different document taped on would work, so I've gotten Rothe up the security requirements to prevent the possible risk of fraud in the future. I could give you a list of all the questionable practices he's put into effect, like... Oh, the Atkinson case was *really* bad, but Rothe recommended that I keep quiet because 'the ends justify the means' and the like. Between you and me, though, I don't know how long I can live with giving false testimony—"

I knew Fender tended to play the morality police, even more than I did, but I couldn't remember her being remotely this obnoxious before. Was it the alcohol, or did I just see everything in a new light now? Either way, I couldn't stand another word. "Please stop talking."

"...what?"

"Shut your mouth and don't open it again. Just – don't." I tried to say it in as neutral a tone as I could, but even I felt the force of anger in my voice after the words were out of my mouth. I didn't want to hear the truth, especially not the ugly truth, not about the single guiding light in my life.

"...oh." I could guess at what conclusion she'd reached, and it was likely to be only half correct at best. "...OH." Her expression betrayed her feelings of being perplexed – or disappointed? "Did you and Rush...?"

"I hate gossip," I answered pragmatically. "I hate thinking the worst of others, and I hate others spreading bad news about other people behind their backs, especially when it's not true. Whatever Rush did or did not do is irrelevant to me now, and I'd sooner just not talk about him anymore, ever." *It just hurts too much*, I added to myself.

Fender finally seemed to grasp what I wanted. "I'm – sorry, Anna. I just figured... Well, if you weren't the worst bad guy out there, maybe you'd feel better?"

It was difficult to muster even a smirk. "I appreciate the sentiment, but please – all I want now is to be left alone."

"How alone?" She raised her eyebrows as though distressed at the idea I would be a hermit until I die. "I mean, if you ever need a hand with – oh – moving or something, or if you just want to hang out or have a shoulder to cry on, you know you can give me a buzz any time, don't you?"

What could I tell her? "Of course, it's why you have my number."

"No, really. Please allow me to do you a service sometime. I can't abide by being this non-friend ex-colleague kind of thing."

I grasped my glass again. "I'll let you know, really. At the moment, you're just getting on my nerves with all the hovering, Mum."

She sighed and rolled her eyes but gave me a hug and a peck on the cheek. "Please feel better soon. Despite what the world has to say, there are still people who care about you."

I couldn't help frowning. I had no idea she had paid me any mind before and still wanted to... I shook my head. "Have a good life."

Whatever else she might have wanted to say, she must not've been able to add to that. Without another word, she waved goodbye and stepped out the door, out of my life forever. I'd ostracised myself from two people today, and who knew how many more bridges I could have burned if I tried. I might've stopped Fender from leaving if I thought I had a chance at doing something that wouldn't just bring her down into my funk, but what could I do? I didn't know anything or anyone worse for someone as people-shy as she was than someone who could only see gloom. Not that—given the rate at which he seemed to find me—I wanted to give Vice more ammunition for

my nightmares.

Once Fender was gone, I finally opened the envelope she brought, containing the framed photo Carter had taken at our office party five years ago. Everyone in my department was in the shot, particularly Rush. I had liked it before for its subtlety, but now it just felt like a reminder of what I didn't have... I threw it across the room, furious at myself for throwing them away in the same manner. How could I ever face any of them again...

The days after that dragged by, interrupted only by being driven to and from my dull and unsurprising court-martial, though I was mildly more cooperative for attempt number two. After my expulsion was made official, I found myself glued to the telly, when I wasn't asleep and hoping I wouldn't wake up, or staring at the ceiling, hoping it would collapse on me. The fear of staying in one place that had me flitting from one away assignment to the next had vanished, replaced by despair and lethargy. The most activity I got outside of eating and basic grooming functions was rapidly changing the channel when some news blip about Australia came on. No one called, no one knocked—not even Fender, as much as I figured she might try again and this time berate me for watching such mindless drivel as an escape from the horrors I'd endured. I might even have welcomed that as a change of pace, but I didn't want to encourage her. I didn't want anyone having to deal with my misery, to be honest. It was as though I was a prisoner in my own mind, freedom lying beyond the other side of the door but nothing there that wasn't already here.

My mind kept latching onto the aftermath, the sickening feeling of being lower than the lowest bug on the planet squished on the underside of someone's shoe. I felt so ill that I could barely eat anything, which by then was appropriate because there was barely any food in the apartment. I spent three-fourths of the day in bed, and only a fourth of that actually asleep.

After two weeks, I couldn't stand it anymore. I needed resolution, some motivation to break out of this malaise. Rush's advice was sound—I needed a catalyst to get me back to being the active, contribution-minded person I once was.

So I called his house. It was a stupid idea, but...

"Good day, this is Sal Amanda—"

I hung up. Damn it! There was no way I was talking to his wife, not even to try to throw myself at their mercy and beg for forgiveness for my transgressions. It seemed I lost my last chance to see the boys again when they snuck out before I could rise from my drunken stupor, now that my only avenue of communication with them was closely guarded. I wanted to explain myself, to clear the air about that night, but that was a luxury denied to me. Before, I wouldn't have thought twice about dropping in as an old friend, but they *were* Rush's family...

What about *my* family? I had put so much effort into regaining lost time with the Rockfords—they had to appreciate everything I had done for them, hadn't they? I didn't have a lot of options otherwise. For instance, I

didn't have my bike. It seemed silly not to go get it back, but I had other priorities, and it could wait even if it had been towed by now.

It took me most of the day to figure out the bus schedule and how to get to the house from my gaff. By the time I arrived, it was much later in the day than I'd planned, but I knocked all the same, not sure what to expect.

"Anna!" Nan looked delighted to see me, as usual, but her face fell as soon as she saw my mood. "What's the matter? Where's your chopper? I didn't hear you ride up..."

I gulped nervously, feeling like the prodigal daughter. "Nan—I was wondering... Is there any chance – I could move back in?"

She took my arm. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Nothing happened... I just—" It was hard to lie to Nan, especially now, and I drooped my head and shoulders in defeat, fighting back tears. "I lost my job. I screwed up big time. No one else cares about me, no one will miss me if I disappear."

"What?" Her gaze seemed to pierce my soul, scanning its depths for the truths I wasn't telling her. "Anna, is this about..." Bless her heart, if she had even the slightest inkling about my involvement with Australia, she didn't say. "Oh, don't discount yourself just because you feel like you don't measure up. Everybody fails."

I stared at her for a moment, not sure if I wanted to laugh or not. I couldn't imagine anyone in history who had screwed up as phenomenally as I had, who had knowingly destroyed everything he or she had set out to build. Even if it was just a bit of knowledge, it was still knowledge trusted to my protection.

"Do you need money?"

"Oh, no, not that." I shook my hands in dismissal. "I have plenty of money. I just – need a shoulder to cry on."

"Oh, sweetie..." She took me in her arms and gave me the tightest hug she could manage. "Of course you can move in, if I have anything to say about it."

I gladly returned her embrace, feeling all my cares melt away at her touch. "Thank you, Nan."

"Anna?"

I looked up to see Mr. Rockford—Pop—standing there. Nan let go, and I turned to Pop, bowing in humility. "Pop, please excuse my rudeness. I wish to return home... I want to move back in with all of you."

He looked dazed, as usual. "But – where would you stay? All the rooms are taken now—"

"I'll move into the basement, if that is acceptable. I no longer have a job, but I can pay my way, and I will be more or less out of your hair."

He seemed to be – distraught? overwhelmed? pleasantly surprised? Whichever it was, he finally broke into a smile, giving me a hug. "It's good to have you home again, Anna."

When we settled down, I cut to the chase. "I don't want to just be

another boarder. I'll pay rent and utilities, but I also want to help out around the house. First, I will straighten the basement – of course. Then I want to help take care of Epic, and I want to do any errands that need to be done—"

"Whoa!" Pop cried, astonished. "Slow down! We can take this one step at a time, you know."

"I can't wait," I protested. I didn't have a lot of time, and I didn't want to waste it on silly things. I had a lot to do before I went. "I'll rent a van and bring everything tomorrow, or the day after – or I may just throw it all out and start over."

"Anna!" They laughed at me for being so dismissive of stuff, but it really was just – stuff. All my possessions would still be around long after I wasn't, and I wanted to *do*, not have. I didn't know what my plans were yet, only that I needed to make the most of whatever I did. Maybe they didn't understand what I needed—what we *all* needed. I would have to tell them.

Everything was pleasant at first. I started to feel ill when my mood wasn't chipper, but—all things considered—I couldn't complain. The day I moved back in was a circus, trying to make the basement liveable. I couldn't sleep at all the first night, as lumpy as my bed had gotten in transit, and I had to use the old futon – which was surprisingly comforting, making me feel as though someone was with me. From then, I had dreams of nestling up with a beloved companion, and I bid the tatty old mattress a fond good riddance, pleased to have outlived it in the end.

The first morning back at the house, I finally caught Nan alone. "So, did anyone visit you guys while I was gone? Like, from my work?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "No. Why do you ask?"

Strange... "Because – when I said I was supposed to turn in Simon, I was really supposed to turn *you* in, Nan."

She stared at me for a long time, which filled me with worry. "Is that so."

"Uh-huh. Your real name is Hatake Nikkou, isn't it?"

Nan looked away with an indescribable expression on her face. "A long time ago, it was."

"What did Riordan do? What was he working on? ...not that it really matters now, since I've been fired."

She had a smirk on her face that betrayed her embarrassment. "To tell you the truth, even I don't know for certain. He was a good man, but he knew how to keep secrets. Frankly, I didn't want to know—easier that way."

Huh. *That* was what I was so afraid about? "I'm glad I got fired, then. I don't know how I would have reported, 'She doesn't know anything.'"

"Why is it so important *now*, what he did so many years ago?"

I frowned at her. "That's what I'd like to know..." At least that was one mystery solved, however anticlimactically. "How about – Callisto?"

She furrowed her brow. "Callisto? Sky's foster mum?"

I furrowed my brow as well. "She's not your sister?"

"No – oh! I know what you're talking about. That was an error in

Stormy's obituary. It caused us a lot of confusion."

"I'd say it did." At least that was off my list now, too.

Even Epic was warming back up to me a little, though I had to prod him. "Epic," I asked him as he was washing the dishes from breakfast, "do you remember when we first met? When you were a baby?"

He gave a worried look, but didn't look at me. "...Epic remembers."

"What do you remember?"

"Epic did not like outside. Epic felt unhappy. Anna saw Epic and said, 'Don't cry.'"

I nodded. "And then what?"

"Anna said, 'The world is big and scary, but you don't have to be afraid.' Anna gave Epic her glasses. Epic felt better—outside was smaller."

"Indeed, I did. I had a foster brother a little older than you who was just as scared, at first. I did my best to help him, but I kept thinking about you. So did my other pop."

"Anna-Pop made Anna go away."

"Oh, no—not at all," I protested, trying to nip that kind of negative thinking in the bud. "He fostered me. I was never meant to stay with him forever. My other—"

I broke off. It still stung, thinking of my prior fosters. It wouldn't do any good explaining to him the inherent difficulties of being handed off from one foster home to another, barely remembering the one who gave me the name Reyes as more than another overwhelmed adult. Yet... I forced myself to dig deep and try to remember only the good times, like that first meeting, but Epic also became colder, more distant as he got older.

"Epic, do you not like me?"

"Anna is Anna," he insisted, turning away.

"But what does that mean?"

He glowered and wouldn't look me in the eye. "No."

"You don't like me?"

At least he had put the dishes down before he started his tantrum. "*NO!*" he cried.

"Epic!" I had to stop this quickly, before it got out of hand. "Epic," I coaxed, "will you tell me why you don't like me?"

"No," he blurted, "like Anna. Love Anna!"

This was news to me! "What? You *love* me?"

Though he still wouldn't look at me, he seemed like he was going to cry and never stop. "Epic loves Anna. Anna is Anna."

I almost didn't have words for him. "Then why do you treat me like a stranger?"

"Anna – will die."

My blood ran cold. "Yes, Epic. Everyone dies, but—"

"Anna will die soon."

So he knew – and was heartbroken by it. I couldn't believe that he... No, he must have seen when I had first spotted, perhaps even before I knew I

had, then as he got older, he realised what it meant. Maybe it possessed him all these years, the overwhelming sorrow of a loved one having to die at an unexpectedly young age and the inability to cope with the knowledge.

Yet that didn't excuse his behaviour. "So – instead of being nice to me, you push me away? That's very rude of you, Epic! How do you think I felt all this time? I love you, too! Would you like me to push *you* away? Treat you like a bad person? Are you a bad person, Epic?"

"Epic is not bad person!"

"Bad people hurt other people, that's what makes them bad people! And being ignored and pushed away hurts!" I hated to raise my voice, but after years of taking it in silence, I couldn't stand it. "Do you understand? You hurt me!"

If he wanted to cry, he couldn't, which must have felt even worse.

"And now you've made *me* a bad person! Does it hurt? Do you like me yelling at you like this?"

"No..." he whimpered, tears starting.

I frowned, then I gave him the biggest hug I had in me. At last, he wept on my shoulder and wouldn't stop. I didn't want to let him go, as long as it had taken me to finally get acknowledgement from him...

"C'mon, Eppie," I coaxed, hoping to bond at last, "want to go out with me?"

"Go where with Anna?"

"There's something I need to do, and I'd be grateful if you were a part of it."

"Epic wants to be with Anna forever."

I couldn't help smiling at him. "I want to be with you, too. I always will be, too, if you keep me in your heart."

"Anna don't die."

"That's not my choice, Eppie," I pouted. "I'll tell you what *is* my choice, though. Rather, I'll show you."

At my encouragement, he braved the germie outside to take the bus with me to the courthouse, then to the DMV. When we returned, Saga was back from school, surprised by our absence. "Where did you two go?"

"To get this," I stated proudly, holding up my new license.

"Anna is Anna Rockford," Epic proclaimed.

Saga stared at my license in awe, a smirk s-l-o-w-l-y crossing her face. "It's about time you joined the family," she scolded with a grin.

"I agree," Pop interrupted.

I turned to look at him, suddenly feeling embarrassed at making a big deal of it. "Yeah, well. Thought I'd better make it official."

"Glad to have you aboard, sis," Saga cheered as Epic hugged me yet again for good measure. I never felt as much love as I did then, and it made me unbelievably happy—why I didn't do it sooner, I'll never know.

As I went to put away my name change papers, Pop caught me by myself. "He finally told you, then?"

Huh? "...how do you mean? Told me what?"

"Why he was so upset."

I nodded slowly, uncertain whether to tell him. No, I needed to tell, because they would all be directly affected by my death now, like it or not. "He was upset all this time because he knew all along that I'm going to die at the new year."

To my surprise, Pop wasn't. "I'm glad he told you."

"Did – you know?"

He nodded. "I was hoping you would tell me yourself, and I'm glad you finally did."

I was aghast at my apparent inability to keep secrets. "How long did you know?"

"Since Epic first comprehended what spotting was all about. It was the first thing he told me, after he did the math—all on his own, too."

Was I the only one in the whole world who didn't know a thing about anyone else? "...I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

"Don't be," he insisted. "*I'm* sorry I let the walls between all of us get so big over the years rather than clearing the air earlier. Guess I've lost my interpersonal skills."

I sighed in disappointment. "I think we all did."

Pop shook his head. "I thought – maybe if Epic saw how the three of you were supposed to leave home, maybe he would, too. Eventually."

"You would have *scared* him into leaving?"

"Not scared, just – I dunno, *bored* him into leaving." He laughed at himself. "I mean, wouldn't *you* get cabin fever with just me for company?"

I had to grin, despite my disappointment in his failure to plan. "I'd worry more about *you*, Pop."

Still, I was on a roll—might as well clear the air with Saga while I was at it.

"Hey, Sagagaga," I called, knocking on her doorframe. "It's your turn for Tell-All Tag."

"Eew," she complained, "you haven't called me that in ages!"

"With good reason, I take it," I said with a chuckle.

She laughed all the same, which I appreciated. "Come in, then. I agree, the wall between us should come down—not for full disclosure, but because I can't keep it between us anymore."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, we were divided over – you know who, at first, but I was too embarrassed to tell you then I really wanted to go to the concert to pretend I might've met someone famous. I didn't think I actually *would* get close to..."

I furrowed my brow at her. "Wait, so – what?"

"You told me he just uses people, didn't you? Well, I wanted to use *him*. I don't care about him in the slightest. I just... When I got his photo, I was really excited because I wanted to use that to make myself look more desirable at school."

I couldn't believe my ears. "You're talking about Vice?"

She cringed as I said his name. "Ye~ah, him."

Her reaction told me she meant it. I thought back for a moment and realised that she had avoided ever saying his name since the concert. It was almost funny how our stances had been reversed—I was speaking about him more easily while Saga was clamming up about him. "That *is* pretty funny," I had to admit.

"Is it?" She played nervously with her fingers. "I just feel bad that I put you through so much for such a selfish thing that backfired."

"Did it?"

She shrugged without emotion. "Seems like none of the boys care that much that I met him. All it did was make my friends show their true colours, and even then no one really remembers after a few months."

"That's good, though. It shows that good—and bad—things don't last forever. That's why you have to form relationships based on things that *do* last, like mutual respect."

"But, how do I judge that? I thought I could trust, say, Glory, but then she went and broke my camera."

"You can't, not always. Sometimes, you just have to take the risk. Sometimes..." My voice drifted off. "...you have to let people let you down. It's how we learn."

Though I had made amends with my family, I had mixed emotions about it. It felt like our shared understanding only emphasised how I still hadn't cleared the air with Rush and his family, and I hated the idea of dying with that regret hanging over me. If only—

My mobile buzzed just then. I answered it without thinking, though I didn't know who would be calling me anymore. "Hello?"

"Versa," came that throaty voice, filling me with shock. "Can you come by the house? It's important."

It was too coincidental. Yet— "Of course, sir," I blurted, eager to fulfill my mission. "I'll be there as soon as I can." Were things finally going my way?

My heart skipped to be seeing him again, though I had given up all hope. Out of sentimentality, I put on my full uniform again and practically flew from the bus stop to the townhouse, feeling a little worried only when I failed to see his car there. Was he parked in the garage?

Just then, I felt a hand clap over my mouth and a burly arm grab me around my chest. I fought desperately to break free, but my assailant was too strong, and he had an assistant. The two bound my wrists behind my back and shoved a gag in my mouth, tying it securely. *NO!* I thought. *He's too early! I can't—*

15. Multiple PI Leadership Plan

It was dark when I came to, my head throbbing from where one of my kidnapers clobbered me with a blunt object. There was the dimmest of lights filling the room, and I could just make out the shapes of a chair or two and some cabinets against the walls.

Oh, and Vice coming at me like a starving predator.

"Are you awake now? ...good."

My blood curdled to hear his voice—a perfect likeness of Rush's. I seethed with anger to have fallen for his trap, to have him corrupt one of the last remaining things meaningful to me. I jerked at my bonds with a furious anger, but they were too tight.

I hated being tied up. It was the worst feeling, being unable to do anything. I had experienced enough paralysis with my fainting spells to then add being bound and gagged to that. Naturally, Vice loved it when I was tied up, because I was quite literally his captive audience—his helpless little play toy, unable to fight back when he pressed his body against me as he did, lips in a sneer against my cheek.

"How's my little vir—"

Yet this time when he grabbed me, I didn't react—no squirming, no fright, not even cold chills. I could have been stabbed through the heart and not felt a thing. If I had unconsciously done it to fight back and show him that he had no power over me in that way anymore, I would have felt more confident. Instead, I just felt broken. Still, I couldn't deny that I liked the end result.

"No," he whispered, pushing me away in anger. "*No!* You've gone and ruined everything now!" Here, he flicked on the overhead light and tore off my gag. "Who was it? Tell me! I'll *kill* him!"

"Who was what?" I retorted, knowing full well what he meant but, for the first time in my life, enjoying the game. I wasn't about to tell him it was *two* hims, either. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"You've destroyed my carefully-laid plans! Aagh!" He grabbed his face as though in pain. "All my hard work wasted! *Years* spent building up to my finest moment! I was going to go out in the most stylishly obscene act of torture ever, and now it doesn't—"

In the middle of his tantrum, he unexpectedly froze. Uh-oh, I didn't like that expression.

His face scrunched up as he stared into mine, as though reading my mind. "...no, not 'her' – unfortunately," he sighed, flopping backwards into one of the other chairs. "Never as interesting as that." After a moment, he

hunched forward, crossing his arms and thinking. The glare he gave me next was threatening, penetrating. "Are you – expecting anything?"

Quietly, I swore every filthy obscenity I could remember, in every language I could remember. I knew the possibilities, but it was far too early to know, and that could change so much if...

I laughed then. I laughed long and hard. It was so clear to me now, in this moment of epiphany, and it was hilarious despite the risk, despite my current fate in the hands of my worst, closest enemy. I laughed so long and so hard in spite of myself that it took Vice striking me across the face to break me out of my delirium.

"I still don't see what you were trying to accomplish by all this," I jeered, gaining confidence once again. "You have no control over me."

Nevertheless, he looked contemplative, as though trying to work out a Plan B for whatever his master scheme was. "It may be viable," he hinted, which unsettled me. "In fact... Oh man, oh man, oh man. Now I wish I hadn't waited so long!"

My imagination was racing out of control. I didn't like the sound of this. Vice would do his damndest to make my life miserable. I strained at my wrist binds, hoping to free myself when he wasn't paying attention.

"What exactly is the matter with you?" I demanded, a weak effort at distraction. "Why do you torture me like this? What's the appeal?"

He leaned in close, as though to kiss me. Feel as I did otherwise on things now, that would still set me off, and I tried my best not to show it lest he do so out of spite. "It's fun," he crooned.

"Fun."

Vice leaped grandly to his feet with flourishing gesticulations. "Of course you wouldn't understand the sheer adrenaline *rush* that comes from dishing out pain! Will I cut you open with a knife and poke at your insides? Will I let scorpions crawl all over you to see if they'll be provoked enough to sting? Or maybe – I'll tie you up with razor wire and tighten it – ever – so – slowly... How much fun is it to watch someone squirm, to know every little qualm, every button to push! You were the most amusing plaything I ever had, because you were *you!*"

His hands dropped limply to his side in dejection before he squatted down with his face in mine once again. "Then you just *had* to go and figure it out and spoil my playtime by not being so easily squicked. What fun is it tormenting someone who's no longer pure?" His pearl-white opaque shades were even more like death's frigid glare than ever before. "But I've still got you. Nothing can break our bond, no mind-over-matter is going to erase what we have. I can still do this." He leaned back and clapped his hands together as though having given himself a pep talk.

Wait—he had said 'go out in style', in so many words... "How long do you have?"

His frown was perplexing as he touched his forehead. Even a big conceited jerk like him had that reflex, apparently. "End of the year," he

said with a sniff, perhaps deciding that I couldn't spoil anything by knowing that much. "I won't even see my next birthday, so I was going to ruin yours. It was going to be your worst birthday surprise ever. Could still be, but I'll need to work out the finer details."

I was about to laugh again. We were going to die on each other's birthdays. Fate – or irony? – had a strange sense of humour. I wasn't about to let him know what I knew, of course, and I wasn't about to let him keep having his way with me. I needed him to keep talking while I worked my binds. "What was Australia about then, really? Your stupid gun box spoiled any chance at—"

"Did you really think I gave a dam?" He threw his arms in the air, standing up and facing away from me. "Guess so, if you fell for that tripe. 'Mummy? Are you my mummy?' Bah – what does the past matter when the *present* is where all the action is! How I was born is irrelevant—I'm here now, I'm-a enjoy it for all its exciting worth." Vice paused in his diatribe, looking over his shoulder at me. "Still, the resemblance is uncanny, isn't it? You know, for a random stranger and all."

All that risk for nothing, then... It figured. "So who were they? My parents... Your—"

"Pssh, I dunno. Dead as soon as we were both dumped in that dump of an orphanage, for all I know – or care." He waved a hand in dismissal. "Nah, people like us, we weren't meant to have parents. My mum, my pop – your mum, your pop – it's all a load of meaningless trifle. All that means anything now is you – and – me."

It sickened me how often he tried to pair us up like this, the idea of our being inseparable. Just because we were— I fought back my recurring nausea to focus on getting out of there, my recurring but, unfortunately, only temporary solution. I tugged once again at my binds and felt a snap. I was almost free! Now I just needed an opening to—

There was a crash at the door. Though it was dimly lit, as the tiny light swinging overhead didn't illuminate that far, I could make out the burly shape of a man, but his silhouette wasn't clear enough for me to distinguish who it was by shape alone.

"Get the hell out of here, old man," Vice shouted, pulling a gun from behind his back. "This is *my* time!"

The newcomer walked up and drew his gun. "Don't make me put a bullet in your head, kid. You'll have the slowest death in history."

My blood curdled to hear his voice. "Giga!" I shouted, not sure if I should be relieved or frightened.

He turned to glare down at me. "Versa," he sneered. "Thanks a lot for pulling that off. I didn't figure Vice had the balls to do the job himself."

"As though *you* did," Vice retorted. "Sending in an internationally-renowned star instead of doing it your own damn self?"

"I'm not an idiot like you. Plausible deniability—and who more deniable than a B-list hack of a 'musician'?"

Vice and Giga had their guns on each other. It was almost a perfect chance to make a break for it, once I worked the blade out of the false skin on my wrist, but they would be expecting it. Further, I needed something to report to the authorities. Maybe if I held out a little longer—

"What do you think you're doing, Giga?" I yelled at him. "Why are you working with the bad guys? With *this* low-life?"

"Don't mistake me for the bad guys," he countered, as full of disdain as ever. "We just happened to have the same motives. I have nothing to do with JAM or this incompetent buffoon." He chanced a glare in my direction. "I did, however, commission their inception."

"Why?"

Giga gave me a disgusted look. "The quarantine is a hefty expense draining the world's resources, and for what? So the Aussies can keep inbreeding, ostracised from the rest of the world? MLCS is only a problem in terms of marketing. If we convince people to accept them as mere age spots, look at how much we'll save the entire planet in time and money!"

I glared at him in bewilderment. "That's not your decision to make! What about the innocents who don't want to be subjected—"

"—to *knowledge*? Yes, a little knowledge can be harmful, but it has yet to be shown that MLCS is anything other than a mild nuisance. Anyone intelligent has ignored the accepted meaning behind spotting. Only those who have tried to 'prove' their forecasted deathdates to be wrong have been caused any distress, and they have still been thwarted, by whatever means."

"Including paralysis!"

"Paralysed life is better than instant death."

"Is it?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Did he believe that bleeding to death in agony was better than dying quickly, painlessly? "Life isn't just about living as long as possible—quality of life is also important."

"Yet this is something denied to those in the quarantine, no?"

"They can leave whenever they want!"

"Not the ones who leave—the ones who *stay*." Giga puffed himself up as though in indignation. "Tell me that spending over ten years in the world's biggest zoo is a paradise, being denied the chance to leave because doing so means giving up, in some cases, ancestral homes! Yes, the people there may leave, but they may never go home again—do you know what that feels like?"

Finally I understood. "You're a displaced Aussie, aren't you?"

"Damn straight!" he growled. "All I wanted was to see my family again, just over in Bunabun. Nope, I left the quarantine, I'm barred for life now. Get the damned government out of my home!"

"You – tried to have an entire continent condemned because you wanted your house back?"

"My *house*?" he jeered. "How about my wife and kids, too scared to follow me out here? How about how I had to start over because my jerk brothers wouldn't front me money when my now *ex*-wife kept everything

because, ha ha, I couldn't come after her? Well, I've got that little tramp now, haven't I?"

"This is about petty revenge?" I felt my eyes roll back into my head in disbelief. "*Tell me you aren't that stupid!*"

"Not petty. It all comes together in the end—the world saves its septillions in cash money, and I get to go and beat the harlot who decided *my* money was worth more than the sanctity of marriage! So what if—"

He was cut off by a deafening shot, almost literally. I didn't wait around to see who had pulled the trigger, using the distraction to slice apart my bonds, but what I could hear over the padded footfalls I made as I bolted to the door indicated Vice.

"Didn't see *that* coming, did you?" he shouted with equal amounts of venom as what Giga had just been spewing. "Nobody—NOBODY—steals *my* spotlight! Not even *you!*" He whirled around when I was only a leap of faith away from the exit, unloading his gun at me.

One bullet caught my shin, and crippling pain shot through my leg. Another hit me in the back, stopped by my flak jacket, but the force knocked me down all the same. I fell to the floor with a tumble, slamming into the far wall with a groan. *This isn't the worst he's done to me*, I chanted, willing myself to stand again, but my strength was abating rapidly. I hadn't yet recovered from my deep chill, the damage I had endured more extensive than I had realised.

Snickering with glee, Vice strolled in my direction, convinced of his evident superiority. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," he crowed. "These big shots think they're all that and a bag of crisps because they have money, power, and status, but one *tiny* bullet can bring that all down like a house of cards." He stopped and spat at Giga's body before resuming his approach. "Guess he must've really believed in that whole 'age spots' thing. I was able to blow his brains out with no trouble what – so – ever. Too bad he didn't take advantage of that so-called knowledge he was touting to plan ahead."

Use your fear, I told myself. *GET THE HELL OUT OF DODGE*. All I needed was for my leg—

"Just look at me! I had my entire life planned out, from beginning to oh-so-tragically-soon end. Every step of the way, I worked out each little detail that would get me to where I am now—on top of the world, with no one to stop me! I have the money, power, and status to do whatever I want, whenever I want, to whomever I want! Oh, yeah, sister! I'm all that and a *truckload* of crisps, and I'm invincible until—"

He paused in his monologue to... I had no idea what he was doing. He dropped his arms by his side, letting his gun clatter to the floor. His head drooped, and his entire body seemed to go slack.

"Ah, buzzkill." He sighed with all the melodrama he could muster. "Time goes so quickly when you're having fun, doesn't it? Only a few short months to go, a few sands in the hourglass." Then he put his hands on his hips for a bit before scratching his chin. "Maybe I should have stolen that

turntable earlier and gotten my gig started at fifteen? Would that have given me a few more years to squander my newfound wealth? Or would that have cancelled out my getting you where I want you—here and now?"

I strained with all my might to stand, but my leg wouldn't respond. I couldn't hobble away fast enough to escape Vice's grip—he forced me to the floor again, pinning my body with his knee and grabbing my wrists so I couldn't fight back.

"What are you going to do to me, then?" I jeered. "Have your way with me? I'm afraid you were beaten in that department, twice!" Screw it, I may as well attack his pride if I couldn't attack his face—if he didn't know about my deflowering until now, he certainly wouldn't know about the boys.

"Say that again," he growled, tightening his grip on my wrists.

"I've had twice the men you are, at the same time. Oh, compared to *those* big, virile studs, you're a little boy." I laughed especially because it was true. "Would I even feel it if *you* took a shot?"

"SHUT YOUR FAT MOUTH."

He let go of my left wrist for only a moment with the intent to strike me, but a moment was all the time I needed. I grabbed his gun and smashed it against the side of his head, knocking him off-balance. *Get up!* I willed, and the adrenaline kicked in at last—I was out the door in a flash. *Don't look back, don't see him gaining on you – JUST RUN.*

I made it just as far as the door when I fell onto a shepherd's crook. At first glance, it looked like a costume prop, but my failing capacity for movement made it a godsend. I picked it up and put my weight into it to carry me outside, to slam the door shut and hopefully keep Vice from getting to me too quickly. As I did, the rudimentary crutch splintered in the middle.

Spectacular! I wedged the narrowest piece under the door, using what I could hold of the larger half to help myself hobble to the roof's edge. Hopefully someone could—

"HELP!" I screamed, as Vice's angry pounding shook the door. It wouldn't hold for long. I hefted myself over the side, falling onto the fire escape. "*HELP ME!*"

I heard Vice finally break open the door, and I kept still, hoping to buy a few moments of time to think.

"Hey, are you okay up there?"

I looked down at the stranger below me. "There's a man with a gun after me! He shot me in the leg!"

"Hold on, I'll get help!" He took out his mobile and started to dial when a burst of red exploded from his hand. "*Aagh!*"

I looked back up to see Vice standing over me menacingly, gun slightly smoking from the last discharge. "Playtime's over, love."

No! I couldn't be his captive again! I threw myself down the stairs, rolling over the side and barely catching onto the edge as I hung in complete powerlessness. It was at least two stories down if I was to fall, and I wasn't sure if my legs would survive the impact.

Vice stomped his way toward me. I had no choice—I let go.

CRACK.

Most of my weight went landed on my right leg, already bleeding from the gunshot. The pain was blinding, and I couldn't move – but, at least Vice didn't, either.

"He's got a gun!" I cried, trying my best to point at him. Finally, a few other bystanders saw the commotion and came to my rescue, giving him pause as he raced back up the fire escape.

BLAMBLAMBLAMBLAMBLAM!

I nearly went deaf from the sound of gunfire in my ear as someone unloaded on Vice. I knew it wouldn't kill him, if he was telling the truth, but I could still hope. I saw an explosion of blood from his left forearm, before he fell over the side of the building, screaming in agony. It wasn't quite how I envisioned him getting his due, but it was pretty satisfying all the same. How would he survive it, though...

"Are you okay, ma'am?"

I looked up to see Lester, and I broke into the biggest smile. "Fancy seeing you here."

"You think one shot to the gut can take me down?" He clutched his middle all the same. "Okay, it hurts, but I'm still active."

I winced in misery. "Wish I could say the same for myself."

Lester nodded at one of the bystanders. "Watch her for me until the paramedics get here. I'm going after the gunman."

"Yes, sir." The stranger at my side put pressure on my leg. "You don't look so good, sweetie," she noted with worry.

I forced a laugh. "At least I made it." It was true—I felt as close to invincible as I could get. It didn't matter that I was the most hated person in the world. At the moment, I was surrounded by protection. "Thank you."

When the ambulances arrived, I directed them to search the building before letting them so much as look at me. I wanted to know that Giga was dead before doing anything else. As misguided as he was in his thinking, he still probably meant well, and I needed at least that closure.

Of the four medics, three emerged from the building with a stretcher bearing Giga. The fourth tended to me before he would say so much as a word about the body, shaking his head in exasperation as he examined my wounds. "I know you had to do whatever it took to save your skin, but your leg took the brunt of it. It's mangled beyond repair from the knee down. I'm afraid we'll have to amputate it."

Fine, whatever. My life was slowly disintegrating as it was—what was a leg. "Cool," I jeered.

"...cool." He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Bionic parts are getting better all the time, aren't they? Maybe I'll just have the other one off, too, possibly my hands—"

"Uh, they're still quite expensive, even if we only do your right leg. Even with insurance, that's a deductible of 100." When I didn't flinch, he

added, "That's in *thousands*."

"Spoilsport." I didn't have insurance now, either, which was going to be a significant blow to my savings. "How's Giga? Can I see him?"

He made a face at me, glancing at the departing ambulance. "He's not dead – somehow."

"Really? How is that possible?"

He sighed as one of the other medics returned and they lifted me onto a stretcher. "We're not sure, but there have been many survivors of gunshot wounds to the head. It's a hell of a lot of luck determining the precise spot where one can be shot and not killed, however, but people like him help us figure out what's survivable."

Huh, how about that. "Well, that's – lucky of him? I guess?"

The medic raised an eyebrow at me. "Depends on who you ask. He might be a vegetable for the rest of his life."

"I understand that he thought a life of paralysis was better than an instant death."

"Really. Maybe he *is* lucky, then."

I thought of his body. He wasn't a bad person—sort of—but it was definitely not an easy task liking him. I imagined giving him a good swift kick as payback for all the hard feelings he'd generated in me, but I didn't want to kick a man when he was down.

Also, I didn't have a leg to stand on *and* a leg to kick with anymore. Not until the prosthetics came in, anyway.

Still, it made me wonder—Giga founded JAM? Who was in charge now? It couldn't be Vice, since he claimed they were his sponsor. Amy? I shook my head at the idea of what that girl had gotten into over the years. If she was in charge of JAM, there was literally no telling what they would do with Giga out of commission. I hoped her course of empire was limited to the medical monopoly I had deduced earlier.

The ambulance ride was definitely a new experience, and surgery meant I was going under again, but this time under the care of those looking out for my well-being. It was disorienting when I finally awoke, to be minus my favourite right leg, but at least I had my health. Somewhat.

"Anna!" my family cried, to finally see me again.

"Hey, everyone," I greeted, pleased beyond words that even Epic had come to see me.

"Anna no hurt," he protested comically. "Not allowed."

"Sorry, Eppie," I pouted with a smirk. *Epic* made a joke? I was so happy! "I won't do it again."

Saga held up the frame with my office party photo. "I brought the picture you asked for."

"Thanks, Saga." I pointed to Lester. "He's the one who saved me."

"Ooo, he's a hottie," Nan cooed.

"Nan!" Saga cried in embarrassment. "...huh, he is."

I couldn't help laughing, even as my eyes drifted over Rush again. I

still felt sad to see him, despite the lightheartedness of the moment captured forever in time.

"He looks familiar," Saga noted, pointing to Rush.

"Really?" I looked at her with concern, unable to remember a time when they would have met, despite the number of times I talked about them with Rush.

"I think I saw him when we were checking out Strayer. Or, maybe someone who looked like him, at least."

"Huh." Maybe I would have my chance to clear the air after all.

Rehabilitation was tough, especially after my doctor's disappointed evaluation. Given my declining health, he recommended I strike a balance between lots of exercise and rest, and I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible—I had a mission, after all. Time dragged as I struggled to adapt to having a cheap prosthesis, besides tiring much more easily than before, but, after two weeks, the day of my discharge couldn't come soon enough. Even before calling my family, I hobbled over to the uni, ten streets away, in the hopes of seeing one or the other of the boys.

...but where? The campus wasn't large, but I wasn't familiar with the layout to know where I should wait. Oh, well... I leaned against a tree under the main building, figuring one of them might come by eventually—it wasn't as though I had much else to do with myself. I waited there for most of the day, just – waiting, hoping. I felt like an idiot waiting there, like a predator stalking its prey, but what else could I do? I almost *wanted* to look like a fool, if it got me what I craved.

"Hey."

I looked up to see Tet standing there, my heart skipping a beat. He looked so much like a younger Rush that it hurt. "Hello, there."

"You're..." he droned. It was tough to tell whether he was simply caught unawares or... "You look – different."

I gave a weak smile. "How so?"

He seemed to think about what was an appropriate answer. "What – happened to your leg?"

"Oh, *that*?" I teased. "Ah... I was trying out the steampunk pirate look, to see how I like it."

He didn't seem amused. Well, I tried. "No, really," he insisted, "what happened to you?"

I straightened up on my cane as best I could manage. "Is that an invitation to get a coffee?"

"Uh – sure."

I momentarily wondered whether I would have been this brave back in my academy years, with someone six or seven years my senior... No, probably not. It felt odd, feeling nostalgic for a time in my life I had missed completely, especially now that my experiences meant I was seeing things through a different filter.

The campus had a tiny canteen, with average-quality coffee, but that

wasn't my concern at the moment. "So," he declared after we settled into a booth, taking a sip of his joe. I waited patiently for him to continue, but it felt like aeons before he would.

"How's uni going for you?" I prompted, hoping that some idle talk would loosen him up.

"...fine." It didn't sound fine.

"Picked a study yet?"

He frowned. "I thought you were going to tell me why you have a prosthesis now."

It felt like a lot to unload on him to add that to the pile. I had hoped that he didn't really want to know after all. "I wasn't where I was supposed to be, and I ended up with a busted leg for my trouble. Couldn't save it, in the end."

"Was this for your job?"

Didn't he remember that I had been fired? "If I'd done my job, we wouldn't have met again that night."

"...oh—yeah."

"But I'm glad we did."

Tet looked serious, much removed from his and Zel's attitude just a month ago. "I—"

"I know what happened shouldn't have happened, but it did, and now..." I fought for the words that truly reflected my feelings. How could I think of propriety when my mind kept overlaying the memory of his touch, his scent, his physique? "I just – *need* someone, you know? Not forever, but for – a little while." And after that...

"I get that," he agreed, "but..."

That one word filled me with an inexplicable dread, though from the start I had already determined it was the likeliest outcome.

"...I see," I muttered, reading between the lines. "Is it your father?"

"N-no, not at all!" he blurted, perhaps to try to spare my feelings. "I mean – if that was it, I would have told him I am an adult now, I can make my own decisions."

"Then." It was a one-word declaration of my understanding, that I wasn't desirable as anything but a one-night stand—something confirmed by his reluctance to give me even a shred of emotional support now, much less what I truly desired. I had warned Saga about this exact moment, but being justified didn't feel as validating as I thought it would be.

"Don't misunderstand me," he insisted, stammering for the words that would satisfy me, words that didn't exist. "It really is me, not you. I was – tempted when my girlfriend and I were going through a patch. That's why Zel and I were on the prowl that night..."

If he was lying, it was a good lie, but it didn't make me feel any better. Then, I was just a snack when supper was delayed. Now, I was even less appetising.

"I'm sure if you talk with Zel, he'd have something different to say

to you. He'll be there, I guess. Maybe. I don't know. All I know is it was a mistake for me to take advantage of your – uh – generosity, and it would be a mistake to keep taking advantage of you, even if that's what you want. It's just that – he talked about wanting to do more things together, and I never figured we'd do... Anyway, talk with Zel—he's got class here in a bit. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to oblige as... Well, you know."

I couldn't say what I wanted to say. "...but Zel's not responsible..."

"I'm flattered that you think I am, but not much more than Zel is. I've barely been able to juggle my studies and job even before this whole mess started." He must have realised it wasn't helping. "Anyway, you're a beautiful woman, but you and me—it just wouldn't work out. I at least have to be honest about this much." He offered his hand to shake mine. "I hope there aren't any hard feelings?"

They were strong, yes, but not malicious. "...no."

He read my reluctance to accept his meager offering and nodded as he withdrew, forcing a smile as he stood with the same majestic air his father resonated. As he turned to leave, as he stepped outside and vanished around the corner forever, did the words flow freely...

"...simply being loved is more than enough."

I didn't think there was even a remote possibility that Zel would be half as accommodating as his brother, despite Tet's clumsy efforts to spare my feelings while simultaneously brushing me off. Still, I had to try.

I waited at the tree, same as before. When I saw Zel approach the building and glance my way, as Tet had promised, I waved shyly at him. He turned aside, walking quickly. Did he see me? I didn't think my prosthesis was visible from how I was leaning, so that wouldn't have been it. Perhaps it was better to follow his cue and pretend he hadn't seen me... I wasn't that eager to have my hopes dashed a second time by the one more likely to dash my hopes from the start, even if it meant I hadn't fulfilled my mission and done what I had set out to do in the first place.

So that was it. The sum of my romantic prospects reduced yet again to the one who was most definitely off the table. Even if I had the gall to date a boy Saga's age like I had joked that I might, no one else I'd met in my entire life came even remotely close to meeting the criteria I needed to fill the emptiness inside me. What the hell was wrong with me that I couldn't even entertain the notion of spending what little of my life remained with someone less than perfect? Why, in my jadedness, did I have blinders up to 99.9999995% of the rest of the population?

I couldn't stop from drifting back to Rush and his family, despite all reason telling me to let them go. I needed something—no, *someone*—to fill the void they left. Not to sound ungrateful for all the Rockfords had done for me, but the family I had wasn't enough—the legacy I was leaving behind was too much for them to handle alone.

16. Data Sharing Plans

Pop hovered over me after breakfast, clearly concerned about my behaviour as of late. "I suppose I'll never outgrow the feeling of having to watch over you," he mused, though his fatherly instinct was still egregious.

"I did mean to call," I insisted, unconvincingly.

"But six hours after you were discharged? What were you doing?"

"...trying to solve a problem."

He sat down next to me, clasping my hand. "You do know you can tell me anything, don't you? I realise that it may seem like a lot to dump on someone else, but that's what we're here for."

I frowned, but I knew I had to open up a little. "I just – don't know what to do."

"In general, or about your...?"

"Both, I guess. I've lost my purpose."

"Thought about trying something new?"

Well—insanity *was* doing the same thing over and over and hoping for different results... "Like what?"

"Wanna help me find my turntable?"

I smirked. "I was hoping for a slightly loftier goal than cleaning out the basement."

He mussed my hair with affection. "I'm going to spin the disc for you once we find it, *duhhh*. Then you can try it."

I hadn't realised how much I wanted to see Pop succeed. "Sure."

"I don't want you to strain yourself, mind. Just help me organise all the knick-knacks as we find them for now."

I felt too stubborn to accept the fragile maiden treatment, but even I had to admit I had put myself through a lot in the last month-ish. "Fine."

The storage closet was nearly as large as the kitchen and stuffed to the brim, which made it no surprise that things had gone missing in there for so long. It was amazing that one small family could collect so much and not realise it. "I'm not sure why we never did this sooner," Pop complained. "It seems every year we add a new box to storage that never gets seen again."

"It's the Rockford family black hole."

He chuckled. "Well, maybe if we looked at it as digging for buried treasure instead?"

I strained to squat down and pick up the nearest item, pliers that had strayed from the toolbox. It bothered me just how immobile I had become in such a short time, but there wasn't much else I could do about it now. "This might be easier if we got boxes and labelled them as we put things inside."

"That's true..." Pop scratched his head, looking around. "I thought we had some more empty boxes back here."

I nudged aside one of the nearer boxes to look behind it, knocking something loose. "Hey, what's—"

I hesitated as I saw what fell. It appeared to be an old videotape, the same type that might have been cutting edge tech in Pop's time. Was it the master for Saga's father's recording?

"Hmm? What's what?"

My envy got the better of me. I tucked it into my pocket without another word, turning aside to hide my theft. "Nothing, I – was thinking."

If he had any clue I'd taken his things, he didn't let on. It made me feel terrible, the not asking, but – something was eating at me. I snuck the tape into my bureau when he went upstairs in search of boxes, hoping to find a way to copy it later.

After a whole day of reorganisation, we unearthed the turntable of legend, and I was eager to see it work. Pop took to it like a starved animal taking to food, unboxing the rig and plugging in wires and flipping through a sleeve of hundreds of old discs. In no time, the house was brimming with quaint music from Gran and Gramp Rockford's time.

"World got you down?" he sang. "There's always music."

I felt invigorated by Pop's set. It was amateurish, but he had never really devoted himself to it. Still, as rusty as he was, I could definitely see him stunning Saga's wedding guests with his style, like he wanted.

"May I try now?" I asked, curious.

"Sure," he said with a smile, pointing out all the parts. "This is the crossfader, this bends pitch... You've watched me scratch." He rubbed his chin. "I'm still not really sure what all the other dials are for. All I've done is play around with it."

I shook my head. Overwhelmed even by his own toys.

"Your minis and mix discs won't work with this old thing, but I still have a box of old blanks if you wanted to copy them over. Your laptop will do that, won't it?"

"It's Saga's now, but certainly."

Within the hour, Pop and I were grooving the whole house, which must've been a sight for Saga when she got home. "I didn't know you could mix," she remarked as she walked into the middle of my set.

"Couldn't. Never tried before today."

She listened as I faded into the next track, Fireflies. "You've got a good feel for it. Why didn't you take up music?"

"Like Vice?" I flushed a bit to say his name so casually, but I was determined to prove I wasn't prisoner to his very existence.

She grimaced at his name again. "Yeah, I guess."

I shrugged. "I wanted to follow my mentor. Didn't think about it much beyond that. I'm not really into the spotlight, anyway. He can have it, for all that they'll give it to him." At the same time, the seed of rebellion had

been planted. Why *not* take his spotlight? If I could become the next hit sensation—even as a one-shot—that would be a slap in his face, wouldn't it?

Still, I already had a new mission. It took me a couple hours of surreptitious research to find a local shop that carried a legacy player, but I barely noticed the time passing when I was in the moment. I was on edge as I left for 'groceries' and took a detour to the electronics store. I practically held my breath in anticipation getting back and sneaking to my room with the device, about to see this inexplicably wonderful person again, yet my eagerness was tinged with guilt. I just *had* to see him again – but why?

Well, no point agonising over it now. Get my copy and return the tape before it was missed—no harm, no foul.

I hooked up the player to my telly and popped in the tape, my eyes glued to the screen. The master recording was in barely perceptible higher definition than the copy Pop had gotten made, but otherwise it was exactly as I remembered. Once again, I took in the shaky-cam of young Pop's style and the sad love letter from a melancholy ghost. "I'm sorry," he whispered, leaning over to turn off the camera as the static of blank tape engulfed him.

I couldn't take my eyes away even after the recording ended. That couldn't be all that was left of him! I felt overcome with the emptiness that belonged to Saga, not certain what possessed me – nor caring.

What could I do, though, that Pop hadn't already tried? Surely he, who had actually known the boy in life, would have more clue where to look than me, who had one recording and a few piecemeal anecdotes from others who hadn't even told me his name. Further, I hated to ask, as intrusive as even this much felt. I was doomed to failure out the gate, and it emphasised my emptiness even more. I was so overcome as I slumped back on my futon that I couldn't bring myself to stop the tape, as though the act would erase his memory from existence, closing that chapter on his life forever.

Near the end of the tape, the static abruptly cut off, but I barely registered it until I heard his voice again.

"Anna... I suppose you're wondering, why did I do this to you?"

With lightning reflexes, I jumped up and rewound the tape. Did I hear what I thought I heard?

His sky blue eyes stared straight into mine. "And, uh... I suppose you're wondering, why did I do this to you? Why did I put you through so much pain and sorrow, instead of just being here for you, being your best friend and helping you live a full, *happy* life?" He looked away as though uncertain about it himself. "I did it because I admire you, *so much*. You're much *stronger* than I am. You can do all kinds of things I never could. You *have done* all kinds of things I never have. I know you might not believe in yourself, but I did what I did because I knew it would make you into a better person, one who has truly overcome hard times to become a real role model for others. I wasn't sure I could help you do that if I let you lean on me as a crutch." Here, he laughed to himself. "Besides – it'll all work out in the end, won't it? These kinds of things have a way of doing that, you know. And I

know how good you are for Kotaro, the lunk."

My heart trembled to hear these long distant words from him, but I still didn't understand *why* I was hearing them.

"One last thing you need to know more than anything else: Never let one person dictate how you live—not even me. There's a whole universe out there full of *life*. Go see it while you can. Freedom is liberating." His smile was warm and melted my heart. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine – as long as you're happy." He waited a moment then turned off the camera again, this time as the tape ended and automatically started rewinding.

I tried to decode this hidden message, but it seemed impenetrable, despite its simplicity. Just what had happened before he died? Why – did it seem to be directed toward me? I listened over and over, and the distinction between "Anna" and "and, uh" blurred to the point where it seemed to be deliberately vague.

My own private message from the great beyond from, apparently, a mysterious clairvoyant. Even Pop didn't know about it, or he would've told the person who made the conversion. I felt...

No, I was being stupid again. Saga's middle name was Anne, so he must've thought that was what her name would be—if that was even what he really said. Or, he talked about the past, didn't he? Then that meant Mrs. Rockford—Alexandrea could be shortened to a variant of Anne or Anna if she had wanted. Regardless, there was absolutely zero reason to believe this was a message exclusively for me. I just happened to walk into an utterly bizarre coincidence against impossible odds.

Somehow, it didn't matter. Digging up the past was informative, but dwelling on it was why I was miserable *now*. My mission was clear—I would embrace the future, enjoy what I could, and hopefully leave behind the smallest mess possible.

...I had a crazy thought—the craziest thought. What if – I embraced *Vice*? What if I turned a trick and acted as he did, rolled in the same filth he did, welcomed him into my pants as he so often threatened to do when at his most vile?

The idea still repulsed me, but now I wondered what *would* happen if I ran toward him, instead of running away. As easily as he always found me, though, I had no idea how to seek him out myself. The best I could think of doing...

A news blip on the entertainment feed caught my eye: There would be an amateur DJ contest at 9:30 tomorrow. The notion of me entering was laughable at first, but when I thought of Pop's rig, the pieces started to fall into place. If I somehow became an overnight sensation, that could be my ticket to – becoming the one I hated. Yet, when I rationalised it, I didn't see myself strictly following in his steps—my fosters had raised me too well for that. Instead, I saw myself forging the way, charging in where Pop once wanted to go before he took on all the responsibilities he had at a young age. It wouldn't be true insanity, but maybe my life would change just enough to

be bearable if I took down the biggest hurdle before me.

If nothing else, it was a new approach.

I picked up my mobile to enter the contest, hesitating as I thought of how I would. What name would I use? I imagined every decent stage name was already taken by now, after the upsurge of would-be performers at the turn of the century. Maybe just use my given name, like Marin von Bruuin? ...nah, I felt too shy for that—I enjoyed being relatively anonymous. Mary Nye? No, reminded me too much of Australia, now that I'd used it once. I thought about Jist Reveast as Jäste but couldn't work out a similar wordplay for my name. Almost anything else was meaningless to me...

The possibilities led to only one reasonable conclusion: Versa. It was hilarious coming to that epiphany, considering that we were reversing roles – *again*, if Vice was to be believed. Yes, it only seemed appropriate. I made the call before making my announcement to the others over supper.

"I'm going to enter the amateur DJ contest at 9:30."

They seemed astounded by the notion. "But you just learned how to use the turntable today," Pop admonished.

I shrugged my shoulders. "And? That's the textbook definition of 'amateur', you know."

"I'm just saying, you seem pretty confident to get up in front of so many people, so soon."

"I've been in front of people before." ...in courtrooms.

Saga was mildly more open-minded. "What's your stage name?"

It felt odd telling them my codename now, wondering if they would make the connection. "Versa."

"Why 'Versa'?"

"I guess, because it's opposite Vice – you know?"

"But they *aren't* opposites," she protested, "they're mirrors. Versa complements Vice."

I grabbed my chest at the phantom pain that struck. "...please never say that again."

"But it's true. Look at the etymology—"

"Are you trying to talk me out of it?"

Saga looked aside in bemusement. "I'm just saying that it's weird."

"He doesn't have that power over me. I can do what I want."

But – what *did* I want? I wanted to succeed, to strike back against him. How would I accomplish that? After supper, I stared at myself in the mirror, wondering if there wasn't a way to stack the odds in my favour. At the moment, I looked so different from all the DJs I knew. Would that help me, especially with my prosthesis? Maybe if I drew attention away from it...

Experimenting, I took some gel and slicked my hair back, taking off my shirt as well. Tet's words came to mind—I *was* a beautiful woman, and I'd just covered that up for so long it never occurred to me that I might be. No wonder Vice—

Eeeew. I pushed those kinds of thoughts out of my head, thinking

instead of the persona I was taking on, as though for a play—DJ Versa, the hottest new act in every sense of the word. I laughed at myself. Vain much?

The next evening, as I dressed down for the contest—Daisy Dukes, bikini's on top—and packed up the turntable, the entire family reprimanded my attire. Epic blushed blood red at the sight of me, Pop and Nan looked as though they would have heart attacks, and even Saga seemed aghast by my newfound exhibitionism – out of jealousy? "Does that mean you guys won't watch my act?" I asked, disappointed but not surprised.

"You're – an adult," Nan insisted pragmatically, still looking away. "You're allowed to do what you want to do."

I couldn't wrap my brain around their behaviour, but – it *was* a 180 from what they'd known of me for so long. Well, couldn't be helped. It was difficult to get an idea out of my head once it was there, and I couldn't afford to have second thoughts about my plan.

We arrived at the club just before the first act—I was next to last, which would give me a chance to read the audience before my set. Luckily it was a 16-and-up performance, so the twins wouldn't be turned away, even as nervous as Epic looked being around so many germie people.

I was on pins and needles waiting to start, wondering how well my selection would go over. I didn't have much to add to Pop's discs, so I would be playing mostly classics, compared to the newest hits that all the other DJs were serving up. What if I flopped? My training had never prepared me for a subjective performance...

One of the managers tapped me on the shoulder. "You're on next," she indicated, pointing to the stage as the prior act, a nondescript girl named Minzoku, wrapped up. Suddenly, I was unsure of myself. What was I doing here? I couldn't believe I was getting cold feet – or, foot, even.

It was now or never. I took a deep breath and strutted over to where they set up Pop's rig, waving like a supermodel as I was announced to hide my embarrassment. I led with *Slowly*, singing along and playing with the BPM and pitch as I faded into *Fashion Show*, to an amazing amount of cheer as I stuttered into *Boyfriend* and phased into *Body Flow*. My act seemed to go remarkably well for what I had expected. Was I really a natural, or was the crowd just unbelievably forgiving? It felt as though I could do almost anything on-stage and they would eat it up like audio candy.

As I thought this, I hit the cue button – and the sudden silence was like a punch in the kidney. In front of a crowd of hundreds of bloodthirsty fanatics? I might as well shoot myself in the head!

My nerves were solid steel as fear gave way to lightning reflexes. I grabbed the mic and crooned, "Open up your arms—spread them wide..." To my immense relief, a roar erupted from the audience, buying me precious time to reload the track. "Nothing's gonna hold us back this time..." At last, *Till Tonight* burst from the speakers as I scratched wildly to mask my error. *Remember your training*, I scolded myself, desperately trying to hide my humiliation at the narrowly missed crash and burn. As *Dragonette* filled out

the remainder of my hour allotment, the audience energy was the highest I'd felt all night. I couldn't believe my performance, and I was actually relieved it was over. How did I ever talk myself into doing this?

I retired to the green room, shaking from the adrenaline. I wanted to crawl back into my hole and die again, for different reasons. I wondered how my family would look at me again, now that I had played the fool in front of them and a venue full of guys looking squarely at my rack, if at all. I could barely even think during the final hour, not even when the producer came in and told me to come back out to the stage. Huh?

I walked back out with trepidation, wondering what to do. All the other DJs were there—oh. It had slipped my mind that this was a contest.

Suddenly there was a camera and microphone in my face. "Second place!" shouted a familiar voice, though I didn't immediately recognise the speaker—possibly some personality I heard on the telly while in my couch potato funk. "DJ Versa, brand new to the scene!"

I made myself smile big for the camera, despite wanting to be out of there already. At least I wasn't first—I didn't know if I could force myself to do this again next week as per the prize.

I stayed on long enough to congratulate the winner, Two Left Beats, and started to look for my family when I was stopped again. "Excuse me," said another familiar voice. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

I turned around and my jaw dropped—I was unable to believe my eyes. Marin von Bruuin was at 9:30? And wanted to talk to *me*? "It's – quite an honour to meet you," I greeted, fighting back my inclination to shy away in chagrin that it took my Vice-Versa persona to meet him. "I'm a big fan of yours."

Marin's smile, speech, and demeanour were delightfully pleasant, everything that Vice was not. "Really, Miss Versa? Well, I'm becoming a big fan of yours, myself."

"Don't say that," I blurted in reflex.

"I am! I'm always on the lookout for new talent, and I really admire your style. In fact, I was trying for a retro approach with my next album."

Was he suggesting I work with him? I was overwhelmed with awe at the idea, but my rationale took over before I could go full fangirl on him. "How long does it take to make an album?"

"Depends. I do a regular radio show every week showcasing the latest hits in house and trance, and making such a compilation is as easy as burning a mix disc. For original tunes, it's up to my collaborators. I've made a single in as little as a day, but sometimes it's taken as long as a month to get it perfect."

"You *do* have quite a discography," I noted, my ego soaring at the notion of adding to it.

"Would you like to discuss it sometime, maybe over dinner?"

"I..." It felt crushing to be given this chance after I didn't have the opportunity to make the most of it. "I can't."

The disappointment in his face was subtle, but recognisable all the same. "Are – you sure?" Bless him, he didn't press me for my reasons for turning him down. "I travel a lot and may not get to come back this way for a while."

"I just – don't have the time. Literally." I couldn't believe that I was telling a complete stranger, even one I knew by appearance. "I'll die at the new year."

His sudden silence was expected, but his words following it were not. "Is it why you're doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"This bimbo act. Wearing almost nothing as a way to draw others in, like you have nothing to lose."

I flushed deeply despite my best efforts. "I didn't mean... That is – what's wrong with how I present myself?"

He was surprisingly introspective. "I worked hard to get to where I am, Miss Versa. I've endured so much flak from my friends and family for putting all my time into something they didn't believe would go anywhere. Even after I graduated from uni with top honours, they all told me I was wasting my time trying to make a career of deejaying. It's taken me twelve years of my life, of pure dedication, to prove myself. Even though *I've* made it at last, so many others following in my footsteps, those who I might call colleagues, struggle every day because no one wants to take them seriously – especially my female colleagues." I felt a chill at his look of disapproval. "What kind of message are you sending, dressing like that? It says, 'Talent doesn't matter—as long as you show some skin, the crowd will like you.'"

My revenge was backfiring horrifically. I had only meant to beat Vice at his own game. I hadn't given a lick of thought about the impact my actions might have on others. Once again, I was hurting more than helping. "I'm – sorry," I apologised.

He must have read the sincerity in my apology. "You do have a lot of talent," he noted, to focus on the positive. "I haven't seen anyone pull off an orbit quite like that in a while."

"I – don't know what I'm doing," I admitted.

He grinned as though at a joke. "I did see you were having some trouble with your cuing. Your rig's a bit old, is it?"

"You noticed me screw up?"

"I may have been the only one watching your hands."

I flushed in embarrassment, feeling exposed as I crossed my arms.

"But that's part of why I noticed you. It takes finesse to cover up a big mistake like that on the fly. Having a lovely voice helps, too."

I bit my tongue, not sure whether I was supposed to be proud of this moment anymore.

Marin took a business card out of his coat pocket and handed it to me. "Why don't you speak with my agent, anyway? Even if we only make one single, it's something special you can leave behind before you go, and I

would be honoured to work on this one gift with you."

What was I doing? Of course I should! "I'd be delighted, sir."

He smiled at my deference. "Marin is fine, Miss Versa. 'Sir' makes me feel old."

"Then you can call me Anna."

"Okay, Anna." He took my hand and kissed it. "Then maybe I'll see you again soon?"

"Definitely."

He nodded goodbye, turning to greet the other DJs. I felt on top of the world, holding Marin's business card, like a ticket to paradise.

The camera guy got in my face again before I could make a break for it. "Versa!" he cried. "I'm Tash. I was hoping you could be on my show sometime, as a feature on local DJs."

Tash—he was the spokesperson for a sort of underground program, though not everything he showed was in a flattering light. "I, uh—I'm not really a DJ. What would I talk about?"

"Not a DJ?" He seemed perplexed by the notion but shrugged it off. "No biggie! We'll work something out."

Another thought crossed my mind, one that would further my plan in a way that didn't require humiliating myself again. "Hey, what about..." I described my idea in detail, much to his interest.

"Really? If that's true, I'm amazed no one's ever noticed before."

"That's the genius of it. It's subtle enough to get past the radar."

He practically beamed. "Well, I'd be delighted to have you on my show for such an exposé. Can I call you sometime?"

"Sure thing." He held out his business card and a pen, and I wrote my number on the back. "Can't wait to do this."

"Me, too! Congrats on second place!"

It was strange how quickly my luck had turned around. I had had no idea I could accomplish so much just from deciding to do it. Fate truly was a fickle beast, but I felt, even if I was just a plaything for some higher being, I was glad that I was being given such an interesting part at last.

It was another week before Tash got back to me about filming the show, but I had to go through with it if I would have my revenge. Despite my and Marin's reservations, I had to go with the 'bimbo' act once again, or I would have seemed like a completely different person, even with the telltale prosthetic leg. As a consolation, I put on a see-through beach shirt for some vague sense of modesty—I would gladly redefine myself afterwards.

On set, I was basically thrown into the show, my only preparation being the discs and instructions I gave to the A/V girl. It felt even stranger going before a camera that would not only broadcast everything live but also capture it all for posterity. I would die a thousand deaths if I messed *this* up.

"Welcome to the show, Versa," Tash greeted as I hobbled up. "As some of you locals may know, DJ Versa won second place at 9:30's amateur DJ contest this past week. How did you make your start?"

"Oddly enough, I started playing the night before I entered."

"Really! Yet you took second place?"

I felt impatient getting through the introductions, but I had to set it up properly if I was going to avoid sounding preachy. "I guess some girls just have it," I boasted, hands on my hips.

"And have it they do..." The audience whistled at the implications, and I had to fight not to cringe.

"Versa, though? Any relation to internationally-renowned DJ and rock idol *Vice*?"

"Oh, he *wishes* that he had what I had!" I didn't have to act out my snark. "Everything he has, he had to steal to get."

"So – you *do* know him?"

"It's a twisted story, actually. We have such a long, sordid history together—" I was cut off by oohs from the peanut gallery, which was only natural. Good, it was time to start the game! "No way," I snapped, putting on an annoyed expression even as I played up my bad girl persona. "It's not what you think at all! He's taken so much from me, much more than I can ever describe. *Vice* has a bad habit of stealing *just* enough of other people's work to seem original on the surface, but every single one of his tracks is an unauthorised derivative of another artist's music."

Boos now. "That's a serious accusation, Ms. V," Tash chided. "Do you have any proof?"

"I'm glad you asked, Tash. Unfortunately, since I only started this week, I can't use my own work as evidence, but I brought some of the more egregious pieces for you to sample. This first one is his track, High Road—" The A/V girl worked her magic just as I asked. "—and here's Haite Street by Buut."

The shared look on all their faces when I pointed out the similarities was astonishing. I felt so pleased by finally getting the validation I craved that I couldn't help spelling it out for the less discerning. "It's can be easy to overlook the melody because *Vice* blasts out the bass, and the beat is just a standard 4/4 at 100 BPM, but if you compare the A/B switches and melody shifts, it's only so much plagiarism. Even the time stretch at 1:13 is left in! This is just one track, too—I've got more from Jäste and Pol von Eyck that are in *Vice*'s latest album."

"Please share."

I did so, gladly. The audience ate it up, and it was with satisfaction that, despite my being a complete unknown on a relatively small program, I wouldn't have been surprised if the session was pirated and broadcast for worldwide notoriety in less than a day.

"One question," Tash asked when the accusations were starting to wear thin. "You seem to have a vendetta against *Vice*. Why pick the name *Versa*, then?"

Somehow I knew that would come up. "You know, the name holds a lot of significance for me, even with someone like *Vice* in the world. It

doesn't matter. I can't help it if someone like him takes the name he has. If anything, I think it's my own way of standing up to him, like saying, 'Check it—I can do what you do while not being a conceited jerk like you are.' I know my appearance seems to betray this, but this was my one chance, my big shot at redemption."

"And redeem, you did," Tash cheered, excited to get the scoop. "I don't know about you, but I'd love to see the look on Vice's face now."

I imagined it and couldn't stop smiling. Even if he made the rest of my life a living hell somehow, at least I would have brought him down with me. "Thank you for having me on your show."

"Thank *you*, Miss Versa."

As I stepped off the set, feeling the pressure of being in the public eye lift off my shoulders for hopefully the last time, I looked at Nan with expectation as she handed me my jacket. "Thanks for coming with me."

"I was a bit worried, I had to admit, but that seemed to go as well as could be expected."

It did seem odd that I would actually have gotten so much attention so quickly, and so successfully. I didn't understand Fate's grand scheme, but it made me wonder what the ultimate goal was, if this was all planned.

I thought of my good luck talisman, the tape I had kept tucked in my jacket pocket the whole time. "Can I ask you something, Nan?"

"Ask me anything."

"What does this mean: 'Atashi wa kare o mitsukeru suru tsumori?'"

She stared at me in bemusement, as though I had spoken in tongues. "Where did you hear that?"

"From Pop. He said Mrs. Rockford said it. What does it mean?"

"...I'm going to find him."

Was she...? "Is that why she became an astronaut?"

"I don't know, Anna. I guess – if she truly thought he was out there, somewhere, then maybe. Yes."

"Is he?"

She looked away. "I can't tell you what was in her heart. I know I would want to believe my beloved was out there, too, if I just looked for him, but I also would want to be with the family that was still here."

I wondered if I would get to meet him when I died, the person who touched my heart without ever meeting me. I thought, if God was one of us, he was the closest I knew, mysterious in his ways. Regardless, I was tired, my vengeful energy depleted. "Don't worry, Nan. I have every intention of being with you guys for as long as I can."

"That's good, because none of us want to let you go."

If only willpower was enough to erase my fate. I gave Nan a hug, pulled on my jacket, and said goodbye to Versa once again.

17. Resource Sharing Plans

"Anna," Nan called from upstairs, "you have a visitor!"

Odd. I wasn't expecting anyone. "Really? Upstairs, instead of at my door?"

"I don't think he knew about the basement door, or maybe the path's not clear of leaves yet. Would you rather he meet you down there?"

"No, I'll come up." I put down Saga's laptop and hefted myself up from the futon with a bit more effort than I expected. Two extra stone was a lot of weight to manage, something I hadn't dealt with before recently—not that my cheap prosthetic leg made it any easier. "I'm on my way."

"Come in, she'll be with you shortly," Nan said to the visitor as I made my way up to the landing. I even felt a little out of breath, which upset me when I thought of myself just six months ago. More than that—

"Hello, Versa," Rush greeted.

"I..." My jaw fell to see him standing there with a light smirk on his face, as though the accumulated aggravation of the last six months had never happened. Words escaped me, and I couldn't even utter a hello.

"Versa—" he started, then corrected himself. "...Anna. You can't even greet your elders now?"

When I looked up at him into his eyes now, cool to the core, it was like staring at a stranger. The sense of hope, that well of inner strength I had always been able to tap before was no longer there. Where there was once a real fatherly presence, I now only saw judgement and condemnation, dreams dashed to pieces upon the pavement. No, it was a façade: the illusion of my once proud mentor through the lens of heartbreak and despondency.

It was odd not to be as enamoured with Rush as I used to be, feeling as though I had betrayed him only yesterday. I felt humiliated just being in his presence, wondering what could possibly compel him to come to see me now that I was no longer his subordinate.

"I didn't expect to see you again, sir," I confessed, feeling lower than low.

"Why not?" he asked, as though it was a silly question that would never have crossed his mind if I hadn't mentioned it.

"I dunno... It's been five months now since I saw you last. I guess I didn't think you would ever want to see me again, after disgracing the entire country like that."

"You think I forgot the time I spent as your pop?"

Tears welled in my eyes, though I fought to hold them back. It took me a moment to choke out my answer. "Actually – yes."

He frowned in disappointment. "Did you really believe I thought so little of you?"

"I... I just thought you weren't a nepotist."

"I try my best to be fair where business is concerned, yes, and I didn't want our familial relationship to affect how I treated you as your boss, but that doesn't mean I stopped caring about your welfare..." He paused a moment in thought. "Do you know why I gave you a codename?"

"To protect my identity on miss—"

"No." His expression conveyed the tiniest hint of embarrassment. "I made myself call you a different name to remove that level of familiarity, to remind myself that I wasn't to treat you as my foster daughter but as an agent in my hire. Even now, it feels wrong allowing myself that pleasure. More than that, I figured you wanted one. You enjoyed watching all those secret agent spy mission shows and pretending you were one when you were little, and I did my best to try to get you that kind of job when you came to me for work – even when no such department exists."

My world shattered as the rose-coloured filter came off. Even when I was under his hire, I could never envision him as anything but perfect, ignoring all evidence that pointed to the contrary. Here he was now, bearing his humanity, his fallibility... I was humoured even as a professional, given my assignments not for my abilities but to keep me close. My ego deflated as my sentimentality soared.

Could I chew him out for secretly behaving as I secretly wanted him to behave?

"All this time," I muttered, "you were patronising me?"

Through the bitter lens of experience, I could now tell that he was biting his tongue. "All the assignments I gave you were no less valid for my indulgences—they just happened to stretch the limits of my jurisdiction. I had to pull all kinds of strings to get you the job that I thought you wanted – which, undoubtedly, affected their decision to have me removed either by choice or by force, but I wanted to do everything I could for my little girl, down to my last official act in keeping your identity private. Even when I heard from Lester about the assault that took your leg, I wanted to race to your side to comfort you, but I wasn't sure that I should, that maybe I would be overstepping my bounds.

"The guilt became too much for me, though, which is why I'm here now. I still care too much to just never see you again, despite everything. I'd be happy to be your pop again, if it would make you happy. The only thing that ever changed between us was Sal wanting to commit to our boys."

"Does she still hate me, then?"

His expression turned to dismay. "Hate you?" He shook his head in astonishment. "I can't believe..."

That cringe on his face, of unfathomable pain, hurt a thousand times more than his unbridled rage at my debriefing, a million times more than his disappointment at my one-night stand with Tet and Zel.

"I wanted a daughter more than anything, but the idea strained Sal with worry. She was always so afraid a daughter wouldn't understand her... It made her much more at ease having only sons, especially her own, and I'm afraid she really only went along with fostering you for my benefit. It wasn't about you as much as always worrying, deep down, you wouldn't like *her*. Sal was upset because she felt so overwhelmed taking care of you and Tet, even before Zel came along, that she was afraid you would blame her for putting the boys first when it became a struggle to balance caring for all of you. When the Rockfords gave us an opening, it felt like the best option for everyone involved."

I stared at him, trying to process his words. "But – the Rockfords were in the same situation..."

"Yes, but Sal and I are older, and she didn't feel like she was giving you the full attention you deserved, especially with me away from home so much of the time. What came naturally to the Rockfords, especially Kotaro, was an uphill battle for Sal. We figured, if we couldn't give you the love you deserved, it was better to allow someone else the privilege."

That changed so much... Why did it seem like we all had the wrong ideas about each other?

"Pop..." Years of repressed emotion burst forth from the dam I had erected. I hugged him tightly, breaking down the wall that had been thrown between us for so long. "I missed you so much!"

"Really? You'd seen me almost every day for, what, six years?"

"But you weren't my pop then."

He chuckled in exasperation, gladly returning my tight embrace as he kissed my forehead. "I guess not."

I wept into his jacket until I was dehydrated from crying—bless his heart, he didn't interrupt me in all that time. After what felt like so many glorious days in my own slice of heaven, I finally let go and wiped my eyes on my sleeve, filled with relief.

Satisfied that bridges were mended, Rush let out an equally relieved sigh. After a pause, he put his hands on his hips in a rather fatherly fashion. "You're letting yourself go, Anna," he scolded in a way that filled me with inexplicable nostalgia. "I know you're in half-life, but that's no reason to let yourself just deteriorate like this. You should be taking advantage of your freedom to get out and about. Growing your hair out is one thing, but you've put on quite a bit of—"

I didn't say a word, but he abruptly cut off his lecture. Whether I was consciously berating him with my body language alone, I couldn't tell, but he finally seemed to get that I wasn't just getting fat because I allowed myself to become lazy during my so-called probation.

"What is it?" he asked, picking up on my non-verbal cues.

"I'm glad I'm not just any other agent to you, sir—Pop."

"Why's that?"

Though I was certain I could trust him to be able to say anything to

him, it was hard dragging it out of myself.

"Something's wrong. What is it?"

Without realising it, I lowered my head, feeling my tail between my legs in remorse even though by all accounts it wasn't by far the worst thing I or anyone else had ever done. "I'm carrying your grandchild," I admitted, taking hold of my belly.

His reaction was cold but not unexpected. "I see."

"I don't have long enough. I'll die when he's still premature."

His expression grew more concerned, but it was clear that there was nothing of substance to say. The gravity of the situation must have halted any inclination to make some kind of wisecrack to break the mood. "...what can I do?"

"I don't know. I don't want him to end up like me, growing up in foster care."

"Foster care brought you to me."

I nodded, frowning. "True, but he can't take that risk. I hate to do this to you."

Rush was quiet for a long time. "We may be old, but we're ready to be Gran and Gramps. Sal would like him – or her."

"Him," I grinned weakly, though I knew it wasn't what he wanted. "I know it."

"Do you? How far along are you?"

"Eh, math." I shrugged, not particularly mindful of how I appeared to my mentor and father figure anymore. It would probably seem obvious in retrospect, regardless. "I can tell you how long I have to go, though."

It was a lot to take in, but this was the best time, in the metaphorical and literal autumn of my life, when all the preparations could be made for the transition to grandfatherhood and orphanhood. The look on Rush's face was painful to see, but now there was an inkling of hope that I latched onto in desperation, afraid I would never see it again. My feelings turned around in an instant with even that tiny scrap of grudging acceptance.

I still couldn't believe that my most deep-seated fantasy was coming true, however indirectly. I'd always had a crush on my foster father in part because he was bigger and stronger than Vice, which made me feel protected just being in his presence. He was my world, and continuing his bloodline would ensure that my world would continue after my death. I was the boy, and this child was the girl, whether Mr. Rockford had intended it that way in his story or not. I understood now—the moral was not to just live to be free, but to live for the betterment of everyone possible. If all of that torture had just been for me, I didn't know where I would be now. My son would be my drive, turning a looming dread into a gift, one that I could not enjoy to the fullest myself but which would bring hope, nonetheless.

He clasped my shoulders and rubbed them, as though contemplating how this could happen. "You know, the hardest thing I ever had to say was when I told you to stop being a prude. Even when I was acting as your boss,

I had hoped you would be my innocent little girl forever."

I had to laugh. "Your innocent little girl shooting at bad guys?"

He shrugged in defeat. "I didn't say that your unicorn couldn't have a grenade launcher." His grin quickly disappeared, however. "I'll be honest with you, though. It feels – wrong for you and the boys..."

"I'm sorry, Pop," I interrupted. "I was in a bad place then, and they happened to go along with it."

"No, it's my own problem. It's not like you're a blood relative, after all, and the three of you didn't grow up together as siblings. I just... When I saw them leaving your gaff, and after I found you in that state, I felt like the biggest failure in history..."

"I'm sorry, Pop," I repeated, feeling ashamed of my indiscretions nonetheless. What hurt the most was having brought him down with me. "You weren't the biggest failure, anyway—I was."

"Australia?" He shook his head. "Anyone with the motivation and a strong enough reason would've broken in, and family is the best there is. If you'd asked, I would've killed to find them for you."

"No, you wouldn't have."

Whether he didn't want to spend our precious time together fighting, he conceded. "What I'm trying to say is at least I can't complain about your choice in men like any other father would. Or, I can, but then I'd be part of the problem."

I had to laugh at that one.

"But it's a problem I want to work on. I got a job as a consultant for a small firm, and it keeps me busy, but not busy enough—I had to let you know I really did try to do good by you, even when Giga pressured me—"

"Giga?" I echoed. "What did he make you do?"

He frowned in disgust. "Maybe you figured it out already, but the thing with your nan was all a test of his. It's impossible to prove that any plans for weapons that might have existed were destroyed, but – effectively, they have been. Giga just wanted proof that you would do what you were told even when it went against everything you and I stood for, that I wasn't coddling you at the taxpayers' expense."

I stared at him, wondering. "*Were* you?"

"Maybe at *my* expense." He laughed with warmth, which I found delightful after the long drought. "I'm still inclined to coddle you, in fact. I'll buy that pony you wanted, a nice silver one – with racing stripes, even."

"Ugh," I blurted out of reflex. "I mean – I think I've outgrown that stage in my life, Pop."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "How about your chopper? You aren't still riding it, are you?"

I laughed. "You know, I never picked up my bike from that night I left it at the Metro and never made it back. It's probably impounded by now. No, I've been doing the Metro-bus thing."

"Have you had ultrasounds taken yet?"

"I'm due for an appointment today. Your timing is impeccable."

He nodded towards his car. "I'll give you a ride, then we'll pick up your bike. It's a waste to just leave it to rust on someone else's property."

"Thank you – Pop."

He gestured toward the door, but I shook my head. "We've still got three hours yet. I'm not that eager to spend that long in the waiting room."

"Maybe I am."

"Haha, no one's *that* eager to hurry up and wait." I beckoned him toward the sitting room. "Let's talk for a bit. Have you met Nan before?"

"Just now."

I grinned as I waddled over to the sitting room, leading my pop by the hand. "Nan, this is my prior foster father Rush. Pop, this is my foster grandmother Sunni."

"How do you do, Mr. Rush?" Nan greeted.

"Charmed."

Embarrassed, I read her non-verbal cues. "Were you eavesdropping on us, Nan?"

"Hmm?" She had an innocent look on her face as though she had no idea what I was talking about.

"I mean did you hear that Rush and his wife will be taking my son when he's born."

"Oh, *that!*" Nan blurted, then pouted in disappointment. "Okay, I suppose so..."

"Nan! He'll be their grandchild by blood."

Her mouth made a perfect circle that broke into a big grin. "And I thought I had interesting secrets!"

I shrugged sheepishly. Rush laughed in spite of himself.

"Oh, fine," she surrendered. "I suppose I've had my grandbabies. Can't hoard them all myself, can I."

"Why, thank you," Rush said with a bow. "Don't worry, Sal and I will let you see him whenever you want."

"Day or night?"

He grinned. "Only if you mean to sit for us."

"Is that a promise?"

I was thrilled beyond words that they were getting along so well. That both of my families could become one big family was more than I had ever wished for, even if I wouldn't be around to see it.

"Hey—who's this?"

I looked over my shoulder to see Saga standing there, astonished to see a huge stranger standing over me, and grinned. "Saga, this is Rush, my son's grandfather."

Her face was indescribable, as though she wanted to be happy or upset but couldn't decide which would be appropriate.

"On that note, I was hoping – would you be my son's godmother?"

She was gobsmacked. "Me?"

I nodded with joy. "Kind of like passing the torch, eh? After all, I spent nine years raising you and Epic, though I don't expect Rush and his wife would hand their grandson over as easily as that."

"I mean... Yes! Of course I will! I'm honoured, really!"

I couldn't help crying in happiness, as quickly and smoothly as my plans for my son were coming together. No shuffling from foster to foster like I had endured—he would have a great big loving family that I would envy until the day I died – and even after that.

I started to look forward to dying, but in a new light this time. Sure, I'd be gone, but these two—no, *three*—disparate families would be as one, and Epic would always have someone to care for him, to have his back when life became too much to bear.

And I would get to meet the twins' biological father, after I followed their mother up to the heavens to see what became of her. Sure, Vice would be there, too, but he wouldn't be able to hurt me anymore – or anyone else, ever again.

It would all be okay. I was ready.

Rush drove me to my ultrasound appointment, another unforgettable experience. When I saw him, I couldn't take my eyes off my little one on the monitor for at least an hour. "Hello, my boy," I cooed, rubbing my belly in sadness that this was the most I would ever get to see of him.

"We're going to do some blood work on you and your child as well, Ms. Rockford," Dr. Barton explained as he finally put away the ultrasound equipment after tearing me away from the video.

"Okay," I agreed, a little worried about the process all the same.

Rush squeezed my hand as the doctor drew my blood. "It's okay to feel uncomfortable," he assured me, "but Sal and I went through this twice before. It's worth the peace of mind."

I nodded. My temporary discomfort was worth my son's security. "It's just difficult to ever get used to pain."

"I would be worried if you did."

The tests were complete in no time at all, though Dr. Barton stared at the results for a lot longer than I'd expected. "Are you the father?" he asked, incredulous.

"Grandfather," Rush snorted, insulted. I had mixed feelings about his reaction.

"Oh." He frowned all the same. "Of course, you already know this is a difficult pregnancy, but – Ms. Rockford, this child is going to kill you."

I barely registered what he had said. "Huh?"

"Among other complications, you're Rh-negative. The father is Rh-positive, as is the baby. You're severely allergic, and I'd be surprised if you made it to full term even with treatment, especially considering your heart condition. It's taken quite a beating in the last few months and, as it stands, you have a high risk of cardiomyopathy, particularly PPCM."

Tears ran down my cheeks, but in happiness. "That's wonderful."

"Huh?"

"I already know that I'm going to die soon. Dying to bring a new life into the world is the best way to go."

His expression was of concern. Was it really so hard to believe that death wasn't so scary? "Thing is, Ms. Rockford—and I'm saying this only as full disclosure of the possibilities—MLCS doesn't affect the unborn, either because the virus can't penetrate the amniotic sac or because it traces back to the newborn's first independent breath." His concern gave way to sadness. "Just because you're most likely to die from complications surrounding your pregnancy, that doesn't mean that's what will actually cause your death, or that your child will survive."

Deep down, I knew this, but when presented with the ugly truth up close, I couldn't cope with the idea at all. "No!" I shouted, trembling, unable to control my impulses. "He can't die with me! He just *can't!* I will die, but he should *live!*" I grabbed Rush, clenching his jacket in despair. "Please – promise me you'll do everything to save him!"

"Of course I will, Anna," he insisted, echoing my concern. "And I'll do absolutely everything to save *you*. I'm not ready to let you go, either."

It was difficult processing this information. I had found peace with my impending death at last, only to have that peace ripped out from under me. It wasn't fair...

Rush took me in his arms, and I wanted to stay there forever, in his protective hold. "We're going to beat this," he growled, "even if I have to pull the virus out of you myself and kill it with my bare hands to get you a hundred more years of life."

I wanted to believe him, so much, but my heart ached to know that it would never happen. I took the recording of my son's ultrasound from Dr. Burton with a heavy heart, wondering if I didn't have the opposite of Saga's recording—the life that would never be. I was in tears the entire way home, even after Rush let me lie in his arms until well after Sal had expected him to return.

"Anna," Nan coaxed, "I think it's time to let your pop go home."

I gave him up with considerable reluctance. "When will I see you again?" I asked, desperate for it to be immediately.

He stood with the same hesitation, clear that he didn't want to leave me in fear that it would be for the last time. "Whenever you need me. You still have my number?"

I nodded.

"I'll break the news to Sal, of course, and to the boys – though I'm not certain how they'll take it."

I grabbed his hand once more. "Good night, Pop."

He pulled away ever so gently, seeing himself out. Nan took his seat beside me and gave me a hug. "Don't let this scare you, sweetie."

"I'm – not... I—"

"Look, Anna – even in the days before spotting, we had a little thing

called hypochondria, and another called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Worrying about it is going to make it come true more than letting things be."

"I get what you're saying, Nan, but – it's hard not to worry."

"I know, sweetie." She patted my shoulder in comfort. "Please get some sleep soon, for both of your sakes."

I nodded, but I didn't want to get up from the sitting room sofa, the place where Rush's aura still lingered. I felt weak being away from him, and weaker that I was so helpless.

"You get sleep, too, Saga."

As Nan retired upstairs, I finally noticed Saga watching me from the dining room. I looked away, embarrassed to have let myself look so pathetic in front of her.

She approached me with caution, as though afraid of setting me off again. "Is it my turn for offering comforts, then?"

I forced a smirk and patted the sofa next to me. "Of course. We're sisters, aren't we?"

She sat, crossing her arms but not certain what to say, opening her mouth to speak but closing it as she changed her mind.

"Let's not talk about him, then," I insisted, tired of so much negative thinking. "How are *you* doing?"

"Better than *you*, I guess," she said with a chuckle, "but that doesn't really say much. Now I have a better appreciation for the lack of drama in my own life, though."

"Hey, at least there's that," I agreed. I spontaneously thought about her father's recorded regrets, wondering if I shouldn't pass along my own life lessons before I couldn't. "What do you want to do with your life, Saga?"

"Huh?"

"I was just thinking, we should get these deep talks out of the way while I'm still around."

Saga thought about it for a moment. "I want to be – important."

"In what way?"

"I kinda don't care. I just want to feel appreciated."

I mulled over her words. "Well, so you know, a lot of important people throughout history weren't appreciated in their time. The lucky ones have been, but most historically-revered figures died lonely and miserable."

"Oh, that's a picker-upper."

"I'm just saying as a caveat. It's nice to feel loved, but be sure to look out for yourself, too. Sometimes, the only way to get what you want is to take it, rather than waiting for someone else to hand it to you."

"What did you want to do with your life, Anna?"

I looked away. "Leave the world a better place than I found it." The 'get away from Vice' part was true but defeating.

"Do you have any regrets? About not doing more, maybe?"

"Oh, *everyone* does. The ones who say they don't are lying, or like me—they recognise mistakes as a chance to learn."

"So, what did you learn?"

I looked at her again, uncertain of it myself. "I guess – that I spent so much time both running from *and* chasing the past that I never learned to live in the present. Even now, I'm having a tough time letting go of the past, though I'm also afraid of the future, and I worry that I'm not giving all of you the time you deserve."

"Well, I can't exactly blame you—your son comes first, after all. Of course, I have to admit that I'm a bit scared for the future, too."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, well. You may have had experience raising us, but I haven't had any experience with kids at *all*. I'm starting to wonder if I can be a good godmother for him."

I grinned at her. "I knew it would be difficult to have a baby here all the time. That's why I'm glad Rush will take him. You shouldn't have to bear the whole weight yourself – nor do I want you to do it."

"I wish you had told us about *your* weight before, then maybe you wouldn't be in this situation now."

This again? "See, Saga, that's the kind of thinking that got me here in the first place. I could spend all my days wondering what I could have done differently, but it wouldn't change the fact that I can't change any of it."

"But that jerk destroyed your life—"

I was strangely defensive. "No, my inability to fight back did."

Saga glared at me that I would defend my abuser. "What, so cutting you was okay?"

"I'm not saying it was, but it wouldn't have tormented me as it did if I'd just had the strength to tell someone. Instead—and I'll never know why I did—I hid it, pretending that I could never be hurt when in fact I was hurt deeply." I stared at the fading scars on my hands in sadness. "I guess, I figured if I hid it deeply enough, it would be like it never happened. Even Rush never knew, as far as I'm aware."

"But it's still his fault. Why aren't you angrier about it?"

"Oh, I am, believe me, but don't just hate him on my account. Even I will tell you he's a genuinely talented individual, if not a pompous ass with an enormous sense of entitlement for it, and he *is* good at doing the absolute bare minimum to get whatever he wants. His brain is the only thing working overtime, but boy does it."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You sound like you admire him."

"I recognise where I stand with him, more like. And – I still want to make peace with that."

"I don't..." Saga frowned in bewilderment. "You want to bury the hatchet with him? When he might bury it in your back?"

"It sounds like a mistake, yes, but I do. All my venom left with my *Versa persona*, and I'd sooner pour my energy into building the foundation for the life I will leave behind. I don't want my son – or you – to make the same mistakes I did."

She bit her tongue trying to understand. "So – you're saying, what, don't take crap, and don't get knocked up?"

I nearly fell over at her words. "No, not that at all! This child is the best thing that ever happened to me!"

"Wow, way to sound anti-feminist..."

"No, listen, you had me completely pegged—I lived for twenty-five years in paralysing fear of impurity. Everything that Vice is inadvertently became my trauma. I couldn't be around men in that way, because I thought of what *he* would do to me and unfairly projected his actions onto them. I never imbibed or did anything illegal because I didn't want to end up in gaol, because I was already in a mental prison.

"No, my mistake was in not living. Life isn't to be feared, because ultimately life ends, and why spend it cooping up in a time capsule? I wish I had learned that sooner, then maybe I would have gotten a chance to know my son." A bitter tear ran down my cheek. "Now I'm jealous of you again. You'll get to know him, and you'll get to tell him all about me."

She frowned. "But you were telling me not to get married straight out of high school. When would you have chosen to have a child?"

"...I don't know, Saga." It hurt thinking that there would never have been a 'best' time, but that was the sad reality for a lot of people, especially me. "Maybe I was never meant to know my own children, but you still can."

"You don't think that it might be a mistake for me? I might end up being the world's worst mother, for all either of us know."

"Then that's the risk you take. The trick is to recognise mistakes for what they are *and* figure out their significance, not just to try to avoid ever being wrong. You can't know mistakes ahead of time because that relies on information you don't have, and preaching is just mindless repetition, not learned knowledge. It's why you would never have believed the range was hot until you touched it and got burned. I could have told you thousands of times not to do exactly what I did, and even demonstrating for you why what I did was a mistake may not have the desired impact, because I don't think it was a mistake for *me*. It might be something you'll just have to experience for yourself to know why it's a bad idea – although I hope not."

"Well, I still don't know. The idea of having kids myself still scares me too much. I don't want to go through what you will."

"You haven't spotted yet, so maybe you won't."

"Not just that, but the risk of my kids turning evil, too. You can't tell me that *Vice's* mum planned for him to turn out that way."

I stared at nothing for a long time, not sure what to say to that.

"Anna?"

"Promise me one thing?"

"...I can't unless I know what it is."

"Even if you don't like someone, don't let that person know it. Don't make your problem someone else's."

She looked away in discomfort. "I'll – try?"

"I mean – civility is all we have to try to make a cruel world more bearable. Life is too short to spend so much time on revenge, or letting other people disappoint us." Here, I heaved myself up from the sofa at last, my physical and emotional exhaustion getting the better of me. "I suppose that was a lot to unload on you, but I feel better knowing I said it than not."

Saga forced a laugh. "I feel better, too, but – I dunno. I hate the idea that the last good talks we had were so depressing."

"Then tell me about your love life," I teased.

She leapt to her feet. "Which differs *how*?"

I grinned, giving her a warm embrace. "We'll make the best of this, I promise."

"So you say." She started up the stairs after Nan. "Good night."

Still an emotional mess, I retired downstairs, eager to collapse into the oblivion of dreamless sleep. As I turned the bend, I saw that my much-needed rest would be delayed. "Epic?"

He clenched his fists, a look of determination in his eyes. "Epic wants to protect Anna."

I stared at him, standing at the bottom of the stairs. "What do you mean, Eppie?"

He held out his arms. "Anna feels safe with Anna-Pop. Epic will be Anna-Pop when Anna-Pop not here."

I wasn't sure what to make of his words. Did he... "Okay, Eppie," I agreed, figuring that anything that would make him brave the chilly, germmy basement was worth giving a chance. "You may protect me."

He picked me up in a big hug, kissing me on the head. "Epic will keep Anna safe."

I gratefully returned his love, indeed feeling safe in his arms. "That you will."

18. Letters of Support

Despite the numerous family discussions about hiding me away or leaving the country or putting me under house arrest or keeping me under tight surveillance in the hospital until I was due, I couldn't let my last days be ruled by fear – especially since I still had not found Vice again, not even when I sought him out. I knew our last days had to come to a head in some fashion, and I wanted it to be on my terms this time.

What I knew of him, though, meant that I had to be alone for him to make his move, which wasn't likely to happen. Rush was over as often as he could manage, acting like such a doting father that I was feeling smothered. When Rush wasn't around, Epic hovered over me to the point of getting in my way. Yet I didn't want to push them away after going through so much. It would take some serious effort to get everyone out of my hair.

Though I encountered the same scripting problems as Saga's father, I put the finishing touches on the video journal I made for my son, copying it to disc for safekeeping, then putting Saga's laptop down for the last time. I locked the disc in a firebox and tucked it into the drawer of my nightstand, at last ready for Vice, for better or for worse.

As if on cue, I got a buzz from Rush. "Sal's been in an accident," he grumbled, as though angry at having been inconvenienced.

"Go to her," I shouted, irritated that he would put me before his own wife, despite once wanting that position. "I'm going to be fine."

"Not this late. I want to be there for you."

I sat up with some difficulty. "And I will be *furios* if you ignore her over me. *GO*."

He was silent for a moment. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I love you."

"...I love you, too."

There. At least we would have that.

Epic stared at me with concern. "Anna-Pop will not be here."

"Maybe, maybe not—we'll have to see. I still have two days left."

"What will Anna do?"

I indicated I wanted to stand, and he helped me up. "I want to take a walk. It may be the last chance I get."

"Outside is cold."

"That happens in winter, Eppie. I'm used to it by now."

Though I knew he wanted to carry me over the threshold, as it were, I insisted on walking upstairs myself, determined not to feel so powerless I needed everyone to do every little thing for me, much less Epic.

"Rush will not be by today," I announced as we entered the sitting room. "His wife's been in an accident."

"Oh, no," Nan murmured, reading between the lines.

Pop gave me a look of concern. "That can't be an accident."

"It's not, I agree." I put my hands on my hips. "Still, it's not worth worrying about. Sal will be fine, as will I."

"For two more days," Saga protested.

"Thank you for the reminder." I hated being testy with them, but I had never been one for countdowns—death being on a timetable was terribly inconvenient. "Anyway, Epic and I will go for a walk."

"It's icy outside," Nan warned. "Even Saga has been having trouble on the walkway."

"Then I'll take some salt to it."

"Epic will," he complained.

"I can do it," I argued, but he wouldn't have any of it, darting to the garage and fetching the salt. With a sigh of exasperation, I fetched my coat and boots, donning them just as I saw the postman drive up.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Pop asked, starting to follow.

"I'm going to get the post for now, until Epic's done salting. I don't want a whole entourage for *that*." Still, I couldn't blame them for acting the way they were when each moment that passed could be the last one they saw of me. "I do appreciate everything you've done for me, though—all of you."

Saga crossed her arms in disdain. "And *we're* the ones concerned you'll up and vanish just from getting the post?"

I smirked as I closed the door. "It never hurts to say thank you."

The walkway was less icy than Nan made it seem—I supposed she was either overcautious or mindful of my prosthesis. Whichever the case, I reached the postbox and pulled out its contents just as Sky drove up in his Viper. I hadn't thought of him as the sentimental type to see me off...

"Hey," I greeted as he got out of the car. "You didn't come to say goodbye to me, too, did you?"

"Not at all." He gave me a look like he had a job to do and wouldn't let anything get in the way of doing it. "I came by to make sure someone else would."

My smile turned to a frown in a flash as I looked toward the house. The garage door was open, but Epic was nowhere to be seen.

I glared at Sky. "Is this how he's doing it, then?"

"I told you long ago—my loyalty is to my mom. What happens to you is beside the point." He pulled a gun from inside his coat, holding it up as though prepared to fire. Instead of training it on me, however, he stepped around the car and past me, walking toward the house.

"You look like him, you know," I blurted, hoping it would minimise the likelihood he would actually threaten his own relatives. "Your brother."

Whatever he thought of that, he wouldn't reveal. "You too."

"Don't hurt them."

"Just watch your back."

As Sky opened the door and stepped inside, I felt a dark presence behind me. Clenching my fists in determination, I whirled around to face him. The man standing before me wore a pressed but slightly rumpled white suit with black shirt and burgundy tie, the crown being an untidy mop of bangs evident of recent helmet use. I hadn't heard a motorbike drive up, but he smelled of that familiar exhaust all the same.

I stared in astonishment. I hesitated to think he was – attractive this way, as though a tanned, male version of myself. The suit was definitely one I might have worn as a man, save those creepy pearl-white lenses.

My eyes darted to his left hand—pocketed, but I could make out the cuff of a glove sticking out, the awkward shape of fingers bent into a partial fist. He also had a prosthesis, then. Was even this much deliberate? Were we always destined to be opposite yet intertwined?

My plan wasn't going to work now—not with Sky involved. How was I going to get out of this one? There didn't seem to be any indication he would play catch and release like every time before, and the nerves of steel that had gotten me out by the skin of my teeth on other occasions had given way to butt of lard, despite my best efforts.

"How's the bike holding up?" he started, as though easing into the torturous parts instead of jumping on in.

Now what was he alleging... I didn't answer, only glaring at him, waiting for his cruel punch line.

"Your chopper, of course. Got it at police auction, didn't you? Ever give any thought about its history?"

Now my bike? I continued glaring at him, struggling not to move so much as a muscle and give him that satisfaction.

"Does it still list to the left when you go faster than fifty? Vibrate over seventy such that it makes the rear-visions useless? Engine stall if you let it sit in traffic for too long? Take a long time to start in winter even when you pull the choke, roll it a few times, and give it two or three kicks? Oh, did you ever fix that weird bend in the front fender where they didn't do the measurements correctly and had to bend it to fit?"

There was no way he could know that from Sky spying on me, and I could tell if anyone had taken it for a joyride. That meant—

"How's it feel to have picked up my bike – all on your own? Did you know it was mine? I can prove it, of course—just watch the first season of that chopper show they've been running. I really liked how they did the stylised V-shaped spokes. Mostly I liked how they kept fighting."

"You're early," was all I could say, as angry as I was that he would try to insinuate that I wanted to be like him.

"What do you expect on my timetable? I told you I only have a day left. Did you think I would let it pass without acknowledgement?"

"I was hoping we could come to an understanding without having to do this dance again."

"Get in the car."

I hated feeling as though their suspicions were correct, that I really did lose my chance to say goodbye for real to my family, just from deciding to get the post. I clutched the parcels in my hand in rage—

—yet, this way they wouldn't have to see me suffer. I felt a wave of relief as I realised the power I possessed. I still had control over my death.

"Fine." I tucked the post into my coat, stepping over to the Viper and taking a seat with considerable effort. The belt was uncomfortably tight at my stage, but I buckled in and braced myself all the same.

What surprised me was his driving—not the erratic daredevil stunts that he'd pulled off before but more careful, even though he drove as if tipsy. I still dug my fingers into the seat and doorframe whenever he drifted into the other lane, but less than I'd anticipated I would.

He also – didn't seem to know where he was going.

"Where do you want to die?" he asked after an hour of unexpected silence, as though leaving the choice up to me.

"Just pull over here," I ordered, not eager to get much farther from home than we already were. I still wanted to be near Dr. Burton, at least.

He pulled onto the shoulder and idled. "So, then – love," he began, throwing his arm over the seat, "any last words?"

The sun was starting to set, and I wondered if I would get to see the sunrise. It really was do or die time now, as much as I thought I'd prepared myself for this moment.

"I thought you were the one with the big plans for us," I ventured, figuring reacting to his first move was a better plan than nothing.

"Pssh," he scoffed, rolling his head back. "Between your shooter friend and destroying my reputation on that smalltime talk show, everything I had is in ruins."

"Now you know how it feels." Even so, it still feel underhanded to do that to him, stooping to his level, regardless of whether he deserved it. "It goes to show, you need to plan for the future, Grasshopper."

"Oh, I planned, Ms. *Ant*. How do you think I got here? I lost some of my funding from their backstabbing, maybe, but I showed them they still needed a way to *find* their precious cure. I've still got the key, in fact."

He figured out a cure? No, it had to be a bluff – but then, why tell *me*? "You're lying."

"I found out long ago. I was keeping her as my trump card for just such an occasion." He doffed his glove to reveal Lester's handiwork. "Even then I could only negotiate the budget for a cheapie—Ms. Amy *really* knows how to play hardball..." Here, he groaned as though in serious pain. "Such a tease! I'd *kill* her to nail that little minx to the wall—"

"Turned you down, did she?" I had to appreciate Amy's strength, to be able to do this to Vice. "The one that got away out of a hundred thousand or so? I mean, even *you* must've lost track of how many children you—"

"Oh, *hell* no," he snorted. "—heh, I've got none *that I know of!*"

The look on his face changed from playful to contemptuous. "As if. I'm much more careful than you think. Why, to knock up one of those b—"

He broke into unabated laughter that shook the car and unsettled me more deeply than I could have imagined was possible.

"Oh, that would be evil even for *me!* It would mean one of them took a turkey baster and shoved it—"

"Ugh, stop!" I shouted, not wanting to consider the notion of a girl *wanting* to have his children, among other things he suggested.

"Just can't stand the idea of a little physical activity between adults, consenting or not?" he taunted. "Even though you've clearly partaken of the forbidden fruit yourself? And have the, ah, *augmentations* to prove it?"

Predictably, he reached for my chest—I batted his hands away with trained reflexes. At least I still had some upper body strength.

"Hmph. Always the upstanding one."

"At least it was my own life. I always figured you were just living – Vicarius Lee."

He furrowed his brow in annoyance. "Living through who? *You?* But – Converse Lee – living life purely as a reaction to someone else's every move isn't much better."

"If you think you're going to irk me *that way*," I snarled with every bit of snark I could manage, frustrated that I couldn't turn things back in my favour, "I'm so over it by now. Your Australia stunt broke me and broke me good." This time it was the truth. I would embrace all that I had denied for twenty-five years: my birth name, my bloodline, and the wickedness of my only known family. Whatever he might try to do to me, I trusted Fate to get my son through it safely—what happened to me was secondary. "But you just have to have *one* last try, is it," I chided, scowling. "Couldn't grant me one last wish before you go and just leave me in peace?"

"And deny me *my* last wish before I go? Have you not been paying attention all this time, Connie?"

I unsnapped my belt and pushed the seat back with a thump, quickly reorienting myself to optimise my defences in the tight cabin space. "I'm pregnant, if you hadn't noticed—" I threw caution to the wind in telling him this, since he wouldn't live to see my delivery. "—and it may interest you, because my son and your *nephew* will outlive anything you throw at me."

"Oh, of course I noticed," he cooed, stroking my hair as he sidled up to me. "So it's definitely a boy? How – uninteresting."

"Well, I think he's a boy," I teased, "but who knows? I may even have – multiples."

His reaction was unexpected. Vice slammed his prosthetic fist into the window, growling with an unbridled fury I had never seen in him before. "Multiples... Did you know—" He pressed his face into mine such that I could feel the heat boiling off his skin. "—multiples are a biological freak of nature. Identical twins, triplets, and that, but fraternal multiples are even worse. Life is special when it's unique—having mass-produced clones tears

that down, removes identity, trivialises the meaning behind the miracle of birth... Not to mention, there's the matter of stealing real estate. People are built to have one at a time—more than that, it's a struggle for each child to get their share."

In all our years, I had never known he felt this way. "So you *were* angry – all this time – over something we couldn't possibly control. Why? What purpose did it serve hunting me down over this perceived slight?"

He scowled at me, bearing his teeth. "You only remember since age three—consider yourself lucky, love." He slammed his prosthesis on the dashboard once for each word he shouted. "*Not – feeling – every – kick – and – punch – and – shove – with – no – protection – what – so – ever...!*" His voice became ragged, guttural. "Would your son feel it, do you think?"

"You're crazy," I murmured, comprehending. "You're absolutely psychotic! Remembering that much, that far back—"

"—would drive anyone crazy, yes."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Why didn't you get help?"

He broke into a fiendish grin. "You *were* my help. Giving you my pain eased my own." He shrugged in dismissal. "Okay, maybe I *was* living vicariously through your pain, after a sense. Can you really blame me?"

My heart broke at the direction this was taking. "Do you really think I ever meant to hurt you? All I know of my own blood relations? All you needed to tell me was that I hurt you, and I would have apologised in a heartbeat! Why can't we just forgive each other and die in peace?"

His voice became harsh again. "That's all you little girls do, isn't it. Tease and flaunt and make trouble only to turn around and blame us boys for falling for it. Doesn't matter what the proof is. Everyone loves the adorable little girls—they get to be primped like porcelain dolls and put on a pedestal for everyone to admire. No one touches little girls without getting struck down by the hand of *GOD*. Little boys get herded like cattle, pushed into being tiny soldiers for the grown-ups' amusement. Little boys fight each other to be king of the hill, not once realising the hill is just a big damned pile of *feces!*"

"What." I couldn't believe my ears. "You are the king of the hill! You and your blood money from the JAM project, what about that? Now that your deadline's here, all your careful planning's down the toilet? Or did you just realise how empty your life really is?"

"*SHUT UP, YOU WHORE!*"

He slapped me across the face, and I tore his sleeve trying to stop him. When that wasn't enough, he balled his hand into a fist to try to land a second blow. I barely had time to block with my forearms when something caught my eye—

There were marks in his left arm above his prosthesis, uncovered by the tear. I recognised them at once as needle punctures—he was under the influence! I had no idea if those were mind-altering drugs in his body, but something was bringing out his rage, making him just plain violent instead

of violently lustful. I had to be more careful how I handled him—the wrong move might have him break my arm instead of bruising it. MLCS might have my back in one sense, but it wasn't in it for comfort.

"You shot up, didn't you? What did you take?"

He fought every effort I made to stop him. "Maybe I won't make you pay the way I had planned for twenty-five years, but I'll certainly try my best!" Yet violent though he was now, he was significantly weaker than he used to be, something that was to my advantage. I wrestled him to the far side of the car, slamming his head against the window.

"WHAT DID YOU TAKE?"

He stabbed me with a switchblade I didn't notice before, catching me in the stomach—but only barely, my flak jacket taking the brunt of it. I mentally thanked Rush for insisting that I wear it even now to give my son the best possible chances. I felt the car shift gear, starting to roll, and I fell back in reflex, pushing open the door to make my escape. At that moment—

CRASH!

Neither of us heard the SUV that hit us coming, the force of the collision causing the Viper to flip out of control. I braced myself for impact, but I couldn't—

...I awoke to the sight of twilight. Was I dead yet? What time was it? It felt like early morning, but—

I sat up with a start, or as much of a start as I could get in my state. I remembered the accident, but how did so much time pass without help?

My prosthesis was mangled, and I could barely pull myself out from where I was wedged between the seats. It agonised me to be this debilitated, but I didn't have a lot of options even before this.

"Help," I called, trying to see where the others were. "Anyone?"

Vice wasn't in the car—he must have gotten thrown from the crash. I examined the landscape for signs of him or the other driver, but it was too dark to tell.

"HELP," I called again, despite the futility of it. This wasn't how I wanted to die, in the middle of nowhere with no one to protect my son... I cried in dismay that everything had gone so badly for us.

"...hello..."

There—a voice! "*HELP ME!*" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "I'm over here!"

"Over there!"

Torchlight bathed the area as four or five people came to my rescue. "How many of you are there?"

"Three, I think. I can't see the other driver!"

"Quick, find the others!"

A wave of relief came over me as the paramedics helped me out of the wreckage. "What took you so long?" I chided with a smirk.

"We got the crash report over five hours ago, but there was a major earthquake that took out the bridges over the Beltway, so we can't easily get an ambulance over here. Can you believe it?"

No, I couldn't. It was so rare for there to be earthquakes in the area that it was almost – contrived. What was this virus planning for me?

"Are you injured?"

"Mostly bruises, and my leg doesn't work."

He smiled at me. "I guess I don't need to ask if you can walk."

"We've found the other driver!" called another paramedic.

"What about my brother?"

"Over here!"

It felt like ages before they brought over stretchers bearing the SUV driver and Vice. "Can I see him?" I asked, anxious.

"Of course." He helped me hobble over to the stretcher, where Vice was in a neck brace and restraints. "We've called in a copter, but it will take some time to get here."

"Good. I'd like the chance to say goodbye."

The paramedic seemed put off. "...oh. Do you want to be alone?"

"Doesn't matter."

"I'll take that as a yes...?"

He lowered me down gently and wandered over to the other victim as I leaned down to Vice's ear. "How does it feel?" I asked, tears welling in my eyes. "Sucks not being able to fight back, doesn't it?"

If he wanted to respond, I couldn't tell. I bent over his face, stroking it gently, feeling the tremor in his jaw. How conscious was he...

"Do you know," I whispered, my throat clenching as I clasped his good hand, "Even though you treated me badly, I never truly hated you. Deep down, I always hoped you'd change, that I could call you my brother again without remorse. I don't want to die full of hate, and I hope you don't, either. I love you, and I always will love you."

Still no response. It was possible that the combination of the crash and whatever drugs were in his body paralysed him completely. That meant any chance that he might have apologised in the end was gone, any secrets he kept following him to the grave...

Even so, I smiled, leaning down to kiss him, putting my head on his chest and listening to his ragged heartbeat. "I hope the afterlife is good to you. Just wait for me, I'll be joining you soon."

The paramedics took my information and contacted my family and Rush, at my insistence. At length, the emergency copter arrived and lifted us to safety, but only when we reached the hospital did it finally occur to me that it was the wrong one. If the bridges were out, how would my family

reach me? I tugged the nearest paramedic's sleeve as they wheeled me down to the ER.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't suppose you can send the copter for my family, too?"

She shook her head in disappointment. "Only for emergencies."

"Can they send for my doctor, at least?"

"Perhaps—is your doctor the only one who can treat you?"

"He's the only one who knows everything I've been through, and my post-mortem wishes."

She frowned at me. "We can try, but I can't make any guarantees."

"Trying is enough. Thank you." I did what I could. All I could do now was relax while they checked me out for undetected injuries.

After an unbearable wait, being poked and prodded and put under the proverbial microscope, I was finally released to my own hospital room to recover. "Do you need anything, Ms. Rockford?" the orderly asked as I got settled into bed.

"How's my brother doing?"

She frowned, looking away. "Stable, but we don't know how much longer he'll last."

"Be sure to give him the best treatment possible." I didn't think it mattered much, and until my change of heart I wouldn't have given him the pleasure of a quiet death, but I had already won. It didn't do to look like a vindictive sister.

At the same time, I still didn't want them to see me go, but I felt guilty leaving the others hanging. Surely Sky wouldn't have actually...

"Also, I want to call my family."

"Okay! The line's by your bed. Dial 7 to get an outside extension."

I thanked her and gave Saga's mobile a buzz, getting an answer on the first ring. "Anna! Where Anna go?"

"Eppie," I murmured. "I got carried away."

Pop interrupted. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just fine. What happened to you guys?"

A pause. "Sky came over and told us not to leave the house until you were gone."

"Then?"

"...he left. Haven't seen him again. What's this about?"

"Nothing," I said with a sigh. "Not anymore."

"We're coming to get you!" Saga cried.

"All the bridges are out, and the roads are a mess. I don't know if you can make it to Inova in time."

"We're trying anyway! And we're going to hate you if you're dead before we get there!"

I felt tears streaming down my face. "You'd better hurry, then. I don't know how long I can hold out."

"Anna?"

I choked back a sob. "Yes, Nan?"

"Be strong."

"...I will, Nan."

"Anna! Don't go Anna Anna Anna..."

I listened to Epic's cries for as long as they could bear staying on the line. I felt my heart break just knowing I had done this to them, denying them the chance to be here for me in my last moments, but at least it wasn't a pain I would have to bear for long.

When they were on their way, Saga's mobile losing connectivity by the moment, I wiped my face off and buzzed Rush. "Anna, what happened to you?"

"He got me, Pop," I whimpered, trembling, "but it's okay. We're going to be okay now."

"I know. I'm on my way. Don't die on me."

I could barely speak, as much as I missed him. "Please come soon. I don't know how long I'll last." I didn't figure he would have much better luck getting here, but it was the thought that counted, and if he had to see me die, then at least I would get to see him one last time. "I love you."

"I love you, and I'm never letting you go. I will see you soon."

My heart melted even as it ached. I felt weak just thinking of him.

There was a knock at the door as I completed the call. "Hello again, Miss Rockford," greeted the staff. It was one of the paramedics who saved me. "I picked up the post you dropped. Thought you might want it now."

I smiled at her in gratitude, even as my breathing became shallower. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Actually, I do – a little. I've seen too many last chances gone too suddenly, too many regrets. When I spotted your unopened post lying in the wreckage, the time it took to scoop up your letters seemed worth the risk."

"Indeed it was. I will remember it for the rest of my life."

The look on her face was somewhat perplexed, but she dismissed it with a smile. "I'll leave you alone for now, then. Please do call if you need anything more."

"Thank you so much." After she left, I tore open the letter. It was sent from Tash but signed by a name I didn't recognise.

Dear Miss Versa,

Please forgive my boldness in getting your address from the producer, but I have searched for you for so long. When I saw your TV interview about Vice, I knew you had to be the woman I saw.

You do not know who I am—something I will always regret. I saw that man abusing you in the cafeteria, but I did not step in because I was afraid of what would happen to me if I did. Since then, I haven't been able to look at myself in the mirror, because all I see is your face, scared and ashamed.

I have done my best to make amends where I could—seeing you that day gave me the courage to step in when I saw something was wrong, even if it made me look like a fool. I couldn't live with that regret again, knowing that I could have helped but didn't. I will always wish I had stepped in to help you then. I do not know what life has thrown at you before that day or since, but I can only hope that your appearance on TV means you are in a better place. Whatever the case may be, I will always hate myself for not helping you get there.

Sincerely, Masami O.

I had mixed feelings about the letter, but if it made a change for the better, then at least we both had that much. I took the pen from the bedside table and wrote a large THANK YOU ♥ on his letter, tucking it back into the envelope. Maybe they would return it to him, to let him know I received his heartfelt message.

The parcel was from Marin. I opened it to find a copy of his album, the cover bearing a significantly more flattering photo of me than my Vice-Versa outfit would ever have allowed. With a sigh of pleasure, I opened it and signed, "To Hunter—All my love, Mum."

The letter Marin enclosed was brief, but still as pleasant as he was. I heard his elegant tenor in my mind as I read,

Dearest Versa,

It was the experience of a lifetime working even briefly with you on a truly breathtaking album. You will be with me and in the hearts of thousands at my NYE show, though we will all wish you could be here to witness our love. All the best to you in this life and the next.

Happy birthday, Marin

I picked up the player from the bedside table and put in the mix disc, listening to all the tracks mixed, then individually as separate layers. The fades were wonderfully melded, but I appreciated hearing each track solo as well.

As I put the disc back in its case, I heard a familiar voice from the hall. "Is that so... I'll be sure to tell her... Thank you for letting us know."

"Dr. Burton!" I called, waving to him.

Harried though he looked, he smiled all the same. "Hello, Anna."

"Anna?" I chided, grinning. "Do I get to call you James, then?"

"Oh." He rubbed his neck in chagrin. "Your family has been all 'Anna' this and 'Anna' that, it's hard to remember my place."

"That's fine. I don't mind. Better than my real name."

He glanced at the paperwork. "Ah, I see. What brought about this change of heart?"

"I've made peace with who I am, that's all."

"I see," Dr. Burton continued, patting my hand. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but your brother died an hour ago. They're not sure how, until an autopsy can be performed, but one of the orderlies mentioned symptoms that suggest a hemorrhaging of the brain—maybe an aneurysm. To be honest, though, I didn't realise you were related."

Le roi est mort. Vive le roi. "It's okay," I assured him. "We were hardly the model of what twins are usually like."

"Really?" He picked up my medical record and glanced through it. "You two don't have the same birthday—oh, er, happy birthday, I guess?"

I smiled at him despite myself. "He was several hours later than me, yet a whole year separated us. It's funny just how much of a wedge that drove between us." My heart was pounding, still. I felt my blood pressure rise to an uncomfortable level, and my breathing was getting more uneven.

Dr. Burton noticed this immediately and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Relax yourself, Anna. It's okay for you to have strong feelings in this kind of situation."

"That's not it," I croaked, struggling to breathe. "It's my turn."

He stammered in astonishment. "You're—but you haven't yet—"

"Please do everything to save my son..."

"NURSE!"

Though it hurt me I wouldn't see Rush again, especially, I would die knowing I gave something back to the world. I felt a heaviness in my heart as my mind wavered in and out of coherence. I knew how much time I had remaining, but not how much of that would be conscious. Yet I couldn't have been more ready.

Everything was on schedule. Everything...

...I love...

...it's time...

1. Introduction to Revised Application/Response to Critiques

Dr. ~~Burton~~, David,

It is a great honour to be considered a valuable asset to your group's molecular-level genetic mapping project. However—and I inform you with the heaviest of regrets—I must withdraw my candidacy due to an unforeseen conflict of interest. I have enclosed all the required forms in the event they become necessary, but I find I simply do not have the unbiased viewpoint necessary to conducting a proper analysis of the data.

The preliminary results have revealed subject T301-CL7171717 to be the brain sample of my birth mother, something your father had failed to mention in presenting the proposal to me, whether due to error, oversight, or—I hesitate to say—some kind of cruel test. To be quite frank, I do not *want* to believe that the reconstructions/transliterations I viewed are at all accurate. Even the most objective and focused of scientists would have difficulty remaining impartial, due to the contents, but I most of all cannot. I am more inclined to believe there is no possible way for a wholly accurate transliteration to be made, between degradation of the sample over time and the interpreter(s) limited knowledge of the subject matter described.

Still, it is my grudging opinion that at least the—shall we say—less controversial content is for the most part consistent with the family history that has been handed down to me. I do feel this proves our methods to be successful – although perhaps opening a whole new can of worms entirely if further research is pursued on samples with direct living relatives who may be harmed by the information within.

Speaking of, Dr. Rockford has continued to be the Rosetta Stone in these endeavours and has unlocked many insightful decryption sequences from what limited access we have had to sample T301-SO7270215. I must, however, question his capability of providing much more than he has to the study, between his considerable age and his inability to disconnect from the subject emotionally. Unofficially, I am concerned about his future and well-being, once sample T301-SO7270215 is no longer of scientific use, since his interaction with strangers is still strained at best and his sister is, to the best of my understanding, his last strong connection with society. Though she is a truly remarkable and perfectly preserved specimen, I am uncertain whether we will be able to secure the kind of funding we shall need to retain access to T301-SO7270215 if we fail to discover a source of immunity – and we cannot afford to pay through the nose for sentimentality alone.

Though he appears in a significant portion of the reconstructions, I

have not yet shared the results with Dr, Rockford, as I do not know how he will react to the reminder of my mother's circumstances. I mention this only as a recommendation against doing so, should he decide to stay on in my absence, as it has taken much work on my family's part to assure him that he was not to blame for failing to protect her.

To address critiques of the application, I have unfortunately failed to find a connection between an absence of spotting and immunity to *Virus securus*. I have theorised that suspension of spotting might be attributable to cryogenic freezing or other forms of cryopreservation, which would explain how a presumably dead astronaut could fail to show symptoms of 'half-life' prior to accepting an exploration mission—as in the case of the first known prospective immunity. The possibility has been corroborated by one of the head engineers at NASA familiar with the details, even though those details were not made public. This is not to try to discourage the idea that MLCS may one day be eradicated so much as a full disclosure of study results.

Unofficial studies and survey data also support my hypothesis that, if *Virus securus* was created by a higher power—shall we say—it may not have been done to intend harm. In fact, recent depression screening studies reveal fewer subjects with suicidal tendencies, excepting those whose lives are scheduled to end soon anyway. It may be that MLCS has the side effect of instilling in people a greater acceptance of death and a lessened fear of mortality while simultaneously increasing awareness of and concern about crippling and paralyzing diseases like ALS.

I hesitate to suggest this is a beneficial consequence, but perhaps it is simply the next stage in human evolution. Without a cure, humanity will come to no longer recognise the days of not knowing when our lives end, and thanatophobia will be little more than an old legend. It also serves to change the way we look at life itself, if only on the surface—as an example, my mother suffered brain death ten days before my birth, even though her body was kept alive as long as possible before preservation.

I analogise the possibilities in our lives to being math equations: a formula totalling the sum of our lives' work as a number that metaphorically represents our deaths. MLCS is simply telling us that total in advance, but whether we live in such a way to make $2+2$ or $1+3$ or $15-11$, they will all still add up to 4 in the end. The possibilities have already been written out—it is up to us which path to choose.

Though I would otherwise wish to provide more direct assistance, I hope for your success in the project, and I am willing to serve as a consultant should the need arise. On a personal note, though I was distressed to learn in striking detail the unspeakable horrors my mother lived through and am still in denial over most of them, I am at least grateful for the validation that I was never blamed for causing her death but, in fact, was her final blessing. May my godmother's ultimate wishes also come to fruition.

Dr. H. Fang

Author's Note

The best thing that ever happened to this story was getting rejected.

I created the characters Vice and Versa so long ago that my memory of specific dates is piecemeal at best, but I had no idea what they actually *did* until 2007, when they formed the basis for my submission to the then-upcoming *Machine of Death* project (www.machineofdeath.net) – because, as everyone knows, the best time to jump on a bandwagon is at its inception. After all, since I had yet to finish a book of my own, how cool would it be to be in a book that was actually in bookstores? Yet my attempt was—needless to say—mediocre, and I had no interest in trying for a subsequent volume. (Much less cool than being there from the start.)

As it turned out, without reading anything else about the *Machine of Death* anthology but the "list of things to avoid"/FAQ and *very* abstract titles and descriptions of the winning entries, I then knew what I was *supposed* to write. My submission had new life as *Mid-Life Crisis Syndrome*, incorrectly hyphenated for emphasis, and NaNoWriMo (www.nanowrimo.org) helped motivate me to write the story the *correct* way. Nowadays, I realize that it couldn't possibly have been a good short story—not when written by me, at least—because the subtle, torturous nuances get lost when the narrative is only fifteen pages long, max.

I like to think I'm not entirely capitalizing on the *Machine*, though I'm sure there are some who would insist I am, especially since I've flat-out admitted my story spawned from the initial concept. The key difference is the *Machine* answers the question of "how"—MLCS answers "when." It's a different animal, even if they're related. Yes, I can't deny I was inspired, but the most I took from it was a general idea. Hopefully it's okay to run with an idea that wasn't (directly) being used, for a story I can't imagine *not* being written with the doom of a predestined end always on the horizon.

The interesting part, which I unfortunately can't prove, is I had the notion for MLCS well before I'd ever heard of the *Machine*, its editors, or any of their works. Hell, I'd barely heard of the Internet then—that's how old it is! The catalyst was Kurt Cobain's suicide, when I realized his half-life was at a tender 13 and a half. Would he have lived his life the same way had he known when his life was half over? Would I, if I knew when mine was? If it was possible to know, would it *cause* people to have crises who didn't realize they were on a timetable before? It's the same mental exercise executed in the *Machine*, just with different parameters.

Of course, now I'm trying *so hard* to justify myself, showing how I'm totally not ripping off the *Machine*, but I find it motivating to be able to

turn a rejection slip (especially being but one of seven *hundred* submissions for a thirty-some-story anthology) into my own distinct creation. It has been my long-running problem to be crippled by perfectionism—especially when "perfect or nothing" usually means nothing—that it is a major breakthrough for me to be able to see how making mistakes is hardly the end of the world. Mistakes show what needs to be fixed, after all, and repetition is the way to hone a skill. (I've fixed *so many* mistakes to know this as fact.)

If anything, the mistake I continue to make is failing to finish what I start—hence the million projects I have going on at any given time, of which I've managed to finish precious little—but I also look at it this way: If I should unexpectedly die, there will be a million things I've left behind that some enterprising individual in need of a restoration project or five can try to continue where I've left off, for better or for worse. If I kept at one thing at a time all the way through to completion, the other million-odd never-started projects would stay exclusively in my head, to be lost forever when I die.

Versa/Anna's fate is, in a way, both a fear and a hope in this respect. I believe everyone, from birth, invents a mental shorthand for the things we learn: this means a bird, this means my mother, that means light, and so on. We later learn words from others to associate with our own shorthand, in order to communicate ideas and to understand others' minds. This is what was being decrypted: Upon unlocking the molecular database of the brain and decrypting her shorthand, everything she had ever thought could be read like a vast twenty-six-year diary. If this happens to me, I could die happy in the knowledge my unfinished work may someday still see completion – and uneasy that future generations would know every little skeleton in my closet.

I suppose I'd be too dead to care, though.

The alternative is what I'm doing now: Every November since 2005, I have taken and will take part in National Novel Writing Month, to at least start transcribing a completely new story from any other I've written before, for as long as I have ideas.

In short, the NaNoWriMo program amounts to a publicly viewable word counter, combining an arbitrary deadline with guilt to produce a novel, ideally. The purpose is to take that "One day, I will write a novel" dream that otherwise will never happen due to procrastination and put it to the task. It's beneficial for anyone who has never written before but wants to try or who has tried before but can't get past the first few sentences due to constant revising (read: me).

Who it does *not* benefit—and why I get defensive when said people put down NaNoWriMo as a useful writing tool—is anyone who isn't already at least somewhat predisposed to writing a book and putting down the idea already in mind, or anyone who already knows how to write a book and is condescending toward those who need outside help to do the same. If you believe that writing 50,000 words of "random crap" in a month is a waste of time, don't do it. If there was a project to eat at a new restaurant every day of the month, and you didn't already want to do it, don't do it! At the same

time, don't put down something because the people who find it worthwhile don't happen to include you. I've seen NaNoWriMo put down as a garbage because a few misguided participants submitted their unedited 50,000-word novels to publishers as soon as NaNoWriMo ended on 1 December—this is like saying mobile phones are garbage because oblivious people talk/text on them while driving. Everything is a tool, to be used well or poorly, but it's up to you how you use it. From the same source, I've seen people who read said books described as "the real heroes," as though reading books is a chore that no one should ever have to endure. Maybe it's just me, but reading and writing seem to be two sides of the same coin—how can one possibly enjoy reading without something to read? And how can one enjoy writing without an audience?

Suffice it to say, I owe a lot to NaNoWriMo and have no qualms saying so at great length—even if no one else reads my books, I have still accomplished what I set out to do and am all the happier for it. The result of my first participation in 2005 was my first self-published novel *Back to Square One*, completed four years later (mid-March 2010). *Mid-Life Crisis Syndrome* is my 2009 entry—a shorter editing period, but because I put the intermediate years on hold in order to release them in what feels like a better reading order. It's not that I've tried to make it necessary to read them that way, but if anyone happens to read them in order of release, I think it flows a little better than not.

I do have mixed feelings about finishing *Mid-Life Crisis Syndrome*, in the end, because there is so much of me in this book, and I have no idea how to top it, so to speak. For instance, how do I make another villain who could possibly hold a candle to Vice? Anyone else I might create feels like such a laughable cardboard cutout by comparison, I'm actually kind of sad to finish him off. Versa, as well—I love her so much because I put her through the worst Hell imaginable, and I hate that I could never do the things that she has, even of her more civilian activities.

I am probably also obligated to mention, as I was finishing the final edit on this book (annoyingly, late for my planned New Year's release date), two different sets of twins were born minutes apart – on different years. I don't know how I feel about it—any other year, and it wouldn't have seemed like the eerie coincidence it is. When I outlined the story, to emphasize their lifelong dissociation despite having been born as close as a brother and sister can get, I chose to write about twins born in separate years because it was the biggest believable division. (Unbelievably, the record for delayed-twins both surviving is ninety-five days apart?!) For the sake of the real life twins, I hope life doesn't truly imitate art in this respect...

Thank you for reading, and I hope you'll stick around to see what else comes out of my bizarre li'l brain in the hopefully many years to come.

—J.

Pronunciation Key

Albert	AL-burt
Alex	AL-ehkz
Amburgey	AM-bur-gee
Amy	AY-mee
Anna	AH-nah
Anne	AHN
Arsenault	AR-seh-nahlt
Burton	BUR-tun
Converse	KAHN-vurs
Crystal	KRIH-stahl
Daniels	DAN-yelz
David	DAY-vid
Ellerton	EL-lur-tun
Epic	EH-pik
Evans	EH-vunz
Falchion	FAHLCH-ee-ahn
Fender	FEN-dur
Fields	FEELDZ
Frehley	FREH-lee
Glory	GLOH-ree
Giga	GEE-guh
Gourley	GOHR-lee
Grey	GRAY
Holbrook	HOHL-bruhk
Hunter	HUN-tur
Iggy	IG-gee
James	JAYMZ
Jeanne	ZHAHN
Jiäste	jee-AH-steh
Jist	JIHST
Keplinger	KEP-leen-gur
Knight	NAHYT
Kotaro	KOH-tah-roh
Kwasigroch	KWAH-zee-groh
Lee	LEE
Lester	LES-tur
Luka	LOO-kuh
Margle	MAR-gul

Marian	MARE-ee-ahn
Marin	mah-REEN
Marius	MAH-ree-oos
Mary	MEH-ree
Masami	MAH-sah-mee
Metalion	meh-TAL-ee-ahn
Netherly	NEH-thur-lee
Nye	NAHY
O'Malley	oh-MAL-lee
Pearson	PEER-sun
Pell	PEL
Phillip	FIL-lip
Pol	PAHL
Rasnake	RAZ-nek
Reveast	rehv-EEST
Reyes	RAYZ (or REEZ, but I prefer RAYZ)
Riordan	REER-den
Rockford	RAHK-furd
Rodin	roh-DAN
Rothe	ROH-thee
Rush	RUSH
Saga	SAH-gah
Sal Amanda	SAL ah-MAN-dah
Scott	SKAHT
Simon	SAHY-muhn
Simpson	SIMP-sun
Sky	SKAHY
Status	STAH-toos
Strait	STRAYT
Sunni	SUH-nee
Tash	TAHSH
Tet	TEHT
Thomas	TAH-mus
von Bruuin	vahn BROO-ihn
von Eyck	vahn AHYK
Vann	VAHN
Vega	VAY-gah
Versa	VUR-sah
Vic	VIK
Vicarius	vahy-KAH-ree-oos
Vice	VAHY-seh (or WEE-keh, when particularly pretentious)
Virus securus	VAHY-russ SEE-coo-roos
Zachary	ZAK-ah-ree
Zel	ZEL